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## DEATH-BY-RAIN

by RAY BRADBURY

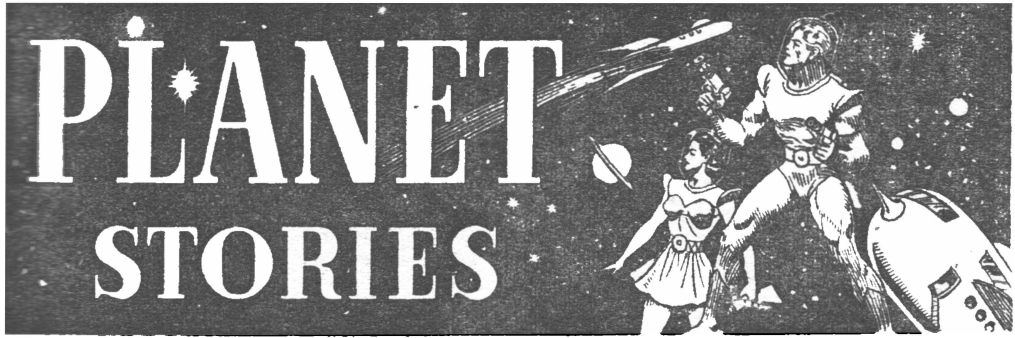


What world claimed her sword—  
Imperial Terra or dying Mars?

## WARRIOR-MAID of MARS

A Novel of Barbarian Worlds  
by ALFRED COPPEL





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# WARRIOR-MAID of MARS

By ALFRED COPPEL

**The Terran Barbarians have landed! Already they plunder a dying, helpless planet! And a whisper rustles through the cold, thin air, across the rust-red sands: "Give us a leader—and we will fight! Give us back our ancient glory!"**

**T**HE SMALL ROOM WAS DARK but for the flickering light of a single oil-lamp that burned on the bare table between the two long rows of black-hooded figures. The thin dry air was surcharged with the tenseness of a tautly drawn cord . . . a strangler's cord. A sentence of death had been passed in silence. Now, the executioners balloted, still in silence, to select from their number a leader.

The High Council of the Maldia was in session. Behind the dark, enigmatic sable masks and robes lurked all the might and hate of a proud, ancient and dying culture. The might of a warlike world's aristocracy. The hate that was the unreasoning, distilled essence of a doomed world's bitterness . . .

Beneath the black cowl that shadowed his face young Telis of Lars' eyes showed fierce pride as member after member pointed silently toward his end of the table. It seemed that the vote would be overwhelmingly in his favor, and a tremor of anticipation ran through him. At the far end of the board he could see his rival candidate's eyes glittering furiously. The Maldia would not be led by Brand, that much was certain. The assembled nobles were quite plainly repudiating his leadership for that of the young Lord of Lars.

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*Then the cannibal-people were upon them—a savage, shrieking horde.*

Outside the tower room, the icy wind shrieked and gamboled through the crenels of the ancient fortress like a harbinger of doom. The draughts set the candle flame to dancing crazily, and long shadows leapt from wall to wall.

Telis stretched his long legs out under the table. To him, the voting seemed unnecessarily prolonged and ritualistic, but he knew better than to voice opposition to customs that had been accepted in the Maldia since long before the Laurrs, the dictator-kings who took the name of the very planet for themselves, had driven the society underground.

The young warrior was forced to admit that ritual and trappings were an important part of the superstitious hold the Maldia had on the great masses of Laurr. And, with the populace cowed, anything was possible. Even the Laurr himself would not care to face the unanimous disapproval of this masked heirarchy. Too many Laurrs, down through the aeons of the planet's history, had fallen before the blades of Maldia assassins.

Telis watched the glittering eyes that peered out from behind the peaked mask that hid Prince Brand's handsome face. The man knew he was defeated, and rage seemed to surround him like a malign auriole. Brand would never be satisfied with the deputy command that would be his for having been second in the balloting. The man wanted full authority, not command of troops in the field as Telis had had. Brand was far too concerned with his own safety for that; he wanted command of the striking force of assassins that would murder the handful of invaders out in the desert. The victory over a few scientists from another world would give Brand the renown he craved and at negligible risk, for all his dark talk about mystery weapons and his pleas for caution.

The only need for caution that Telis could see was the possible intervention of the Temple or the Laurr. And the Temple knew nothing. And the Laurr could be handled . . . by Telis.

Telis looked around him, wishing the masked nobles would have done with it. It would not be a safe thing to have the Temple learn that the Maldia met in Telis'

own palace quarters. He noted with satisfaction that the voting had ended.

The shrieking wind outside died suddenly, leaving a thick silence.

A black figure arose from either side of the table. The one on the right turned toward Telis, and its voice had a strange and disembodied timbre in the stillness.

"Telis of Lars," it said, "you lead."

Telis inclined his head in acceptance. Taciturnity was part of the ancient tradition of the Maldia.

The figure on the left turned toward Brand. "Brand, Prince of Laurr, you follow."

Brand heaved himself to his feet. "I protest this insult!" he said thickly. "Why am I to follow him? He is not even of royal birth!"

The robed figure on the left seemed to tense. Its voice sounded suddenly almost metallic. "You follow," it repeated deliberately.

Brand stood irresolutely, two solid rows of shadowed faces turned toward him. Then Telis spoke up softly, almost casually.

"A challenge, Brand, to decide?"

"I follow," muttered Brand, sinking into his chair sullenly.

Telis smiled to himself. If ever a coward like Brand should pick up a flung challenge, surely the Water Goddess would throw down the moons!

Slowly, the hooded men filed from the room, leaving Telis alone. For a moment Brand paused by the door, and Telis could see that he fingered his sword hilt under the sable robes. But he stood so, glaring at Telis, for only a minute. Then he was gone.

From the darkness of the courtyard beneath the tower window came the sound of a whistle, and Lord Telis relaxed. The bribed guardsman's signal indicated that the last member, of the Maldia had mounted his sith and was safely away.

**T**ELIS felt a stirring of pride. Any victory was a pleasing thing to him; but tonight's smashing triumph over Brand was a thing the renegade princeling would long remember! The Maldia had chosen to forget that he, Telis, came only from

the lower nobility.

His position as Captain-General of the Laurr's armies, as well as the real affection the ruler had for him, had been a large factor in the selection, Telis knew. The Maldia was certain that the old Laurr was fond enough of his young Captain-General to overlook the breach of faith contemplated for the morning . . .

Telis doffed his robes and dressed himself with care. Always fastidious about his appearance, he knew that this night his dress must be impeccable. The Laurr of Laurr was very particular about such things.

With a last hitch at his jewelled harness, Telis stationed himself before the polished onyx mirror. The image that gazed calmly back at him from its dark surface was sufficiently imposing, he reflected, even for the Laurr of Laurr. He was tall and well-knit; the war harness, bright with gems, hung low on his hips; his long legs were bare, and his chest covered only by the crossed straps that supported his weapons.

The black sith-leather was studded with battle-decorations. It would be well, Telis reasoned, to remind the Laurr of his many services to the throne. Tacitly, perhaps, but nonetheless firmly.

All the gems won in the Guski campaigns and in the last Water War were there, as was the golden cross of the Laurr's own Knighthood . . . presented to Telis by the hand whose blessing he planned to seek this very night.

Glancing at his chronometer, Telis turned away from the mirror. Through the high, narrow window of his palace quarters, the light of the nearer moon streamed in golden glory, shaming the feeble light of the ef-lamp. Telis stepped to the window, his gaze seeking the low hills beyond the still, shallow waters of the Grand Canal. The beauty of the night caught at his breast, for, even as he watched, the great orb of the farther moon was rising sedately to add its light to the already fulsome glory of her racing sister.

Below and across the palace grounds, the flickering lights of the city spread like a web of living beads in the moonlight.

As always, Telis felt a rush of pride as he contemplated the beauty of his world,

A great sadness filled him then, for he knew that such beauty could not last much longer. Soon now, the sun would rise on a planet of death . . .

Telis shuddered and turned away. The beauty of the night faded, leaving only reality. And reality was stark and deadly on Laurr. The water was vanishing, and the great plains that had once been green and fertile were now oxidized wastelands. Lars, far to the north, was deserted now, for the canal had silted up and life had become unbearable. And now the great deserts of iron oxide stood at the very shores of the Grand Canal, and what did flow down from the pole was barely enough to keep the watercourse free of red silt.

Aeons ago, before the great Wars that had almost wrecked the planet, the ancients had seen the drought coming. They had known that the air and the water would steadily unite with Laurr's thirsty iron, leaving the planet barren and desiccated beyond belief.

They had tried to plan for that day and had built the great waterways as part of their sonservatino program. Other projects had been started; mysterious power plants far out in the deserts with walls of foot-thick pund had been built. But somehow, nothing good had come from these mysterious Temples. The first of the Ten Great Water Wars had begun even then, and the warring people of the planet had demanded weapons from these strange plants.

For many generations the engineer-priests had refused the pleas and demands, but, as the steadily diminishing water supplies had caused war after war after war, they relented.

From the pund-lined Temples had come a steady flow of ghastly weapons. Weapons that left Laurr's cities shattered piles of rubbish to be covered by the drifting sands. Weapons that had destroyed forever the once flourishing culture that might have saved the world from its inexorable doom.

The secrets of the past were forgotten . . . or covered with legendary dross. But the wars went on and on and on.

Telis knew, staring out across the rusty sands, that Laurr was doomed to a quick

death. It would not come in his lifetime . . . but soon . . . soon . . .

And then the Tellurians had come! To gloat and exploit. To steal the iron of the deserts and drain away the last of the planet's resources to their wantonly wealthy world! Even the Laurr of Laurr had given them safe-conduct . . . on the basis that their expedition proved some of the Temple's favored dogma concerning the origin of the race!

Weakness! thought Telis savagely. It fills us as life slips away from our planet. But it would not be so! The ancient, dreaded Maldia would see to that! If Laurr must die, then at least she could die upright and untrammelled by ghoulish invaders!

In sudden fury, Telis snatched up his cloak and strode from the room. The jewelled glyph of the Water Goddess, Mother of Laurr, gleamed fiercely for a moment on the hilt of his short-sword in the feeble light as Telis sought the long winding ramp that led to the lower levels and the audience chamber of the Laurr of Laurr.

