

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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THE NEST

BY POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL



With the Nest and the Rover, Duke Hugo was well set for his business—which was loot! But he hadn't counted on a mad Cro-Magnon and a maddened dinosaur, by name of Iggy!

I'd been out hunting all day, in the reeds and thickets and tall grass of the bottomlands down by the Styx, and luck had been bad. The heat and mug-

ginness bothered me worse than it should have, after all these years in the Nest, and the flies were a small hell, and there was no game to speak of. We'd



killed it all off, I suppose. Once I did spot the sabertooth which had been hanging around the cattle pens, and shot at him, but he got away. While chasing him, I went head over heels into a mudhole and lost my powder-horn and two good flints, besides ruining my shirt. So I came back toward evening in a devil of a temper, which is probably what started the trouble.

There was a sort of quiet golden light all over the world as I rode homeward, filling the air and the wide grasslands and the forest. Pretty. But I was thinking bitterly about the cave and The Men and a wet cold wind blowing off the glaciers of home and roaring in the pines. I wondered why the hell I hadn't had the brains to stay where I was well off. You got rich, working out of the Nest, if you lived, but was it worth the trouble?

Iggy's feet scrunched on gravel as we came onto the road. A lot of the boys have kidded me about riding a dinosaur, when a horse is so much faster and smarter. But what the hell, a young iguanodon goes quickly enough for me, and the flies don't bother him. And if the need arises, he's like a small tank—as I was very shortly going to learn.

I plodded along, swaying in the saddle, ten feet up in the

air on Iggy's shoulders. The fields stretched around me now, hundreds of acres of wheat and rye and maize, with the orchards dark against the yellowing sky. The slaves were still at work, cultivating, and a couple of overseers waved to me from their horses. But I was feeling too grouchy to reply; I sat hunched over pitying myself.

A screen of trees and hedges marked off the fields; beyond, the road went through gardens that blazed with color, all around the Nest. Roses and poppies like fresh blood, white and tiger-tawny lilies, royally purple violets—sure, Duke Hugo was a free-wheeling buzzard, but he did know flowers. Ahead of me, I could see the peaked roofs of the houses, the slave pens beyond them, and the castle black over all. I thought of a hot shower and clicked my tongue at Iggy, to make him step faster.

That was where the fight began.

The girl burst out of a clump of cherry trees in blossom, screaming as she saw me. It was a small dry scream, as if she'd already burned out her throat. I only had time to see that she was young and dark and pretty, then she swerved around to dodge me. Her foot slipped and she went down in

a heap. I don't know exactly why I grabbed my ax and jumped to the ground. Maybe the long red weals across her naked back had something to do with it.

She tried to scramble up, I put my foot on her back and held her down. As she looked up, I saw big dark eyes, a small curved nose, a wide full mouth, and a hell of a big bruise on one cheek. "What's the hurry, sis?" I asked.

She cried something, I didn't know the language but there was a terrible begging in her voice. A runaway slave—well let her run. The sabertooth would be better for her than her owner, judging by those marks. I lifted my foot and bent over and helped the girl rise.

Too late. The man came out through the trees after her. He was a young fellow, short but strongly built, and mad as a Zulu. He wore a gray uniform, a square helmet, and a swastika armband—a Nazi, then—but his only weapons were a broadsword and the long whip in one hand.

The girl screamed once more and took off again. He snarled, and snapped the whip. It was a murderous Boer sjambok; its heavy length coiled around her ankles and she stumbled and fell.

I suppose it was my bad luck

that day which flared up in me. I had no business interfering, but I didn't like Nazis much. I put a hand on his chest and shoved. Down he went.

He scrambled up, bellowing in excellent Norman French. I hefted my ax. "Not so fast, chum," I answered.

"Get out of the way!" He lunged past me toward the girl, who was lying there crying, out of hope, out of tears. I got him by the collar and spun him around, flat on his back.

"I rank thee, friend, in spite of that fancy uniform," I told him. "I rate a flintlock, and thou'st only got that pigsticker. Now behave thyself!"

Sure, I was looking for a fight. It's the best way there is to work off your temper.

"*Thou bloody swine—*" He got up again, slowly, and his face was strange. It was a look I'd only seen before on children and kings, just about to throw a tantrum. I didn't recognize him, never having had much truck with the Nazis or their friends. Suddenly he lashed out with the whip. It caught me across the chest like a white-hot wire.

That did it. No damned swordsman was going to hit me that way. I didn't even stop to think before my ax bounced off

his helmet.

The clang sent him lurching back, but the steel held firm. He screamed, then, and drew his sword and sprang for me. I met the whistling blow in midair. Sparks showered, and our weapons were nearly torn loose.

He growled and tried to thrust, but a broadsword is no good for that. I knocked the blade aside, and my ax whirred down. He was fast, jumped back. I furrowed his shoulder.

"The devil damn thee!" He got two hands on his sword and it flamed against my bare head. I caught the blow on my ax handle, swept it aside, and took one step inward. A sidewise chop, and his head was rolling in the gravel.

Most people think a battle-ax is a clumsy weapon. It isn't. I'll take it for close quarters over any weapon except a .45 or a carbine, which I didn't rate. His pretty sword went spinning as he fell, flashing the sunlight into my eyes like a last thrust.

Breathing hard, I looked around me. I was a little surprised that the girl was still crouched there, but maybe she was too tired and scared to run any more. She was a stranger to me, and I'd have noticed anyone that nice-looking, so I decided she must have been cap-

tured just lately. She'd been horribly treated.

"Who art thou, sis?" I asked, trying to be gentle. I asked it in French, English, Latin, Greek, and whatever other languages I had a smattering of—even tried the language of The Men, just for the hell of it. Her eyes were wide and blank, without understanding.

"Well—" I scratched my head, not knowing exactly what to do next. It was decided for me. I heard a barking curse and the sound of hoofs, and looked up to see a dozen Huns charging.

I've no particular race prejudices, not like some of The Men. I'm about a quarter Neanderthal myself, and proud of it—that's where I get my red hair and strong back. We'll say nothing about the brains. Otherwise, of course, I'm a Man. But where it comes to Huns, well, I just don't like the greasy little devils. That was beside the point right now, though. They were after my skull. I didn't know what business of theirs the fight was, and didn't stop to think why. No time. Not even time to get mad again. The lead man's lance was almost in my throat.

