

PLANET STORIES



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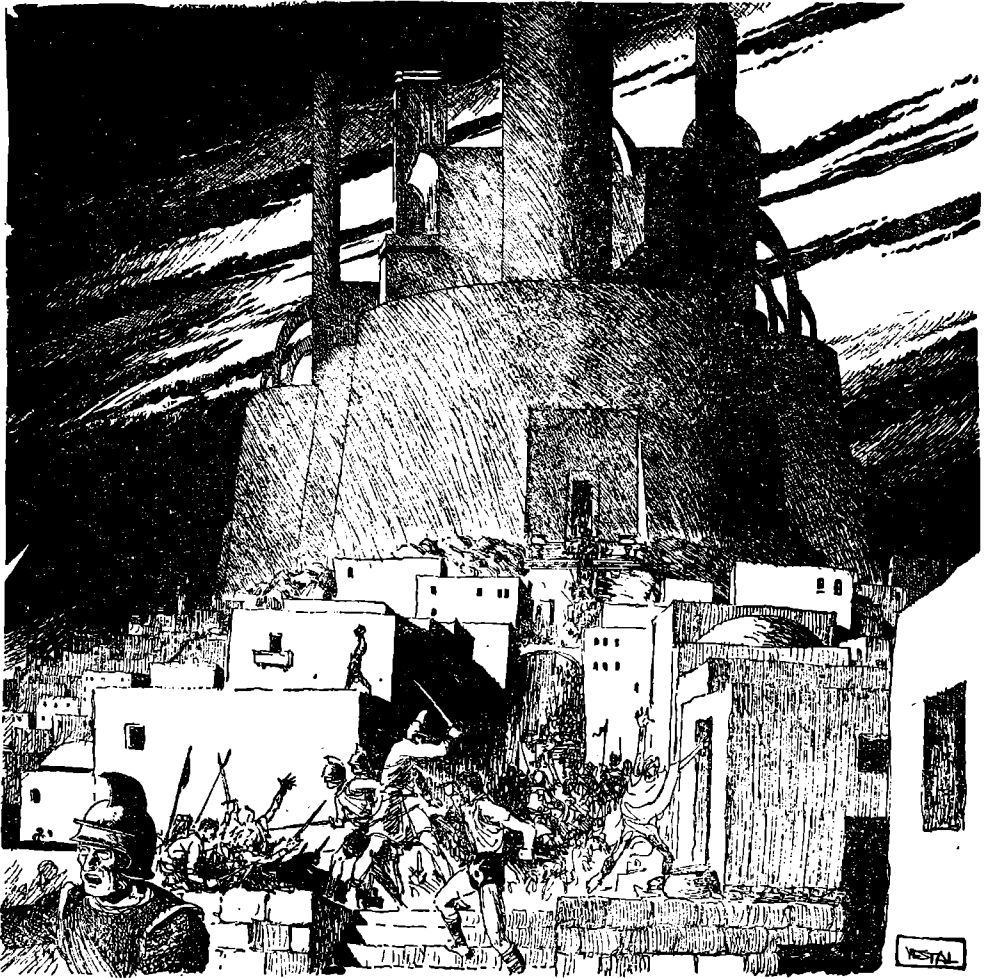
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Tonight the Stars Revolt!

A Novel by GARDNER F. FOX

In the Black Pools he found the 50,000-year-lost wisdom of the Ancients. For a day Red Angus held victory in his sword-hand. But it was too short a glimpse, too elusive a thought to bolster the star-rabble against the Citadel's iron guard.

THE pools were like the gaping mouth of space itself, dark and fathomless, extending into bottomless wells, the depths of which the people of Karr could only guess. Some said the god Stasor dwelt in the glistening black depths. Others claimed

the emptiness was the hollow interior of the planet. None of them was right.

All men feared the pools. Only a man fifty thousand years old knew their incredible secret, and he lived in an invisible city. . . .

RED ANGUS fled like a frightened hound through the twisted alleys of the Lower City. Dim lamplight from the towering white walls of the Citadel threw glowing brilliance across his naked chest, glinted on the metal studs of his broad leather belt, and on the rippling muscles of his long legs. He skidded on a patch of slops, righted himself and dove for the darkness of an arched doorway. He drew back in the shadows, barely feeling the burn of the new brand on his shoulder that stamped him as a pirate.

Faintly, he heard the shouts and drumming feet of the Diktor's police as they ravaged in the streets, hunting him. His heart thudded swiftly under the high arch of his ribcase. Red Angus smiled wryly.

He was a hunted space pirate, just free of the cell blocks below the palace. But he was more than that to the Diktor of Karr. He was a Karrvan noble who had gone bad, who had fled into space and established an eyrie on a wandering asteroid, who had set himself up as a one-man crusade against Stal Tay, ruler of Karr by the grace of the god Stasor.

"I'll find a way," the pirate swore in the shadows, listening to the shouts and running of the guards, the sharp, barking blasts of their heatguns.

There was a faint sound behind the thick oaken door. Angus moved his naked back, still welt and scarred, away from the damp wood. He clenched a big fist and stood silent, waiting.

He was a tall man, lean in the belly and wide about the shoulders. His mouth was thin but curved at the corners as though used to smiling. Close-cropped reddish hair gave his hard, tanned face a fiery look. Dark blue eyes glistened in the half-squint of the habitual spaceman.

The oaken door swung open. A cowled form stood in the darkness of the archway putting out a thin, old hand toward him. Where the cowl hung there was only a faint white dimness for a face.

"The Hierarch will see you, and save you, Red Angus," said the old man. "Come in. He hopes you'll listen to reason."

"The Hierarch?" snorted the lean man in disbelief. "He's hand in arm with Stal Tay. He'd land me back with my ankles

in a manacle chain."

The cowled man shook his head and whispered, "Hurry, hurry. There's no time to argue!"

A shout from a street less than sixty feet away decided the half-naked, winded Angus. He moved his shoulders in a bitter shrug and slid inside the door. The latch clicked on the door and a hand caught his. A voice, gentle with age, said softly, "Follow me."

TWO hundred feet from the door the walls began to glow. Angus looked at his guide and saw an old man, a member of the Hierarchy, a priestly cult of scientists who were honored and protected by the Diktor. Thirty years before, when the people of the Lower City had been ravaged by disease, they had stormed the block of buildings where the scientists worked.

They had wrecked machines and killed men.

The people of the Lower City were no better than savages and the pagan superstitions they boasted were encouraged by Stal Tay. It pleased the Diktor to believe that science was something only the rich deserved. So Stal Tay stepped in. He withdrew the scientists from the world of men and gave them a little world of their own that was called the Citadel.

Red Angus and the scientist went through corridors that bent and twisted in subtle fashion. It was quiet in this underground tunnel. Once Angus heard the subterranean rush of a hidden river seeking an outlet in the great Car Carolan Sea. Water condensed in the oozing droplets on the cold stone walls.

Then they were going up handhewn stone steps toward an archway in which a thick, soot-blackened door was opening. Lights glared beyond the doorway in a large room with a high, groined ceiling.

He saw Tandor first, standing big and massive among the cowled priests, the wall light glinting from his bald head. They had had a time taking him from the Lower City, Angus saw. There were cut marks on him, and the blood here and there on his rough wool tunic had dried.

A tall man in a white cowl that was bordered with purple came toward them.

He said, "I saved your man from the Diktor's torturers. Money will do much in the Citadel. Even a pirate's first captain is not as valuable as a handful of *sestelins*."

Red Angus shrugged. "What do you want from me?"

The Hierarch nodded. "They told me you were a sensible man. Tonight I will free Tandor after you do me a service."

"What service?"

The Hierarch studied him carefully. "Kill the Diktor!"

Angus barked derisive laughter. "As well ask me to find the Book of Nard. I'd stand as much chance!"

"I may well ask that too, before you and I are through."

"Suppose I refuse?"

The Hierarch sighed. His black eyes glittered in the shadow of his cowl. "I'll smash your legs so you can't run, and let Stal Tay send his men for you. I'll put red-hot daggers in Tandor's eyes until he confesses your crimes. I—"

Angus scowled. "I thought the Diktor was your friend."

"He keeps us penned in the Citadel as his slaves. The scientific discoveries we make he claims as his own. He sent the diseases that the people blamed on the scientists."

Angus said, "I will kill him." But he thought to himself, I only play for time. It's promise or get my legs broken.

They led Angus to a little room where a cowled man waited for him with garments that were living reds and ochres, braided with gold and ornate with jewels. The scientist said coldly, "You are to impersonate the Ambassador of Nowk. He's red-headed and big with a scar on his face like your own."

The night air was crisp as Angus stepped with the cowled scientist through a stone gateway and into a long, sleek wheeler. He gathered his cloak of black sateenis about him and sank into the foamisal upholstery.

The cowled man whispered, "Everything is arranged. A woman dancer, Berylla by name, will dance for the Diktor. Right after that he plans to call you to his side to discuss the new trade agreement with Nowk. The dancer will give you the signal as she leaves. When you're summoned

strike at the Diktor's neck. A *divertissement* in the form of drunken revellers has been planned. In the excitement, you will be spirited away."

Angus touched the slim dagger at his side and nodded.

