

SWORD OF TOMORROW

BY HENRY KUTTNER

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF THE FUTURE

Trance-borne to a far distant age, Pilot Ethan Court is plunged into peril and adventure on a strange new world where his courage and idealism are put to a stern test!

CHAPTER I

Jap Torture Cell

IT WAS always easier when he sank into the opium-drugged stupor from which not even torture could rouse him. At first he clung to two memories—his rank, and his Army serial number. By focusing his pain-hazed mind on those realities he was able to keep sane.

After a while he didn't want to keep his sanity.

Men can survive a year, or two years, in a Japanese prison camp. They may emerge maimed, spiritually sick, but alive. They remember their own names.

He used to say it aloud at first, in the musty darkness of the cell.

"Ethan Court," he whispered to the black, hidden walls. "Ethan Court." And then—"Times Square. Tiffany's, Bretano's, Staten Island. The Yankee Stadium, pop corn, whisky sours, Greenwich Village"

Presently he noticed that the sound of his voice was different, and after that he scarcely spoke. The horrible lethargy of inaction closed around him. Occasionally, though less often now, he was taken before Japanese officers who questioned him.

He was somewhere in Occupied China, he knew, but since his plane had been forced down, he had been shunted for a long distance by a roundabout route. He guessed that this was a temporary headquarters, probably on the site of some old Chinese town, and he suspected that it was in the hill country. His savage captors told him nothing, of course. They just asked questions.

How much could he disclose in the way of military information, the Japanese did not know. Hard-pressed, they were overlooking no bets. His stubbornness enraged them. The commander of the post, a disappointed samurai of a politically-unpopular family, gradually came to believe that a feud existed between Court and himself. It became a contest between the Japanese officer and the American, entirely passive on one side, ruthlessly active on the other.

Time dragged on, while bombers roared in increasing numbers over Japan and the brown hordes sullenly withdrew from Burma and Thailand and the islands north of Borneo. This headquarters was isolated, but in a strategic spot. The commander saw the tides of war rage past him and recede. The radio gave him no comfort. The Emperor of Japan was silent upon his

throne.

A transfer required time. In enforced idleness, the Nipponese commander devoted himself to breaking the will of the American. Torture failed, and so he tried an ancient Japanese trick—opium. It was mixed in Court's food, and, after a while, the craving grew in him. The Jap officer kept his prisoner saturated with the drug. Court's mind dulled.

A MONGOL, Kai-Sieng, was put in Court's cell. He was a prisoner, too, and spoke only a few English words. There had been an uprising, Court gathered. The prison cells of the fort were overflowing. For a month Kai-Sieng remained, and in that time Court learned of the deceptive Peace of the Poppy.

Curious conversations they had there in the dark—scraps of English and Chinese and lingua franca. The Mongol was a fatalist. Death was inevitable, and meanwhile he had killed very many Japanese. The taunts and torments he had undergone had not moved him. He knew the hiding-place of his Chinese guerrilla leader, but the Japs would not learn it from him.

"They cannot touch me," he told Court. "The part of me that is—myself—is sunk deep in a well of peace."

Yes, he smoked opium. Kai-Sieng said, but it was not that alone. He had been in Tibet, at a lamasery. There he had learned something of the secret of detaching the soul from the body.

Court wondered.

In military classes, he himself had studied psychonamics, that strange weapon of psychological defense that is, in essence, self-hypnotism. Here in a prison cell in China, from the mouth of a rancid-smelling Mongolian guerrilla, he was learning an allied science—or mysticism.

He told Kai-Sieng something of his fears, that he would go mad, or that he would be unable to endure the tortures. His will was weakening under the impact of the cannabis indica, and he was afraid that eventually he would talk.

"Turn their own weapons against them," the Mongolian said. "The poppy smoke is the opener of the gate. I will teach you what I can. You must learn to relax utterly in the central peace of the universe."

Mysticism, yes, but it was merely a phrasing of psychonomic basics. There was no candle-flame to focus Court's attention. He was sick, body and soul, and relaxation was impossible.

If his lips ever came unsealed, he might blurt out everything—including a certain bit of military information that no Japanese knew he possessed. It was vital that the enemy should not get that information, how vital only Court and a few three-star generals in the Eastern Theatre knew. Suicide was impossible. He was watched too closely for that. And so, with his eyes open, Court walked into the trap his captors had set and became an opium addict.

Kai-Sieng showed him the way. The Japanese were only too glad to supply a layout, and Court found the Peace of the Poppy. But under the Mongolian's guidance he learned something else, the psychonamic defense that had come out of a Tibetan lamasery. It was hard at first, but the opium helped.

He visualized the sea, deep, calm, immense, and he let himself sink into the fathomless depths. The farther clown he went, the less the outside world mattered. Soaked in opium, his mind drowning in a shoreless ocean, he sank into the blue deeps, and day by day he left the prison farther behind. It was psychic science of a high order, but the Japanese commander did not understand. He thought that Court's will was growing more pliant, that soon he could successfully question a mind-dulled, helpless dupe.

Kai-Sieng was taken way and shot. Dreamily Court knew what was happening. It did not matter. Nothing mattered, really. For only the azure sea was real, that profound deep that took him into its protective embrace and kept him safe.

The opium supply stopped. The Japs had grown suspicious. But they were too late. Not even the craving of Court's body for the drug could wake him from his blue dream. Not even torture, ruthless and inhuman, could bring life back into his eyes. He had gone down the ancient Tibetan road and found peace.

But he was not dead. His body, inactive, required less and less fuel. It was not inhabited. His mind had gone elsewhere. Like the blue-robed lamas who are reputed to live for a thousand years in the Himalayan peaks, Court was prolonging his life-span by—resting. The machine of his corporeal existence was idling. Dimly, in the heart of the machine, the life-spark flickered.

He did not know it. He did not know his name any more. He remembered nothing. He rocked endlessly in the limpid blue vastness, while the armies swept across the face of the world, and Fujiyama's white cone reflected the red of burning cities. He slept, while the shark-faced planes flew above him, and while the buildings exploded in thundering ruin. He slept, while his cell was sealed in crashing destruction, and the seal was crimsoned with Japanese blood. He still slept, though above him, on the surface of the earth smoked a lifeless rubble where a Japanese fortress once stood.

Hermetically locked, there in the dark, Ethan Court lay at rest. In Tibetan monasteries Tibetan priests slept similar sleeps, and wake, and finally died. The earth swung in its tremendous orbit around the sun, and warring nations were stilled.

And there was peace—for a little while.

* * *

The awakening took many, many years. The specialized human body is a fragile organism, and enormously complicated. A man who has slept for—ages—does not start up as from a half-hour's doze. Moreover, the peculiar psychic factor that made Court's slumber possible also made his quickening a slow process.

There was air, first. It filtered through a crack in the rubble roof and stole into Court's nostrils. Oxygen crept into his stilled lungs and infiltrated the nearly motionless blood-stream. The red corpuscles fed upon it, and the vital spark, slowly and gradually, flamed brighter.

But in his mind there was no awareness. The blue seat was deep. A little troubled, now—but only a little.

Finally men found him.

He did not know it when a dark, bearded face peered down into his cell, and when, a torch was lowered. He did not hear the cry of amazement in an alien tongue. Nor did he sense that he was being carried, in a rough litter, to a village hidden amid mountain peaks.

HIS clothing had long since rotted, but the corroded metal of his dog-tags was still looped on a rusty chain about his neck, The tribesmen put the tiny plates in a sacred place, and, at the command of their priest, they tended Court. Perhaps some hint of the holy Tibetan lamas had filtered down through the ages, for they recognized Court's sleep as something mystic and sacred.

They washed him and rubbed his emaciated body gently with oil. They pressed between his lips the warmed milk of the kharam, which had not existed in the Twentieth Century, and some times they prayed to him.

The priest himself watched with tired, wise eyes, and wondered. His people had no written history, only folk-tales that turned into superstitious legends of the day the gods had destroyed the world—the gods who strode with enormous, crashing strides and left flame behind them. So he wondered.

Meanwhile the peaceful life of the nomads went on. They bartered and hunted, and among them, presently, moved the gaunt figure of Ethan Court, unshaved and strange in a native tunic. But behind his eyes the—soul—had not wakened.

A psychiatrist might have guessed the answer. There was psychic trauma present, induced by shock and nurtured by the blue seas in which Court's awareness still hung quiescent. A part of his mind roused, He learned the language, word by word—it was not complicated—and he would play quiet games with the children, a blue-eyed, bearded spectre from the past. He became accepted as part of the community life. He was not holy any more. Familiarity had altered that. But his hosts were friendly, and the priest spent long hours trying to find the key to Court's soul.

Then a change came. A new face swam into the dark mirror of Court's realization, and afterward, frighteningly new things. He sank deeper, protectively, into the blue sea. For he was flying again. That terrified him. He scarcely sensed his altered surroundings, the lush magnificence of rainbow plastics and dim music, and he tried not to realize that there were tiny pin-pricks of pain now and then in his arms and legs,

But something was troubling the waters. Something reached down inexorably toward him, groping, seizing, pulling him to the surface.

Always, now, voices spoke to him in this new language he had learned. They were urging him to—to seek someone. Who? They did not know, but they said that he knew. They commanded him to remember—what?

A name.

Whose name?

The blue sea was becoming very shallow. Waves of troubling, strange music beat upon him. Color and light quivered and shook before his puzzled eyes.

The name was—Court. Ethan Court!