Along endless corridors, ef-lit and lined with rigid guardsmen, Lord Telis of Lars made his way. Underfoot, the ever-present drift of reddish sand gritted as he walked.

Turning into the main passageway that led to the inner courtyard, Telis heard the sound of his name . . . softly spoken, but demanding. Stopping, he looked about him. A dark-robed figure beckoned to him from the shadow of a huge stone buttress. It was Gorla, First Cycle Priest of the Temple, and Telis' long standing friend at court. His eyes were sombre in his round, good-humored face.

"I have met you just in time. You are on your way to see the Laurr, friend Telis?"

Telis nodded. "Of course. I am already keeping him waiting. I'll see you in the morning, friend Gorla." He made a move to slip by the young Priest and be on his way.

"A moment, Telis!" Gorla's voice was suddenly sharp. "You are about to ask the Laurr to break his word to the outlanders, are you not?"

Telis' eyes narrowed. "Perhaps . . ."

GORLA laid a hand on his arm. "Telis, I have known you many haads. As children we played together on the fields of Lars. Believe me, I wish nothing but the best for you. Why are you involved with this bloodthirsty madness of the Maldia?"

Telis withdrew his arm as though the Priest had stung him. Only the strength of a lifelong friendship kept him from striking Gorla, for the Priest's words had hit a deep-seated prejudice. The Maldia was of the nobility . . . and Gorla was a Commoner.

Gorla went on slowly, emphasizing his words carefully. "Dorliss knows of your plan to break the Laurr's pledge and attack the Tellurian camp."

Telis stiffened. How was it possible? He had told no one!

The Priest divined his thoughts. "The Temple has ways, Telis, of knowing such things. The Maldia can bribe a guard . . . and the Temple can bribe him again. You should have thought of that tonight."

Telis drew himself back. "So?"

"You are foolish, my friend. And it is the duty of the Temple to see that Laurr does not suffer for your foolishness. The Maldia is a fearful thing, Telis, a creation of senseless hate. Why do you hate the Tellurians? You have never even seen one. They are but men like ourselves, and they bring gifts of great promise to Laurr. It is not fit that such as you should be joined with a renegade like Prince Brand . . . a craven and a lying usurper . . . and for the purpose of attacking those who have come across to seek knowledge and friendship!"

Telis pondered. What Gorla said about Brand was largely true. The man was untrustworthy and underhanded, a blind seeker of power. But prejudices of caste and upbringing were too much to combat. And to renege now would be to mark himself a coward in a world that lived by the sword. It was unthinkable!

"You, Gorla," Telis said pointedly, "should limit yourself to scientific and theological matters and leave matters of state and policy to those better equipped to handle them."

Gorla shook his head sadly. "Foolish

friend!" Then his voice took on the unmistakable tone of command. "In the name of, and by the authority of the Temple, I demand that you abandon your projected attack on the Tellurian camp."

Telis threw back his head and laughed. "Demand, is it? I know of no plan to attack the foreigners, friend Priest, now or in the future! Now kindly step aside. I cannot make the Lurr of Lurr wait on me while I argue senseless points with you . . ."

Gorla sounded defeated. "Then you refuse?"

Telis frowned at his friend. "Of course, I refuse! And you may carry that message back to Dorliss . . . if there *is* such a place!"

With that he turned away, but not before Gorla laid his hand on Telis' arm and said: "Then forgive me, old friend . . ."

Telis wondered at that. Forgive? Forgive what? Then other matters forced that question from his mind. So the Temple knew of the Maldia's plan to massacre the aliens. To what extent, he wondered, would the Temple go in striving for its own inscrutable purpose to save the Tellurian scientists? And why? In spite of himself, Telis could not suppress a shudder, for the Temple was powerful . . . perhaps the most powerful thing remaining on the desiccated planet of Lurr.

The ancient order of the Temple Priests dated to far before the Ten Water Wars that had so devastated the globe with their atomic fury. Its beginnings were lost in the dim mists of antiquity, even antedating the building of the waterways. The membership was perhaps the one body selected for any purpose on Lurr without consideration of family or background, and this fact accounted for the fierce loyalty of such able young Commoners as Gorla.

The long wars and the struggle for survival had destroyed much of the ancient science, and what remained lay within the jurisdiction of the Temple. As it so often happens in times of great stress, science on the world of Lurr had taken on the vestments of religion in order to survive. A benevolent, scientific hierarchy, the Priests of the Seven Cycles spent their cloistered hours delving into the great

knowledge of the ancients, seeking the answers to riddles solved long ago and forgotten in the fratricidal wars that were the direct result of the dwindling water supply. Ostensibly, the Temple conducted the world-wide worship of the Water Goddess, principal deity in the Laurrian Pantheon, but actually the Priests were scientists striving frantically to salvage what little they could from the wreckage of the ancient civilization on a doomed and quarrelsome planet.

ALL this Telis of Lars knew only vaguely. He was a soldier, and little concerned with the ins and outs of the scientific theocracy of the Temple. His life up to now had been spent largely in wars and tourneys, in love-making and the less exacting pastimes of the hedonist. Only the coming of the Tellurians had stirred him to take a more direct part in the doings of the court circles, for above all he loved Lurr, and in the outlanders Telis saw the final, insupportable insult to his beloved, prostrate home-world.

The government of the Lurr of Lurr and the Temple seldom clashed. Each remained within its proper sphere, and both were content. But into this peculiar age-old arrangement the Tellurian spaceship had fallen like a disrupting bolt from the sky. And men—men like the men of Lurr—had emerged from the vessel . . . seeming to prove the Temple's much-doubted hypothesis that both Lurr and the planet the aliens called Terra had been colonized by a great race of interstellar travelers. How much more could be proved or done with the Tellurians' aid remained to be seen. The Temple was already calling them the Redeemers of Lurr, and through its good offices a safe-conduct had been granted by the Lurr of Lurr himself.

They had come seeking iron. They wanted to mine and later, perhaps, to colonize, though Lurr was uncomfortable for them. But this the Maldia found unthinkable. The Tellurians were barbarians, and the ancient nobles of Lurr raged at their intrusion.

Telis found himself among these objectors. For many haads, Lurr had known



of its approaching doom and it wished to die, Telis thought, as it had lived—proud and unconquered. The Tellurians were outsiders who had no place on the barren face of his Laurr . . . and it was Telis' intention to drive them away or destroy them. For this he had been chosen leader of the attack that the Maldia planned to mount in the morning.

Already agents had been sent out to agitate among the degenerate tribes of the desert—the cannibal Guski—and the Maldia was assured of at least four thousand tribesmen in arms in return for food and plunder. The power of the Maldia, five hundred sith-mounted nobles, added to the mass of Guski seemed more than enough to handle a small scientific expedition from space.

Now, as he left the guest wing of the palace and strode across the dark courtyard that separated him from the household quarters of the ruler's family, Telis smiled to himself. The intruding Tellurians were due for a shock. Their safe-conduct would be voided within the hour and Laurr would be free of them before the sun set again!

He was almost across the yard and into the gate of the household wing when something made him pause. He had the feeling of being watched . . . followed. His sharp eyes swept the whole of the courtyard. It was walled and heavily planted with desert shrubs so that his inspection told him nothing. He shrugged and turned again toward the gate.

One step he took, and no more. From overhead came the low whirring of an airsled's idling motor. He stopped short, searching the sky for the craft. A sled in the air low over the Laurr's palace at this time of night could mean nothing good.

The sharp clank of metal behind him made him swing around, his sword hissing from its scabbard. Three hooded figures were almost upon him, naked steel in their hands. Telis thought wildly of calling for aid, and then he realized that these men would never dare to attack him if they had not either bribed or killed the household guards. Instinctively, he thought of Brand. Was this the renegade's doing? By killing

him and spiriting his body away, Brand could contend before the Maldia that Telis had lost courage at the last moment and fled rather than lead them in an overt act against the Tellurians . . .

There was no more time for thought, for the three men were upon him. He slipped his second sword free and stood facing them, searching for some hint as to their identity. Overhead the airsled hovered, waiting . . .

With a cry, Telis lunged forward and caught one of the attackers on his point. The man doubled up and fell to his knees as his two companions closed in. The courtyard now echoed the ring of steel on steel, and the labored breathing of men fighting.

Telis fought fiercely. He was fighting for his life—and for what was even more important on Laurr—his honor as a warrior.

His blade wove a deadly, glittering web in the darkness, but his two assailants closed in steadily. The whirring sound of the airsled was nearer now, and Telis glanced upward to see if he could catch a glimpse of the aircraft. His heart sank.

The ship was a dark blot across the stars, but he could see that a rope ladder hung down into the court and more men were pouring down, swords in hand.

Desperately, Telis pressed forward, trying to rush the attackers and gain a brief respite. One of the men feinted in the low lines and followed with a thrust at the head that caught Telis a glancing blow on the temple and set the stars to dancing before his eyes.

The fellow rushed in eagerly and Telis heard his companion hiss: "Careful, you fool!"

Telis' attack stalled under the concerted rush of the masked man, and he was forced to retreat until his bare back touched the roughness of the courtyard wall. There could be no further retreat.

The assailants separated now, so that Telis was forced to strike wildly from side to side to avert being hit. His sword made a glittering arc as he parried a near thrust and a lightning riposte pierced the swordarm of his nearest attacker.

Before the others who had dropped

from the sled could close in on him, Telis whirled and ran along the base of the wall. If he could reach the gate of the household wing he would be safe, for no assassins would dare follow him into the inner sanctum of the Laurr himself.

He heard a voice shouting hoarsely in the darkness, and other voices replying angrily, impatiently.

"We've lost him!"

"The devil's wounded Marl and Varo!"

"Find him, you fool! He must be taken."

Telis ran breathlessly along the wall, hoping against hope that the gate would not be covered. It was a vain hope. As he broke out of the shrubbery, the shouts began again and he was forced to retreat into the shelter of a towering desert plant.

He waited there, breath coming in long rasping gasps, and his head singing from the blow he had taken.

With pounding heart he listened to the attackers beating the bushes for him and shouting commands and advice to one another. More men must still be coming down from the airsled, for there were fully ten in the dark courtyard now.

"He can't have gotten far!"

"See that the gate is covered—"

"How the young devil does fight!"

"Pierce that bush there! I saw something move!"