THE Diktor of Karr was a big man. He was solid in the shoulder and slim at the waist. His head was bald, and there was a jagged scar across his right temple. He sat on his jewelled throne and drummed restless fingers against the hand-carved arm.

Beside him sat a woman with sloe eyes and hair the color of a raven's wing. The thin stuff of her gown clung to supple haunches and proud breasts. She watched the new Ambassador from Nowk thread a path through the guests, unable to decide whether the man was ugly or ruggedly handsome. But he was big, with long, heavily-muscled arms and legs, and he had the look of a fighter.

Moana laughed softly. There was music in her voice and art in the manner of her movement as he drew closer. Her eyes ran over his big frame slowly, slumberously.

Red Angus came to a stop at the base of the dais and bowed low. He was a pirate but he had been in the great capitals of the Six Worlds.

"Your first visit to Karr?" smiled Stal Tay.

"The first, excellency."

"You like the court we keep?"

Red Angus knew of the taverns and swill-wet streets of the Lower City. He knew the people were slaves to the Hierarchy and to the Diktor and his little coterie. Girls danced and pandered to the desires of the rich—if they did not, things were done to them in secret. He knew men grew old before their time, working to pay for the rare jewels that Moana and others like her flaunted.

But he murmured, "Plegasston of Nowk has said, 'For the good of the State, the greatest number of its people must enjoy the greatest amount of its highest rewards.' But Plegasston was a dreamer."

Moana gestured Angus to the golden chair beside her. She let her fingertips brush his hand as he took the seat. "Tell me about yourself, Ben Tal."

Angus grinned, "I'm a relative of his Eminence of Nowk. That explains all about me. But you. You're priestess to the god Stasor. You've gone into the black pool to face him. You've heard his pronouncements!"

Moana made a wry face and shrugged. Strains of music swept down from the fluted ceiling, diffused throughout the room. Her black eyes glowed. "Don't talk religion to me, Ben Tal. Take me in your arms and let us dance."

She was warm and fragrant, following his movements. Her dark eyes enticed as her hands fluttered from his arm to his shoulder to his neck. She made the moments fly. Seated with her at a table, letting her feed him playfully, he almost forgot his mission.

And then. . . .

The room darkened. The hidden musicians made their stringed instruments dance with savage rhythm. And in a circle of golden light, her white flesh gleaming fitfully through a garment of diamonds, a woman swayed out onto the cleared floor. And Angus remembered. He was here to kill a man.

The woman in the service of the Hierarchs was a fireflame out there with the jeweled dress cloud of living rainbows swirling about her. She pirouetted, dipped, and leaped. She was motionless—and a storm of movement. She laughed. She wept. She taunted and cajoled. She was everything any woman ever was.

Angus saw her eyes darting, hunting him. They slid over his deep chest and long legs, square jaw and close-cropped red hair many times without recognition. Only toward the end, as the beam of light that spotlighted her dance touched him too, did she know him.

Her surprise made her stumble but she recovered swiftly. She whirled around the room, diamonds tinkling faintly to the stamping of her bare feet. She threw herself into the Dance of the Garland of Gems, and made it a living thing. When she came to the black curtains she posed for an instant, moved her arm in the agreed signal, and was gone.

The Diktor lifted a hand and gestured. Angus bowed to Moana and got to his

feet. With all the iron control he had developed on the lonely star-trails he fought to keep his hand from his knife-haft.

He bent to take his seat. Now his right hand was sheltered by his body and he put it on the dagger.

The thin blade whispered, coming out of the scabbard.

Red Angus leaned forward and thrust at the throat before him.

Four hands came out of midair and fastened to his wrist. They dragged him down by surprise and by the weight of their bodies. He went off his chair in a rolling fall, hitting the man to his left, toppling him backwards into Stal Tay.

MEN were shouting. A woman screamed. Angus brought his hard left fist up in a short arc, drove it into the stomach-muscles of the man on his right. The man grunted and went backwards. Red Angus stood free, his clean blade still naked in his hand.

He leaped for Stal Tay but other guards had come running. One threw himself before the dagger, both hands catching at it. Another hit the pirate across the legs with his hurtling body. A third man clawed himself to a position astride his back, hooking a hairy forearm under his chin. That was when the rest of them hit him.

Angus went back off his feet into a mass of struggling, cursing flesh. The guards yelped triumphantly but Red Angus had fought in tavern brawls in the Lower City, had wrestled with salt slavers on the desert dunes, had fought fights from Karr to Rimeron. He surged up. His fists went up and down. His right hand flashed out, closing on a guard's wrist. The guard screamed and fell away, moaning.

Angus breathed through distended nostrils, dancing back, fists thudding into rib and jaw. He fought to get room and he almost made it. But a guard left his feet in a wild dive before the pirate could brace himself. The man hit his knees and took them out from under him. Angus went down under a dozen leaping warriors. Grimy, blooded, Red Angus shook his head and gave up.

Moana was standing above him, laughing scorn through the queer, awed light in

her eyes. Her white breasts rose and fell swiftly under their scant covering. "The little dancer knew you, Ben Tal. I saw that. But she's never been out of Karr City. And this is your first visit. Who are you?"

Red Angus shrugged as the guardsmen lifted him to his feet and sat him roughly down in a chair before the Diktor. He made a wry face. There was a taste like bitter ashes dragging down the corners of his mouth. His belly quivered under the glistening cloth of his breeches. He seemed to hear the Hierarch's drawing voice, "If you fail, you die!"

The Diktor waved a hand. The guards lifted him, dragged him behind velveteen drapes and along a stone corridor, into a small room. The Diktor and Moana followed at his heels. It was the Diktor who turned the key in the lock.

"Who sent you?" the stocky ruler asked softly. "Who paid for my death? Tell me that, and you'll walk out of here a free man."

Red Angus shook his head. He met the hazel eyes of the Diktor grimly.

Stal Tay smiled. "Berylla the dancer knows you. I can always have her brought in, you know."

Moana had been walking around Angus. She came close, put a hand on the tunic that fitted his chest like a glove, and ripped. His heavily muscled shoulder was laid bare, where the inflamed interlocking triangles gleamed.

Moana cried out. "A pirate!"

The Diktor opened his eyes wide. "Of course. Now I know you. Red Angus. My men captured you a week ago. But how in Stasor's name did you get free?"

Angus said briefly, "Does it matter?"

"No." Stal Tay went and sat on a curved sigellis-chair and crossed his heavy legs. He drummed short, powerful fingers against the beethel-wood arm. "But the fact that you came back after getting free—that is important. You wouldn't have stayed in Karr City unless you had to. Who made you stay? Certainly you didn't hate me enough to risk your neck on such a long chance."

Angus grinned through the fear in him. "A million people hate you, if you want to know. You keep the lower-city men and women in filthy poverty to buy you and

your kind jewels and luxury. You subsidize the Hierarchy, using their science to make your life easier and safer. Why deny those poor devils down below what you could give them so cheaply? Heat. Light. Power to operate a few machines. Let them taste something from life besides slops and sweaty clothes and hard beds."

"Oho," laughed the Diktor softly. "Plegasston of Nowk made a convert. What else did he say, Angus?"

"He said that government and science should serve the people, not enslave them. Doesn't Stasor teach that?"

MOANA laughed softly. Her black eyes taunted him. She said, "You want to hear what Stasor says about government and science and people, Angus the Red? Let me take him through the Veil, Eminence. Let the god himself tell the fool."

The Diktor smiled thinly, looking from man to woman. He shook his head. Moana moved to one side of the square-set ruler. Her black eyes bored straight at Angus. He tried to understand their expression.

The Diktor stood up. "I've used reason, Angus. You're a pirate. You've preyed on my space-caravans. You've stolen and plundered from me. I tell you again, I'll forgive all that—even reward you—if you tell me who sent you here this night."

The black eyes burned at him in Moana's pale white face. She touched her full upper lip with a red tongue-tip.

"If I could see Stasor," fumbled Angus, trying to fathom what Moana wanted him to say. When she nodded almost imperceptibly, he went on, "perhaps he could make me change my mind. If Stasor says I've been a fool, why then everything I've believed in will have gone smash. In that case I'd like to serve your Eminence."

Moana's black eyes laughed, silently applauding him. The Diktor scowled thoughtfully. He swung around on the girl. "Will you be his vow-companion?"

Angus knew what that meant. If he found a way to escape, the Diktor would stretch that lovely white body on the rack in place of his own, give those thighs and breasts and face to the red-hot pincers, the nails, the barked hooks. He would never let her suffer that fate.

Maybe the Diktor knew that. He smiled a little as Moana promised. He went, without another glance at Angus.

Moana said softly, "It was all I could do, Red Angus. He would have taken you to the Pits tonight if I hadn't delayed it."

"You don't owe me anything," he told her crisply.

"I do, though. My brother angered the Diktor a year ago. He was sent to the salt marshes of Ptixt. You raided the caravan that carried him and set him free. My brother lives safely hidden today, in one of your pirate cities. I remember that, Angus. Sometimes good deeds do pay off. What does Plegasston say about that?"

She went past him and through the doorway.

He followed her swaying body along the drape-hung corridors, into small rooms and past oak-beamed doors. She came to a blank wall, reached up and pressed pink fingertips against a rose-red stone.