The blue oblivion washed back. It was torn asunder like a veil. It fled far away and was gone, and into the place where it had been came rushing the memories of the man who had been Ethan Court.

For he remembered now. He was awake. And, in the moment of that awakening, he knew that he was in a new world.

CHAPTER II

Air Accident

THE tense faces ringing him altered. He heard a soft "Ah'h" of satisfaction from many lips. Involuntarily he scowled, his glance flicking from eye to eye. He was half-reclining in a curious sort of chair. It was a bulky chair, with coils of tubed light twining about it. A circle of men stood facing him, watching.

His lips tightened.

"What's going on here?" he said in English. "Where am I?"

One man, completely bald, with a close-fitting white garment revealing his skinny figure, waved the others back. He spoke a tongue that Court understood.

"Leave me alone with him now. He is awake. Call Barlen. Notify the Throne. Out, now!"

They trooped out through a door that lifted silently in the wall. Court lifted himself out of the chair where now the shining coils had dulled. His body felt like an old friend. He had been using it without realization for a long while, and he was in good physical condition. Looking down, he saw that he was wearing a blue-and-brown figured tunic of light, pliable material, and shorts of the same color. There were shoes of elastic, translucent plastic on his feet.

The room had a strange, exotic appearance. The walls shimmered with color, soft pastels, abstract designs that were curiously soothing in their effect. The furnishings consisted of a few couches and a littered table. Court had never before seen such furniture or such a room.

The bald man was coming toward him. Court, still frowning, spoke in the new language.

"What is this? I asked you where I am? Am I a prisoner?"

"No, you're no prisoner," the man said. "You've been a patient. I'm Tor Kassel. Can you understand me easily?"

Court nodded, still wary. "This place is what?"

"My home." Kassel hesitated. "You know your name?"

"Naturally. But that's about all I do know."

"Is it?" The dark eyes were intent. "Your memories haven't returned?"

Court shook his head wearily. "I'm mixed up. I expected something else. But this is right, somehow."

"It is quite right." Kassel's voice was gentle. "There are a few things you should know before you can completely readjust yourself. As for your health—it is perfect. For five months you have been here, under my care. Let me see if my theory is correct. First, are thirsty? Or hungry?"

"No," Court said. "I just want to know where I am."

Tor Kassel rested his thin hand on the table. "You were in an underground place. There you fell asleep. You caused that sleep yourself. It was a hypnosis, self-induced."

"The opium," Court said suddenly. He used the English word. Kassel stared.

"Opium?"

"A—a drug I smoked. It helped me to fall asleep. It was habit-forming."

"You do not have the habit now," 'Cassell said. "Take my word for it. The reason—well, you slept in that hidden place, and time passed. A very long time."

Court felt his anger rise. "I know quite well it was a long time. Don't treat me like like a child. How long? A thousand years?" Once the words were out, he felt their improbability.

Kassel hesitated. "I don't know. We can estimate the period after you give us a few facts—the positions of the stars in your era. Our history goes back only a thousand years."

"Who are you? What race?"

"We are Lyrans. That means nothing to you, does it?"

"No." Court mused "A thousand years. Why, only that far back? What year is this? Three thousand something?"

"Seven-eighty-four," Kassel told him. "Dating from the time of the First Pact, when a few wandering tribes banded together."

"All right. Maybe I don't understand you."

"You have a barbarous accent, and you haven't learned our colloquialisms," Kassel said. "But you learned the language very well during your stay with the Mouranee nomads. You were—mentally asleep—then, but you must have been with the Mouranee for several years."

"I want a mirror," Court said abruptly.

THE bald man walked to one of the shimmering walls and made an odd gesture. An oval in the bright surface dimmed and turned silver.

"Here," Kassel said.

Court moved forward hesitantly, uneasily. Whatever he expected to see, it was not the old Ethan Court, of course. But neither had he expected to see a grimy, bearded savage. Yes, he had grown older. There were streaks of white at his temples, and his brown face was thinner. Deep lines bracketed his lips. Under scowling dark brows his blue eyes were sparkling suspiciously.

Kassel remained near him, talking. "An ethnologist and historian of our race found you with the Mouranee tribe. They learned what they could of your history. You had been found, half-alive, in an ancient, underground chamber. The Mouranee took you to their village and treated you."

"I remember," Court said. "Yes, I remember that." He touched his lips with hesitating fingers. This flesh—still firm and alive after more than a thousand years? Perhaps more than—ten thousand!

But he could not believe that. Kassel had cupped something small and bright in his palm.

"These were found with you. Our scientist could not read them, naturally, but he recognized some of the letters and figures. A very ancient tongue—it is a lost language today, except for a few transcriptions on metal that we cannot decipher."

He dropped the objects in Court's hand. Newly-polished, they were shockingly familiar. Suddenly they were the only real thing in this alien place. Name—blood type typhoid shot—serial number.

Kassel went on. "You were brought here. We guessed the possible importance of our find. Suspended animation is possible today, but that it should have existed in your era is extraordinary. When was it?"

"Nineteen-forty-four," Court said. "Or Nineteen-forty-five. I don't know."

"Well, that doesn't tell me much, I'm afraid. Our chronology is different. What were you?"

The man's meaning was clear. "Artist, once. And soldier, after that."

Sudden relief showed in Kassel's hairless face. "Good. There are artists today, but no soldiers. We have peace, or we have had, Court, you must be instructed regarding our times."

The door opened. Through it came a giant figure, a ruddy-faced man with a

golden spade beard and mane of yellow hair. His clothes were garishly flamboyant. Sweat beaded his high cheek-bones.

"Tor Kassel." he said hurriedly. "I came for the patient. He saw Court. "He is awake, then!"

"He's awake."

"Good! Come with me, you! At once!"

Kassel's eyes gleamed. "What the devil do you mean? This is my home, Barlen! This man Court is my patient. He'll go with you if I permit it. Not otherwise."

Court's gaze moved from face to face. "Do I have anything to say about this?" he asked.

Barlen stared. Kassel nodded.

"Certainly. You may do as you choose. And I'll see that no one tries to bring pressure." He glared at the big man.

Barlan's teeth gleamed amid his yellow beard as he grinned.

"So I must apologize again," he said. "To you—my friend—and to you—Tor Kassel, I make my excuses. Forgive my impatience. But you'll admit I have reason. Kassel."

"Perhaps you do. Yes, I think you do: Just the same, Ethan Court is still my patient."

"He's something more than that." Barlen showed his teeth. "The Throne is interested."

"I've notified the Throne."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"For a little courtesy," Kassel snapped, and swung to Court. "The Throne—our ruler—has been much interested in your progress. There's an interview scheduled. But it's to be at your convenience, for I don't want you to overexert yourself."

COURT could not suppress a smile. "Am I healthy now, Kassel?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I'm certainly curious. I'm ready any time."

"Do you want me to go on my knees to him, Kassel?" Barlen said impatiently. "My car's outside."

"I want nothing except a little consideration," the doctor mumbled. "National emergency or not, medicine still has its rights."

"Come on, Court," Barlen said. "If you're ready."

Clutching his dog-tags, Court followed the huge Barlen through the doorway, Kassel at his heels. Down a winding spiral ramp they went, past walls that shivered and murmured with sound and color, and emerged into a porte-cochere where a car stood—a huge, sleek bath-tub, apparently—with a padded bench circling its interior. A simplified control-pedestal rose in the center, easily reached from any point within the car. Barlen stepped in, the others following. and waved them to seats.

"We fly," he said, with simple pride. Court looked at him.

"So did we," Court said, and the giant blinked.

"Well." He touched levers. "You'll see." The car slid out into darkness.

Then there was the odor of green growing things and cool, fresh night air, and Court felt the car rising. Without a sound it slanted up. He sat motionless, staring at the loveliness of the city spread below. It was a city of rose and pearl.

"What could I expect?" he told himself. "This is the future. Naturally things are different. Naturally."

Valyra, the central city of Lyra, lay clustered about a low mountain, spreading down from its slopes into the distant darkness. It glowed with a warm radiance that outlined the gracious curves of domes and roadways, and the dreams of a hundred architects had made the city into a single unit of beauty. Each curve subtly led the eye to the central mountain.

There, on the summit, stood a domed palace, fragile looking and shining.

"Did you have this?" Barlen's voice held smug triumph.

"No," Court said. "Nothing like this. No."

His hand tightened on two bits of metal, for abruptly the elfin city was horrible to him. He didn't want perfection. He wanted craggy, dirty blocks of concrete, granite, brick and steel, towering above Sixth Avenue. He wanted to hear the nerve-grinding roar of a subway. He wanted to smell of hot-dogs roasting in an open-front Nedick's shop. He wanted to look down at a city that wasn't perfectly planned and executed—a place with the homely name of New York or Pittsburgh or Denver, where brownstone stood next to chrome, and where pushcarts stood beside sleek limousines.

He didn't want this. It wasn't fair. He was an ordinary man. There had been a war, and he'd been in it. But this wasn't all right.

It was wrong that he should have fallen into some sort of mystic sleep in a dungeon in China and wakened after thousands of years had passed.

Mother-of-pearl—bah! It was a fine set-up for a hero, maybe, but he wasn't a hero and he didn't want to be one.

Court flung himself forward, straight at the man with the ray-gun

All that he had seen was fairy-tale stuff. That covered it. He didn't fit into fairy tales. This golden-bearded giant, beside him, probably lived on a

steady diet of romance. But it wasn't Court's meat.

He gripped his dog-tags desperately and shut his eyes, wishing and praying to be back in the familiar yellow mud of China. Anywhere, in fact, but this cake-icing city in a time that wasn't Ethan Court's time.