I skipped aside, chopping low, at the horse's forelegs. The poor beast screamed as it fell. The

Hun sprang lightly free, but I'd sheared his arm off before he hit the ground. The next one had his sword out, hewing at me. I turned the blow and chopped at his waist, but he was wearing chain mail. He grunted and swung once more, raking my cheek. Then they were all about me, cutting loose.

I scrambled toward Iggy, where the big stupid brute stood calmly watching. The Huns yammered and crowded their ponies in close. Reaching up in an overhand sweep, I split one brown monkey-face. A sword from behind struck at my neck. I ducked as it whistled over me, and thought in a queer short flash that this was the end of Trebuen.

"Chinga los heréticos!"

The tall horse had come thundering from the Nest and hit the pack like a cyclone. Don Miguel Pedro Estebán Francisco de Otrillo y Guttierrez flashed like a sun in his armor. His lance had already spitted one Hun and his sword sent another toppling. Now he reared the Arab back, and the slamming forefeet made a third man's pony yell and buck. The Huns howled and turned to meet him, giving me a chance to cross steel with one at a time.

Slash and bang! We were

fighting merrily when a shot cracked in the air, and another and another. That was the signal of the bosses. We broke off and drew away from each other, still growling. There were five dead on the road, too trampled to be recognized. I drew air into lungs that seemed on fire and looked up to the new rider. She'd come galloping from the Nest, not even stopping to saddle her horse.

"Ah, Señorita Olga!" Don Miguel rose in his stirrups and swept her a bow till the plumes on his helmet brushed his horse's mane. He was always polite to women, even to Captain Olga Borisovna Rakitin, who by his lights was not only a heretic but unmaidenly.

I sort of agreed with him there. She was a big woman, as big as most men, and beautifully formed. The tight gray-green uniform of the Martian Soviet left no doubt of that. Under the peaked, red-starred cap, her face was straight, finely cut, with high cheekbones and big gray eyes, and it was a sin the way she cropped her bronze-colored hair. But she was a human icicle; or maybe a chilled-steel punching ram would be better.

She holstered her pistol with a clank and looked us over with eyes like the wind off a glacier.

"What is the meaning of this brawl?" She had a nice low voice, but spoke French like a clicking trigger.

Don Miguel's bearded hawk face broke into the famous smile that had made him the terror of husbands and fathers from Lagash to London. "Señorita," he said gently, "when I see my good friend Trebuen set on by pagans and in danger of death before his conversion to the true faith is completed, there is only one thing which any hidalgo can do. Surely a lady will understand."

"And why did ye fight?" she went on, looking at me and the Huns.

One of the horsemen pointed to the battered Nazi body. None of them spoke French very well, so they wouldn't talk it at all if they could help it. It was plain I'd killed a particular pal of theirs. Well, any friend of the Huns is an enemy of mine.

"And thou, Trebuen?" she asked. "I've had about enough of thy Stone Age cannibalism. Thou'rt the worst troublemaker in the Nest."

That wasn't true, and she knew it. The Huns and the Nazis were forever brawling, and the Normans were even worse—though as they owned the place, I suppose they had the right. And I resented her

crack about my people. The Men aren't cannibals, they're peaceful hunters, minding their own business. I'd never heard about war before being recruited into the Nest. That was when I chanced to meet a mammoth-hunting party, guided them, and had one of the Duke's sons take a fancy to me. They could always use tall husky men here.

"I didn't like his face," I snapped. "So I took it off."

"This girl—" She looked at the plump, dark little chick, who had huddled up close to me.

"My property."

"I didn't know even thou went in for slave-beating," she sneered.

"I didn't do that!" I shouted.

Don Miguel had noticed the girl by now. He beamed at her, because she was certainly a knockout. Then he swept off his cloak and threw it over her shoulders. She drew it close around her and gave him a funny look, like a kicked dog that somebody finally pets. One small Mand stole toward mine, and I took it.

By this time the cops had arrived, twenty of them marching in double-time from the Nest. The setting sun glared off their helmets, armor, and shields. They broke formation at their leader's command—he was a centurion, I noticed—and closed

in around us, their short swords bare and sharp-looking.

"There've been enough brawls here," said Captain Olga. "This calls for an inquiry. Maybe a hanging or two."

"Señorita," said Don Miguel, very, very softly, his black eyes narrowed on her, "the law of the Nest permits gentlemen to duel. Any subsequent quarrel is between the victor and the dead man's friends."

"We'll see what the Duke has to say about it!" she snapped, and wheeled her horse around.

"Come on, friend," said the centurion. "Up to the castle."

I shifted my ax. "Are we under arrest?" I asked, putting a bite in the words. Cops have to be kept in their place.

"Er—not exactly, I guess," said the centurion. "But you'd better stay inside the castle walls till the Duke settles your case."

I shrugged. Killing a man here wasn't a crime—there were plenty more where they came from. I might have to pay a fine, and perhaps some weregild to a few Huns and Nazis. That griped me, but I could afford it.

That's what I thought—then.

I clicked my tongue at Iggy, who stooped over so I could scramble aboard. I took the girl in front of me, which made the ride a pleasant one. She was

horribly scared, and clung close to me. Iggy rose back up on his hind legs and stalked alongside Don Miguel's horse. The Huns trotted sulkily in the rear, twittering in their own language. The cops enclosed all of us and marched steadily down the road. They weren't really Romans, most of them were barbaric riffraff from Germany and Thrace, but their discipline was beautiful.

Don Miguel looked up at me. "Who is the young woman?" he asked. "Where is she from?"

"I don't know," I said. "Looks Semitic, but that could mean almost anything."

"Well," he said, "we'll take her to the Wisdom and find out."

"Uh—" I stumbled awkwardly. "I don't know how to thank thee for—"

"*De nada, amigo.*" He waved a long, lily-white hand. "It was a pleasure. Quite apart from the fact that I have to save thy heathenish soul before thou departest this world, unworthy apostle though I am, there is this question: Where else in the Nest would I find a man who could keep up with me in a drinking bout?"

"Well, there is that," I agreed.