"The whorls at the tips of my fingers set off a light-switch mechanism within the stone," she explained. "It's better than any key."

Somewhere an engine hummed faintly and the rock wall began to turn. It swung aside to reveal a narrow corridor leading downwards. The walls were coated with a luminescent blueness that glowed brightly, lighting the way.

Angus saw the pool long before he came to it. A round metal collar bordered the glistening blackness, that seemed to press upward as though striving to burst free of whatever held it. It shimmered and quivered. It pulsed and throbbed with something close to life itself.

Angus came to a stop, staring at it. He put out a hand and thrust it into the darkness. It felt light, biting, and he thought it might taste like heady wine.

Moana took his other hand. She whispered, "Come," and stepped down into the pool.

The darkness swam all around Angus. He felt it on his skin, in the pores of his arms and hands and legs. It made him giddy, so that he wanted to laugh. It was like walking on air, to stride in this thing.

They went down into the pool and stood in a strange space, where there was only

blackness, unrelieved by light. It was cold. Faintly, Angus could hear what he thought was music.

"Will yourself ahead," he heard a musical voice whisper.

He floated effortlessly.

"Where are we?" he wondered aloud.

"Out of space. Out of time. In the abode of the god. Soon now, we shall see Stasor."

A bright point of red glowed faintly, as a pinhead might gleam when heated in a fire. It grew swiftly to the size of a fist, to the size of a head.

The red glow burst, and sent streamers of flame out into the darkness.

Where the red had been was Stasor.

HIS FACE floated in a white mist, ancient and wise and sorrowful. The dimly veined lids were shut. The forehead was high, rounded, surmounted by snowy hair. On either side of the great hawk-nose, high cheekbones protruded. The eyelids quivered, slowly arose.

Angus stared dumbly into living wisdom. He wondered deep inside him how old Stasor must be, to know what those eyes knew; how many worlds he must have gazed on, how many peoples he must have seen grow to statehood, to degeneracy, to death.

"You entered the pool. I felt your emanations. What do you wish?"

Moana said, "I am your priestess, Stasor. I have brought a man to see you."

"Let the man speak."

Angus wet his lips. He scowled, trying to find words. He mumbled, "I've been sentenced to die for attempting to kill the Diktor of Karr. He's an evil man."

"What is evil, my son? Is a man bad because he opposes your will?"

Angus growled, "He's a curse to his race. He sends disease and death on his people when they disobey him. He keeps improvement from them. He makes them slaves when they might be gods."

"That is your belief. What says the Book of Nard?"

Moana whispered, "The Book of Nard is lost, High One."

Stasor was silent a long time. He said, finally, "The Book must be found. In it are the secrets of the Elder Race. Go to the

City of the Ancients. There you will find the Book."

"No one today knows where the City is, either. It is lost, with all the secrets of the Elder Race."

"The City lies across the Car. Carolan Sea, through the Land of Living Flame. Go there."

The lips closed. The eyelids shut. Swiftly the old face faded into nothingness. The blackness came and pressed around them.

Angus turned slowly, as in a dream. Still in that dreamlike trance he found himself staring at three tall, cowled forms that stood like sentinels.

Moana screamed.

One of the cowled figures lifted an arm and gestured assurance. "There is no cause for fear. The Hierarch sent us to bring you before him."

Moana shuddered. Angus felt her cold hand seeking his, trying to hide itself in his palm. Hand in hand they willed themselves after the cowled forms. They swam bodily through the blackness, moving eerily, without muscular movement.

A round curtain of shimmering bluish notes ahead of them was like a glowing patch in the darkness. One of the cowled forms turned and waited. He said, "Another pool, Moana. The pool of the Hierarchy. We, too, know the way into this world."

"What is the blackness?" wondered Angus.

"What man knows? It was formed and built by the Elder Ones before they went on."

They were in the pool, passing upward through its queer surface. It sizzled and bubbled all around them, tingling on the skin.

They passed the pool and stood in a low-ceilinged, bare room.

A cowled man opened a door for them and stood aside.

The Hierarch sat in a curved chair ornate with gold edgings. His pale, ascetic face gloomed from the shadow of his big cowl. He stared at them, a thin smile touching his lips. He stared so long that Angus asked impatiently, "What do you want with us? Tandor, is he free?"

Moana gasped, sudden understanding

waking her mind. The Hierarch brushed her with his eyes and sighed.

"Tandor is free. I fulfill my promises. You tried and failed, yet you tried. Now—"

He paused, fingertips pressed together, brooding down at Angus.

"Many thousands of eons ago, before our race came into existence, all Karr belonged to the Elder Race. It lived a long time on this world, before it went on."

Angus grinned, "Your priest said that. You and he mean—"

The Hierarch spoke patiently, as if lecturing a child. "It did not die out. It went on, to another plane of existence. Everything must progress. That is the immutable law of nature. The First Race progressed, far beyond our understanding, beyond the natural laws as we know them. They exist today—somewhere outside.

"Stasor, now. Take him, for instance." The Hierarch flicked burning black eyes at Moana. "Some think he is a god. He is a member of the Elder Race."

Moana said harshly. "Blaphemy! You speak blasphemy of Stasor."

The Hierarch shrugged. "I tell you Stasor is a four-plane man, one not bound by our three dimensions. He and his kind have gone on to that other world. They left behind them rules to guide those who came after them. They left the pools. They were a great race, the Elders, and the black pools are their greatest discovery. Those rules they gave us are contained in the Book of Nard. I want that book!"

"Why?"

The Hierarch smiled gently. "With the secrets of the Elders at my fingertips do you think the Diktor could keep us penned here in the Citadel?"

A faint hope burned in Angus' chest. "You mean, you wouldn't be cloistered any more? That you'd give your science to the people and help them up?"

"Pah!" snapped the Hierarch, "The people? Pigs! They wallow in their filths and love it." His burning black eyes glittered fanatically. "No, I mean I—and not the Diktor—will rule all Karr!"

He is mad, too, thought Angus. He and the Diktor—mad with the lust for power. If the Diktor dies and the Hierarch rules the people will change a bootheel for a

mortar and pestle. *Even the stars must revolt against that.*

II

THE street was dark, except for the moonlight shining faintly through the serrated rooftops, and reflected grey and dismal from the rounded edges of the cobblestones. Angus and a cowled man made a short dash, ran into the shadows, and trotted at a slow pace.

Above them a sign creaked on rusty chains. Angus looked behind at the huge stone bulk of the Citadel where it rose from solid rock, wall piled on wall, and turret on tower, and battlement upon bastion. Beyond the Citadel the thin, delicate spires of the palaces towered above the clean, fragrantly perfumed Upper City. Up above, there was no swill. There was no stench of rotting garbage. The patricians did not know what roast derstite looked like on a greasy platter, or how broiled colob smelled or what awful stuff the vintners sold in the big Mart.

Angus said, "I still don't see why the Hierarch bothers sending me after the Book. He has a lot of scientists who'd do a better job of finding it."

The lips of the man twisted in the darkness of the cowl. "How do you think the Diktor keeps us penned in the Citadel, red-man? He has spectragrams of each of us in his palace, attached to central controls. Every once in a while he has his captains check on our locations. When the vibratory beams touch us, they reflect our spectrums on the visi-screens. If one of us is out of place—beyond the limits of Karr City, that is—he sends a patrol to find and capture us. We lost several good men that way before we grew resigned. Once a scientist is captured by the Diktor he is destroyed. Instantly."

"Isn't there anyone else to help you?"

The scientist showed his disdain by a twitch of the lips. "Who? One of the people? They'd run so fast to betray us a theto-hound couldn't catch them. They hate the Diktor, but I think they hate us more."

Behind them the shadow of a man with a zigzag scar on his face disengaged himself from beneath an overhanging cornice and

silently followed.

Angus and the scientist went through the narrow streets, down stone steps and across a great square. To one side the red lanterns of the Spotted Stag tavern glowed and the shouts and roistering laughter of men mingled with the shrill, excited laughter of a woman.

The scientist glanced about him nervously, wet his lips with his tongue. "I don't like this section. It's too near the wharves. There are other rats than the four-legged kind."

A blackish, blunt object in the big hand of a half-naked man bounced from the skull of the cowled one. Angus went forward, left hand hooking. He caught the big man on the side of the mouth and drove his head sideways. His right fist was crossing as his left landed. He hit the man with his right hand and the man went backwards into a brick wall.

"Easy, Angus," growled a voice in back of him, with a hint of laughter in it.

Angus whirled, teeth bared. When he saw the bald head of the giant in front of him he laughed harshly.

"By the gods! Tandor. The Hierarch did keep his promise, then!"

"We heard you'd missed killing that scum that lives in the palace by an inch. Tsk! The Hierarch felt that, with luck, Stal Tay would be dead by now. He let me go, yes. As soon as he learned that you and that priestess were in the black pool."

Angus bent and threw back the cowl of the scientist. There was a swelling lump on the back of his head. Angus said, "I thought you broke his skull when you hit him." He looked at the man stirring against the brick wall. "Sorry, friend. I thought you a footpad."

"Tandor told me you were fast. He wasn't lying." The man grinned ruefully, feeling his jaw.