Telis tried to smother his labored breathing as the group drew nearer to his hiding place. His hands cradled his two swords lovingly as the searchers spread out into a semicircle and moved steadily towards him.

Telis tensed himself to leap. Within seconds, they would be upon him and assassins on Laurr showed no mercy, particularly to one who had wounded two of their craft. He doubled his legs under him and waited.

"There he is!"

Telis burst from hiding and braced himself for the rush. His back was once again against the wall and this time, he knew, there would be no escape.

A glittering circle of naked swords surrounded him and he lashed out furiously, driving the attackers back by the main force of his charge.

Then it was that a stray beam of light from the closely guarded gate caught a

jewelled glyph on the harness of one of the assassins and Telis' heart froze. The insigne was the Sword and Atom—the ensign of the Secular Guard of the Holy Temple!

The disclosure was like a blow. It was Gorla rather than Brand, who was trying to kill him! The bitter understanding seemed to sap his strength. When he felt the stun-gun's tingling impact, it was almost a relief. Blackness came . . . darker than the primeval night, and he felt himself falling . . .

## II

THERE WAS WIND ON HIS face, and the air was bitterly cold. Telis stirred. His harness covered him only slightly, and his bare limbs and naked chest stung under the lash of the icy night air. From somewhere, muffled by the roaring of the wind, Telis could hear the familiar beat of a multiple-pulse jet engine. Under his questing hands lay the caulked deck of an air-sled, and he realized that the aircraft was under way and that he was lashed to rings in the afterdeck.

With a shuddering sigh, he forced himself to relax. Since his abductors so obviously had the better of him at the moment, there was little he could do other than watch and wait.

For what seemed to be several hours, he lay quiet and watched the endless procession of the stars overhead. Finally, as the last effects of the stun-gun's bolt wore off, he lifted his head to get a look at his captors.

In the greenish glow of phosphorescent light that emanated from the instruments on the sled's panel, he could see two figures seated at the controls. The dim light gleamed for a moment on an insigne—the Sword and Atom. He had not been mistaken back there in the courtyard. He was in the hands of the Temple.

The nearer man glanced in his direction and, seeing that he had awakened, leaned forward to speak. There was no surprise in Telis as he recognized him. Only a hot anger. For the man was his friend Gorla.

"Telis! Are you all right?" Gorla had to shout to make himself heard over the

rush of the wind.

Telis felt his anger increase. Here was Gorla, who had had him attacked, stunned, and finally kidnapped. And now, it seemed, he was concerned over the state of his health and general condition! It did not matter that Brand would within hours be convincing the gentlemen of the Maldia that Telis of Lars was a faint-hearted coward who disappeared in the eleventh hour before the attack on the aliens' camp! What mattered to Gorla was simply: "Telis, are you all right!"

Getting nothing but a scowl from Telis, the young Priest sat back, a half smile on his round, pleasant face. He could well imagine what Telis' thoughts were about now. Hurt pride and mortified anger were apparent in every line of the Lord of Lars' tense body.

For hour after hour the air-sled sped along through the smooth night air. The farther moon set and the madly racing nearer moon rose again in the west and charged insanely across the backdrop of the eternal stars. Telis could not see his chronometer, but he estimated that they had been travelling almost all night at the highest speed the sled could handle. The pulsing of the jet was a smooth, continuous purr. They were heading in a westerly direction, and after a bit of mental mathematics, Telis estimated that they must be very near the heart of the Great Red Desert and a long, long way from the capital.

As he struggled to keep from freezing, the young noble estimated his chances for survival on this strange flight. He found them dishearteningly slim. For some reason, the seemingly benevolent Temple had intervened harshly and forcefully in the plan to destroy the Tellurians. But it should have been apparent to the Priests that his abduction would not stop the attack. There were plenty of men to take his place. Brand, surely. Then why was he being held?

Perhaps the Temple did not wish that he should gain the sanction of the Lurr of Lurr for the Maldia's plan. But why abduction, then? Why not merely hold him prisoner until the attack was begun? The events of the night showed a great

deal of careful planning and organization. Such things took time. And again, why? Telis had a strong suspicion that in some way the great fondness that the Lurr of Lurr had for him, and the correspondingly large influence he wielded because of it had more than a little to do with these strange and dangerous doings . . .

The motion of the air-sled as it slanted sharply downward interrupted his reverie. They were nearing their destination, and whatever was in store for him would not be long in materializing.

Gorla arose from his seat at the panel and cautiously made his way across the precariously canted deck. Reaching Telis' side, he knelt and brought his lips close to the young warrior's ear.

"We near our base, Telis, my friend," he shouted. "I beg of you to be prudent and to contain yourself when you are interviewed. The Temple elders are wise men and you will do well to listen and learn when they speak with you . . ."

Telis made an angry retort that the wind snatched from his lips and whirled away into the night.

"I know you are angry with me, Telis," the young Priest continued, "but you have made all this necessary. Remember, it is for Lurr!" He laid an arm across the prisoner's shoulders that Telis could not find the heart even in his anger to shrug off. "And," the Priest was smiling now, "you shall see Dorliss, Telis. Few laymen ever do . . ."

Dorliss! Then there *was* such a place! The legends told of it—a fabled city hidden from the sight of men by some mysterious power, where the Priests of the mighty Seventh Cycle cloistered themselves to study the oldest of the ancient riddles. Dorliss! Even the name had a magical sound! It was here that the Temple's finest minds were said to struggle in their quest to reclaim Lurr's air and water from the sea of rust that surrounded them . . .

Gorla squeezed the young lord's shoulder in an impulsive gesture of friendship and returned to his place at the sled's panel. Telis stared out into the night, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness. The idea of actually seeing Dorliss still enchanted him and, even though he was arriving

trussed up like a fowl for the slaughter, the experience promised to be a rich one. He recalled many arguments with Gorla about the probable existence of the Temple City. He had contended that invisibility was impossible, and Gorla in his young scientist's enthusiasm had covered sheets and sheets of vellum with strange mathematical symbols to prove that a light-shielding field could be created.

Telis smiled thinly. If Dorliss was near, and it seemed to be, then a light shield must surely exist . . . for he could see nothing but desert below in the moonlight.

The aircraft trembled slightly as the pilot flared out his long glide, and with a breathtaking suddenness, the stars and the moon vanished, leaving only a sable blackness around them. Down again, the sled plunged, and after several moments, the glide flattened again. For a minute it hovered, and then it dropped sharply, and there was a hissing sound as the runners touched the ferric sand. They were down.

A company of Temple Guardsmen bearing torches appeared out of the darkness, and Telis was freed from the deck-rings. Respectfully, but firmly, he was taken into custody and marched across the gritty soil of the landing field toward a lighted gate in the distance.

The light shield must have been impervious to moonlight, or perhaps it was made transparent during the hours of daylight. Telis never knew. But as they made their way toward the gate, the sun rose with its usual, breathtaking suddenness. The thin air of Laurr precluded any dawn or twilight and, when the sun burst over the horizon, the transition from blackness to day was done with shocking speed. It was a phenomenon that Telis had seen every morning of his six haads, but this time the effect was different. For never before had Telis seen such a city as marvelled Dorliss!

**A**ND, as though created in a trice out of the very stuff of darkness, Dorliss sprang into being before his astounded eyes. The flood of golden light from the sun touched the spires and minarets of an enchanted city, casting shards of amber light into the deep canyons between

the slender towers. Unable to help himself, Telis paused to wonder. His gaze found the great golden dome that housed the Mirror of the Sky . . . fabled place where legend said that a man might sit and see the glories of the heavens reflected on a monster glass of polished obsidian, figured by the cunning hands of artificers dead over eight thousand haads!

Telis had long been a scoffer . . . but here was proof! And farther off, basking in the warm morning light, there was the Fist of the Goddess . . . a great spire capped by a mammoth sphere. This was the machine that the stories claimed could shatter even the smallest particles of matter and suck out of them the pure force that was the essence of their being, even as had the ancients long ago. It was from a similar machine, the Temple Priests avowed, that the hellish missiles of the first eight Water Wars had been fashioned . . . the terrible weapons that had left the once great cities of Laurr in molten, ghastly heaps of slag, later to be covered over and obliterated by the steadily rising tide of rust from the deserts.

And here it all was before him! Here was Dorliss, City of the Temple!

Stunned by beauty and overwhelmed by nearness to the might of the ancients, Telis stumbled along toward the gate. For the moment, his own plight was forgotten in the singing glory of seeing fabled Dorliss and knowing that there was truth in the tales the Priests told to the people who cried for life in a world slated for death.

Surely, Telis thought, if Laurr could be saved from extinction, the workers of such miracles as these could save it!

The thought of Laurr brought him up sharply. It brought back a cold awareness of his purpose . . . of his will to escape and rejoin the Maldia in its attack on the invading Tellurians. The attack that should at this moment be under way!

Whatever happened to him in this fairy city, Telis swore by the Goddess herself that he would not allow himself to forget his duty. Surely, such wonders as these were not meant to be shared with the barbarians from across the void!

The thought remained with him as he was escorted into the city, and along wide



thoroughfares heavily travelled with sith-drawn traffic. Above, an occasional air-sled passed, but in the main the city's travelling was done on foot or by means of the ubiquitous sith . . . a six-legged, docile, great-hearted beast that was the sole remaining animal of its size left on Laurr.

Telis was taken first to the anterooms of the Central Temple, where a kindly-faced Third-Cycle Priest assigned him quarters. From there, he was taken to the tall spire apparently reserved for sudden guests of the Temple.

In respectful silence, he was freed of his bonds and left alone in a room such as he had never dreamed of occupying in his own border fortress . . . or even in the palace of the Laurr of Laurr himself.

One curving wall was made entirely of glass, and it faced the city to the west and the desert to the north, so that the whole magnificent panorama stretched out before him like a framed picture. And the furnishings! By the Goddess! He had not dreamed that the sombre scientist-priests of the Temple did themselves so well! Suspecting the presence of listening devices or peep-holes, he snooped. He found nothing. A soft canopied bed waited invitingly, reminding him that the only rest he had had had been the stupor induced by the stungun; and a table laden with refreshments and wines stood in the center of the deep-pile carpet. What a difference from the stone floors and the draughty keeps to which he was accustomed!