We entered on the Via Appia. There was pavement within the bounds of the Nest, beautifully

laid—but a lot can be done when you have all the slave labor you want. Small houses lay on either side of the broad street, surrounded by gardens and bowers—the homes of the ordinary warriors. Slaves and naked children stopped to gape at us as we went by. We saw a few friends in the streets or in front of their homes: Thorkel the Berserk, all tricked out in Italian silks; the Mongol Belgutai, swapping small talk with Amir Hassan of Baghdad; the old sea dog Sir Henry Martingale, smoking in his garden while his concubines fanned him and played music. They hailed us cheerfully, not knowing what we had coming to us. But then, neither did we.

The cops' footfalls slammed on the pavement, a dull drum-beat between the fantastic houses. There were about a thousand homes in the Nest, each built according to the owner's fancy. A half-timbered Tudor cottage nestled between a French château and a swoop-roofed Chinese affair with one of their silly-looking dragons out in front; across from it were a miniature Moorish palace and one of those adobe huts the Greeks insisted on kenneling in. We turned at the fountain in the Place d'Etoile—a lovely piece of Renaissance work,

though it had gotten somewhat knocked up en route to us—and crossed London Bridge to the Street of St. Mark. The town muezzin was calling Moslems to prayer as we climbed the hill on which the castle stood.

Its gray stone battlements threw a night-like shadow over us. Looking around, I could see the slave pens on the other side of town; overseers were herding the field workers back, and such of the city's slaves as worked by day were trotting obediently toward the same place. Not many ever tried to get away—there was no place to go, and if a sabertooth or nimravus didn't get you first, the Normans would hunt you down with dogs. They thought that was rare sport.

We went through the gate into the flagged courtyard, past the guards—those were specially trusted Janissaries, armed with repeater rifles. "Get on down," said the centurion. "I'll take your mounts to the stables."

"Okay," I said, "but if they don't give Iggy enough to drink there, thou'll hear from me. He needs lots of water."

We stood in the courtyard. A couple of big mastiffs growled at us. There was a small group of Normans breaking up an outdoor poker game as it got too dark to see—some of the Duke's

many sons and grandsons. They swaggered past us into the main keep. Most of them were dressed in Renaissance style, though one wore a Chinese mandarin's robe. Some, the older ones, carried pistols as well as swords.

"I suppose we wait here till the Duke summons us. I hope it won't be long—I'm hungry." Don Miguel spoke to the Nubian porter: "If we are called for, we will be in the Wisdom's chamber, or else in the main gaming room."

The girl shuddered as we walked into the keep. Don Miguel laid a brotherly arm not quite about her waist. "There, there," he said. "We shall find out who thou art, and then we will get thee some wine and dress those hurts."

"How about the rest of her?" I asked.

"Oh, there is no hurry about that," he answered.

I felt a tingle of jealousy. Just lately, I'd lost my concubine in a crap game to Ethelwulf the Saxon—I'm not a harem keeper, I believe in one at a time—and had been thinking that this wench would make a nice replacement when she was patched up. But if a man's saved your life—oh, well. She kept looking in my direction anyway.

We went down long, stony

corridors, hung with rich tapestries; the electric lights didn't drive away the gloom and chill, somehow. Now and then we'd pass a slave or a warrior, but no one paid any attention to us, in spite of the fact that I was only wearing breeks and that Don Miguel and I were both spattered with red. You got used to almost anything in the Nest.

"I thought the Duke was away this afternoon?" I said.

"He is. Off to survey the Danelaw. I fear me the poor English will be missing more than the vikings ever took."

"Well," I said, "it's about time for another expedition anyway. The boys are getting restless." As a warrior third class—technically a musketeer—I had my own responsibilities and command. "And there ought to be good pickings in Saxon England; the Romano-Britons certainly had some fine things."

Don Miguel shrugged delicately. "I wish, my friend, thou wouldst not be quite so blunt about it," he said. "At any rate, Duke Hugo and his party should be back in time for dinner. They took the Rover out this morning."

The Normans were often pretty stupid. They could have brought the Rover back within a second of its leaving the Nest,

no matter how long they stayed in the Danelaw, but no, they were too superstitious for that, they had to be gone all day. In fact, they'd never done any of the things they could have done with the machine, except just transport themselves and us. Oh, well, it was theirs.

We came to the fork in the hall. One branch of it went off toward the eating and gaming rooms, another to the guarded door beyond which was the Rover's place. We took the third branch, toward the harem. That was guarded too, of course, by slaves whose size and strength hadn't been hurt much by Hugo's following the quaint custom of his father, Duke Roger of Sicily; but we didn't go that far. The girl shuddered and moaned as we started up a long stair, into the north tower.

A fancy bronze door at its top opened into the Wisdom's laboratory. I slammed the rather gruesome knocker down, and pretty soon his dusty voice said to come in.

The lab was a huge room, most of it filled with bookshelves; an arched doorway led into a still bigger library. One end of the lab, though, was given over to grimoires, wands, skulls, a stuffed crocodile, bottles and flasks, an alembic, a spectroscope, and an induction furnace, for

the Wisdom dabbled in alchemy. He came toward us, his long black robe sweeping the ground, his hairless head bent forward as he peered near-sightedly at us. "Ah," he murmured. "The Cro-Magnon and the hidalgo. What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

I never knew just where the Wisdom came from. Some said he was Victorian English, some said he was Reformation German, but my private guess is Byzantine Greek. He was here because of his impossibly good memory and scholar's brain. I don't think there ever was a book he couldn't translate or a language he couldn't soon learn, and if you gave him time and references, he'd tell you what you wanted to know about any sector. It saved a lot of first-hand casing of many joints. Then he was our interpreter and teacher of new arrivals. I didn't like him—nobody did—nasty cold-blooded snake—but we could hardly do without that big head of his.

"We got into a fight about this girl," I said. "Where's she from and so on?"

He flir'ed at her, touched her with long skinny fingers, tilted her head this way and that. She moaned again and shrank close to me. Finally he began to talk to her, trying

this language and that. At one, she brightened a little, under the dirt and tears, and began to jabber back.

He nodded, rubbing his hands together with a dry scaly sound. "The daughter of a Babylonian merchant," he said. "Seventeen years old, carefully brought up. Some of our men snatched her during Assurbanipal's sack and brought her here. She resisted the attentions of the 'one in gray' as she calls him—a Nazi?—broke out of his house, and ran in terror. Then you rescued her. That is all."