Tandor shouldered Angus aside and picked up the cowled man. He led the way up through the streets, the limp man's legs and arms dangling inertly. Tandor asked, "Where was he taking you?"

"To a hidden globe-ship. I'm supposed to find the Book of Nard. The Hierarch is holding Moana as hostage for my success."

Tandor whistled softly, eyes round. "He exchanged me for the girl. A smart man, the High Priest!"

LAUGHTER came out at them from the illy-lighted interior of the tavern together with the dry smell of wine and the stench of sweating flesh. Tandor kicked the oak door open and went along the wall with his burden. A girl with a rag around her middle ran for Angus, tipsily pressing wet lips to his. She threw up a wooden goblet, the red wine splashing over its rim, crying, "The Anvil! To Red Angus the Anvil—the only friend we have!"

The roar echoed in his ears as Angus stepped into the little side room. Tandor kicked a chair toward Angus, reaching for a wooden pitcher. He growled, "Are you going hunting for the Book?"

Angus stretched out his legs and dragged a full goblet toward him. He stared at the dark liquor. Finally he said, "Yes, I'm going."

"Why?"

"Because I've seen the way they live in the Upper City. I've seen the life they lead and I've seen the life those people out there in the big room lead."

Tandor made a rumbling sound in his throat. "You don't think they'll appreciate your changing it, do you?"

Angus looked thoughtful. He smiled, "I know what our race is heading toward, now. We will be like Stasor—the man behind the veil—eventually. The longer the Diktor stays in power, and others like him, the longer will the rest of us be kept from that goal."

Tandor grinned like a wolf. "Some men like to be martyrs. It's a weakness of the brain." He scowled, and brought the flat of his ham-like hand down on the wooden tabletop. "I say it's madness. Let the Hierarch and the Diktor slit each other's throats. Let's go back to the star trails, Angus. Out where a man can breathe and stretch himself."

Angus shook his head. "Take the ship yourself. Go raiding, if you want. I stay. I want to answer a question."

"What question?"

"Why is science?"

"Why is—? You're crazy, now. I know

it. Of all the stupid questions. Science is an art designed to better the life standards of the patrician class. There. That answer you?"

"I say science is something that should benefit all. Why do we have torches while the hierarchy and the patricians use illuminations and incandescent walls? Why don't we have stoves instead of hearths or electronizers instead of percussion guns?"

Tandor smirked. "It's safer."

Angus got to his feet and walked about the smoky, oak-beamed room. In the reddish light his naked chest and thickly muscled arms seemed coated with crimson. The short crop of red hair on his rounded, square-jawed skull added to the illusion. He planted his hands on his hips and stood in front of his lieutenant.

"I turned pirate when the last Diktor executed my father for leniency with his servants. The Diktor said he was undermining governmental discipline. I took my mother and fled into space. I found a safe spot on Yassinan. I built a pirate empire with your help. I'd offer up all that—all the wealth we've amassed in Yassinan—to smash the setup here!"

Tandor spat on his hand and rubbed his palm dry on the flat of his bald dome. He said drily, "You make me mad, Angus. You aren't satisfied with things. Always you have to change them. Isn't life full enough for you now?"

Angus ignored him. "If I could get the Book of Nard and free Moana and take her away to safety we might stand a chance. If we could develop science undisturbed on Yassinan we could do it."

"Why fret about Moana?"

"She became my vow-companion. You know what that means to somebody like the Diktor." Angus slapped his broad leather belt decisively. "I'll do it. I'll go in his globe-ship and try and find the Book. Tandor, you stay here. Raise men to fight for us."

The big man with the bald head nodded gloomily. He poured wine from the wooden tankard, downed the brimming goblet in one long gulp. He wiped his lips on the palm of his hand and rubbed it dry on his bald head. "I hear you. I think you're mad but I hear you. What are you going to do

with that?"

His thumb jerked at the limp scientist in the long cowled robe. Angus shrugged. "He'll come around. When he does I'll pretend I've fought off his assailant. Meanwhile, you find out which globe-ship he means to give me. Can you do that?"

The big man rumbled, "Tandor can do anything. I'll find out without leaving the room." He lifted his voice and bellowed. When the door opened and a red face peered in, Tandor grinned, "Find that wharf-rat Plisket and send him in here."

Plisket limped in, grinning at Angus, bobbing his head. His eyes opened when he heard what Tandor wanted. He chuckled, "The hierarchy plot like a pack of fools. Everybody outside the Citadel hates them. It happens I hate the Diktor more. They gave me gold to build a ship."

"The Skimmer?" asked Tandor. "That wonder-boat you were telling me about?"

"It is a wonder boat. It incorporates the—"

"Never mind the details," rapped Angus, leaning his palms on the table. "Is that the boat the hierarchy want me to use?"

"It must be. It's the only one unchartered. And Angus—if you are to control it—remember that it will submerge. And it has four speeds, two more than . . ."

Tandor slapped the table with his palm, making the goblets bounce. "Enough, enough. Plisket, your tongue wags like a hound's tail. Angus, are you ready?"

Angus stretched his tall, heavily shouldered body. He went and bent his lean height over the shallow-breathing scientist and swung him up in a fireman's hitch. He walked firmly, steadily, as he headed for the oaken door.

THE man with the zigzag scar on his cheek drew back into the darkness of a jutting second storey as a door creaked open down the street. His eyes glittered, watching Angus emerge with a cowled body atop a shoulder. The hidden man touched a glittering knob strapped to his wrist, turned the knob and lifted it to his mouth.

Angus did not see him, did not hear him whisper into the voxbeamer. He heaved up, settling the body on his shoulder. He began to trot, with space-devouring strides. He

went by the spot where Tandor's bully had struck down the cowled man. He went ten paces beyond it, and halted. He lowered the man to the ground and began to shake him.

"Wake up . . . he didn't hit you that hard. Come on. Man, stir yourself . . . that's better . . . see me, do you? Who am I? Angus. Good. You're better? All right . . . on your feet . . . here, I'll give you a hand."

The scientist teetered weakly, tried to smile. "I told you it was a place for rats. What happened?"

"I beat him off. I carried you a bit, thinking he might come back. We've lost some time."

"Sorry. I'll make a report to the Hierarch. He'll be glad to know you didn't run out on him."

Red Angus clipped coldly, "I wouldn't leave Moana to that Diktor devil. The Hierarch knows that."

The cowled man nodded. "Just the same, I'll tell him. I like you, Angus. If I can ever help you, remember Thordad."

"You're all right? Sure you can go on?"

"I can go on. Hurry. Never mind me. I'll make it."

THEY saw the towering ball of the globe-ship as they broke from the squat buildings framing the square at the waterfront. It was a ball of golden brilliance, riding the slight sea-swell despite its bulk, occasionally rubbing against the soft snubbers attached to the dock. In the moonlight it loomed majestic and awe-inspiring above the wet, rounded stones of the quay. Its soft *slip-slap* motion on the waves made it seem alive in the salt-laden breeze moving in from the sea.

The scientist halted. "I leave you here. You know how to get to the Flaming Land? Good."

Thordad held out his bony hand. Angus grinned and clasped it. He chuckled, "Tell the Hierarch to dust off a shelf in his Literatum. I'll fill it with the Book of Nard."

Thordad smiled, turned on a heel and strode off into the darkness of an alleyway. Angus went on, eyes gleaming up at the hulk of the ship. He heard the wind whistling in the rooftops, and across the flat

stretch of the square. With eyes and ears already occupied, he did not hear the sobbed cry Thordad managed as a hand closed on his throat, nor did he see the dagger dripping crimson in the hand of the man with the zigzag scar, rising to fall again and again in Thordad's body.

Angus went across the gangplank into the curved port. He pressed a stud and the door slid into place. Lights sprang to full illumination, revealing shimmering metal beams and cross-braces, glittering crimson floor, and long banks of control panels. Glowing tubes, slowly warming, flooded the gigantic room with a soft blue color.

Angus studied the meters. He drew down a red-handled lever. Far below the plasticine-sheltered engines throbbed, roared their power. Slowly the great hull of the globe-ship began to revolve, circling the inner ball. The fine margin of air-space, charged with electronically regulated magnets, made a soft, swooshing sound as the outer ball rotated faster. The inner ball, a gigantic gyroscope set in a magnetic field, held steady, while the outer globe swirled rapidly.

The globe-ship seemed a huge ball that some giant's hand was shoving through the water. It flipped water from it as it raced. Its bulk, designed for the minimum amount of friction in water, danced across the waves with terrific speed.

Angus watched the great bulk of swaying, restless water ahead of him, saw combers flee by, watched huge swells come and go, split by the globular hull. He flipped over the light-map and studied his progress, making changes in the directional needle.

He headed out across the heaving Car Carolan Sea toward the Flaming Lands, where no living man had ever gone before.

THE Diktor turned from a contemplation of the serried bands of light glistening across the beaded spectragraph screen. A young attendant in golden jacket and breeches touched a button at his command and the screen went dead.

The drapes over the arched doorway at the end of the room billowed aside as an officer entered, clicked heels and bowed. His

voice was hoarse. "Teoman has returned, Eminence. He bears news of the pirate."