Recalling that he had not eaten for some time, he fell to on the laden table. And then, as weariness stole over him, he laid himself fully dressed on the wide bed to rest and await whatever came next. Telis was a soldier and, like all soldiers everywhere, he ate first, rested next, and was content to await developments in all the comfort that his surroundings could afford him.

For a prisoner, he thought with a wry smile, I am certainly being treated royally. By the Goddess! How would I be treated if I were a friend?

At last the strain of the night's events took its toll of him, and the young Lord of Lars slept as the Temple City of Dorliss awoke to its many and varied tasks . . .

THE pointer on his chronometer stood at the twenty second hour and the sun was low on the horizon when Telis was awakened by a liveried escort at his bedside.

With a respectful bow, the man indicated that Telis should follow him, and the young lord trailed him through the door, satisfied that within a very short time he would be before someone in authority here. His mind was full of thoughts concerning the attack on the camp that by this time the Maldia must surely have completed, unless . . .

Unless his disappearance had disrupted the carefully laid plans that had taken the secret organization so long to complete. In that case, agents would have to be sent out again among the Guski desert tribesman to instruct the chieftains concerning a later date to be used for the attack, and a different leader would of course have to be picked. Telis grimaced. It would be Brand, naturally. And all the high officers of the Maldia would be convinced that Telis had defaulted, for they had no inkling that the Temple was involved or that it even knew of the projected attack. One way or another Telis of Lars would be the scapegoat . . . Prince Brand would see to that!

Telis' guide led him out of the spire and into a sith-drawn car. The great beast stepped smartly along, its six padded paws soundless on the verdant moss of the thoroughfare.

As they neared the center of the city, Telis saw that he was being taken to the Central Temple, a graceful structure of alabaster whiteness. The guide halted the sith before the Temple and Telis alighted. An attendant came forward to take charge of the sith, and the escort motioned Telis into the building.

They passed the portal and entered into a fairyland within a fairyland, for the inner rooms of the Central Temple were by far the most wondrous in all Dorliss. There were panelled walls of purest quartz crystal, faceted to reflect the light in enchanting beams of polychromatic loveliness. And the mosaic floors depicted in silver and gold the scenes of historical significance from the long life of the Temple.

A thousand other things there were that filled the young warrior with awe . . . for mere beauty per se had long ago passed the surface of Laurr, and only here in the inmost sanctum of the Temple could such things survive and be cherished.

Another thing Telis noticed also. Though guards abounded *outside* the city, he had seen but a handful within the walls. He remembered something Gorla had told him long ago: that science could not really thrive against a militaristic background, and that was why so much of the ancient lore was lost when the planet became nothing more than a battleground. Plainly, the city of Dorlies was not ruled by force, and—a break for freedom might not be the impossible achievement that he had begun to imagine it.

Now they were within a long hallway, bare but for the crystal panelling. From somewhere came the whispering of plaintive music. It tinted the air with a gentle nostalgia that found a strangely responsive chord in Telis. He was told that the sound came from another chamber where a Priest was engaged in research on sounds and their effect on human emotions. It had been so long since music existed on Laurr that even this knowledge had been forgotten . . .

The guide led Telis on and on, past the long hall and through many portals that opened at last into a small circular room devoid of any sort of ornamentation. In the center of this room, a man sat at a table that rose in graceful lines out of the floor itself. He was old, old.

Telis stared at the man. He wore the sable robes and the insigne of the Seventh Cycle, the topmost rank of priest-scientists. Recognition came, too. This man was not merely a Seventh Cycle Priest . . . he was actually the High Superior of the Temple. The old eyes and kindly face, the long white beard and sable robe were the same as he remembered from a hundred solideo-graphs in a hundred provincial Temples.

Telis would have thrown himself to his knees before the spiritual head of all Laurr had he not suddenly remembered that he was a prisoner here, abducted like any thieving Commoner.

He looked stolidly around the room

then, and for the first time he saw the girl.

A noble of Laurr had plenty of opportunity to become something of a connoisseur in the matter of woman flesh, but the moment that Telis' eyes found the girl's he knew that here was something special.

Her hair was black and her skin fair, a combination seldom found on this side of the planet where bronze skin and brown hair were almost universal, but Telis had heard tales of such women from brother officers who had carried the Laurr's battles of unification to the southern hemisphere. The clothes this woman wore were strange . . . a blouse covered her where most Laurrian women went nude, and a short skirt descended from a harness not unlike Telis' own. Her belt was hung with various pouches and holsters. And over all, she affected a transparent jumper of stuff like flexible glass that covered her from neck to ankles like chrysalis. Her eyes were deeply shadowed, and she seemed either ill or terribly disheartened . . . or both.

SHE stood in silence, a liveried escort at her side, to all intents and purposes a prisoner like himself, for she wore no swords and to be disarmed upon Laurr was to be a prisoner . . . even the peace-loving Temple Priests packed their full complement of weapons.

There was an air about the girl that touched Telis deeply, a deep-seated strength and quality, even through her obvious illness or discomfort. He wondered at her crime. Heresy, perhaps? He had never heard of the Temple arresting heretics . . . the Water Goddess was more a wishful personification than a demanding deity. But perhaps this girl was something special in the matter of heretics as she obviously was in the matter of beauty.

But the explanation was not a satisfying one. There was something more. Then it came to him like a swordthrust. Could the girl be . . . a Tellurian? Was it possible?

The intoned words of his escort interrupted his thought.

"Reverend High Superior, here is Lord Telis of Lars, Captain-General of the

Laurr of Laurr's Armies."

The Superior inspected him kindly enough. "I have heard that two of our guardsmen were injured in taking young Telis. How are they now?"

"They suffered wounds, one critical," reported the escort, "Both will live, Reverend Superior."

The old man nodded. "It is well." Then he turned to Telis and he added: "How well you fight for your prejudices, my son!"

Telis remained stiffly erect and silent, his eyes hard on the unknown girl. For the moment all he could do was watch and wait for an opportunity to escape.

"You will be interested to know, My Lord of Lars," said the High Superior mildly, "that the scheduled attack on the Tellurian camp was not launched this morning . . ."

Telis relaxed slightly. Then there was still a chance to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow nobles. Perhaps soon.

" . . . but you are no longer chieftain of that abominable organization, the Maldia, for which you should give thanks to the Goddess! At the moment your so-called friends are meeting to replace you with one Prince Brand," the High Superior continued. "They have declared at his instigation that you are a coward and a traitor. Those are the actions of your fine friends. What do you think of them?"

Telis felt a stirring of anger. "If what you say is true, Reverend Superior, I have the Temple and you to thank for my disgrace."

The High Superior looked reproachful. "Like the rest of your caste," he sighed wearily, "you are blind. I suppose it will be an impossibility to convince you that your Maldia is doing infinitely more harm than good with its senseless code of slaughter and more slaughter. That is all it will ever succeed in bringing to our suffering planet!"

Telis held his peace. There was nothing he could say to refute the High Superior that was not based on obedience to life-long prejudices, and he somehow felt that those arguments would be wasted on such a man as now sat before him.

"Yet I must try," the old priest contin-

ued, "to teach you the difference between rightful pride and sinful, destructive arrogance. I must try to make you see that these Tellurians you profess to hate so . . ."

Here Telis' eyes sought the girl, but her expression told him nothing. He looked back at the High Superior.

" . . . that you profess to hate so are now Laurr's only chance for survival."

"Words," Telis said coldly.

The old man nodded slowly. "But true words. Words that can bring life instead of death. Better words than you will ever hear in that barbaric Maldia!" His old eyes seemed to bore through Telis now, stripping him bare of intellectual barriers and misunderstanding. "We could," the priest mused, "turn you over to our psychologists and let them drive the devils out of your mind . . ." He paused thoughtfully. "But no. That would not be the same. You, yourself, must come to understand. You must be allowed to learn of your mistaken ways without interference."

Telis frowned. "Abduction, then, is not interference."

"We regret the necessity. But the lack of time made it necessary. The attack on the camp had to be delayed and the Maldia chose to act almost too quickly," said the High Superior. "At least we have been able to cause a delay of that wanton act."

"Now or later," said Telis carelessly. "It will come."

"And with it death to those who offer us redemption and life?"

"Redemption?" asked Telis hotly, his eyes full on the girl. "Slavery!"

The High Superior sank back in his chair wearily. "I should have known," he muttered disgustedly. "Well, so be it, then. You will remain here in Dorliss until we are able to evolve some scheme for the protection of our friends. In time even you will see that we act for the best good of Laurr."

"These other-worldlings have narrowly averted on their own world the catastrophe of atomic war that wrecked ours. Hence, they are no longer a warrior race. They have devoted themselves to science in ways that we never knew even in the golden

haad.. Their technics can be our salvation, if we are only intelligent enough to accept their offered hand of friendship!"

Telis was listening with only half an ear now. A plan was forming in his mind. A plan of escape.

"... remember that the races of both Terra and Laurr are sprung from the loins of a single great transgalactic people," the High Superior was saying, "and together they might one day rule the Solar System. Think of it, Telis of Lars! Even the knowledge of interplanetary travel will be ours if we join in brotherhood with Terra! All the might of our Temple science could not achieve that in the short haads left to us . . . but the Tellurians offer it *now*! And the only payment they ask is some of the deadly iron that eats away our atmosphere and drains us of our precious water!

"Think of these things, young sir, until next we speak."

The old man sank back, exhausted by his speech and made a sign that the audience was over. He knew somehow that he had failed . . . and that other measures were now in order.

### III

**A**N HOUR BEFORE SUNRISE, Telis was awake and ready for action. He arose and dressed himself, broke his fast on the remains of his late evening meal, for he dared not guess how long it would be before he ate again. He banged at the door of his apartment until an attendant appeared, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

Telis made a long face. "I—I must see Brother Gorla," he demanded, "the Priest who brought me here. I—I feel the need of spiritual guidance."

The attendant, a Temple novice, showed benign pleasure at his words.

"Could I not be of service, my son?"

Telis shook his head. "The words of the High Superior have caused me to reweigh the values of my long and sinful life. Brother Gorla has long been my spiritual father and counsellor. I must see him." It was not altogether a lie. The kindly old

scientist's words had made him think a bit, in spite of himself. The old man had seemed so sure. And Gorla had long been his source of advice and even companionship for a good five haads.

The novice was disappointed, but understanding. He departed to waken Brother Gorla.