"Look out, Barlen!" he heard Kassel say. "That car's coming too close!"

"Fools!" Barlen rumbled. "They'll hit us." The big man raised a warning shout. "Grapples! Hold them, Kassel! I'll protect Court."

Mighty arms swept about Court, lifting him from his seat. One glimpse he had of an air-car sweeping forward. Silvery rods, like tentacles were reaching out, and dark faces were intently watching. Then Barlen sprang over the side, gripping Court to his barrel chest, and the two of them went plunging downward through the emptiness of the night.

CHAPTER III

The Blue-Eyed Girl

BY INSTINCT he reached for the ring of a rip-cord that wasn't there. He heard himself automatically counting. They turned over slowly as they fell, but Barlen kept his strong grip on Court. Above them the unlighted air-cars were lost against the sky.

Court felt Barlen writhe. The city was rushing up at them with sickening speed, so close now that details were visible. But as Barlen moved, a coruscating shell of color blotted out vision. Hands of iron seemed to seize every part of Court. Next came a wrenching jolt so violent that it threatened to dislocate his neck. But soon he was floating down slowly through a curtain of light. Faster now—and faster.

He struck hard, tangled with Barlen, and the shimmering colors faded and were gone. The giant jerked him to his feet, and gave a swift glance around.

"They may follow. In here, quick."

"But Kassel! What of him?"

"I don't know. He's either dead, or a captive. Hurry!"

They had landed on the rounded dome of a roof that glowed with pale pink. With Barlen guiding him, Court slid down precariously to a ledge and crept along it to a window that appeared to be made of mother-of-pearl. Barlen kicked a hole in the oval pane. With a wary glance at the sky, he jumped through the gap, pulling Court after him. They were in a big, empty room furnished with sybaritic magnificence.

Barlen made for the door. As it slid upward at his approach, a man appeared on the threshold, wide-eyed and excited. He was middle-aged and had coal black wooly hair.

"Who're you? What does this mean?"

"Acting for the Throne," Barlen said. "Where's your visor?"

"It's in here. I'll show you. Come."

The man scuttled along the corridor, leading the way. Barlen dragged Court with him. The visor was simply a blank oval in the wall. Barlen made signaling gestures before it. The oval hummed. A pattern of lines like Persian script appeared.

"Acknowledged," a toneless voice said. "Report."

"Enemy air-car directly overhead." Barlen turned to his inadvertent host. "Where are we?"

"Sector Forty, Gamma Three."

"Forty Gamma Three. Possible spies. Not Lyrans, I think. Physician Tor Kassel trying to hold them. Action."

"Acknowledged and action," the voice said. The light faded. Barlen turned away with a shrug.

"They'll send up air-cars to investigate," he said. "I doubt if they'll find anything."

"What about Kassel?" Court asked.

Barlen gestured. "We have enemies, and they're ruthless. They were after you. Word leaked out, I suppose." He hesitated, then looked at the woolly-haired man. "Would you drive us to the palace? Or let us have one of your servants, friend? It's for the Throne."

"Gladly," was the answer. "Are you hurt, Den Barlen?"

"Oh—you know me. No, I'm not hurt. The car?"

"This way."

"We'll go by surface," Barlen explained, as the tub-like vehicle whisked them through glowing streets. "It's safe, I suppose. My repulsor charge is exhausted, anyway. I'll have to get you a tube."

"What was it?", Court asked.

"Anti-gravity. It's not too perfect—you noticed the jolt—and it requires delicate timing. Don't push the stud till you're two hundred feet from the ground. If you release the charge when you're too high, it won't last long enough to bring you down slowly. The mechanisms are bulky. There's room for the complete device in an air-car like this, but in a pocket safety tube, all we can do is install a short charge. It has to be renewed after each use."

"Who were those men?" Court asked.

THE man at the controls, his face angry turned his head.

"They must have been the enemy," he said. "Deccans, perhaps. Is that

right, Den Barlen?"

"Maybe," Barlen said. "I don't know. Didn't get a good look at them."

"Deccans. They have spies everywhere."

"Well, Deccans or not, they were after you, Court," Barlen said. "I'd have preferred to stay with Kassel and fight, but your life's more important."

"Why?" Court asked.

The giant winked and glanced toward the driver.

"Here's the palace. Thanks, friend. You've helped the Throne tonight."

"And harmed the Deccans, I hope," the man said. He brought the car to a stop. A few guards, not many, were at this door of the hill-palace. Barlen exchanged a few words with one of them, and was waved inside. Court had an impression of immense spaces and bright colors—then he was in an elevator that rose swiftly. He stepped out, with Barlen, into a good-sized room where a man was awaiting them. Thin, undersized, with a clever, fox-handsome face, the man brushed back his red hair nervously with one hand and smiled at them. Behind him, a spiral ramp led up to a crystal door high above them.

"Hello, Barlen," the red-haired man said. "Is this Court?"

"It's Court, yes. I'm sorry, but the Throne's waiting."

"I'll take him there."

"Go to the devil, Hardony," Barlen said. "Run your sneaking spy-system and let me handle these matters."

Hardony's hand stopped moving across his hair. "It's my job too, you know."

"It's military tactics, not espionage. Come on, Court."

From somewhere a woman's voice spoke angrily.

"Stop quarreling and send Court up here! I want to see him. Barlen! Hardony! Send him alone."

Both men bowed to the wall high in the wall. Barlen waved Court forward. "Follow the ramp," he said, and grinned. "Don't be nervous. There's nothing to worry about."

Court grimaced and turned to the incline. He walked up the spiral slowly, conscious that the two men below were watching him, red-hair and yellow-beard. So the Throne was a woman. More rose-and-pearl hokum. Smiling crookedly, Court touched the white hair at his temples. Well, he was no Prince Charming.

The Crystal door opened. He stepped through into a bubble of darkness.

There were dim lights, but they paled against the spectacle of Valyra

spread around and below. This was, he saw, the highest point of the palace on its mountain-top, and it was a room walled and roofed with material as transparent as glass.

Behind him the door clicked shut.

"I don't know the rules," Court said. His voice was harsh. "Do I bow, or just fall flat on my face?"

"Your dialect is that of a savage," a voice answered. "You act like one, too. Perhaps, though I am too critical. You have been asleep for a long time. Wait."

Slowly a blue glimmer pulsed and grew, faded to pale rose, and spread out into a cool, quiet radiance that filled the room. The city, spread below, lost its colored, vividness, and became ghostly, while the chamber became distinct.

It was huge, so great that it was spacious, despite the richness of its furnishings. Fragile delicacy of sculptures and curious mobile art-forms contrasted with the massive solidness of heavy tables. Immense carved cabinets, and marble railings could be seen.

Yet the room was a unit. There was no discordant note. Walls and roof were the transparent glass dome. The floor was divided into sectors of shifting tints that faded and wavered and flamed up as Court watched.

Facing him, a few feet, away, was a girl— a very beautiful girl—with red-gold hair and intent blue eyes. She was wearing the briefest of garments. Its dull silver revealed the slim perfection of her body. Except for the richness of her garments, nothing showed her rank.

She settled herself on a divan. Her gaze measured him.

"I've seen you asleep," she said. "That was different. You're awake now."

COURT stared at her, a dull irritation rising within him, though he could not have told why. Slowly her red lips curved into a smile of curiously gentle sweetness. The glamour and strangeness were gone. She was only a girl now, human, approachable, not the ruler of an alien civilization.

"My name's Irelle. I know yours. If you feel able, we'll talk." She smiled. "You may sit down, if you wish."

"Sure." Court seated himself near her. "Sure, let's talk."

"How do you feel?"

He hesitated. "Healthy enough. But I'm not comfortable."

The blue eyes held a touch of pity. "Kassel told me what to expect. You can't remember much, of course. You went to sleep—oh, long ago—and suddenly you find yourself in a new world. I know, Court. It's not easy for you."

Her sympathy loosened his tongue. "No, it's tough. I've read stories about

such things, but they were fiction. They couldn't happen. Only it has happened. All this doesn't really amaze me. We had science in our day. Anti-gravity's nothing miraculous. The miracle is that I haven't changed."

That was it, he knew. He didn't fit. He was keyed to a different pitch, the world of 1945. This new era, with its rose-pink cities and social culture of which he knew nothing, made him feel helpless and resentful. Long ago his life had been aimed at the goals and ideals of the Twentieth Century. Now those ideals were gone. They were without purpose or meaning. The foundation like those ancient cities where he had lived, had become dust.

Here was a new and alien structure, a civilization grown from a root he had never known.

Irelle seemed to understand something of this. "You will change, of course. I'm no psychologist, but I can put myself in your place. You don't even know what you want now. Isn't that true?"

Court ran his fingers over a cushioned surface that hummed and vibrated under his touch. He drew his hand back quickly, meeting Irelle's eyes.

"Something like that."

"And you're suspicious. There's so much you don't comprehend that you resent it. But that isn't necessary, Court. Especially for you." She watched him. He could sense the interest in her regard.

"Am I to be put on exhibit? Or do I lecture in some university—if there are universities?" But there must be, he thought, or there would have been no word for it in the language. Still, they might be far different from the old Yale or U. S. C.

Irelle touched a mobile object and watched the plastic curves glide and swing into motion, till it resembled a dizzying waterfall. "This. It's meaningless till it's moved. Then it shows its purpose. You, Court—once you begin moving, with a plan—will be like that."

"What plan?"