"The poor child," said Don Miguel. There was a world of pity on his face. "I fear I shall burn in hell a long time for belonging to the Nest."

"What's her name?" I inquired.

"Oh—that." The Wisdom asked her. "Inini. Is that important?"

"Yes," said Don Miguel stiffly. "She is a human soul, not an animal."

"There is a difference?" The Wisdom shrugged. "Was there anything else?"

"No," I said. "No, I guess not. Thanks. Let's go get some chow."

Don Miguel was still biting his lip. He got those guilty spells now and then, though why he should blame himself, I don't know. He'd been in

trouble with the Governor of México when he was located by one of our recruiters, and it was as much as his handsome head was worth to go home.

Now I don't mind a good healthy fight at all. When we took Knossos—yes, we were the ones who did that—or helped in any of several times from Brennus to Charles V, or worked in a hundred other wars, it was good honest battle and we earned our loot. You could say that when we lifted that Prussian city just ahead of the Soviet soldiers, we deserved its loot more than they. And my year of hijacking in Prohibition America—the only time I was ever allowed to carry a real firearm—was just clean fun. But in nearly ten years of the Nest and the Rover, I'd seen a lot of other things that turned my guts. Like this.

"Come on, Inini," I said. "Thou'rt among friends now." She managed a small trembling smile.

We were going out when the door opened before us. Captain Olga Rakitin stood there. Her gun came out as she saw us. "There ye are," she said, slowly. Her lips were drawn back, and her face was very white.

"Uh-huh," I answered. "What of it? Been looking for us?"

"Yes. Drop that ax! Drop it or I'll shoot!" Her voice rose high.

"What the holy hell—"

"Thou knowest who thou killed, Trebuen?" she asked shrilly.

"Some damn Nazi," I answered. My spine prickled, looking down the barrel of that gun. It threw explosive shells.

"No. Not a Nazi. Just a young fellow who admired them, liked to strut around in their costume. He didn't rate a gun yet, but his birth—Trebuen, that was Reginald du Arronde! A grandson of the Duke!"

There was a long thundering silence. Then Inini shrank back with a little scream, not knowing what went on but seeing death here. "*Nombre de Dios!*" muttered Don Miguel. "Judas priest!" I said.

It felt like a blow in the belly. Duke Hugo had some first-class torturers.

Olga's voice was still wobbly. I'd never heard it that way before. "Come on," she said. "The others will find out any moment. Thou mightest as well come quietly with me."

I shook myself. My hands were cold and numb, and I had trouble talking. "No," I said. "Nothing doing, iceberg." I took a step toward her.

"Back!" she screamed. "Back or I'll shoot!"

"Go ahead," I answered. "Think I want to be boiled alongside my own stuffed skin?"

I took another step toward her, very slow and easy. The gun shook. "*Gospodý!*" she yelled. "I will shoot, me *Hercule!*"

I sprang then, hitting her low. The gun went off like thunder and tore a hole in the ceiling. We fell with a crash. She hit me with her free hand, cursing in Russian. I wrenched the gun loose. She tried to knee me as I scrambled away. I got up and stood over her. She glared at me through tangled ruddy hair and spat like a wildcat.

Don Miguel had his sword out, the point just touching the Wisdom's throat. "Make one sound, *señor*," he purred, "and I trust you will be able to find a suitable guide into the lower regions."

The gun felt odd in my hand, lighter than the American rods. Those Martians built them good, though. I went to the door and peered out. A sound of voices came from below.

"They heard," I grunted. "Coming up the stairs. Gives merry hell now."

"Bar the door," snapped Don Miguel. He pricked the Wisdom's neck a little harder. "Dog of a

heathen, I want rope. Swiftly!"

There was a tramping and clanking outside. The knocker banged, and fists thumped on the door. "Go away," quavered the Wisdom at Don Miguel's sharp insistence. "I am working. There is nothing here."

"Open up!" roared a voice. "We seek Trebuen and de Otrillo for the Duke's justice!"

The Wisdom was pulling lengths of cord from a chest and knotting them together. From the edge of an eye, I saw Inini creep timidly forth and test the knots. Smart girl. She didn't know the score, but she knew we had to take it on the lam quick.

"Open, I say!" bellowed the man outside. Other voices clamored behind him. "Open or we break in!"

I took my ax up in one hand, held the pistol in the other, and stood waiting. The door shook. I heard the hinge-rivets pulling loose. "Hurry that rope up, *hidalgo*," I said.

"It's not long enough yet—a frightful jump down to the courtyard— More rope, thou devil, or I'll see thy liver!"

The door buckled.

There was a green-gray blur beside me. Olga's fist came down on my arm. I'd forgotten her! She yanked the gun from me and jumped back, gasping.

I whirled to face her, and looked down its barrel. Inini screamed. Don Miguel ripped out a cuss-word that would cost him another year in Purgatory.

I looked at Olga. She was crouched, shaking, a blindness in her eyes. My brain felt cold and clear. I remembered something that had just happened, when I took the gun from her.

"Okay, iceberg, you win," I said. "I hope you enjoy watching us fry. That's your style, isn't it?" I said it in French, and used *vous* though we'd been *tu* before like the other warriors.

The door crashed down. A tall Norman burst in, with a tommy gun in his hands and hell in his face. I saw spears and swords behind him.

Olga gave a queer, strangled little noise and shot the Norman in the belly.

He pitched over, his gun clattering at my feet. No time to pick it up. I jumped across his body and split the skull of the Papuan behind him. As he fell, I smashed down the sword of a Tartar. A Goth stabbed at my back. I brought the ax around backhanded, catching him with the spike.

"Get out!" yelled Olga. "Get out! I'll hold them!" She fired into the mass of the men. I sent another head jumping free,

whirled the ax around, and hit a *Pickelhaube*. My blade glanced off, but bit into the Uhlan's shoulder. A Vandal hollered and swung at me. I caught his blade in the notch I have in my haft, twisted it out of his hands, and cut him down.

They backed away then, snarling at us. There'd be men with guns any second. "Go, Trebuen," cried Don Miguel. "Get free!"