Three quarters of an hour of darkness remained when Gorla appeared at the door. Telis met him, looking carefully up and down the hall to see that they were alone. How careless these Temple people were with their prisoners!

"Telis, my friend! What is it? Brother Alto said that you needed some . . ." Gorla began.

Telis measured him carefully and swung. With all the power and co-ordination of a soldier's superbly conditioned body behind it, Telis' fist caught the Priest on the point of his jaw and knocked him sprawling to the thick carpet. Quickly dropping to his knees, Telis relieved the fallen man of his two swords and stungun. He strapped them to his own harness and looked about for a means of reviving the Priest. Taking the wine bottle from the table, he splashed some of the dark fluid into Gorla's face. For a moment, Telis had the feeling that it had all been too easy. But he drove the misgivings from his mind and concentrated on the next steps in his break for freedom.

The young Priest sat up fingering his jaw gingerly. There was a reproachful look in his eyes.

"Telis, you can't escape if that's what you intended by striking me. Give me back my weapons."

Telis smiled savagely. "Oh, no, my good and faithful friend. Now get up. Up I say, or I'll spit you where you lie!"

Gorla gave him a rueful smile. "By the Goddess, I believe you'd do it, too."

"There is a girl here," Telis snapped. "What do you know about her?" If the girl actually were a Tellurian, she would be an invaluable hostage.

"Girl?" Gorla looked puzzled.

"Quickly!"

"It's true that there is a girl here, but—"

"Who is she? Why was she brought here?" demanded Telis.



"She was found by one of our patrol sleds . . . lost in the desert and near dead. They picked her up and brought her here. Since then she has remained . . . voluntarily."

Telis gave a short, hard laugh. "You can do better than that, Gorla!"

The Priest shrugged. "Then why ask me if you don't intend to believe the truth?"

"I'll hear it from her. We are leaving, friend, and she goes with us!"

Gorla shrugged again. "As you wish, Telis. There seems to be nothing I can do to stop you."

"Then lead me to her quarters, and not a sound out of you, do you understand?" Telis prodded the Priest gently with the short-sword.

"But command me, lord," muttered Gorla sarcastically. He picked himself up off the floor. Telis snatched the cloak from his cassock and wrapped it around the gleaming blade of the short-sword, still keeping the point at the base of the Priest's spine.

"Don't force me to use this, Gorla," he hissed in the other's ear.

Gorla shook his head silently and led the way off down the corridor. The early hour was well chosen, for the whole towering edifice seemed to be deserted. Somehow, Telis felt, *too* deserted. The whole magnificent megalopolis that was Dorliss seemed to sleep serenely under its mantle of invisibility.

In a tight silence, Gorla led Telis until they stood before a closed door near the ground level.

"Open it," commanded Telis.

"I have no key," Gorla protested.

Cursing under his breath, Telis tried the doorlatch. To his surprise, it gave easily and the door swung open. Telis lifted his sword, half-expecting a trap, but no attack came from the darkness beyond the portal. He shoved Gorla through and closed the door, the dark closing in around them.

"A light," whispered Telis.

Gorla touched a switch on the wall and light flooded the room. On the great bed near the far wall, the girl sat, bedclothes held to her breast, staring at them curiously. It was strange, thought Telis, that she showed no fear. And stranger still was the

fact that her face was encased now in a bag-like contraption made of the same unusual material as the jumper he remembered seeing her wear. It was stretched tight by internal pressure that apparently came from a small cylinder at her bedside and connected to the mask by a flexible metal tube.

Some new and strange addiction, wondered Telis? It was not unknown upon Laurr for some to succumb to the lure of narcotics, what with the incessant warfare jangling the nerves and the ever-present spectre of doom hanging over the whole planet. Telis himself had tasted gas from a similar contraption on one of his hedonistic revels . . .

Whatever the drug was, he had seen her without the bag-like helmet in the Central Temple. Addiction might account for her seeming illness that he so well remembered from the previous day.

There was no sign of illness about her now! He stared at her, his breath catching in his throat.

Exotic woman!

NEAR at hand, her beauty was almost a living, tangible thing. Her hair gleamed, and her skin was palely translucent, like purest alabaster. The refraction of the light through the transparent mask surrounded her face with a glowing nimbus that made Telis think of the solid-eographic icons of the Goddess. Her lips were full, almost sensuous, and her great dark eyes looked at him quizzically but unafraid.

"There is no time to explain," he said rapidly. "We are leaving this place. Now."

She nodded without surprise, as though she had known exactly what he was going to say.

Telis motioned for her to get up. For a moment she waited, but when Telis showed no sign of turning around, she slipped out of bed and covered herself quickly with the blouse and harness that lay on a chair nearby. As she did so, she slipped the transparent mask off and, even as Telis watched her appreciatively, he could see the illusion of health fade from her face. A pinched look appeared, and a thin line of blue formed around her mouth. She

seemed short of breath.

The girl adjusted her harness about her, making sure that the contents of each pouch were there. Then she slipped herself into the transparent jumper and reached for the mask.

Telis caught her arm. "The mask stays here."

The girl looked perplexed. She looked to Gorla for aid. The young Priest moved to intervene, but Telis motioned him aside. "No," Telis spoke sharply. "You may have to fly an airsled . . ." He paused. "You can fly one, can't you?"

The girl nodded. "I have learned to fly one," she said. "But my mask . . . I need it!"

The girl's face looked stricken at the thought of leaving her precious mask behind. But Telis hardened himself. He could not let this escape be risked by her unpredictable actions. Besides, he had seen her in the Temple without the mask, so it was not a matter of life and death for her.

"The mask stays," Telis said flatly.

For a long moment there was something like sheer terror on the girl's face. Then, as though by an effort of the will, she composed herself and nodded her agreement. Telis was forced to admire her courage.

Gorla seemed to realize that any comments that he might make concerning the mask or the girl Telis would not believe, since for the moment they found themselves enemies. He decided to maintain a discreet silence and hope for the best.

"And now, friend Gorla," ordered Telis, "lead us to the landing field and get us an air-sled. It is a long way back to the capital and I have no intention of trying to make it on sith-back, not as long as your Temple Guards are so handy with the aircraft."

Like a bemused sleepwalker, Gorla led the way out of the building and through the dark streets. No beam of light now penetrated the light shield surrounding the Temple City, and Telis found the protecting darkness much to his liking. The drowsy guards at the gate looked curiously at the trio, but, recognizing Brother Gorla, made no effort to stop them.

Soon they were at the landing field and Gorla had run out the very air-sled that had brought Telis to the Temple City. Telis stepped into the forward cockpit and tested the jet. It came readily to life under his practised hands, and he motioned Gorla and the girl in beside him.

"Fly low," the girl said almost pleadingly.

He laid the stun-gun within easy reach and turned to Gorla. "Not that I don't trust you, my old friend," he said with a thin smile, "but I will feel much more comfortable if you are well-behaved while I am flying."

Gorla made no reply. He merely shrugged and wrapped himself in his cassock as best he could.

Telis glanced around at the sleeping field. Far across the landing area lights were flashing on. The sound of the airsled's jet had awakened the attendants, and soon they would be giving the alarm. But there was no chance for anyone to stop them now. Almost disdainfully, Telis shoved the throttle forward on the quadrant and the jet roared. With a hissing of runners, the sled moved swiftly across the red sand and into the air.

Zooming low over the buildings at the far end of the field, the sled drove out into the blackness. Then with breath-taking suddenness, it slashed through the light shield and the lights of Dorliss vanished while the heavens came alive with the early morning stars.

Telis pointed the sled's blunt nose at the hatefully beautiful morning star that was Terra riding low on the eastern horizon. Presently, he levelled the craft and reduced his speed to maximum cruising power. Just skimming the reddish dunes, they sped eastward, into the sudden glory of the desert dawn . . .

#### IV

AT NOON, TELIS TOOK TIME to search the sled's storage locker. Turning the controls over to the girl, he crawled across the bare deck into the rear cockpit. Most sleds that were used for over-desert flying carried emergency rations and weapons for the use of anyone

unfortunate enough to need them. In the matter of weapons, he was doomed to disappointment, for this particular sled carried none. But there was a small packet of concentrates, and a flask of precious water. Telis gathered the packet in his arms and turned to start back toward the forward cockpit.

He stopped short. From his vantage point behind her, Telis could see that the girl had taken a small cube from her pouch and was holding it to her ear. For several seconds she sat quite still, as though listening, then she turned the cube, held it to her lips for a moment, and returned it to the pouch at her belt.

He scrambled back to his place beside her, demanding, "That cube. What was it?"

"Cube?"

"In there." Telis touched the pouch that hung at her side.

"You must have been mistaken. There is no cube," she said, "Perhaps you saw me checking my compass . . ." She reached into the pouch and drew out a small magnetic compass in a square metal case. "You see?"

Telis frowned. It was possible that he had been mistaken . . . but he was inwardly almost certain that the compass he held in his hand was not the cube he had seen the girl using. For a moment he toyed with the idea of searching her, but reconsidered. The sled would not touch the ground again until it landed in the capital near the Grand Canal. There was no possible way that the girl could harm him or interfere with his plans now. And perhaps the cube was a happy-gas inhaler . . .

He looked searchingly into the girl's face. She looked as though she could use some stimulant. The blue about her mouth and the tight, pinched look in her face seemed to have worsened since leaving Dorliss. She actually looked ill. She gave him a wan smile, and he decided to question her no more for the present.

Opening the packet of concentrates, he offered her one and passed the pack to Gorla. Then he passed the water flask around, cautioning them to drink sparingly.

As the hours passed and the sun began

to slide down toward the western hills, Telis began to worry about their navigation. Not knowing the exact location of the Temple City, he could only guess at the proper course for the capital; and the low altitude made navigating very difficult. Telis decided to climb higher and see if he could not catch a glimpse of the Grand Canal or some other familiar landmark. He nosed the sled upward slightly and edged the throttle forward, sending the sled upward toward the cobalt sky.

The girl was looking down over the side at the desert rushing by. Though there was nothing to be seen but rust-red sand, something about the desolate waste seemed to please her.

Telis touched her arm to attract her attention. "We've been together almost all day and I don't even know your name," he said. "I am Telis of Lars . . ."

The girl smiled back at him. "My name is Leslie Karr," she returned.

Leslie. Telis turned the name on his tongue. It had a foreign flavor. As exotic and lovely as the girl herself. And two names. Leslie and Karr. Telis found the last hard to pronounce. Now, he wondered, why two names? She must be a person of consequence in her home land.