"I wish Tor Kassel were here," she sighed. "He knows far more than I of the mysteries of the mind. Barlen and Hardony are fine strategists, but the subtleties are beyond them. Our air-cars couldn't find your attacker. Barlen's car was located adrift. Kassel was gone; I suppose they captured him. They want information—"

"Who?"

"Listen," she said, a new light in her eyes. This is something you'll understand easily, I think. You were a soldier, weren't you?

Well, there are no soldiers now."

Court looked at her. "There's no war?"

"Not yet," Irelle said sombrely. "But it will come soon. When it comes, we'll be helpless. You saw what their spies can do—the Deccans. They knew,

somehow, of your existence, and they wanted to capture or destroy you. Barlen saved you from that. He'll fight to defend Lyra. But without weapons, he can't do much. Nor can Hardony, though his espionage corps is well organized."

"Without weapons?" Court asked. "Why haven't you any weapons?"

"Kassel could have explained it better," she said. "Still, I'll try." She took a deep breath. "We cannot make weapons, defensive or offensive. I mean we cannot. Our— our minds refuse to conceive of such ideas. We have scientists. One of our technicians discovered anti-gravity years ago. But there is something deep in our minds—our souls—that locks the door of knowledge. We are creative, but we cannot create a weapon."

"I don't get the idea," Court said. "Even I can see how anti-gravity could be turned into a mighty good weapon."

Irelle's lips parted as she leaned forward.

"You were a soldier, Court. But we are the children of destruction. It is, Kassel said, a hereditary conditioned reflex. Or something that grew from a seed in our minds, long before our history began, when the world ended—after your time, and long, long before mine. There is a legend of a Tree in a Garden, and the fruit of that tree was war."

Her face darkened.

Court felt a small, horrible chill crawl down his spine. He sensed now, as never before, that a dreadful strangeness lay hidden behind the loveliness of the rose-pearl city. The ominous drumbeat of the past, like iron seas, boomed far underground.

City of enchantment—it was builded on what bloody dust?

"There is a legend," Irelle said, her voice a whisper. "God placed man in a garden, and said, 'Of the fruit of that tree you shall not eat.' But man disobeyed. And there was war. Then God said, 'Lest you perish utterly, I will give you forgetfulness.'

"And He reached into the minds of men, and, where He touched—something died."

CHAPTER IV

An Offer Is Made

REALIZATION hit him with shocking impact. I'm in the future, he thought. It was one word, familiar enough—something he had, until now, taken for granted simply because he had not faced it squarely. He knew the answer now. A remnant of the sheltering blue sea had remained. Lyra, the city Valyra, the air-cars, the alien environment, he had accepted, watching the scene from the viewpoint of a spectator.

But now he knew that he wasn't a spectator. That was the essence of the shock. As long as he remained outside of this fantastic circle of living, he was still safe. It wasn't quite true. Subconsciously the feeling remained

that he could dismiss this new world by waking up.

Irelle's dimly-lighted face, human and lovely, was near his own. Behind her, the rippling waterfall of the crystal mobile, had faded, into a dull glow. Beyond that, the great sweep of the dome-wall, and the rose-pearl glow of Valyra, where men and women lived, reared families, ate and bathed, shimmered on.

Under his breast-bone was a dry, a painful ache. He knew what it was. He wanted to go home. He wanted to see the cities he had fought to save, and which he had lived too long over to see again. No death could have been completer than this.

But New York was gone. Chicago was gone. Little lakes in Wisconsin, where fish leaped in the sunlight, the white ribbons of highways cleanly revealed in the shafts of headlights, the movement and turmoil of hotel lobbies—all had vanished. There had been an—amputation. Time had cut cleanly. But men still feel pain in amputated legs.

He thought, I was going back. After the war, I was going back to the States. My family was there, my work, my home—things I worked for and fought for. I needn't have worked. Or fought. It's canceled.

Instead had come a new world. And he didn't give a hoot about it, or about its problems.

Something had died. Well, that was that. "So you've told me a legend," Court said harshly. "What's the truth?"

Irelle settled back, an odd look of relief in her eyes.

"The truth? We don't know. Our history goes back to the time when we were nomadic tribes, and all mankind was wandering over the face of the earth, without science, struggling just to keep alive. Before that, there was no history. Men did not think. They were too busy. And before that, the world ended. It was a war, I suppose, but such a war as is inconceivable today. Whole continents were blasted."

She gestured. On the floor between them a picture came into view—a world-map, spheroid, slowly revolving.

"Do you recognize this, Court?"

But he could trace no familiar contours. The great land-masses of Africa and the Americas, of Eurasia and Australia had vanished. This was a new world.

"We have only the legends now," she said. "Tales of colossal demons smashing the world with hammers of thunder and fire. In the end, not many men were left alive,"

Even in my day, Court thought, there were hammers of thunder. What war could have ended civilization? The Third World War? or the Fourth or Fifth?

New weapons! Weapons out of hell!

"It was madness," Irelle said. "It left a few tribes wandering amid ruin that was more than ruin. Nothing survived but life. In that life remained horror and fear. When, after a long time, science began anew, men could not build weapons. They were afraid. Kassel said there was a psychic block in their minds. Men forget what they do not wish to remember. The subconscious is very powerful. So, when people tried to turn their science to weapon-making, their minds would not work in that direction. They could not do it."

Court nodded. He had seen soldiers, shaken with battle-nerves, totally unable to remember the scenes that had shocked them. It was a protective device created by the mind. In a world almost completely destroyed by unimaginable warfare, it might have become a hereditary partial amnesia. Yes, he could understand more clearly now.

"But if there aren't any weapons, how do these Deccans manage?"

IRELLE shook her head gently. "They have weapons," she said. "They were always a warlike race. They have menaced us for many years. Now they plan to attack. We have our own spies, under Hardony. Listen, Court. We are peaceful people, but sometimes wars are necessary,"

"Yes," Court said. "I know that."

"We need weapons to protect ourselves. But we cannot conceive of those weapons. We can build them, Kassel said, but our brains cannot originate the ideas. You mentioned a weapon that could be adapted from anti-gravity. Well, never in a thousand years could we plan such a thing practically. We want your help for that."

"An idea man," Court said. "I'm beginning to get it. But I don't like it."

Irelle let out her breath sharply. "I know. You don't realize the necessity, yet. Nevertheless it exists. Please, will you do this? Hold your judgment. Look at our world, and understand it. After a while, I'll ask you again. There will be no pressure brought to bear on you. All we ask is that you look at the truth with unbiased eyes."

Court hesitated. "I—I don't know. I didn't ask for anything like this."

She stood up, holding out her hand. Court rose, and the girl led him across the great room to the transparent wall. Below, the city swept down the slope, its winding streets and skyways dissecting the sprawling, glowing masses.

"Valyra is alive," Irelle said softly. "You've been dead, Court. You don't want to waken, do you?"

It was true. He was thinking longingly of the blue sea that had cradled him for eons.

She half turned. Some indefinable perfume, subtle and sweet as spring, drifted into his nostrils.

"Have you forgotten life?" she said—and lifted her face.

He kissed her, hard and savagely at first, with a fierce resentment that refused to admit that this was more than a gesture. Yes, he was dead, and dead flesh does not quicken easily.

But he came back to life with Irelle's lips on his own. Not all of him, perhaps. Perhaps there was a part of Ethan Court that would never waken, that would always remain in the blue sea of the past.

He drew back at last, shaken. His eyes were hard. "Was that what you wanted?" he asked.

Irelle's gaze met his steadily.

"I do not give my kisses promiscuously,* she said. "I tried to answer a question for you. Well, is it answered?"

Ethan Court stared at her. For an instant, beneath her softness, her warmth, her radiant beauty, he had detected a hint of steel. Driven to desperation, she could be hard—even ruthless and cruel. But Court was not surprised. She was a queen and queens are usually arrogant. Also, in battle, he had learned to be cruel and ruthless himself.

He looked away. "I don't know. Maybe. I don't know."

"I shall never kiss you again," she said. "Remember that. After all, I am the Throne. When you decide, I will be told. Meanwhile, you are free to do as you like."

"Suppose I say no?" he said brutally. "And I think I'll say no? Suppose I won't show you how to build weapons? Will you kill me then?"

"If you decide that our position will be desperate." She glanced out at the rose-pearl city below. "No, you will not be killed. For then I shall know that Kassel never wakened you from your long sleep. I shall know that you are dead, Court. That you died ages ago, in your old forgotten world." As Court went out his shoulder brushed the mobile and set it whirling in a blinding cascade of liquid brilliance.

In the days which followed Court tried to adjust himself to this new life. He'd seen fantasy films, in his own area, and he may have expected mile-high machines and sleekly perfected ribbon-roads that carried gleaming robots on their errands. But the truth was somewhat different. It had the difference of reality, which is never perfection.

There were machines, but they were not a mile high, and sometimes they broke down. Sometimes they smelled of burning plastics and haywire lubrication. Court wasn't a mechanic or a technician. He saw a great many wheels going around, and he knew that gadgets of such complexity had not existed in his own era. Nevertheless, they did not leave him stunned. They were only gadgets, after all.

THE giant Den Barlen sponsored him, and Court grew to like the brusque, intolerant military leader. Barlen had one thought—unquestioning loyalty. But there were other traits, a deep sentimentality which Court found strange. To Barlen, Lyra was something more than a country. It was a living

entity. Tears would stand in his eyes as he told some old folk-story of his ancestors. There was glamour in Lyra, a strange storybook atmosphere which at times puzzled Court. Certainly there was much to puzzle him.