No time to argue with his Spanish pride. I had to be first, because only Olga and I really knew how to leap, and she had the gun. The rope was dangling out the window, knotted to a gargoyle. I took it in my hand and slid into the big darkness below. It scorched my palm.

When its end slipped away, I fell free, not knowing how far. I dropped the ax straight down, relaxed cat-fashion, and hit the stone flags hard enough to knock the wind out of me. About fifteen feet of drop. Staggering up, I yelled to the lighted window.

A dark shape showed against the tower wall—I could barely see it. Inini fell into my arms. *Real smart girl*—she'd snatched up that tommy gun. But it smashed across my mouth.

Olga came down under her own power. We both caught Don Miguel. Ever catch a man in helmet and corselet? I groaned and fumbled around for my ax

while Olga shot at the figures peering out the window.

"This way," I said. "To the stables."

We ran around the high keep, toward the rear. The yard wasn't lit, it was all shadows under the stars. But a party of cops was coming around the other side of the donjon. I grabbed the tommy gun from Inini and gave them a burst. Just like hijacking days. A couple of javelins whizzed wickedly near me, then the cops retreated.

To the stables! Their long forms were like hills of night. I opened the door and went in. A slave groom whimpered and shrank into the straw. "Hold the door, Olga," I said.

"*Da, kommissar.*" Was it a chuckle in her voice? No time for laughter. I switched on the lights and went down the rows of stalls. The place smelled nice and clean, hay and horses.

But it was good old Iggy and his rank alligator stink I was after. I found him at the end of the stalls, next to the Duke's armored jeep and his one tank. I wished we could take a machine, but the Duke had the keys. Anyway, a dinosaur can go where a tank can't. I thumped Iggy on his stupid snout till he bent over and I got the special saddle on his back.

Olga's gun was barking at the entrance. I heard other shots, rifles. When they brought up the big .50-caliber machine-guns, that was the end of us. Don Miguel had saddled his Arab by the time I was done.

His face was pretty grim. "I fear we are surrounded," he said. "Can we break through?"

"We can try," I said. "Olga and I will lead on Iggy. You take Inini." I wished he could use the tommy gun—it was easy enough, but his stallion would bolt. The brute's eyes were already rolling. Praise be, dinosaurs are too dumb to know fear.

I led Iggy toward the door, where Olga was firing through the crack. "Hop on, icicle," I said.

Her face was a dim shadow and a few soft highlights as she turned to me. "What will we do?" she whispered. "What will we do but die?"

"I don't know. Let's find out." I scrambled into the saddle while she slammed and bolted the door. She jumped up in front of me; the seat was big enough for that, and we crouched there waiting.

The door shook and cracked and went down. "Whoop!" I yelled. "Giddap, boy!"

Iggy straightened, almost taking my head off as he went

through the door. Olga had holstered her pistol and grabbed the tommy gun. She sprayed the mob before us. Iggy plowed right through them, trampling any that didn't get out of the way in time. Spears and swords and arrows bit at him, but he didn't mind, and his tall form shielded us.

Across the courtyard! Iggy broke into an earthshaking run as I spurred him with the ax spike. Don Miguel's horse galloped beside us. The moon was just starting to rise, shadows and white light weird between the high walls. A machine-gun opened up, hunting for us with fingers of fire.

They were closing the portcullis as we reached the main gate. Don Miguel darted ahead, the iron teeth clashing behind him. "Hang on!" I yelled. "Hang on! Go it, Iggy!"

The dinosaur grunted as he hit the barrier. The shock damn near threw me loose. I jammed my feet into the stirrups and clutched Olga to me. A ragged piece of iron furrowed my scalp. Then the portcullis tore loose and Iggy walked over it and on down the Street of St. Mark.

"This way!" cried Don Miguel, wheeling about. "Out of the Nest!"

We shook the ground on our way. Turning at Zulu House—

Löbengula's exiled warriors still preferred barracks—we came out on Broadway and went down it to the Street of the Fishing Cat. Across Moloch Plaza, through an alley where Iggy scraped the walls, through an orchard that scattered like matchwood, and then we were out and away.

The Oligocene night was warm around us. A wet wind blew from across the great river, smell of reeds and muck and green water, the strong wild perfume of flowers that died with the glaciers. The low moon was orange-colored, huge on the rim of the world. I heard a *nimravus* screeching out in the dark, and the grunt and splash of some big mammal. Grass whispered around our mounts' legs. Looking behind me, I saw the castle all one blaze of light. It was the only building with electricity—the rest of them huddled in darkness, showing red and yellow fire-gleams. But there were torches bobbing in the streets.

Don Miguel edged closer to me. His face was a blur under the moonlit shimmer of his helmet. "Where do we go now, *Tre-buen?*" he asked.

We had gotten away. Somehow, in some crazy fashion, we'd cut our way out. But be-

fore long, the Normans would be after us with dogs. They could trail us anywhere.

Swim the river—with the kind of fish they had there? I'd sooner take a few more Normans to hell with me.

"I think—" Olga's voice was as cool as it had always been. "I think they will not start hunting us before dawn. We are too dangerous in the dark. Perhaps we can put a good distance between in the meantime."

"Not too good," I answered. "The horse is carrying double, and Iggy just won't go very far; he'll lie down and go on strike after a few more miles. But yeah, I do think we have a breather. Let's rest."

We got off, tethered our mounts to a clump of trees, and sat down. The grass was cool and damp, and the earth smelled rich. Inini crept into my arms like a frightened little kid, and I held her close without thinking much about it. Mostly, I was drawing air into my lungs, looking at the stars and the rising moon, and thinking that life was pretty good. I'd be sorry to leave it.

Don Miguel spoke out of the shadow that was his face. "Señorita Olga," he said, "we owe our lives to thy kindness. Thou hast a Christian soul."

"*Tchort!*" She spoke coldly. I

sat watching the moonlight shimmer on her hair. "I've had enough of the Nest, that's all."

I smiled to myself, just a little. I knew better, though maybe she didn't herself.

"How long hast thou been with us, iceberg?" I asked. "Five years, isn't it? Why didst thou enlist?"

She shrugged. "I was in trouble," she said. "I spoke my mind too freely. The Martian government resented it. I stole a spaceship and got to Earth, where I was not especially welcome either. While I was dodging Martian agents, I met one of Hugo's recruiters. What else could I do but join? I didn't like the 22nd Century much anyway."