The Diktor came striding across the floor, sweeping his cloak behind him with a short, thickly muscled arm. He gestured peremptorily and the billowing curtains lifted. A man with a zigzag scar on his cheek bobbed his head up and down, sidling into the room.

"The pirate has gone in a globe-ship across the Car Carolan Sea, Highest One. A scientist of the Dragon Class was assisting him. I daggered the scientist but I could not reach Angus in time."

The Diktor bit his lip. "Moana?"

The spy shook his sparsely-haired head. "No sign of her, Eminence. She was not with him."

The Diktor tossed a bag of coins to Teoman, gestured the man out. He snapped an order and went striding back and forth across the room as the officer hurried out.

The officer came back with two red-clad attendants who wheeled a squat engine, bulbs and gears locked inside a transparent jacket, before them. High on the gleaming metal top of the machine stood a vox-phone.

The Diktor bent and put his lips to the vox-phone. He said irritably, "Subject: the Car Carolan Sea and adjacent territories. Query: What, if anything, of scientific value is reputedly found in that region?"

There was a faint hum of the gears and pistons. A soft, gentle voice replied, "The flaming Land and the Desert of Dead White Stones border the Car Carolan Sea to the west. To the east is the continent of Karr Major. To the south the ice floes that are barren. To the north, the polar regions. Beyond the Flaming Land is an inland sea fed underground by waters from the Car Carolan. Beyond that sea lies the desert. It is an uninhabited land. There is nothing of scientific import there aside from the volcanic region of the Flaming Land."

The machine clicked and died. The Diktor sighed. He would have to go and see Stasor. He did not want to do that because he had a feeling that the members of the Elder Race did not approve of him and his methods.

EVEN far out at sea Angus felt the heat coming toward him in surging waves.

Mists, formed from water heated to the boiling point, rose like a white pall to shelter the Flaming Lands from his eyes. But here and there, through a breeze-made rift, he could see huge tongues of fire, red and sullen, rising from the ground.

Angus drove the globe-ship into the white fog. Gigantic bubbles broke under it, flung mists and steam up over the ship. Inside the glober the heat was fierce.

Angus was clammy with the sweat running down his cheeks and ribs. It was sapping his energies. When the controls started to blur in his eyes he knew he had enough. His fingers touched the warm control lever and threw it forward.

He fled miles from the mist and slowed to a stop, riding the ocean's swell. He muttered, "I'm through. Finished. I can't go over and I can't go under . . . or can I? Didn't Plisket say something about that? Wait . . . wait . . . sure! He said this thing will submerge."

Angus got up and crossed the room. There was a small literatum inset in the metal wall. He ran his eyes over titles, reached up and brought down a thick book on geophysiology.

He bent, consulting pages on subterranean oceanology. His finger pointed out a paragraph. "From the Car Carolan Sea an underground river feeds the inland sea that lies between the Flaming Lands and the Desert of Dead White Stones."

It took him a long time, hunting blindly in the heated water all around him. He went deep, trundling across the jagged ocean bottom. The oxygenerators were laboring when he found the great dark orifice looming ahead in his sea-lights.

It was close work, maneuvering the glober through the sea-tunnel. All around was the muted booming of volcanic fires sending up hot jets of molten lava, flame and ashes. Water swirled, black and thickish, past the rounded hull.

When the water lightened, he knew they were out of the tunnel. Angus sent the glober rocketing upward. It burst through the water into clear air. The Flaming Lands lay behind. Ahead, across the bluish expanse that was the inland sea, lay a vast stretch of sand and rock.

Angus anchored the globe-ship. He dove

overboard and swam to the whitish sands. The sun was warm above and the hot sand bit through his leather boots. Angus threw a big canteen across his shoulder and fastened a small packet of food tablets around his waist.

He walked for two days and a night before he found the half-sunken road that arched across the desert. The road ended four days later, in the barrens. His water was gone and the leathern pocket that had held food tablets was empty.

"I can't turn back," he thought. "I've been gone a whole week from the inland sea."

Angus turned and stumbled on. The sun beat down on his naked shoulders, on the remnants of the sun-worn rags about his middle. With each puff of sand his feet kicked up, something went out of his spirit.

Angus saw a brown rock uplifting its jagged tip from the sand. He ran awkwardly toward it, hoping that from its top he might see the spires of a distant, nebulous city. But there was only sand and more twisted, curving dunes, and the faint azure tint of the horizon.

He stood on the naked finge. of rock and swore. He invoked the olden gods—the fecund Ashtal, goddess of love and sex; Grom who fought with warriors; Jethad who loved the wise. He called on them for their attention and he cursed them, upwards and down, forward and back.

In his rage he took the empty canteen and hurled it.

Choking, he broke off in mid-course.

The canteen had disappeared in mid-air!

THE Hierarch made fists out of his taloned hands. The cowed man, bent before his carven chair, trembled. The Hierarch whispered, "Are you sure?"

"We followed his spectragraph in the screen, Excellency. We followed it until it disappeared!"

The black orbs in the thin white face of the chief scientist burned with fanatical ardor. Through thin lips he rasped, "He tricked me. He had those pirates of his pick him up when he was safely out of my hands."

"He went through the Flaming Lands," quavered the cowed man. "We saw him do

that. Would he go to all that trouble to be picked up in the desert? He could have escaped from the Car Carolan Sea."

"Evidence of his cunning. He wanted to make sure he was a good distance away from the power of the Diktor."

"The Diktor?"

"You fool! I'm going to the Diktor and turn Moana over to his torturers. I'll tell him Angus planned with Moana to kill him. Hai. The torturers will work over her a long time, I think. When Angus hears of that . . ."

The Hierarch brooded. He smiled, "I might even turn that into a trap for him. When he returns, having heard what has happened to Moana, I'll be waiting for him."

Angus slid down from the rock with his heart in his mouth. *The canteen flew out into the air*, he thought. *It went high, and as it came down it disappeared!*

There was something just ahead of him. Perhaps a force field hidden in the shifting and eddying mists rising from the desert lands.

If he could find the canteen and discover what made it invisible . . .

Angus was weak. His knees crumpled as he tried to take a forward step. He summoned the muscles and the nerves of his big, gaunt body. He went forward one step, then two.

At the third step he fell. He put out his hands.

They parted the grey mists in front of him but did not break his fall. His naked knees hit rounded stone and then his palms went out and touched the worn pavings of a city street.

"Gods!" the pirate whispered, lifting his head, blue eyes burning like coals in his tanned face.

The gray mists shifted, fading. From their wisps, as though like the flesh of a naked woman revealed by smoky veils, shone queerly rounded and smoothly curved walls of amaranthine and ocher, red and jonquil yellow. Here and there a dome of pearly champagne stood tipped with a knob of vermilion. The houses on the edge of the city were low, seeming to rise higher and higher toward the center where a tall,

slender building reared its spire.

Red Angus drew a deep breath, running his hands down the ridged muscles of his thighs. He turned and stared behind him where the hot sands ought to be. He saw only gray mists, shifting and shimmering.

Angus went down the street, past empty-windowed buildings, across bare intersections, his foot-falls loud in the stillness of the dead city.

He walked until the entrance to the central tower was in front of him. Crested with heraldic devices—Red Angus recognized the flame-eyed Stallion of forgotten Shallar and the rampant Dragon of Domeer—the wide door was a glittering mass of emeralds embedded in carvings so delicate they seemed sheared from paper.

The doors opened at a touch, revealing red-and-yellow squares of metal stretching forward beneath a glittering dome of translucent jade. In the center of the hall stood a low metal rim about a bubble of grayish green iridescence. He went toward the rim, bent over and stared down.

"One of the black pools!" whispered Angus.

Through the luminescent bubble he could see only blackness, a jet nothingness that seemed alive.

A STEP sounded on the metal flagging behind him.

Angus whirled.

A man stood there, leaning on a bent staff, smiling gently. He was clad in a loose woolen garment, white as falling snow. His arms and legs were bare and brown. His face, though lined and creased, seemed almost youthful.

"I have waited many years," he said softly, "and no one ever came. Now—at last—there is someone who has found the city. Welcome. I bid you welcome to the Tower of the Ancients!"

"Stasor!" cried Angus in sudden recognition.

"The Stasor you know, yes. One of my race is chosen to spend a hundred years as Guardian of the City, to wait for any who might come to seek its treasures. You are the first who ever found it."

Angus said, "A lifetime of loneliness. Are we worth it?"

The old man laughed. "We do not die—not as your race knows death. It's one of our attainments. Like the blackness where you first saw me."

"The blackness?" Angus turned, stared down at the metal collar encasing the jet black pool. "What is it? It must be all over the planet. No one knows what the pool is."

"It is the greatest product of my race. Many eons ago a scientist discovered that an atom may be split to create ravaging energy. For years the mightiest scientists of the Elders studied that fact. Eventually they built machines that could house such awful power. Finally, after many centuries, they developed the pools.

"The pools are nothing more than that atomic radiation—sheer energy—bottled up in vast chambers lined with *stalabasil*. Ready for use at any time.

"In the early days men died from such radioactivity. As time went on and we handled it more and more, our bodies evolved, so that the painful burns that caused death became as mere tinglings along the nerve-ends. Your own race, that evolved on Karr after the Elders went on, is also immune to it."