It was an agricultural land chiefly, though there were a dozen large cities beside the capital of Valyra. There were factories, and Court inevitably found himself paying attention to such matters as fuel-sources. Atomic power was unknown, rather to his surprise. There were extremely effective liquid and compressed powdered fuels, and something of special interest to Court was the device that powered the anti-gravity.

In the air-cars was a type of specialized generator, but the parachute rods held a storage charge—a battery, in effect, though electricity was not involved. The Lyrans were able to compress heavy power-charges in metal mechanisms, the strength limited only by the bulk of the container.

He found himself looking at Lyra with the eye of a strategist.

Lyra was not fortified, and would not be easy to defend. Offense, in the case of Lyra, would be the best defense. An enemy air-fleet, equipped with even Twentieth Century bombs, could reduce the land to ruin in a short time:

Demolition bombs could wreck its factories and homes. Fire bombs could scourge its farms and fields. It would be a "milk run"—bombs away, with no opposition.

There were no weapons—none at all. Dozens of times Court saw places ideal for anti-aircraft emplacements, for camouflaged landing fields, for rocket-cradles. But the great factories turned out the artifacts of peace, ploughshares instead of swords. Under other circumstances it would have been close to a Utopian system. No, through Lyra rustled whispers of threat and danger, of Deccan spies searching for weaknesses, of enemies moving implacably closer.

There were a few weapons, of course, but they were primitive, swords and staves, and the snake-hilted daggers used by Hardony's espionage corps, which served both for defence and as a means of identification. In his own time that particular symbol—the Aesculapian serpents twined about a staff—had meant healing, but now its purpose was surgical only. Hardony's men were well-trained, Court discovered. They covered Lyra in a network, careless of their own lives, and were fanatically loyal to the Throne. But he thought that they were not too fond of Hardony himself.

Barlen did not like the red-haired espionage chief.

"I don't trust him," he told Court. "Hardony pretends to believe in nothing. He's cynical and he's a cruel brute. Striking in the dark with a dagger is his style."

Baden grinned savagely through his yellow beard, Yes, Barlen hated Hardony!

CHAPTER V

Deccan Enemies

DURING the days which followed, Court grew to believe Barlen was prejudiced about Hardony. Court began to see a good deal of the spy chief and, although Hardony was cynical, Court found he was refreshingly free from hypocrisy. Often Court had chances to have long talks with the red-headed man, for Barlen's duties frequently called him away. Soon Hardony began to invite Court to go with him on various expeditions—sometimes on business for the Throne.

"You know a city by its dives," the redhead said one night, as they sat in a dim tavern filled with an almost intolerably heavy perfume.

The room was low-roofed and enormous, artificial white perfumed fogs drifting about in dim veils, and off-beat music humming from somewhere. The drinks were unfamiliar, but they were intoxicating. Hardony watched a foppish, silk-clad youth laughing. He was seated on a nearby dais.

"That man, for example," Hardony said. "What do you make of him, Court?"

"He's nervous," Court theorized. "He hasn't looked at you once since we came in. He isn't as drunk as he pretends."

Hardony nodded. "But he knows who I am. That girl next to him told him. I don't know him, though. He's a visitor from some other city, or a Deccan spy. Have you wondered why Barlen and I spend so much time with you?"

"No," Court said. "I'm being guarded?"

"Right. If you know that, do you know why?"

"The Deccans?"

"They tried to capture you once. They're not fools. They've probably more right to survive than our race has, if you apply the law of survival of the fittest. They learned about you almost as soon as you were bought here, and naturally they want you—either to use your knowledge, or to kill you."

"They sound bloodthirsty," Court said.

Hardony smoothed back his red hair. "Necessity. I'd kill you myself, if that was the only way of saving you from falling into Deccan hands. But there'd be no animosity in it—nothing personal. Simply logic."

Court grinned. "I see your point. However, I'd be apt to resist."

"If everybody thought alike, there'd be less trouble," Hardony said, sipping a bluish liquor with streaks of gold curling through it. "This isn't a unified nation by any means. We've got factions. Any large social group has. So it takes a strong hand to rule. Luckily the Throne's hereditary, and people are automatically loyal to Irelle. That's ingrained. But too many of them try to interpret their own schemes for living. Many hate me because I know that a strong espionage force is necessary. You can't mould clay with clay. It takes a knife. I'm the knife."

"What about Barlen?"

"A dull knife," Hardony said gently. "If he didn't hold a rank equal to my own, he'd be a useful tool. As it is, his bothersome military machine comes into conflict with my corps at every opportunity. Fidelity's necessary—my men don't love me, but they obey me. And Barlen's men follow him. His men hate mine, which doesn't matter so long as a strong hand keeps Lyra unified. If we fell into chaos, the Deccans would have no trouble in taking over."

"I've seen no signs of chaos," Court said. "You wouldn't. It's under the surface. But it's there." Hardony grimaced. "Barlen's a romanticist. He sees what he wants to see. To him, Lyra's a land of honey and cream, with soft music and pink babies and bright flowers everywhere. I know what's under that. I think you know, too. Human beings aren't nice. They're vermin, with the instincts and rottenness of vermin. Lyrans are no better than any other race. Deccans are vermin too. Do you wonder I'm hated?" He smiled crookedly.

"Yet you're doing an efficient job," Court said. "I wonder why?"

"So I won't have to crawl with the rest of the vermin," Hardony said, finishing his drink. "It's no fun wriggling in the mud. My legs were built to stand on."

"And to stand on others, maybe?"

HARDONY gave Court a quick glance. "Who'd run the espionage corps if I didn't?" the spy chief demanded. "Barlen? He hasn't the intelligence. He'd blunder ahead, and one day the Deccans would be ready, and Lyra would go down fast. This isn't a perfect land by any means, but it's the best one available. I intend to keep it so, if I can." He looked at Court shrewdly. "You've been here several weeks now, and I suspect you beginning to feel impatient."

"Impatient for what?"

"Bored, then. Being a spectator isn't sufficient."

Court turned his goblet idly between his palms. He didn't say anything.

Hardony shrugged. "Let's go. I've an errand to do tonight. Come along. You'll find it interesting."

"All right." The heavy perfume that filled the tavern was drugging; Court was ready to leave. He followed Hardony, threading his way among the raised platforms toward the door. The music hummed faintly in the dim, cloudy radiance.

Someone cried out sharply. Court glanced back, searching for the source, and stiffened. A dais had been overturned, and a heavy, dark-clad figure was sprinting forward, shouting.

"Hardony!" the man yelled. "Watch out!" He was running toward the platform where the foppish youth had been sitting. The youth was on his feet now, in a swirl of rainbow silks, something blue and glittering in his hand. He was struggling to release himself from the girl who clung to him.

She was desperately trying to gain possession of the weapon. A curtain of rosy fog drifted between them, half veiling the pair from Court's eyes.

It was over very quickly—before Court could recover from his surprise. The silk-clad youth wrenched his arm free. A ray of brilliant, pale light shot out, striking the girl full on her breast.

She stiffened, head thrown back, mouth a square of screaming agony.

She dropped—lay motionless.

The running man who had warned Hardony had almost reached his goal, the killer. But he was not swift enough. Again the white ray lanced out, splashing over dun cloth and brown skin.

Momentum carried the victim forward in a hurtling rush. He crashed against the dais and toppled, his cry dying out.

Beyond the rosy cloud-veil the figure of the youth seemed to loom gigantic. He swung around, eyes blazing, and his glare centered on Court.

"Ethan Court!" he shouted.

The blue weapon rose.

Court flung himself forward, bending low. But he knew that he could not hope to reach his opponent in time.

Over his head a whistling streak raced. Through the distortion of the mists he saw something flicker toward the killer and smash home upon his forehead.

The foppish youth dropped without a sound.

Then came tumult. Court, recovering his balance, saw Hardony run past him, a subsonic whistle at his lips. The espionage chief, grinning fiercely, caught up the blue weapon and thrust it into a pocket. He knelt beside the unconscious man, beckoning to Court.

"What the devil, Hardony! What's it all about?"

"I don't know. Lucky my aim's accurate." Hardony recovered his snake-headed dagger, drove it into its scabbard, and indicated the rising welt on the prostrate man's brow. "You were right, anyway. Our friend here wasn't as drunk as he seemed."

Hardony hesitated, and then, with a swift motion, tore open the youth's tunic at the throat. He reached up, took a half-filled glass, and spilled the liquor over the bared chest. With a scrap of silk he scrubbed at the smooth skin.

Beneath dissolving pigments the ghost of symbol began to show—a cross within a circle.

A GASP went up from the surrounding crowd. "A Deccan," someone said.

"That's the Deccan sign, Court," Hardony said quietly. "A spy." He stood up,

frowning. Uniformed figures were filtering in now, unobtrusively taking over, summoned by their chief's sub-sonic whistle. Hardony beckoned to one.

"Court, go with this man. I want you in a safe place."

"I'm staying here."

"Don't be a fool. I'll use force if I have to. You're unprotected against such weapons as the Deccans seem to have, and this spy may not have been alone. Go along, now."

A hand gripped Court's arm. Unwillingly he let himself be urged toward the door. The musky perfume of the tavern gave place to the crisp freshness of the night air.

Back in the apartment that had been furnished him, Court began to pace nervously, longing for a cigarette and gradually growing more restive. There were guards at the door, he saw. Till now, they had at least kept out of sight. The hours dragged past, until Court felt about ready to explode. At last the door slipped upward. He whirled, ready to vent his annoyance on Hardony—but it was the giant Den Barlen who entered.