I could understand that. And it wasn't strange she'd been picked up, out of all the reaches of time. Recruiters visited places where there were pirates and warriors, or else where there was an underworld. Olga would naturally have had something to do with the latter, she'd have had no choice with Soviet assassins after her. And she'd be wanted here for her technical knowledge, which was scarce in the Nest.

"Has the Duke or his men ever explored beyond thy century?" asked Don Miguel idly. A proper caballero wouldn't be thinking

of his own coming death, he'd hold polite chitchat going till the end.

"No, I think not," she answered. "They would be afraid that the true owners of the Rover would detect them. It is in the anarchic periods where they can operate safely."

I wondered, not for the first time, what those builders were like, and where they were from. It must have been a pretty gentle, guileless culture, by all accounts. Some twenty historians and sociologists, making the mistake of dropping in on the court of Duke Roger of Sicily. But even though Roger himself had been off in Italy at the time, they might have foreseen that one of his illegitimate sons, young Hugo, would suspect these strangers weren't all they seemed. Just because a man is ignorant of science, he isn't necessarily stupid, but the time travelers overlooked that—which was costly for them when Hugo and some of his bravos grabbed them, tortured the facts out of them, and knocked them off. Of course, once that had happened, anyone could have predicted that those few Normans would take the Rover and go happily off to plunder through all space—on Earth, at least—and all time—short of some era where the Builders

could find them; and that they'd slowly build up their forces by recruiting through the ages, until now—

"I wonder if the Builders ever will find us," mused Don Miguel.

"Hardly," said Olga. "Or they'd have been here before now. It seems pretty silly to hide out way back in the American Oligocene. But I must say the operations are shrewdly planned. No anachronistic weapons used, no possible historical record of our appearances—oh, yes."

"This era has a good climate, and no humans to give trouble," I said. "That's probably why Hugo picked it."

Inini murmured wearily. Her dark hair flowed softly over my arms as she stirred. Poor kid. Poor scared kid, snatched out of home and time into horror. "Look," I said, "are we just going to sit and take it? Can't we think of a way to hit back where it'll really hurt?"

It was funny how fast we'd all switched loyalties. None of us had ever much liked Duke Hugo or the company he kept, but the bandit's life had been a high and handsome one. In many ways, those had been good years. Only now— It was, somehow, more than the fact Hugo was out to fry our gizzards. That was just the little

nudge which had overturned some kind of mountain inside us.

Olga spoke like a machine. "We are three—well, four, I suppose—possessed of two working guns, a sword, an ax, a horse, and a dinosaur. Against us are a good thousand fighting men, of whom a hundred or so possess firearms. Perhaps a few of our friends might swing to our side, out of comradeship or to sack the castle, but still the odds are ridiculous." She chuckled, a low pleasant sound in the murmuring night. "And as a Martian, I am Dostoyevskian enough to enjoy the fact a trifle."

Inini whispered something and raised her face. I bent my head and brushed her lips. Poor little slave! I wished she'd been mine from the start—everything would have been so much simpler.

Slaves!

I sat bolt upright, spilling Inini to the grass. By the horns of Pan and the eye of Odin—slaves!

"Five thousand slaves!"

"Eh?" Don Miguel came over to pick up the girl. "Thou'rt most unknighly at times, *amigo* . . . There, there, my little partridge, all is well, be calm . . ."

Olga got it right away. I heard her fist slam the ground.

"By Lenin! I think thou'st got it, Trebuen!"

Five thousand slaves, mostly male, penned up in a wire stockade, not very heavily guarded—Swiftly, we settled the plan of action. I showed Inini how to operate the tommy gun; she caught on fast and laughed savagely in the dark. I hoped she wouldn't shoot the wrong people. Then we mounted and trotted back toward the Nest, changing women passengers this time.

The moon had now cleared the eastern forests and was flooding the plain. It was a white, cold, unreal light, dripping from the grass, spattering the trees, gleaming off water and Don Miguel's armor. I swore at it. Damn the moon, anyway! We needed darkness.

We swung far around the Nest, to approach it from the side of the slave pens. Luckily; there was a lot of orchard there. Trees grew fast in the Oligocene, these were tall ones. Twigs and leaves brushed my face, branches creaked and snapped as Iggy went through them, speckles of light broke the thick shadows. I halted on the edge of the shelter and looked across a hundred feet toward the pens. The castle beyond was black against the high stars, most of its lights turned off again. The

hunt for us must have died down in the hour or two we'd been gone.

The pens were a long double row of wooden barracks, fenced in with charged wire. There was a wooden guard tower, about thirty feet high, on each side, with searchlights and machine-guns on top; but there'd only be a few men on each. Olga slid off the horse—her gun would frighten it too much—but Inini stayed with me, sitting in front and cradling her weapon. Nothing moved. It was all black and white and silence there under the moon. I licked my lips; they felt like sandpaper, and my heart was thumping. Two minutes from now, we might be so much cold meat.

"Okay, Iggy." I nudged him with my heels, trying to hold my voice hard. "Let's go. *Giddap!*"

He broke into that lumbering run of his. The shock of his footfalls jarred back into me. Someone yelled, far and faint. The searchlights glared out, grabbing after me. I heard the machine-gun begin stuttering, and crouched low behind Iggy's neck. He grunted as the slugs hit him. Then he got mad.

We hit the tower full on, and I nearly pitched out of the saddle. Wood thundered and crashed around me. The machine-gunners screamed and

tried to drag their weapon over to the parapet. Iggy heaved against the walls; they buckled, and the lights went out. Then the tower caved in around us. Something hit me, stars exploded, and I hung on in a whirling darkness.

Iggy was trampling the beams underfoot. Wires snapped, and the juice in them blazed and crackled. One of the guards, still on his feet, tried to run for help. Inini cut him down.

The gun on the other side of the stockade began hammering. I shook my head, trying to clear it. "Go get 'em, Iggy! Goddam thee, go get that gunner!" He was too busy stamping on the tower we'd just demolished to notice. His breath was hissing as he wrecked it.

Olga dashed past us on foot, shooting at the other post. She was hard to see in that tricky light. The tracer bullets marked the gun for her. Bullets were sleeting around me now. A few slaves began coming out of the barracks, yelling their panic.