"Reservoirs of energy," murmured Angus, rubbing hand on thigh. "If you could harness that energy and turn it into channels of production . . ."

His blue eyes widened as breath caught in his throat. Stasor smiled, his old head nodding. "That's what we Elders used. We powered our machines with it. We needed no fuel, no refilling of bins or tanks. It was always there, ready to tap."

"Does the Book of Nard mention it?"

The old man nodded. "All our secrets are contained in the Book of Nard. Do you want to see it?"

They went up a flight of spiralling steps and into a room where heavy golden drapes hung bright and splendid. On a wooden rest lay a closed book, its covers solid gold, its parchment leaves tinted a pale rose.

"Open it," said the Guardian.

Angus bent and lifted the cover. He gazed on the archaic lettering etched into the thick vellum.

Each man has in him the seeds of his own immortality. He must progress or he must die. And the race is like the man. Who shall

say what path that progression shall take? A man cannot know his own future. Neither does the race. This is the Book of Nard, first of the Elder Race. With encouragement to all peoples who come after us, we leave this short transcript of our past.

Angus lifted his eyes. He stared at the smiling Guardian, who nodded. Quickly the pirate touched the parchment, spread the pages wide. His keen blue eyes scanned the etchings while he read the record of those who had gone on. He scanned mathematical and astronomical formulae, chemical equations, biological charts.

He whispered, "The entire history of the race, told in the achievements of its scientists!"

"It is all that lives."

"I don't understand it, of course. I catch a thought, here and there. But the entire equation . . ."

"You don't understand it?"

"No."

The old man smiled. He said suddenly, "Would you like to see some of those achievements in action? Would you like to see the worlds in three-dimensional space, the island universes, the galaxies, the stars and their planets?"

Angus said, "I've been out among the Six Worlds. I've seen other systems through telescopes."

The old man laughed. It was a spontaneous, happy sort of laugh. "I don't mean that way. Come, let me show you what my race can do." Angus caught him smiling oddly, the corners of his lips drawing down, as though he shared a queer joke only with himself.

They did not use the stairway this time. They stepped into a bare room walled and ceilinged and floored with shining steel. The old man touched a stud on the door.

The room of the book was gone.

IN ITS stead, there was a round chamber with a transparent dome that revealed stars twinkling uncounted miles above. In the middle of the otherwise unfurnished room stood a low, flat dais set with chairs riveted on their curving metal legs into the dais. A bank of controls was set flush in the floor of the platform.

The old man led him to the dais. He

smiled, bending over the control panel, "This is the kind of observatory your race will have, someday. You won't have to depend on polished mirrors and light and thick lenses. Basically the principle of the thing is the same as that of the teleport room we used to come over here. We just make use of coordinated space and time factors. It's like steering a boat on an uncharted ocean. If you know where your lodestar is you can go anywhere you want."

He turned and reached for a chair. We're ready now. You are perfectly safe, no matter what you see, or think you see. Just relax."

The reflected light in the room was fading. Blackness came down through the transparent dome and surrounded them. It was like the Staratarium Red Angus had visited on Mawk—or it was, until Angus saw stars beside and below him.

A nebulae that was uncounted light years away came rushing toward them. It was a spinning silver wheel at a distance, but it broke into great blotches of black space to dissolve into just another star system without form or noticeable nebulosity.

They swooped over a reddish planet and dropped through its atmosphere. They studied great buildings of stone and metal that towered high into the clouds. Tiny fliers and great air-freighters dotted the skies. The old man said, "This people used their science wisely. They built a civilization that gives every man all he wants which is, in effect, all he can understand."

They left the red planet, swept light years away and down through heavy mists to a greenish globe whirling majestically in the light of its distant sun. Beneath them lush, tropical jungles lifted fronds and branches to the steaming mists. Somewhere in that massed carpet of vegetation an animal screamed in its dying agonies. Through a break in the trees Angus saw a naked man squat and hairy and with a stone-bladed spear in his hand, fleeing before the bounding fury of a gigantic tiger. The great cat was making its last leap, spreading its talons into the man's shivering flesh, as the mists crept up and hid them.

"A young world," Stasor said softly, "with all its life ahead of it in which to find its destiny."

They went out into space and found a planet where giant insects ruled, where a lumbering thing in the shape of a man, but mindless, was used for heavy labor. Another planet showed lizards dwelling in strangely wrought mansions. A third showed mind-beings that looked like crimson jellyfish hanging in midair by some means of mental suspension.

"All these," explained Stasor with a wave of his palm, "are freaks. Life throughout the whole universe, across all of its uncountable light-years, follows mainly a pattern like our own. Creatures that we call man, with two arms, two legs, two eyes, a nose and mouth, breathing atmosphere into lungs, have been the ruling race because of circumstances like gravity and atmosphere, over which they themselves have no control.

"One more example, then we're done. . . ."

They fled across star galaxies, through sprawling universe where binaries and dwarf stars and red giants alternated against the black void like a spangled curtain. They went through the Megellanic Cluster and the Andromeda nebula. They came swooping down so swiftly that the stars blurred a little, even at their incredible distances, toward another galaxy.

Stasor found a little star. It was surrounded by nine planets. He chose the third planet outward from the star, and dropped his observational platform through the heaviside and ionosphere.

Angus craned forward. He liked this world. It reminded him vaguely of Karr, with its green grasses and rolling oceans.

"Its inhabitants call it the Earth. A peaceful place. Look over there—you can see the city clearer now."

It had graceful spires and round, lovely dwellings. Giant ships rested beside white, sparkling wharves. People went back and forth clad in light, airy garments. There was an air of glowing contentment.

Stasor said, "This is their golden age. It will last a long time. Soon they will colonize other planets near them. In the end—some million years from now—these people will rule almost all the known universes. And yet, compared to ours, their science is just a crawling child."

ANGUS felt a touch of jealousy. "Why should they rule the worlds? We people of Karr . . ."

"Wait, not yet. I want to show you this world three hundred years ago."

He touched a lever. The world below them grew away, shot backward and out into space. Angus cried out in amazement. "It's receding away from us."

"I'm going back in time. Remember, this is an expanding universe. It's come a long ways in the past three centuries, going toward the fixed star, Vega. We have to follow it."

This time, there was no lovely world. There was only blackened earth, charred and scorched. Great humps of steel stuck up from the ground like the fire-blackened ribs of some giant fallen in swamp-muck. From the west came seven thin, lean shapes, speeding through the air. From the blackened ground came thinner, smaller shapes to intercept them. The small shapes were like wasps in their darting and their speed. The big shapes never had a chance. They went down in masses of red flame, spinning.

Stasor announced, "This is their Last War. It is to go on ten more years. The seven shapes you saw were bombers loaded to their wings with atomic bombs. The smaller ships were fighters, their armaments mounted with fission-guns, an invention of an American scientist."

"Ten more years!" flinched Angus. "There's only blackened ground for them to live on."

"They live underground," explained Stasor.

Angus mused, "There's such a sharp difference between this world and what it's to be like three hundred years from this time."

"The American who invented the fission gun," explained Stasor, "will lead their world to that pinnacle. He is going to organize the remnants of the civilization left after the last war, compel interracial wedlock and births. The biological result of that will be, naturally, a new and different race in the course of the years. It is that race that will go out from Earth to the stars."

Angus regarded Stasor thoughtfully.

"You're thinking that what the American did with his people, I can do with mine."

The old man shrugged. He reached out and twisted the dials. He murmured, "Karr fights a war just as deadly as the one you see below. There's a difference. Instead of death, Karr's enemies deal it stagnation and degeneration."

"If I could get the Diktor to give the Hierarch's sciences to the people," Angus mused.

"Where there is hope you have new life," smiled Stasor gently. "Without science to benefit their lives the people of Karr have no hope."

Angus lashed out bitterly, "The Diktor is too powerful. There isn't any way to beat him."

"I will show you a way," murmured the old man.

IV

STAL TAY held high court before his ruby throne. He sat with right hand on his knee, bent forward, thin lips smiling. Before him stood the Hierarch, rigid with rage, black eyes burning under the shadow of his white cowl. To the Hierarch's left an almost naked Moana was crumpled on the cold stone floor, manacles rivetted to her wrists and ankles, her white flesh gleaming through torn garments.

Stal Tay taunted, "You come too late, Hierarch. I know where Red Angus went, what he went for, and who sent him."

"It was done in your interests," rasped the scientist. "I brought her to you that you might know the truth."

Stal Tay glanced at the weeping Moana. "So many odd things are done in my supposed interests these days. At that, I'm almost inclined to believe you but what really bothers me is this—did Angus find . . ."

The Diktor snapped off his speech abruptly. He rose half out of his throne, fingers clutching the jeweled arms. The Hierarch whirled. Even Moana turned her head to look, the sobs still racking her body.

A yellow glow was forming in midair a foot above the stone tiles of the Audience Chamber. The yellow glittered, coruscated and faded away. Where the color was now

stood a flat black dais with three chairs whose curving legs were rivetted to the floor of the dais. A man turned from the control panel that rose between the seats, a man with red hair and a tanned body. The man looked at them and laughed.

"Angus," whimpered Moana.

"Seize him," raged Stal Tay.