His yellow beard was bristling, his blue eyes were ablaze. Over his shoulder he snarled an oath at the guards.

"I'll deal with Hardony myself! Since when does he deny Den Barlen entrance anywhere in Lyra?" The big man moved swiftly to Court, gripped the latter's shoulders with hard hands.

"You're all right? You weren't injured?"

But Court was in no mood for sympathy.

"I can take care of myself," he growled, pulling free. "If you can order those guards around, tell them to let me out of here."

"No," Barlen said. "He's right in that one thing. But in nothing else. Taking you out—unguarded—in the dives where anyone could slip a knife between your ribs—it's disgraceful! He isn't capable of protecting you. All he can do is hatch his rotten, twisted plots."

"I told you I wasn't hurt," Court snapped.

"But you might have been. I came as soon as I got word. From now on you're under my protection, and mine only."

His eyes dark with suppressed anger, Court faced the giant. His lips were tight.

"I've had enough of this," he said. "Too much. I'm used to being a human being. For three weeks I've been carried around like a baby, showed this and that, treated like a semi-invalid. Bah! I know how to feed myself! The next time I see a guard trailing me, I'm going to knock his teeth loose."

That made Barlen pause. His face troubled, the giant muttered under his breath, uneasily fumbling at his beard.

"You—well, perhaps you're right. I can see your point of view. But it isn't only that, Court. You're in a very special position."

Court grimaced. "I'm an ordinary mug who overslept. Nothing more."

"It's not all," Barlen said firmly. "You're not a super-intelligent person or anything like that. We've got brains of our own in Lyra. But you've got one faculty that's completely missing from the race—the creatively aggressive spirit. Lyra's like a machine that's fueled and ready to work. Yet she's without means of making the spark that'll activate the fuel. You're that spark, Court. Unless the machine begins to move under its own power—and that soon—it will be crushed."

"It will be crushed to powder unless it explodes first because of internal tension," a new voice broke in. Hardony walked into the room, red hair catching the light, a half-mocking smile on his face. "Court, you're either Lyra's saviour or its destruction. I'm not sure which, yet."

Scarlet mounted to Barlen's cheeks. "If there's trouble, you're behind it, red fox! I half suspect you of aiming at Court's death yourself."

Hardony groaned wearily. "Don't be that much of a fool, Den Barlen. I could have killed Court a hundred times before now, if I'd wanted that. But I don't. He must make weapons for us, that's all."

"What happened tonight?" Barlen demanded. "A Deccan spy in Green Tavern?"

"Yes. He tried to murder Court—to wipe out the knowledge in his brain before it could be used. He failed, though. He managed to kill a woman there, and one of my operatives."

"What was that weapon he had?" Court asked.

HARDONY made a small, wry sound. "I don't know. It was turned over to our technicians to analyze. And it exploded as they were working on it. One of them is dead, two seriously wounded. The spy—we questioned him. But he apparently doesn't know the mechanism. He was given it, with orders to kill Ethan Court."

"And you took Court down to Green Tavern!"

Hardony shrugged. "It's showed me one thing, anyway. We'll have to move fast. There's unrest everywhere. The people know about Court. Word's got out. That filthy Underground Group—they take orders from the Deccans, and they're starting dissension. Barlen, your own men would start a fight with my agents at the least excuse."

"What is this Underground Group?" Court asked. "I've heard something about them, but not much."

"It's some sort of secret organization," Hardony said. "Traitors and criminals. They should be stamped out and they will be."

Abruptly Hardony slipped up his sleeves, revealing a blood-stained bandage about his biceps.

"I got this coming here through the streets. Yes—there's dissension."

"Who did it?" Court asked.

"I don't know. He escaped."

"It might have been anybody," Barlen said unpleasantly. "Anybody who recognized you, that is."

The two men looked at each other, bristling. Then Hardony let his sleeve fall back into place and laughed softly.

"I think it's time for you to decide, Court. For we can't promise you a home indefinitely. If the Deccans don't invade first, there'll probably be civil war, and if not that, somebody's apt to kill you for not aiding us when you've got the knowledge we need."

Court hesitated. "But the Deccans have some sort of death-ray. I don't know anything about weapons of that type."

Barlen gripped his shoulder. "Bosh! Any weapons will do. A fair chance is what we want. We'll fight 'em with swords if we have to."

Court was remembering the girl the Deccan spy had killed so ruthlessly. He was still angry about that.

"The Throne wants to see you," Hardony said. "Will you come?"

"Why not?" Court said. For he had made his decision.

CHAPTER VI

Globe of Colors

ETHAN COURT had no reason to change his mind as, with Barlen and Hardony, he hurried through the night, via air-car, toward the palace on the mountain. Beneath him Valyra hummed with music. But under its beat he could detect an ominous and growing tension, a discordance that might swell into a shattering, cataclysmic fury. Here was a land strained to the breaking-point, threatened by invasion, wanting only weapons.

The Throne—Irelle—was waiting in one of the great reception halls, an enormous room crowded with the gaily-clad nobles of Lyra. A strained anxiety pervaded in the palace, too. Irelle was talking to an enormously fat man whose gross body was incongruously clad in fluttering silks, red, purple, and green. He looked like a mediaeval jester, Court thought.

"We need supplies," the fat man was saying unhappily, his pouting lips scarlet against the sagging whiteness of his cheeks. "No supplies. I must have them. The least one can expect is to live with a minimum of comfort."

"That is out of my province," Irelle said patiently. "Technical supplies are needed elsewhere, Farr. You know that."

Farr tugged at a green tassel on his bulging stomach.

"Surely a few appliances to help keep me in comfort wouldn't be missed?"

Barlen clapped his hand on the fat man's back. "Comfort, Farr? You've got luxuries in your castle which would keep most men busy, although I don't envy you them. What brings you away from your dreams?" His voice was mocking.

Farr drew himself up. "My pleasures are my own affair," he said sharply. "I interfere with no one else. I ask only to be let alone, and to have a few supplies when I need them."

"Those supplies are needed elsewhere," Irelle said. "You've forgotten that there are other worlds than your dream-ones. Lyra is, I think, more important."

"But I require so little!"

Irelle cut him short. "Barlen, Hardony, Court—come with me." She turned, and led them into a small adjoining chamber.

"Well?"

Hardony spread his hands. "It's entirely up to Court now. I can do no more. My men are ready, but have no weapons."

"My men are equally ready," Barlen said.

Irelle looked at Court. "I heard what happened tonight. It seems to me I'd be justified in resorting to—anything—to save Lyra. Even torture." Her blue eyes were hard now.

Court was silent.

"Listen to me," she lashed out at him. "Thus far you have refused me weapons. You come from the past, from a world that destroyed itself by its own vileness, and you presume to sit in judgment on us. On Lyra! Are you God, then?" Her voice had become shrewish. Her face contorted with fury.

"No," Court said. "No, I'm not God."

"Then—what?"

"I'll help you. There's nothing else I can do. I see that now." His voice was very low. "The world isn't ready for peace even yet. I didn't sleep long enough."

Barlen's triumphant oath rattled against the ceiling. "Good, Court! Good! You were a soldier once, and you're still one. With weapons we'll have a chance against the Deccans."

Hardony's smile twisted into faint wryness. "It took you long enough," he said. "But perhaps that's a good thing. Lyra's at white-hot pitch now, and can be moulded easily. Once the people know you're with us, you—you may be God, after all."

Court was watching Irene. Her hard lips had softened, he saw, and the spark had gone from her eyes. Once more she looked like the woman who had kissed him—not the ruler who coldly threatened torture.

"So you did not die, then," she said, and only Court knew what she meant....

A half hour later Court walked alone on a terrace of the palace, waiting and pondering. Above him an alien sky was glittering with cold stars, immutable as eternity itself, compared to the chaotic affairs of mankind. Beyond the balustrade lay Valyra, a rose-pearl stain against the night. Behind him the palace seethed with subdued excitement.

Soon, now, technicians and scientists, long held in readiness, would be gathered together.

"Speeches aren't necessary," Hardony had said. "They want to ask you questions. They want a basis to work on, and there's no time to waste. Even a single night lost now might be disastrous."

COURT did not know what to say. How could he describe the world in which he had lived? It was the little things that he remembered most clearly, a tree-lined street, green and cool on a blazing summer day, kids bicycling along it, an ice-cream wagon driving slowly along, bell tinkling. He didn't want to talk about weapons to the Lyran scientists. He wanted to tell them of other things—the things of peace.

It was so futile now. For, it seemed, there would always be wars to destroy. Was there no solution, ever? He stared up at the unanswering stars. Wars there, too, probably. Hardony was right. Men were vermin.

No, Hardony was not right. For an answer existed somewhere. Not yet, perhaps. Far in the dim, unborn days of the future, in a land and a time not yet come, but it would come. He would not see it. Even after his long, long sleep, the cravings of conquest and death pulsed too strongly in man's blood. War had almost destroyed the world, but men had forgotten that. The sword was being drawn from its scabbard once more.

This time it would flame across an earth that lay unprotected against its edge.

"Science," Court said under his breath, bitterly. "So it's got to be used for war again. And this is the future!" His tone was heavy with disgust.

"War is a folly," a voice said. An enormously fat figure appeared from the gloom, waddling forward awkwardly. The gay colors of Farr's garments were hidden in the dusk, but Court could dimly distinguish his gross face and body.