Iggy finally made up his stupid mind that the slugs still hitting him now and then were from the other tall shape. He turned and ran to do battle. Inini fired ahead of us as we charged. Olga had to jump to get out of the way. Iggy started pulling down the tower.

Don Miguel was shouting to the slaves as they boiled out of their houses. "Forward, comrades! On to liberty! Kill your oppressors!" They gaped at his sword. God! Wouldn't they ever catch on?

Men must be pouring from the Nest now. I kicked and cursed, trying to face my idiotic mount around to meet them. The tower began crumpling. It went down in a slow heave of timbers and splinters. Don Miguel was still haranguing the slaves. Trouble was, about the only ones who knew much Norman French had been here so long the spirit was beaten out of them. The newcomers, who might fight, didn't know what he was talking of.

A horn blew from the castle hill. Turning my face from where Iggy stood over the ruins, I saw metal flash in the moonlight. Hoofs rolled their noise through the ground. Cavalry! And if the Duke got his armored vehicles going—

Olga darted almost under Iggy's feet, to where the machine-gun lay on its splintered platform. She heaved it back into position and crouched over it. As the horsemen entered the stockade, she cut loose.

They broke, screaming. Huns and Tartars, mostly, with some mounted Normans and others.

Bullets whined from their side, badly aimed in the confusion.

I heard a slow drawl from down under me. Looking, I saw a tall man in the tattered leavings of a gray uniform. "So that's the idee," he called. "Whah, stranger, you should'a said so the fuhst time."

"Who the hell are you?" I found time to gasp in English.

"Captain Jebel Morrison, late o' the Red Horse Cavalry, Confederate States of America, at yo' suhvice. The buzzahds grabbed me an' mah boys when we was on patrol in Tennessee—All right, y'all!" He turned back to the milling, muttering slaves and shouted: "Kill the Yankees!"

There was a scattering of rebel yells, and some other men came running out toward him. They snatched swords and spears from the riders we'd cut down, let out that blood-freezing screech once more, and trotted toward the entrance of the pen.

"So 'tis smite the Papists, eh?" roared an English voice. "Truly the hand of the Lord is on us!" And a bull-necked Roundhead darted after the Southerners.

"Allah akbar!"—"Vive la republique!"—"Hola, Odin!"—"St. George for merrie England!"—"Ave, Caesar!"—The mob spirit caught them, and the

huge dark mass of men surged forth toward the Nest. About half the slaves, the rest were still afraid, and they were unarmed and unprotected—but God, how they hated!

Don Miguel galloped forth to put himself at their head. I cursed Iggy and beat him on the snout till he turned around and lumbered after them. Inini laughed shrilly and waved her tommy gun in the air. We broke out of the pen and rolled in one swarm against the enemy.

Somebody reached up to touch my leg. I saw Olga trotting beside me; she'd grabbed one of those Hunnish ponies stampeding around the pen. "I didn't know thou wert a cow-boy!" I yelled at her.

"Neither did I!" Her teeth gleamed in the moonlight as she laughed back at me. "But I'd better learn fast!" She snubbed in the pony's neck as it skittered. I suppose her interplanetary flying had trained nerve and muscle—

It must have been bare minutes from the time we first charged the stockade. Only the castle guard had been ready to fight us. But now as we entered the streets, going down long white lanes of moon between the black forms of houses, I saw the bandits rallying. Shots began to crack again. Men crumpled in

our ranks. We had to hit them before they got organized.

We went over one thin line of Romans with a rush, grabbing up their weapons. Circling the castle hill, we began mounting it on the side of the broken portcullis. Men were streaming from the houses and dashing toward our host. It was a bad light for shooting guns or arrows, but plenty bright enough for a sword.

Inini and Olga blazed at them as they came up the Street of St. Mark. No one could miss a bunch of men, and both sides were having heavy loss; but individuals, like myself, were hard to hit. I saw the attackers recoil and churn about, waiting for reinforcements. We struggled on up the hill, in the face of gunfire from the castle.

The bandits behind us were piling up now, into a solid wall of armed men across the street. I lifted my voice and bellowed: "Who wants to overthrow the castle?"

They hesitated, swaying back and forth. Suddenly a shout rose. "By Tyr! I do!" A couple of men pitched aside as Thorkel the Berserk darted toward us. Inini fired at him. I slapped her gun aside. "Not him, wench!"

Hoofs clattered on the street. I saw moonlight like water on

the lacquered leather breastplates of Belgutai's Mongol troop. *God help us now*, I thought, and then the Mongols crashed into the other bandits. Belgutai had always been a good friend of mine.

Steel hammered on steel as they fought. I knew that a lot of those wolves would switch to our side if they thought we had a fair chance of winning. Hugo had trained them to steal anything that wasn't welded down, and then stuffed his own home with loot—a mistake, that! But we had to take the castle before we could count on turncoats to help us.

We were up under the walls now, out of reach of the tower guns, but our numbers were fearfully reduced. The slaves weren't running forth so fast now, they were beginning to be afraid. I jabbed Iggy with my ax, driving him forward against the gate and its rifle-armed defenders. We hit them like a tornado, and they fled.

I was hardly in the courtyard before a new bellowing lifted. The tank was coming around the keep. It was a light one, 1918 model, but it could easily stop our whole force. For a minute, my world caved in around me.

The tank's machine-guns opened up on Iggy. He'd already

been wounded, and this must have hurt. He hissed and charged, I saw what was coming, dropped my ax, and jumped to the ground. Inini followed me. We hit the pavement and rolled over and bounced up again.

Iggy was crawling on top of the tank, trying to rip steel apart. His blood streamed over the metal, he was dying, but the poor brave brute was too dumb to know it. The tank growled, backing up. Iggy slapped his big stiff tail into the treads. The tank choked to a halt. Its cannon burped at us. The shell exploded against the gateway arch. Iggy stamped a foot down on the barrel and it twisted. Someone opened the turret and threw out a grenade. It burst against Iggy's throat. He got his taloned forepaws into the turret and began pulling things into chunks. Even a dying dinosaur is no safe playmate.