Telis thought of the cube. Perhaps a signalling device. A thought struck him. The Temple? No, it was not likely. A nagging doubt remained. He recalled uneasily how simple the escape had been. Too simple. Was this girl an agent of the Temple? Or had his first suspicion—that she was a Tellurian—been right?

"Telis," Gorla broke the silence, "can you tell me where we are?"

Telis shook his head.

"Why are we climbing?" Leslie asked. She looked afraid. "Please—I-I asked you to—"

Telis cut her off almost sharply. "I know what you asked me. But we must get high enough to have a look around us. To be lost out here would mean the end for all of us; an unpleasant end, too. It will only be for a short time."

Leslie dropped into an uneasy silence. Higher and higher the air-sled climbed until at last Telis levelled the aircraft off and began a systematic search of the

horizon to the east. There was no sign of the greenery that edged the great waterway.

"Telis!" Gorla's shout cut across the roaring of the wind. "Leslie! Look at her!"

**T**ELIS whirled to look at the girl. The strange malady from which she suffered had chosen this moment to strike her down. For a moment Telis was shocked. Never had he seen a happy-gas addict react in this way! The thin line of blue that surrounded her mouth was deeper, staining her lips and spreading to tinge her whole face with azure. Her eyes were closed and her breath came in huge rasping gasps. Gorla was cradling her in his arms, chafing her wrists and trying to force water through her slack lips. He looked up at Telis, shouting frantically!

"Down! Down, Telis! We have to get her down low!"

For a moment Telis did not understand, then he realized what was meant and shoved the sled over into a steep dive. The girl was suffering from oxygen-starvation. She seemed to suffer from it chronically, and if the sled did not reach denser air soon she would die! That was the reason she had feared altitude and had begged that the sled be kept low.

And Gorla knew!

Suddenly the whole improbable picture of the escape flashed before Telis' eyes, and a sick feeling swept over him.

In a panic Gorla whipped out a transmitter and began to shout into it. Fearing the girl's death, his instructions were forgotten and he began broadcasting for help. Telis stared for a moment, not understanding. The radio devices used by the Temple were unknown to him, but he knew with an instinctive certainty that Gorla was making contact with the Temple Guard back in Dorliss. The rumors he had heard of the Temple's methods of quick communication seemed to ring in his ears and fury took him by the throat. Why hadn't Gorla used the radio before? Was it because the whole escape was a monstrous hoax, engineered by the Temple for the purpose of somehow shattering the Maldia and what it stood for? The answer was a blazing, irrevocable

yes!

And to what extent was Leslie Karr involved? In his fury, Telis could not think clearly enough to guess. He had the helpless feeling of great wheels containing smaller wheels and all spinning and whirling for some darkly unknown purpose . . .

He snatched the transmitter from Gorla's hand and slammed it over the side. Sick anger filled him. The Temple must at this very moment know their exact location from that tell-tale signal that Gorla had sent in his panic for Leslie! What a fool he had been with his escape and his cleverness! How they must be laughing at him back in Dorliss!

"May the Goddess damn you!" he gritted at Gorla.

"You fool!" the Priest retorted, his round face livid. "You've killed her with your stupid plottings and your . . ."

"She will live," snapped Telis. He knew how to deal with anoxia. Long campaigns in the air forces of the Laurr had taught him. But the rest of it . . . the debt to be settled with Gorla . . . that was something else!

His fury made him careless, and as the sled touched the sand, it almost overturned, skidding and careening over the red sand until at last it came to rest at a crazy angle on the slope of a low dune. The jet coughed and died, its nozzle jammed with sand.

Quickly, Telis lifted the insensate girl in his arms and laid her on the sand at full length. For just a moment he wondered at her weight . . . she seemed almost twice as heavy as she should be for her size . . .

Then the urgency of the moment was upon him, and he knelt at her side, placed his lips on hers and began forcing air into her lungs with his own. Presently she stirred and Telis knew with a feeling of great relief that she would recover.

He wrapped her in Gorla's cloak, for the sun was *sinking low and the night chill* was already in the air.

Then he turned to face the Priest, memory rekindling his fury. He caught the man by his cassock and pulled him close. "Now, Gorla, you'll tell me the whole story—all of it!" His voice was icy with suppressed anger.



But Gorla's eyes were not on him. Instead they seemed centered on something above and behind him. The Priest's features contorted with a sudden fear, and he twisted around, pulling Telis with him. "Look out!"

**T**HE warning came too late. The sudden twist had saved Telis' life, but the flashing missile caught him in the shoulder. A searing pain blazed through Telis, and he spun around, staggered by the impact of the thrown short-sword that had pierced his shoulder.

Through a dancing haze of agony, Telis could see a ragged line of naked men and women on the crest of the dune. Each carried a short-sword and a long-sword, and the bodies were filthy and covered with rank hair.

Guski!

A lank woman lifted her arm and pitched her short-sword. It struck in the sand near Leslie Karr's prostrate body. Telis threw himself on the girl, protecting her body with his own. With pain lancing through him from the blade that still impaled him, he freed one of his swords and his stun-gun, throwing them to Gorla. Their personal quarrel was forgotten in the heat of the attack.

Blood was flowing out of him. Gritting his teeth to keep from crying out, Telis twisted the imbedded sword free. With a sobbing moan he dropped it to the sand. He fought back the blackness that threatened to engulf him. Gorla must not fight alone!

The Priest had sought the shelter of the air-sled and was shooting handily at the attackers on the crest. Already he had accounted for three men and a woman, and several of their companions, not knowing or caring that the stun-gun did not kill, had withdrawn from the fray to butcher the fallen ones into long strips of bloody meat which they stuffed hungrily into their mouths.

Telis felt Leslie stir, and he struggled to his feet and helped her to the sled.

With surprising quickness she adapted herself to the necessities of battle. She took a peculiar looking pistol from her pouch and levelled it at the attackers.

A sharp report burst from the weapon in the girl's hand and, on the crest of the dune, a Guski woman shrieked and pitched to the sand. Twelve times this process was repeated, and Telis began to have hopes that the battle would be won before he, himself, collapsed from loss of blood.

It was a vain hope. After the twelfth explosion, the weapon fell silent, and the strange performance was over.

There was a tense lull during which the Guski butchered their dead, and Gorla tried fruitlessly to start the dead motor of the sled. Then the Guski began to close in, and Gorla and Telis both were forced to leave the sled and advance to meet them. Leslie stayed near the aircraft, digging frantically at the jammed jet.

To Telis, his sword seemed suddenly very, very heavy. He touched Gorla on the shoulder. "At least . . . we'll die . . . friends . . . together," he muttered.

Gorla's face contorted with grief. "Friends . . . always, Telis. I never felt any other way," he said simply.

There was no time for more. The Guski were upon them—a savage, shrieking horde of vile-smelling beasts, hungering for the taste of human meat.

Time seemed to stand still. Telis thrust and slashed, cut and parried endlessly. Pain was his only reality. Faces appeared before him, and vanished into gouts of red as his blade found marks. Steadily his strength failed and finally he dropped to his knees, still lashing out feebly with his weapon.

Suddenly the cacophony of battle was overwhelmed by the jerky, uneven barking of an ailing jet. Leslie had cleared the nozzle! Startled and fearful of the jet flame, the Guski shrank back momentarily. In that moment, Gorla half-dragged, half-carried Telis to the sled. Telis could feel the movement of the sled as it coursed lamely across the sand, trying to gain flying speed. He heard Leslie gasp:

"It's no use, Gorla. It can't lift the three of us with the jet half-clogged."

Gorla's voice came sharp and clear. "Then I stay. Take him on. That's the important thing. He must be made to see. . ."

Telis realized with agonizing helplessness that since the sled could not lift three

persons Gorla was remaining behind. To face the Guski!

He tried to cry out his protest, but he was too weak to do more than moan.

"Can you find the way?" Gorla asked the girl.

"I have maps. There's the transmitter, too. I can come in on D-F fixes. But what about you?"

"Never mind me . . . remember, the fate of my world goes with you . . . and with Telis. Explain that to him . . . after he knows . . ."

Telis heard the motor speed up again, and he felt the bumping of the runners on the sand. But he was unconscious before the sled lifted into the air . . .

## V

**F**OR WHAT SEEMED A LONG time, Telis floated in throbbing darkness. Pain spun in little wind-devils of fire across the surface of his mind and it was not physical pain alone. Two thoughts tortured him constantly. He had failed the Maldia and he had deserted his friend, leaving him to die at the hands of the cannibal tribesmen.

Aeons swept by in that timeless, vitalizing darkness, and at last Telis opened his eyes.

For a moment he thought that he was back in the Central Temple of Dorliss, but as his eyes focused more clearly, he saw that he was in a small, neatly bare room. The walls were white, and one of them seemed to curve gently overhead until it met the first plane of the ceiling.

A cool hand was stroking his forehead, and Telis turned to meet the eyes of Leslie Karr. She sat at his bedside watchfully, and somehow he knew that she had been there for a long time.

Her clothing was different than he remembered. Her harness was gone. Now, her supple figure was clad in a straight tunic of dark metallic cloth that hung from her shoulders to the middle of her thighs, caught at her small waist by a linked belt. Her dark hair was swept back from her face, exposing her small, elfin ears. There was a look of health and vitality about her that was amazing when Telis recalled her

condition in the air-sled.

"Wh . . . what magic is this?" he asked.

Leslie smiled. "No magic," she said. "Only some decent air."

Telis drew a deep breath. It was true. The air was different . . . and wondrous. Vitality filled him and with it came a thousand questions. Where was he? What was this place? What had happened after the fight on the desert? And the question he most wanted answered—what of Gorla?

Leslie laid a warning hand over his lips and cautioned him against spending his new found strength too prodigally. He was healing, she told him, and within a very few days he would be able to be up and around. At that time, all his questions would be answered. This last she told him with something like reluctance in her voice.

Plainly, wherever they were, Leslie was at home here.