Angus bent and lifted something and held it up. It glittered in the light filtering through the arched windows of the Audience Chamber. Angus said, "This is the Book of Nard. I've come to bargain with you, Stal Tay."

The Diktor sank back into his throne, gesturing his guards aside. He said, "What do you want for the Book?"

"Moana."

"Moana," said the Diktor in surprise. "Is that all? Take her . . . but wait. How do I know this isn't a trick? How do I know I'll get the Book?"

Angus stepped from the dais to the floor of the chamber. He placed the book in its golden covers on the floor. "I went to the City of the Ancients. I met Stasor and took the Book of Nard from him. I came to bring it to you. I see I came just in time to save Moana."

Stal Tay came to his feet. "That thing you ride. What is it? Tell me its secret and I'll pardon you."

Angus laughed in his face. "Stasor calls it a teleportator. It shifts space, draws sectors of space together in an instant. In it a man can move from here to anywhere on Karr. Stasor knows many things, Stal Tay. One of them is how to bring you off that throne!"

The Diktor's face purpled. He started to talk but his eyes caught the golden covers of the Book of Nard and he controlled his anger. "Take her," he said, "before I decide the Book isn't worth your insults!"

Irons clanking, the girl stepped to Angus' side, let him lift her to the dais. Then Angus turned and studied the Diktor through narrowed eyelids.

"I'm giving you the Book now, Stal Tay. But it's only fair to warn you—I'll be back for it!"

He stepped onto the dais, turned a knob on the control panel. The dais fled and

the golden bubble came back, and then that, too, disappeared.

Moana sobbed as the dais fled through shifting white mists. Angus knelt beside her, using his disintegrator on the links of her manacles. She said, "The Diktor will send men for you. He'll never let you get away with this. You've only won a temporary victory."

Angus chuckled, "He'll be too busy with the Hierarch and the Book of Nard to go after me for a while. When he does, it will be too late." He dropped the severed chains to the floor of the dais. "You see, none of the scientists in the Citadel will understand the sciences in the book. They'll tell Stal Tay that and he won't believe them. There'll be a minor war between the Diktor and the Hierarchy. Once a breach between them is made, we'll step into it."

THE dais settled on something solid. The golden veil dissipated as before a wind, to reveal the smoke-blackened beams of a tavern room. Tandor was there, a wooden mug in one hand, straining forward from the tableside, his other hand clutching its edge, staring at them.

Angus helped Moana down. Tandor drained the mug and slammed it on the tabletop. He demanded, "Well? Got a bellyful of it? Ready for the star trails?"

"Not yet, Tandor."

Tandor growled and rubbed his palm on his bald head. He grumbled, "You'll be a martyr yet. You watch. You'll see. Red Angus—who died saving nothing!"

The pirate grinned at him, leaning his palms flat on the tabletop. "If I win, you know what'll happen, don't you? You and I will have to rule Karr. You'll be my major-domo. You'll wear fine clothes and make decisions and listen to people bellyache."

Tandor howled, leaping up so suddenly that his chair went skidding. He slammed his palms on the table. "Not me!" he bellowed. "I want no office and no snivelling folk to spoil my days! I—"

Angus moved a hand. He put it flat to Tandor's chest and held it there. The bald giant snapped his lips together. He grew silent as a clam, and as still.

The door was opening.

Something that looked like a man, that

was swathed in white bandages from toes to head, with just two slits for eyes and a hole for a mouth, was coming in the room. Tandor's hand swooped and lifted with a disintegrator.

"Angus," whispered the apparition. "Red Angus! I need help."

The pirate was across the room, catching the bandaged figure in cradling arms, lowering him to the couch. He whispered, "This is the second time you've been on that couch, Thordad. What happened to you?"

"When I left you at the globe-ship dock one of Stal Tay's spies knifed me and left me for dead. The Hierarch sent men to find me. They doctored me and were carrying me to the Citadel when the Diktor jumped us. He sent me to his torture dungeons."

The man shuddered under the bandages. The eyes, through the slits, were wide with horror and remembered pain. "The Diktor wanted to learn what the Hierarch was after. I wouldn't tell him. Before that he confronted me with the Hierarch who disowned me. He told Stal Tay to do with me what he wanted!"

The raw hate throbbed in Thordad's voice. It sent a cold ripple down Angus' spine. The pirate leaned closer to the bandaged mouth. "The Diktor let his beasts at me for three days. It was horrible. But I got away. I think I went mad with the pain. I crept to my cousin's house and was bandaged and partially healed there. Then I came here. You're the only hope any of us have. You've got to do something—anything—to stop that madman and the Hierarch!"

Angus wiped his hands on his jacket. "You, Tandor. What news have you?"

"I've been busy too," Tandor growled, eying Thordad curiously. "I've roused the men and women of the Lower City. I've sent for the pirates on Yassanin, sent for warriors from the cities of Streeth and Fayalat. We've a crew of fighting men with swords and spears and a few disintegrators. But with the scientific might of Stal Tay and the Hierarch we're beaten before we start."

Angus laughed. "Not yet. Stasor has promised help. We're to meet him and get the weapons he told me about. Into the

teleportator on the double—all of you."

When they were in the chairs fastened to the dais, Angus threw over the lever. A golden mist formed about them, hardened. There was an instant of coldness . . .

The golden mist disappeared. The teleportator stood before the fountain in the Tower of the Ancients. Angus sprang from the machine. "Stasor, I'm back!"

There was no answer. Only the silence of the dead walls of the dead city replied.

It was Moana who found the blood-stained bit of silk that had been ripped from Stasor's garment. Wordlessly she held it out to Angus.

His belly turned over when he saw it. He looked at the girl, then at Tandor.

"The Diktor's come for him. With Stasor to unravel the secrets in the Book of Nard, Stal Tay can't be beaten!"

Tandor shrugged massive shoulders. "I knew that a long time ago. We'll all die. It's just a matter of when and where."

IN THE time Angus had allotted him, Tandor had thrown up a small city of tents and wickiups along the stone ridges of the Bloody Cliffs. Here came the pirates from Yassanin, the starved soldiery from the star cities of Fayalat and Kor. Here were half-naked gypsy girls and camp followers, fighting men and muckers. Here were dishonored captains and untried youths who owned swords and a hot hunger to use them.

In the red fire of an armorer's forge, Red Angus handled a ring-barreled gun that was powered by a portable dynamo set up on a small, two-wheeled cart.

The armorer said, "It's weak and it's clumsy, but it's the best I could do. The electraray gets its power from the dynamo in the cart. Power travels along the fuel line to the breach. A tiny converter translates it into a thin beam of force. I've seen them in the museums. I made sketches. Given more time I could do better."

Red Angus put a grin on his lips and held it there by sheer will-power. His hand clapped the man on the back. He told him, "You've done fine, Yoth! Keep it up. Turn out as many as you can!"

The armorer shook his head glumly. "They won't be much alongside the disin-

tors that Stal Tay will nave. Even their sonic-beams will do more damage than this!"

Tandor came swaggering up through the half-naked, hairy chested men who fought with blunted sabres and war-spears. There was dirt on his face, and runnels of sweat ran on his barrel chest. He planted his legs apart, and glowered at Red Angus.

"You're mad as a priest of Grom. You keep us here when we'd do better by scattering to the six worlds."

Angus said, "These are the toughest fighting men in the galaxy. If they can't take the Citadel no one can. Once we get within sword-sweep of the Diktor's guards . . ."

Tandor bellowed. He went up on his toes and waved his arms, and his veins stood out on his bald head. "As well get within sword-sweep of Ashtal the Shameless!" he roared. "The Diktor will sweep the streets with disintegrator beams when he sees us coming. Maybe you want to play martyr, but I've better uses for my life. Take that gypsy girl . . ."

Angus caught him by the fur of his cloak and shook him. "Forget your gypsy wenches. We go into the Lower City at night. All of us, over a week's time. We bed down in different homes. Loyal homes. A fortnight from now will be the Night of the Serpent. Singing and dancing in the streets. Wine. Women."

Tandor grinned. "Aie, that sounds good."

"At the hour of the Dog we hit the Citadel. There'll be so much roistering going on we'll belt-whip every mother's son into the streets that night, and make 'em yell to cover our movements. No one'll notice us!

"We hit the Citadel from every street. Some of us will get through. Ten streets, ten companies, each of them a flying wedge to get inside and kill Stal Tay. That's our first job. After that . . ."

Red Angus talked on, sketching in the hot sands. He did not see a bandaged Thordad come out of a tent and stand there, watching them, and listening. Thordad turned away after a while and went back into the tent where he sat shivering and staring down at his hands.

Neither did Red Angus see him that

night when he daggered a guard and fled on a haml across the desert for Karr City. They found the guard but guessed him a victim of a jealous lover for he had a reputation as a lady's man.

The days slid into weeks, and the fires burned and metal glowed, and the forges and the anvils never stopped. Swords and shields and spears, daggers and clumsy electrorays were turned out for eager hands.

They broke camp in the faint mists of an early dawn. On ewe-necked haml and on foot, by cart and by stolen jetcar, they left the base of the Bloody Cliffs. They came into Karr City by twos and threes and hid themselves in the taverns and in the thatch-roofed houses. The city knew them and the city swallowed them, and the city slumbered, waiting.