There was fighting all around the courtyard. A lot of the men with guns must have been disposed of by now. Those of the slaves who knew how to use firearms were grabbing them out of the hands of bandits who'd been mobbed, and turning them on the Normans. The rest of our boys were seizing axes, spears, swords, and chopping loose. Captain Morrison had somehow—

God knows how—managed to hold them more or less together. The Normans and their cohorts charging out of the keep joined forces and hit that little army. It became hand-to-hand, and murder.

I was only hazily aware of all that. Olga came running up to me as I got on my feet. Her pony must have been shot from under her. "What now?" she cried. "What should we do?"

"Get to the Rover," I said. "It's the only way—they're better armed than we, they'll finish us unless—"

Don Miguel was fighting a mounted knight. He cut him down and clattered over to us as we and Inini ran for the keep. "With ye, my friends," he cried gaily. I imagine this work was taking a lot of guilt off his conscience. Maybe that was one reason why some of the other bandits, down in the street, had thrown in with us.

We ran along the hallway. It was empty except for some terrified women. Around a bend of the forbidden corridor was the Rover. I skidded to a halt. Machine-gunners watched over it. "Gimme that!" I snatched the tommy gun from Inini and burst around the corner, firing. The two Mamelukes dropped.

The door was locked. I took my ax this time, and battered

at it. Wood splintered before me. I turned at Olga's yell and the bark of her gun. A party of Normans, a good dozen of them, was attacking. I saw Duke Hugo's burly white-haired form in the lead. They must have heard the racket and—

They were on us before we could use our guns to stop them. A sword whistled above my head as I ducked. I reached up and cut at the hands. As the man fell against me, screaming, I flung him into another chain-mailed figure. They went down with a clash. Two-handed, I bashed in a skull. Hugo had a revolver almost in my belly. I slewed the ax around and knocked it from him with the flat of the weapon. His sword hissed free before I could brain him. It raked me down the side as I dodged. I smashed at his unhelmeted head, but he turned the blow.

"Haro!" he yelled. Edged metal whined down against my haft. I twisted the ax, forcing his blade aside. My left fist jumped out into his face. He staggered back, and I killed him.

Don Miguel's horse was pulled down and slain, but he was laying merrily around him. We cleared a space between us. Then Olga and Inini could use their guns.

I went back to the door and

smashed it in. We broke into the high chamber. The Rover lay there, a tapered hundred-foot cylinder. Inside, I knew, it was mostly empty space, with a few simple dials and studs. I'd watched it being operated.

Don Miguel grabbed my arm as I entered. "We can't leave our comrades out there, Trebuen!" he gasped. "As soon as the Normans get organized, it will be slaughter."

"I know," I said. "Come on inside, though, all of you."

When I turned a certain dial, the Rover moved. There was no sense of it within us, only a glowing light told us we were on our way through time. A thousand years in the future.

Hugo had never checked his own tomorrows, and wouldn't let anyone else do it. That was understandable, I guess, especially if you were a medieval man. I couldn't resist looking out. The chamber was still there, but it was dark and still, thick with dust, and some animal which had made its lair here scrambled away in alarm. The castle was empty. In a million years or so of rain and wind, and finally the glaciers grinding down over it, no trace would be left.

I drew a shuddering sigh into the stillness. But I knew I was

going back. We'd left a lot of friends back there in the mess of the Nest. And besides, I'd always had an idea about the Rover. Those Normans had been too superstitious to try it, but it should work. Don Miguel swore, but agreed. And Olga helped me work out the details. Then we took off.

The verniers were marked in strange numerals, but you could read them all right, once you'd figured them out. And the Rover was accurate to a second or less. We jumped back to within one second of our departure time.

The rest of the fight is blurred. I don't want to remember the next twenty minutes—or twenty-four hours, depending on how you look at it. We stepped out of the machine. We turned and went quickly from the chamber. As we reached its door, the machine appeared again, next to itself, and three dim figures came out. I looked away from my own face. Soon there was a mob of ourselves there.

We stuck together, running out and firing. Twenty minutes later, each time we finished, we'd dart back to the Rover, jump it into the future, and return within one second and some feet of our last departure point. There were a good three hundred of us, all brought to

the same time, approximately. And in a group like that, we had fire power. It was too much for the enemy. Screaming about witchcraft, they finally threw down their weapons and ran. I hate to think about seventy-five of myself acting as targets at the same time, though. It would only have needed one bullet.

But twenty minutes after the last trip, our messed-up time lines straightened out, and the four of us were all there—victors.

I stood on the castle walls, looking over the Nest as sunrise climbed into the sky. Places were burning here and there, and bodies were strewn across the ground. The bandits who'd fought with us or surrendered were holed up in a tower, guarding themselves against the slaves who were running wild as they celebrated their freedom. I only allowed firearms to those people I could trust, so now I was king of the Nest.

Olga came to me where I stood. The damp morning wind ruffled her hair, and her eyes were bright in spite of the weariness in us all. She'd changed her ragged uniform for a Grecian dress, and its white simplicity was beautiful on her.

We stood side by side for awhile, not speaking. Finally I shook my head. "I don't feel too

happy about this, iceberg." I said. "In its own way, the Nest was something glorious."

"Was?" she asked softly.

"Sure. We can't start it up again—at least I can't, after this night. I've seen enough bloodshed for the rest of my life. We'll have to organize things here, and return everyone to whatever time they pick; not all of them will want to go home, I suppose. I don't think I will. Life with The Men would be sort of—limited, after this."

She nodded. "I can do without my own century too," she said. "It could be fun to keep on exploring in time for awhile, till I find some era I really want to settle down in."

I looked at her, and slowly the darkness lifted from me. "Till we do," I said.

"We?" She frowned. "Don't

get ideas, Sir Caveman." Her lips trembled. "Thou and th-thy Babylonian wench!"

"Oh, Inini's a sweet kid," I grinned. "Don Miguel was giving her the old line when I saw them last, and she seemed to enjoy it. But she'd be kind of dull for me."

"Of all the insufferable, conceited—!"

"Look," I said patiently, "thou couldst easily have shot me when I first grabbed for thy gun. But underneath, thou didn't want to—be honest, now!—so thou missed. And I don't think thou changed sides a little later because of a sudden attack of conscience, any more than the rest of us, iceberg." I switched into Americanese, with Elizabethan overtones. "C'mere, youse, and let me clutch thee!"

She did.