The days passed almost too swiftly. Strange men came and went, giving him odd medications and dressing his wound. All his questions were tactfully avoided. Yet their concern for a stranger was confusing to Telis. By the code that Telis had lived his six haads with, a stranger was ipso facto an enemy. According to that tenet he had lived and had become a great soldier and a high officer of the Laurr of Laurr himself. Now here were strangers treating him with kindness . . . and their kindness was striking at the roots of everything he had ever believed. And there was Leslie. She remained with him constantly, tending him and comforting him with her presence. Telis felt himself losing his heart to this exotic girl with her kindness and her breathtaking beauty.

**F**OUR days passed and then his confinement was over. He was able to rise from his hospital cot. His harness was brought to him, and even his weapons. If proof were needed, Telis thought, the act of returning his weapons proved that he was among friends. And true friends they must be, for they had nursed him and fed him, and he could not forget that his friend had been willing to remain behind alone to face the Guski so that he, Telis, might be brought here. And that recalled the burning question mark. *Why?*

When he had dressed himself, Leslie came into the room. Her face was sombre. "Telis," she began, "I have something that I must tell you before you leave this room. Believe me, it is not easy. You see, I . . . I have not been honest with you . . . Not that I have lied. Believe me, I haven't. But . . ." She broke off momentarily in confusion. Her face was flushed. "I have let you mislead yourself, and that's very like lying, isn't it?" She did not wait for a reply, but rushed on. "Now I have to stand by and watch you find out who and what I am. Oh, believe me, I have no wish to hurt you or your people, Telis. I couldn't . . . now . . . because I . . . I . . ." She bit her lips. "All this is necessary. You had to be convinced, you see, because of your great influence with the Laurr . . ." She gave a short, nervous laugh. "All this isn't making very much sense, is it?"

"No," replied Telis, puzzled.

"You know by now that you were tricked into coming here. It was all planned by us and by the Temple . . ."

Telis felt the blood drain from his face. He knew exactly what was coming next. The whole incredible picture was clear.

"Oh, Telis," cried Leslie. "Please understand! Gorla understood . . . and he gave his life so that we could make you see! Can't you see what I am trying to tell you? Can't you see that if you help us we can bring life back to Laurr? And that if you won't it might mean ages of senseless warfare? Telis . . . try . . ."

Telis of Lars stared. It all came flooding back to him. All the tiny, irrelevant pieces of the puzzle. The mask back in Dorliss! A respirator! Her need for oxygen . . . the anoxia that struck her down in the air-sled . . . the rich air of this room! Her weight . . . the greater density of a heavy gravity planet's evolution! Alien, alien!

Leslie Karr could feel the barrier rising between them and she cried out against it. Tears streaked her face, and even that added to Telis' sense of alienage. Laurrians did not weep. The water in their bodies was far too precious for that. It was all too grotesque! He, the former leader of the Maldia, beholden to the invaders for his very life!

Then the shock began to wear off, and his mind to function more clearly. This place with its sloping wall was a compartment in the Tellurian spacecraft, that much was now obvious. Yet they had trusted him within it . . . armed. And they had been kind to him, they had nursed him back to health after the Guski's wound almost killed him. Why? It was not enough that he had great influence with the Laurr. He had had the feeling that they liked him. Could it be, he wondered, that the whole basic philosophy of the Maldia was in error? The Temple spoke of mighty Tellurian science. Could it actually do what the High Superior of Dorliss claimed? Redeem the planet and give it hope again?

And there was Leslie. In that moment of introspection, Telis knew with a distinct shock that, Tellurian or not, he loved her. Telis of Lars, peer of the ancient realm of Laurr, member of the dread, anti-Tellurian Maldia, was in love with an alien woman! Creature of another world—different and strange—and yet he loved her! Standing there, watching her tears course down her cheeks, he felt his heart constrict, and he knew that she had won.

"Please, Telis—my Telis—let me show that we can be friends!" she cried.

Telis stared at her. "Friends?" he asked thickly.

Leslie took a step nearer, her eyes suddenly wide, almost afraid. It came to Telis in a blinding flash of insight that she too was feeling the soul-wrenching conflicts of love for an alien creature. To her Telis was the exotic, the outlander.

Then like the snapping of a steel wire, the barrier was broken, and she was in his arms, returning his kisses with an almost desperate abandon . . .

THE Tellurian camp was a revelation to Telis. Guided by Leslie and a group of Tellurian scientists, he beheld machines such as had not existed on the surface of Laurr for ten thousand haads. Here, among the squat, pressurized domes of the camp were the end-products of all the theories the Temple had salvaged from the lost books of the ancients.

Power was drawn from the destruction

of infinitesimal particles of matter by a mysterious process the scientist referred to, as "fission," and Telis found to his surprise that Leslie was not a noblewoman as he had supposed, but something called a "metallurgist." These terms meant nothing to him, but the teaming activity of the camp and the matter of fact way in which miracles were daily performed made him begin to understand what the High Superior had meant when he had said that together the races of Terra and Laurr might one day rule the solar system. The machines and the magnificent, graceful projectile that was the spaceship fired Telis' imagination.

If any doubt remained in his mind, it was shattered irretrievably when Leslie showed him the mining operations. Thus far, they had begun only on an experimental basis, the Tellurians wisely wary of extending themselves before permission to remain was granted by the Laurr. But, even on a small scale, what Telis saw stirred him more deeply than had any of the other wondrous things he had been shown.

Since the deserts of Laurr were almost pure iron oxide, it was explained to him that they were the result of the ubiquitous iron's propensity for uniting with oxygen. The result, after many aeons, was that the air was actually rusting away. By the marvelous miracle of Tellurian chemistry, the iron oxide was broken down into its constituent elements. This resulted in a stream of iron ingots, and . . . free oxygen!

Telis was quick to realize what this process would mean to Laurr over a period of time if it was made universal. Great quantities of the precious oxygen would be released into the air to revitalize it, and later to combine with the large amounts of hydrogen in Laurr's atmosphere to form water!

The Tellurians had in fact already set up a pilot plant where oxygen and hydrogen were mixed to make the water they needed for their own purposes. Part of it was used for drinking and bathing, and part was used for puddling the iron oxide before it was passed through the separation process. Great pressure hoses washed

the impurities from the ferric oxide even as Telis watched, astounded. Never had a Laurrian seen precious water treated so carelessly, but with a great effort he was able to acclimate himself finally to an economy of plentiful water, and the sight of great streams of it churning the desert to reddish mud shocked him less and less as the days passed.

Only two thoughts marred Telis' happiness during these days spent in the camp. First the thought of Gorla's fate remained with him always, and he resolved that his friend's sacrifice should not be for nothing. And, second, there was the Maldia. Now, with Prince Brand at its head, it was more than ever a threat to the safety of the people from the third planet, to himself, to the Laurr and by extension to the world of Laurr itself.

Telis resolved that he must return immediately to the capital and lay his findings before the Laurr. Only in that way could the danger of the Maldia be removed. With the safe-conduct from the supreme ruler confirmed publicly, the Maldia would not dare to attack the camp.

The air-sled was repaired, and Telis made ready to leave the following morning over the protests of Leslie and the camp medical staff who contended that his wound was not yet sufficiently healed.

But Telis' resolution had come too late. Even as the sled was loaded, a shout from the watchtower brought the whole camp out into the streets. With sinking heart Telis heard the words of the camp guard. The Maldia had come, and the camp found itself surrounded.

## VI

**T**ELIS HURRIED WITH LESLIE to the watchtower and his horrified eyes looked out over the surrounding desert. Fully five thousand Guski men and women surrounded them, led by at least five hundred well-armed and sith-mounted warriors. Telis recognized many of them as his former comrades of the Maldia. And Prince Brand was there. Telis felt a hot wave of hate for the man.

Thus far, they had made no move to attack, and that in itself showed the char-



acteristic mark of Brand's leadership. With a force of fifty five hundred fighting men against an even two hundred poorly-armed men and women, mostly elderly scientists, Brand still chose to proceed with caution lest the unexpected defeat him . . .

Telis started. The unexpected!

He let his mind harken back to the stories the older Temple Priest told of the mythical coming of the Water Goddess. And he thought of the books he had read dealing with the forgotten science of weather on Laurr . . .

Quickly he called a meeting of all the department heads. Leadership fell on his shoulders like a cloak, for among all these learned men and women he was the only warrior.

One woman suggested that all the personnel of the camp move into the spaceship and that they lift the craft into the air, spraying the attackers with the deadly radioactive exhaust gases. But the ship's navigator vetoed that idea quickly. There was fuel enough only for the return flight to Terra when next the two planets came into conjunction. Moreover, such a move would destroy the camp and all its machinery, negating the entire purpose of the expedition.

It was then that Telis stepped forward with his plan. The Tellurians seemed doubtful that it would work, but Leslie who had been among the Laurrians more than the rest of them, convinced them that they could lose nothing by trying.

"Telis is of Laurr," she said to them, "and he knows the ways and beliefs of his people. I, for one, think that his plan is our only hope. Outnumbered as we are, and by savage fighting men and women, our only chance is fear. It saved our lives before, and can again!"

When the technicians had left to modify the necessary equipment, Telis summoned the non-essential able-bodied men. Arming them with the few Tellurian powder-guns that were available and with whatever cutting weapons came to hand, he made ready to lead them out to meet the attackers. Time was needed. Telis and his respirator-masked, make-shift company determined to gain that time.

He stationed his men near the main gate to the camp and walked slowly out toward the masked attackers, tensely aware that at last Prince Brand had him at a real disadvantage.

Knowing that to convince these caste-ridden fanatics and savage cannibals that the attack should not be launched, would be next to impossible, Telis evolved a stratagem that might save a few precious moments. The warlike society of Laurr had developed a very strict code duello. As it was among most warrior civilizations, "honor" or "face" were of the utmost importance. He, himself, by disappearing on the eve of the Maldia's planned attack had lost face. Now, he resolved to turn this fact into a weapon against his attackers.

"Ho! Brand, there!" he hailed. "Come forward!"

Prince Brand squinted across the distance to see if he could recognize the speaker. Slowly, recognition came, and with it a fulsome satisfaction. This was better than he could have hoped for!

"So it is my Lord Telis returned from the realm of the Goddess to guide our hand against the invaders!" he smirked. "Come! Join us, illustrious phantom. We are about to complete the work you so nobly began the night you decided not to risk yourself!"

FOR a moment there was a silence among the noblemen of the Maldia, and then the laughter started. It was what Telis had expected. It was ironic, bitter laughter for one who had failed the warrior's code. To these men he was a coward. Even the naked savages laughed, though they did not understand the reason for it.