In the tavern of the Spotted Stag, Red Angus paced the floor. Tandor, an arm around his gypsy girl, was sampling a new tun of imported wine. Moana was white-faced, pale and silent at the table.

Angus said, "I don't like it. I don't like it. I have the feel of a wolf sniffing at the jaws of a trap."

Tandor drew his lips from the gypsy's neck long enough to say, "It's quiet, isn't it. What more do you want?"

"That's just it. It's too quiet. There are no Citadel guards out hunting me. No arrests for five days. No street patrols, even!"

"Good. Then let's call it off and go back to Yassanin. You'll like Yassanin, honey." Tandor nuzzled the girl's throat, "I have a big house there. Much wine. Better wine than this!"

Angus stared at the man through slitted eyes, reached for a goblet and lifted it. His hand poised the goblet, about to throw. Angus swore and buried his nose in the cup. He flung it from him, and it broke against the wall.

THE city stayed quiet for five days. On the morning of the Night of the Serpent it exploded with energy. Men and women, in masks and costumes, paraded and sang. They drank and danced and the Citadel brooded down on them.

The day wore on. Tandor and Angus were busy, keeping some semblance of order in their fighting crews, keeping the

men from the wine-barrels, readying them for their assignments. Tandor went stalking into the taverns and the wine shops with heavy hands, striking out as he walked, often upending an unfortunate into a wine-tun after knocking in its head with the head of the man he held upside down in his hands.

Red Angus went more circumspectly, fighting off the tipsy women and armed footpads who waxed rich in the torchlight gatherings during the long Night of the Serpent. He rounded up his crews and found them their weapons.

"Tonight the stars revolt!"

At the hour of the Dog ten companies of hard-eyed fighting men came out of the shadows of the ten cobblestoned streets that led by twisting tiers to the Citadel. They went up the curving stone stairs to the smooth Citadel streets and started forward . . .

And then the Diktor struck.

The sonicbeams came first, cutting the front ranks to bloody pulp. Disintorators rayed into action. Men went down silently under the lightning-swift impact of purplish lances.

It was a rout.

Here, a naked mercenary from Fayalat would flesh his blade in a few necks as he drove in behind a wall of dead flesh. There, a warrior from Kor might take three of Stal Tay's soldiers with him before he touched hands with his ancestors. But the beams and the rays slew in the darkness and the rabble was driven back.

Where Red Angus fought with an electroray cart, sweeping the ringed nozzle of his weapon in and out of the shadows, the men of the Lower City stood a while. They fought with the ferocity of trapped thots, for the pits of Stal Tay yawned for them.

"Hold firm!" roared Tandor, his sword a sweeping line of gray death where it circled and darted.

"Fall back," cried Angus. "Back to reform! They've trapped us well, the tricky dogs."

A man with a bandaged face stood out a moment from the shadows, pointing. He cried, "Half a hundred *oblis* to the man who brings down Red Angus!"

"Thordad!" shouted Angus, and he knew

now the manner of his betrayal. Thordad had seen a chance for reinstatement and had taken it. He had seen the rabble that served Red Angus and knew the disciplined power of the Diktor's guards. He had gone with news of Angus' plans. This trap was the result.

Red Angus forgot the others. He sighted the electroray carefully. A thin beam of brilliance lanced out. It touched Thordad on face and neck. A headless corpse rolled at the guards' feet as they came forward.

Their rush caught Angus and the men with him. It swept them backward through the streets, rolled up their flanks. It clubbed the center with sonicbeams until men screamed in the agony of mashed legs and caved-in chests.

Angus fought like a maddened griff. He used the electroray like a broom, sweeping it before him. He kicked the two-wheeled cart ahead for without the dynamo in the cart the electroray was useless.

A sudden rush of guards caught Angus in a maelstrom of cursing, howling men.

They hit him and drove him back against the glittering metal collar of one of the black pools, yawning grim and silent in the cobblestoned square. They hammered him with swordblades and pounded the cart with metal-headed axes.

Angus stumbled, fell. He came up slowly, his back to the cold metal collar of the pool, the ringed barrel of the useless electroray still in his hands.

It's all over, he told himself, staring at the swords coming for him. I've failed, and I'll die, and so will Moana, and Tandor, and all the rest of this motley crew who tried to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Angus clubbed with the ringed barrel and a man fell whimpering at his feet.

"Come on!" the pirate roared. "Here's my last stand, here at the edge of the pool! You're done with Red Angus. See how a free man dies."

Angus broke off, eyes wide.

The pool!

One of the black pools of Karr . . .

WHAT was it Stasor had said of those pools? "The pools are nothing more than atomic radiation—sheer energy—bot-

ted up in vast chambers lined with stala-hasil. Ready for use at any time.'

Ready for use.

With the savage fury of the barbarian, Angus slammed the ringed barrel at the faces pressing in on him. They wanted him alive and that gave him the precious moment he needed.

He whipped the electrora y high in the air, swung it so the weighted powercord flailed high and far over the metal rim of the pool's collar. It dropped down and down into the black depths.

Angus pressed the stud.

A ravening stream of black mist shot from the ringed nozzle. It touched the oncoming soldiers of the Diktor, touched them, and . . .

Ate them!

When the black mist faded the Diktor's soldiers faded, too. They were gone in that desolation of yawning street and crumpled walls. Where the black mist had touched nothing remained.

Tandor bellowed.

The star-pirates roared their glee.

Angus moved the weapon and touched the stud again. The black mist fled outward, up one street, down another. When he was finished there were no soldiers facing them. The streets to the Citadel lay empty, beckoning.

They went forward in a ravening wave of fury, the fury of roused fighting men, who had looked the eyeless sockets of Death's skull in the face and lived. The night held no more terrors for them for their nostrils were tasting the fragrance of victory. Other men came up from the Lower City to join them, men who bore home-made weapons, crude clubs and axes.

Angus caught a sweat-streaked Tandor by the arm. "This gun! The powercord that fell in the black pool. That's what did it. It's a weapon of the Elders. The pool feeds it, gives it power . . ."

"What matters that?" bellowed Tandor, shaking a new sword in his hand. "It worked!"

"But it won't work if I can't keep the powercord inside the pool."

Tandor blinked, grunting as understanding came to him. "Huh. That's different. *Pask. Gatl. Sonal. At the double, you riff-*

raff. To me."

He gave orders crisply, then swung to Angus. "They'll scour the Lower City for copper wire. We'll couple an extension to the cord so you can take it wherever you want."

Angus nodded. "Put a file of men on either side of it. Keep them there. Make them fight for that cord with their lives. If they fail us, we die."

Tandor handpicked his men, big men all, with the scars of many battles speaking their experience. The cord was slit and fitted with gleaming copper cable-lengths, insulated, and welded tightly.

Weapon in hands, Red Angus led his rabble army up the stone-block roadway steps, upward from the mire and filth of the Lower City, upward to the clean white reaches of the Citadel.

The Diktor's personal guards made a sortie against them, but the black mist swept them away. When the Hierarch sent his troops to join those of the Diktor the mist swirled around them once, and then blew away, leaving the Citadel gardens empty of opposition.

It was over.

They walked through the gardens, into the halls and corridors of the Palace. Men stood weaponless, fright tightening the lines of their faces.

Tandor roared, "The Diktor, you foul hounds. Where is he?"

Men pointed and at the end of their fingers loomed the great golden bulk of the Audience Chamber.

The Diktor and the Hierarch stood before the ruby throne. They were beaten men, expecting death, their cheeks washed an ashen grey.

Angus said, "If you've harmed Stasor you'll take a year to die."

The Diktor gestured wearily. "He's in chains, in the lower pits. We haven't harmed him. He would not translate the Book of Nard. But even so, dead he was useless to us. Alive, he might have changed his mind."

He went on to explain how he had traced Angus' journey in the spectragraph, how his men had followed Angus' course in globe ships to bring the god of Karr to the Citadel. He said, "You were beaten.

Whipped. My messengers told me that you were hemmed in, your men chopped to thumbbits. And yet—yet you come here—”

Madness glinted in the Diktor's eyes. His right hand moved like lightning, and the blue metal of a disintor caught fire from the soft luminescence of the walls.

The Diktor was swift but Tandor was faster. His hand blurred and a glittering longsword jumped the five feet that separated them. It drove the dead body of the Diktor back three steps to the ruby throne. He fell at its base and a pool of blood grew larger on the floor.

The Hierarch shrugged and put a pellet to his mouth. The poison acted with incredible speed. He was falling as the chamber door opened and a gently smiling Stasor entered, leaning on his staff.

Angus and Moana stood on the heights of the Citadel and looked down at the Lower City. They saw the thatched roofs no longer, but instead tidy houses, clean streets and healthy children. Men and women walked with pride, their bodies clean, enjoying the new life that Stasor and the Book of Nard could bring them. It would take time, all that. But it would come.

Moana moved gently. Her hand caught his. He turned her head up and his lips settled on hers.

A hundred feet away, Tandor grinned. “A martyr, I called him,” he told the night.

He thought of a black-haired noblewoman who had been widowed in the night's fighting. Tandor rubbed his head again and chuckled. He tiptoed from the gardens.