"War is folly," Farr repeated. "But I never argue with folly. The Throne rules, and let her rule, I say, so long as I'm permitted to live my own life. But I'm not. They won't let me have the equipment I need for my happiness."

Court turned away, but the fat man dodged in front of him. "Please wait." His high-pitched voice was thin with anxiety. "You can do me a great favor. Irell would grant you anything, and it isn't much I ask. But it means a great deal to me. Don't go; listen to me for a moment."

"Well, what is it?" Court said ungraciously. He was annoyed at the

intrusion.

"Surely a man's entitled to happiness, if he interferes with no one?" Farr said. "I need a little more equipment, and they tell me it's needed elsewhere. But a few power-sources and dynars won't make any difference to Lyra. You'll find me a valuable friend, Court, and I'm asking such a small favor. A word in Irelle's ear would serve the purpose."

"Settle it yourself," Court growled. He swung back. "What do you need special equipment for, anyway?"

"To be happy," Farr said. "I weave dreams."

"What?"

"I weave dreams," the fat man repeated. "Science can be turned to other ends than war. Years ago I retired to my castle and made my own worlds. There I can do as I please. I have certain—sciences." He hesitated. "Not that I'm a scientist. I'm an artist."

"Yeah?" Court said. "I thought I was one myself, a long time ago."

Farr smiled. "Then you can understand, I'm sure. In beauty and strangeness and—and new worlds, I forget the ugliness of this one. Science can give art life. If you could step into a picture you had painted, all would be well."

"If," Court said.

"But I can," Farr told him. "I paint with certain—forces, certain energies that can mould matter until it's real, to the artisan's eye. And more than that. It isn't static. It grows. It develops from its seeds of color and designs and sound, as a plant would grow."

"Do the technicians know about this?" Court asked doubtfully.

"Certainly. Some of them worked out the basic principles for me, as a worker would build a musical instrument. But I am the one who plays that instrument."

Court's skepticism fought against his interest. There might be a weapon here, some possible adaptation.

"How does this set-up work?" Court asked.

FARR took a black globe, the size of an orange, from his garments.

"Man is attracted by art-forms, which are the materialization of his subconscious self—his ego. He strives to create his personalized conception of pure thought. By transmuting them into color and form—and sound—the realities possible in this world. Even in your day, I imagine, men did that."

"They did," Court said. "Sometimes they succeeded pretty well."

"Only in art is perfection," Farr said. "That's because man can achieve absolute freedom. He is prisoned in his body and limited by his five senses. But his mind can stretch out in the infinity and conceive miracles. If he

were not bound by the flesh, if the worlds his mind created were real—to him—there would be perfection. The prison walls would be down. Free mind, in a world self-conceived and self-realized. Here, now, is color." Farr's hairy finger traced a line over the black globe, and it became milky white. A slow whirl of color moved in its depths, reminiscent of a spiral nebula.

That gave place to pure abstract design, racing tints that dissolved and grew and darted out brilliantly as Curt stared.

"This is incomplete, of course," Farr said. "It's a small device I carry with me for—for refreshment. In my castle I have more complete equipment. You will see why I need material that is refused me—and my need is more important than the building of a few more weapons. Here is color, Court—color that isn't entirely objective. It is a chameleon. It draws shading from your watching mind."

Tiny, glittering, fascinating, the miniature world of glowing rainbows—lived—in Farr's palm. Amber and shell-white, sapphire and angry scarlet, the colors raced. The designs formed and reformed. And in those colors was a hint of something utterly alien, yet familiar.

A curious rhythm, exciting as a Ravel piece, touched Court's nerves with its stimulus. Some mobiles, he remembered, had had a similar fascination to him in his own time.

Now this one was nearly perfection.

Chips and facets of honey-gold spun off. Rays of ocean-green, peacock-blue blazed out. Clouds of velvet purple, almost tangible in their richness, bellowed. Ever the colors built and formed and danced. Ever the light and the rhythm moved like life within the little globe.

The colors died. The sphere went black. "But now I can show you my real worlds, Court, of which that was a mere sample," Farr's voice said.

Court looked up, blinking. His eye: widened with incredulous amazement. For beyond Farr was not the green foliage of the terrace and the rose-pearl vista of Valyra, but the smooth, glass texture of a wall—the wall of a room.

He was no longer in the terrace. His startled survey told him that. He was in room, bare and unfurnished, with a dim glow coming from the low ceiling.

"You are in a dungeon of my castle Court," Farr said, smiling. "It has been nearly five hours since you first looked into my colored ball. You are a long, long way from Valyra now, and not even Hardony will suspect that, foolish Farr of holding you a prisoner."

CHAPTER VII

Sinister Dream World

COURT started forward, the muscles of his legs tensing. Farr shook his head. "You can't touch me. You're looking at a projected image now. In the flesh—and a great deal of it there is—I'm many floors above you, in my

castle. You, Court, are in a certain chamber I prepared for myself long ago."

But Farr's image, if an image it were, seemed tangibly real. Court reached out a tentative arm, and his hand passed through the fat man's body without resistance.

"You believe me now?" Farr asked. "That's a step in the right direction, anyway."

Court glanced behind him, saw a couch, and dropped upon it, watching Farr out of narrowed eyes.

"I'm a prisoner, then," he said. "Are you a Deccan?"

"Farr a Deccan? Fat old Farr, who does nothing but sit in his castle and weave dreams? No, I'm a Lyran by birth. But by choice I'm a cosmopolitan of many worlds. None of them is real."

"Why did you bring me here?" Court's gaze examined the walls. There was no sign of a door in the smooth, unbroken surfaces.

"Because you interfered with my plans. It wasn't hard. My air-car was in the palace terrace, and no one could suspect Farr of kidnaping. I brought you here without trouble. Since I don't approve of killing, you'll stay here."

"Your plans," Court said. "For example?"

Farr's tiny eyes sparkled craftily. "Did you believe what I told you on the palace terrace? Peace at any price? No, Court, no!" And Farr's gross body seemed to grow taller and harder. "Once I thought so, in the days when I built this castle for my pleasure. It was enough, then, to live in dreams. But I saw a shadow darkening over Lyra, and it darkened even my dreams."

"Well?"

"If war comes, Lyra must be prepared for it. I know that. But I also know something else. The danger is not from Decca. I have certain sources of knowledge. There is an enemy within, and if you build weapons, Court, you will be supplying that enemy."

"Who?"

"It does not matter, since there will be no weapons made." Farr said.

COURT glanced bitterly at Farr. "Fine. When the Deccans come over, you'll be in a swell fix."

"They won't."

"They have weapons."

"Do they?" Farr said cryptically. "Well, I know the value of preparedness, and I promise you that if Decca ever plans invasion, you'll be awakened from your sleep and then you can build your weapons. There'll be a need for them then, and they won't be turned to the advantage of a traitor who

wants only power and conquest. That, Court, is why I brought you here. You're in a secret cell, far under my castle, and I have the only key. You will need no food or water because there is energy in the light that you see. You will exist for years in that room, grow old, and die there. But you will not be unhappy, for you will have worlds to live in far lovelier than any on Earth."

Court's throat felt dry. "I think you're insane, Farr," he said.

The fat man chuckled. "That's a matter of viewpoint. A madman's worlds may be a great deal more satisfying than one he did not create himself. You, Court, will have the opportunity of being a creator."

"Maybe."

"You cannot help yourself. The energy will draw from your mind, and build pictures—that will live. Pictures in which you will live. You'll be happy. You can forget Lyra and the Throne and such folly. They will not matter."

"You cannot reach me. I'm doing you a great favor—letting you share such dreams as only one man has ever had before. So farewell." The figure of Farr grew misty. The small eyes blinked at Court. "Ah—a word of advice. Lie on the couch. You'll find it softer than the floor."

Court said something profane. But Farr was gone; the bare walls threw back the light starkly. Light that—the fat man had said would be food and drink to the prisoner.

The devil with that!

Court stood up, his mouth tight, his fingers working. He took a step forward, a grin of sheer fury twisting his face. To get his hands on Farr's gross throat would be a pleasure.

He took a deep breath. There was nothing to be accomplished by beating his head against the walls, much as he felt inclined to do so. He examined those walls, foot by foot, finding no trace of any jointure. The door was well-concealed.

He was drowsy!

Panic gripped him. He shook his head savagely, blinking, fighting down the sleep that seemed to pour like warm golden sand from the hidden lights overhead. He began to walk back and forth, jolting steps that assumed a definite rhythm.

Back and forth, back and forth. He was still awake.

He was sitting on the couch, sinking back!

He sprang up, but his legs could not support him. He was thigh-deep in the warm sand that shifted and moved slowly around him, sending him swaying back to a reclining position on the couch. Blood dripped from Court's lips as his teeth clamped down. The momentary agony rose to a pitch beyond pain, transmuted into a keen pleasure....

He sank back.

Beneath him the solidness of the couch seemed to give way. The sliding golden sands buried him. He dropped down, through a glowing sheen of warm light, while the surrounding curtains of sand changed into a pattern of ferns—fronds—frost-crystals—

He was standing in a forest of glass.

The air held a clarity that was like a picture of Rousseau, and like Rousseau's work, too, were the vivid plants that surrounded him. They were ferns, intricate and patterned, and they were of pure, transparent crystal.

He touched a glittering frond, and it dazzled into vibration. And it sang.

PIZZICATO the high tinkle of crystalline notes rang out. Through the glass forest the music whispered.

And the forest replied.

In a million tones, pure as light itself, the forest rustled and shook into blazing movement. The sound thrilled through Court's flesh. He was a part of the bright jungle, vibrating with it—

Something touched his feet, warm and gentle. He looked down. From nowhere a blue, liquid pool was flowing, rising like the tears of Niobe about him.