Telis' fury rose under the goading mirth, but he knew with some satisfaction that all the palaver was taking up precious minutes, stalling the attack that he could hold at bay only with his wits.

"You, Brand," said Telis slowly and distinctly, "are a usurping rogue. Your mother was a she-sith and your father a Guski slave of questionable ancestry. You are a coward and a pandering lackey!"

A sudden quiet settled on the serried

ranks and Telis continued with his insulting monologue.

"I challenge you to fight me here and now—so that I can strip the harness from your puffy carcass and throw it to the siths! Refuse, and I will come and get you!"

A low moan of rage rose from the ranks of the nobles. Never had a high-born prince been so grossly and deliberately insulted. According to their code, there was only one possible answer, and they awaited it with eagerness. Brand must fight.

But Prince Brand was no fool. He knew Telis for a swordsman, and he strongly suspected some sort of trickery from the too-silent camp. Still, he knew that Telis must be punished and before the troops or his hold over them would fail. It could be done without placing himself in jeopardy for the sake of a gallant gesture.

He turned to an equerry. "Bring him to me. Dead or alive."

Telis heard, and gave an insulting laugh. "Preferably dead, eh, Brand?"

The equerry looked pained. He turned to Brand. "Sir, he has offered a challenge. It would be in very bad form to . . ."

"Bring him!" Brand snapped testily. "If you are afraid, take a company . . ."

The officer stiffened. "I am not afraid, sir—though others are!" He wheeled his sith and trotted toward Telis.

"Get back, Captain," ordered Telis. "My quarrel is not with you!"

"Ride him down!" called Brand.

The officer unsheathed his lance and laid it in rest. Levelling it at Telis, he dug his booted heels into the sith's flanks and thundered across the sand, leaning low in the saddle.

Telis stood braced and, just as the animal came abreast of him, he stepped aside, catching the tip of the lance under his arm and whirling. The movement of the weapon overbalanced the officer and he tumbled from the saddle to sprawl in the sand. With a mortified howl of rage, the man was on his feet and upon Telis, but his fury made him careless. Telis' sword flashed out and the point found the officer's sword arm, piercing it neatly and

ending the encounter with a flourish.

Telis turned to face the attackers once again. "Now Brand," he taunted, "will you come out to do your own dying? Or will you send another lackey to take the steel meant for you?"

Brand's heavy face darkened. For answer he raised his hands to the buglers. "Attack!"

The force swept forward like a great tawny wave, shrieking and cursing. Telis stared aghast. An attack he had been expecting, and even the possibility of the Maldia finally taking the camp had occurred to him. But that fifty five hundred roaring madmen would attack one man was more than he had prepared himself for.

Death seemed a certainty, and a fleeting image of Leslie swept across his mind. He lifted his futile swords and murmured a prayer to the Goddess . . .

IT was answered. The rain came like a gift from heaven. From the nozzles of the camp's pressure hoses there poured a great effluvium of pure, cold, water. It rose in a graceful curve high into the air and spilled down to lash the red sand into a morass and spray the attackers.

Telis himself was caught up in the wonder of it. And the effect on the Maldia's fighting force of Guski was nothing short of miraculous. The charging savages pulled up, faces lifted to the sky in mute amazement. Then came fear—shrieking, mad, insensate terror! Rain was falling where no rain had fallen for ten thousand haads! The Goddess had opened up the flood gates of heaven and the stuff of the sky was falling down on a sinful Lurr! Dropping their weapons, they fled out into the desert—away from the accursed place that the Goddess had chosen to enchant! And, in their flight, they carried the mounted nobles of the Maldia, cursing, shouting, trying to regroup their shattered cohorts.

Telis stood in the downpour, his body tingling to the touch of the precious water. He was thinking not that this trick of Tellurian technics had saved his life; rather he was thinking of Lurr and what this could mean to the planet. The deserts

could be conquered, the world could be redeemed!

Presently, the water stopped and a Tellurian from his company ran forward to shout: "Telis! Look there! Aircraft!"

Telis looked skyward, and the door to the future seemed to slam shut in his mind. Fully two hundred air-sleds were beating rapidly toward them. The Maldia again . . . more of them?

Telis looked out into the desert. The mounted force had abandoned the attempt to regroup the demoralized Guski, but it had formed into a phalanx and was returning to the attack.

Automatically, but without real hope, Telis motioned his men into extended order. They were caught between two forces, helpless between the sith-mounted Maldia and the airborne contingent. The irony of it caught at his breast painfully. It was bitter hard to die just at the brink of a golden age . . . a golden age that would never come now.

Now he could make out Brand's face far to the rear of the mounted column. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the sleds were almost upon them, too. Telis braced himself for the attack.

Then, with a roar of jets, the air armada passed low over his head and began disgorging warriors onto the rapidly narrowing strip of sand between him and the Maldia. For a moment Telis was stunned by the strangeness of the maneuvers . . . and then his astonished eyes caught the gleam of the device blazoned on the grounded sleds. It was the Sword and Atom of the Temple!

With a glad cry he leaped forward to greet the Temple Guardsmen. Snatched from the brink of disaster, the camp now revelled in a surfeit of friendly warriors! The Maldia halted in confusion and air-sleds moved out to cut off their escape.

Telis searched the ranks of the Temple troops for some explanation of this seeming miracle . . . and his eyes found a familiar figure. It was battered and bandaged but unmistakably . . . Gorla!

He caught the priest by the arm and spun him around with a shout. The familiar round face reddened with pleasure and he threw his free arm around Telis.

"You've healed, Telis!" he cried. "And in more ways than one!" he added significantly. "I see you leading the defense instead of the attack!"

"I've been a thick headed fool, Gorla! But you . . . how are you here? I—"

"You thought me meat for those Guski back on the desert that night?"

Telis nodded.

The Priest laughed. "By the Goddess! I thought you were going to get up and give us trouble that night! I suppose I should be thankful for your wound. You never would have left me otherwise!"

"But, how did you . . ." Telis began.

"The Temple takes care of its own, Telis, my friend," said Gorla. "We were being followed at a distance all the way from Dorliss by a guardship. Of course, when you threw my transmitter over the side, they lost us. But you were the one who had to be convinced about these Tellurians. So I stayed. There were a few bad moments . . . once or twice I thought the Guski had me cold, but the guardship was searching and it found me before the brutes could finish me off. Since then, we have been standing by at Dorliss, waiting for the Maldia to move."

"And here you are, thank the Goddess!" breathed Telis.

They stood surrounded by Temple Guardsmen and Tellurians watching the air-sleds break up the sith-mounted force of the Maldia. The back of the assault was broken. Riderless animals careened about wildly through the confusion, and people were pouring out of the camp to greet their liberators.

"Who led them?" asked Gorla indicating the sullen nobles.

Telis looked around for Prince Brand, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then his sharp eyes caught a cloud of dust moving rapidly across the desert. It would be Brand. He alone, of all the Maldia, was cynic enough and coward enough to throw over the battle-to-death code at the first sign of opposition.

With an oath, Telis caught at a sith and swung into the saddle. "There!" he shouted to Gorla, pointing. "If he escapes the Maldia will form again!" Telis kicked the sith savagely, and the animal plunged

off in pursuit of the fleeing renegade.

At full speed the sith carried Telis out into the desert. For half an hour, there was no loss or gain, Prince Brand's animal holding its lead tenaciously. Already, the Prince had turned to see that he was being followed. But Telis' beast was fresher, and now began to narrow the distance.

They were well away from the camp when Telis caught up. Riding in, he cut across the path of Brand's animal, forcing it to break step. Brand slashed wildly at him but Telis parried and dodged in under the other's guard. Then, hooking his knee under that of the struggling Prince, he heaved upward and dislodged him from the saddle so that he tumbled to the sand.

Telis reined in the sith and leaped to the ground. Brand was already on his feet, sword in hand, his face contorted with fear and rage. Telis advanced steadily, hate coursing through him.

**I**F Brand had been a faintheart before, he was not now when his life depended on his skill and cunning. Even as their swords crossed, Telis knew that his work was cut out for him. There was no sound but the clash of steel and the labored breathing of the two men as they locked in combat. For almost a quarter of an hour they fenced without appreciable gain on either side. But Telis was younger, and the strain was beginning to tell on Brand. He knew that he must win quickly or die.

Stepping back, Brand snatched the helmet from his head and threw it full at Telis' face. Telis' sword made a glittering arc in the sunlight as it caught the missile and knocked it aside. But for the moment he left himself unguarded, and Brand lunged in to sink his point into Telis' naked thigh.

Telis staggered but did not fall; the painful wound stung him, and Brand, thinking that he had scored a telling blow, launched a furious attack. Telis backed steadily across the sand, leaving a trail of blood. He measured the pace carefully and, when Brand paused to catch his

breath, Telis feinted at his head. Brand's blade came jerkily up to meet the thrust, and Telis stooped, whirled his point under Brand's guard and lunged with all his force.

The blade sank deep into Brand's chest. Telis stepped back and slipped it free. The renegade stood for a moment, staring unbelievably at the wound in his chest that bubbled a bloody froth. His arms stiffened and the swords he held dropped noiselessly to the sand. Very deliberately, he sank to his knees, still staring at the wound, then he pitched forward into the sand face-downward. He was dead.

Telis sought his sith wearily and mounted. He turned back toward the camp without another look at Brand. All the fury and excitement of battle was washed out of him, and he felt very tired.

The gentle movement of the sith's gait helped to steady him. He rode slowly along, looking out over the wastes of the Great Red Desert, envisioning the land as it would be one day . . . green and fertile, alive under a sky no longer starkly clear, but laced with clouds that would bring soft rains and stirring life from the land.

He topped the final rise and before him was the Tellurian camp and the tall, beautiful projectile of the spaceship. The throngs of mixed Laurrian and Tellurians were shouting and cheering the end of the struggle.

Now the future seemed assured. Telis promised himself that the future of the Tellurians on Laurr would be one with his own. And someday, he thought, perhaps he would see Terra—or even the stars!

It would be a great task, he reflected, this changing the face and fate of a dying world. But together the redeemers and the redeemed could work it out. Telis knew somehow that the thing would be done.

A figure detached itself from the crowd and ran towards him, calling his name. It was Leslie. With a quickened pace he made his way toward her. The door to the future opened, and he stepped through without looking back.