He remembered—the blue sea! The blue sea that had cradled him during his long voyage through time!

Once before he had fought free of that hypnotic azure deep, and now its touch roused anger and terror within him. The blue stillness that had once meant peace now meant the oblivion of death to Court.

He lunged forward—crashed into the crystal forest.

It was fragile, that white wonderland. The intricate branches and fronds crackled and broke as he pushed through them. The crystal song was a discordance, a tinkling cry of protest. Beneath his feet gritty stuff crunched and crackled. A dazzle of whirlwind, a glassy, motion spun before his eyes, pinwheeling into a blinding nebula of light and roaring sound—

It was gone.

There was gray void.

Something leaped into being in that enormous nothingness. A block, asymmetrical, oddly angled, bright yellow.

It grew.

It rose into a tower. Ochre protuberances sprang from it, monstrous growths like fungi. From its base a strip of amber unrolled like a carpet, racing to Court's feet.

Dots of light grew with enormous speed into rolling spheres, angry orange,

shaded with pale gray. They spun into a goblin dance, receding, plunging forward, spinning into infinite distances and returning.

Cubes and polyhedrons mounted jerkily like trees.

The amber carpet whipped back, carrying Court with it. He was drawn into the center of the devil-dance.

The abstracts toppled toward him, disintegrating as they fell. They vanished. Overhead a scarlet bowl flamed down like a falling sky, bellowing with enormous thunders.

A world self-conceived and self-realized. Some distantly untouched part of Court thought, "I'm visualizing all this. It's been recessive in my brain. And Farr's diabolical machines are making it real to me."

It was horribly real, and most horrible was the exhilaration that rose within Court. He began to see meaning in the geometrical dance, began to perceive what lay behind the symbolism of abstract cubism that was animate and articulate. A yellow coil rose into a spiral, shrilling a high-pitched note that blended with the deep bass of a shapeless purple blotch that curved and writhed like an amoeba.

He felt himself moving in time with the—the things.

Yellow shrieked into red—red sang into orange—orange murmured into green. The humming chord that was an emerald triangle faded into blue—

Into blue that lapped and rose—beckoning—drawing him down into an abyss where there was no time. . . .

Into the blue sea of eternity!

He struck out at tower and angled globe, saw them give way and disintegrate beneath his blows. As they crashed down the blackness of infinity folded in from above, eating up color and sound.

He stood alone in the dark.

A dark that was unbroken—but not quite. He sensed, rather than saw, a variation of shades—of faint hints of shapes....

Light came.

LUSHLY rich, flaming with tropical color, an Arabian Nights' jungle hemmed him in. A chain of suns was strung like a necklace across a sky more sensuously deep than any sky on earth. It was brighter than earthly forests was this jungle.

Flamboyant, it—flaunted. The deep green of great banners of leaves was veined with the purple blood of those plants. The flowers were cupped blossoms that might have grown in Solomon's gardens—brighter than color!

They were brighter than any artist could conceive, but they were not paint. Chalice of shining silver dripped liquid gold that foamed on the richness of the earth. A seed dropped here would sprout into pure wonder. Behind the

barred shadows of the trees—shadows deep and velvety—paced the sleek forms of tigers, yellow and black. Their eyes watched Court. Their bodies moved like sliding water through the blazing, shocking richness of that mad jungle.

A world self-conceived....

He saw the first hint of blue water this time, and sprang away from it. The burnished shield of flower dipped down, pouring burning nectar upon him. Lovely feminine forms, white as snow, bent toward him. One had red-gold hair, a face of dazzling beauty. It was Irelle!

The bright tigers faded like the phantoms they were. All but one. Court was astride it, feeling the smooth muscles bunch and ripple under his thighs as the great beast crouched and plunged upward.

Cold winds dried the sweat on his cheeks. One hand tight in a furry fold of skin, he flung up the other to guard his eyes from flames that lashed out at him.

He was riding through fire—riding on steed that roared its excitement in deep tones of bell-like clarity. Like a huge gong the tiger's cry rang out, and Court, caught in the spell of racing motion and power, shouted too.

On they raced—and the blue sea loomed ahead.

Court leaped from of the tiger's back. He fell through whirling winds that slowed and were gone, leaving a chill barrenness—an empty gray world.

A grayness on which a broken line laboriously crawled and elongated.

Another line, thin, black, came to meet it. A few others drifted by.

Nothing, now, but the grayness and the scatter of lines, meaningless, and yet—Court watched.

The purest essence of linear art, perhaps. A few lines, symbolic of rhythm and pattern—a pattern basic that artists may seek all their lives and never find.

For a long time Court stood motionless, watching the silent, unchanging scene. The blue sea welled up again.

In the next vision there was neither color nor sound, nothing that any of Court's five senses could assimilate. Yet this was the strangest world of all, and the one that held Court longest. He knew it, with some curious inner vision of his mind, and the intoxication of swooping motion through space and time held him.

After that came other visions.

Free mind, in a world self-conceived!

In that ultimate vast freedom, unbound by the fetters of flesh, he sensed at last—something alive. It drew away from him, but he followed it.

He was no longer completely human. Yet the bonds that held him to his own earth were strong. The psychic forces that could prison a Lyran forever could not quite render Court helpless. He was of a different breed from the Lyrans, of a race that had always fought for survival, and perhaps, too, after his age-long sleep, there was a part of his mind that could not be touched now—something that the blue sea had never given up.

So, in that incredible space-time beyond life, he thrust out at the fleeing life.

He recognized it.

He knew—Farr.

Unimaginable meeting, in a plane of pure mentality! But the living part of Farr was there, and Court thrust out at it savagely.

Thrust out—and gripped it. Held it helpless— and bent it to his will.

Though it struggled, Court was the stronger. At last he knew he had succeeded. He fought free of the inconceivable cosmos that surrounded him, battled doggedly toward a warmth and a familiarity he sensed still existed. He could not fail—not now.

Fast! He must go fast!

Into the vortex he went spinning, down and down, faster and faster, smaller and smaller, diminishing from that cosmically unfettered mind into something small and limited and familiar....

He dropped into a room with bare walls, a tiny room where a tiny figure lay, fettered by its pitifully few senses, leaving beyond him a greater glory than he had ever known before and which he would never know again.

And so Ethan Court awakened!

CHAPTER VIII

Traitor To His Trust

A DOOR was open in the wall. and on its threshold Farr stood, a metal key in his hand, life slowly coming back to his dulled eyes. He swayed forward and back like a dummy figure, shaking his head dazedly.

Court stood up, his knees watery. He staggered forward and wrenched the key from Farr's fingers, slipping it into his pocket.

That roused the fat man. He made no attempt to recover the key. Instead he stared at Court half-blindly.

"By the—by the gods! You're awake! What kind of a man are you?"

"I've been waiting to get my hand on your throat, Farr," Court said. But he made no move, waiting for strength to return to his muscles.

Farr touched his forehead gropingly. "I did not think such a thing was possible. You—you drew me from my dreams and made me open the door

of your prison!"

"All right," Court said, "Hypnotism." He knew that was not the full answer.

"I don't understand. What did you do?"

"We were both dreaming," Court said. "And we met somewhere. Let it go at that." Farr's fat body seemed to shrink. "I was a fool. I should not have gone into the dream-worlds where you could reach me. But how could I know the power of your will?"

"You couldn't. Which was lucky for me. And mighty unlucky for you, Farr." Court took a step forward.

"Wait!"

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Not long. A few hours." Court felt relief. He had thought his visions had lasted much longer—days or even weeks. He gripped Farr's soft forearm.

"We're going back to Valyra now, both of us. You as hostage. If any of your men try funny business, it'll be too bad for you. Valyra needs you now. I've got some ideas about these dream-creators of yours. It's just possible they could be adapted as weapons."

At that Farr tried to wrench free, his eyes widening.

"No, Court! No! I was foolish. I know that now. I should have told you the truth in the beginning, but I felt it would be impossible to convince you."

"What truth?"

"I have no choice. You must believe me, Court. You didn't know my motives for bringing you here."

"Well?"

"I wanted to stop you from building weapons, so much is true," Farr said. "But my reasons weren't selfish. I'm a leader of the Underground Group."

"Peace at any price, eh? Peace while the Deccans invade and conquer?"

"No! Decca wants peace, for reasons I can show you. Decca is not secretly arming. If it were. I'd have acted in an entirely different way. I'd have given you every assistance in weapon-making. But here's the truth, Court, something I've found out only after much espionage through my group. There is a man in Lyra who wants to seize control of the country, and then make war. He is the enemy. Decca really has no weapons. They can't conceive them any more than we can."

Court laughed harshly. "The devil they can't! Your story's too thin. A Deccan tried to kill me with a death-ray of some sort, so I happen to know you're lying."

"Tried to kill you? A death-ray?" Farr bit at his thick lips. "I've never heard of such a thing. That's folly. We of the Underground Group are in

communication with Decca, and both the Deccans and our group are working for peace."

"You're easily duped. I think you're a liar, Farr."

DESPERATION showed on the fat man's heavy face. He hesitated. "Yet I'm forgetting. There's the treaty."

"What treaty?"

"Do you remember Tor Kassel?" Farr asked. "The physician who brought you back to life?"

"The man who was captured by the Deccans?"

"Yes. He's in my castle now. Will you talk to him, Court? I ask only that."

"So I can walk into another trap? No, thanks. We're leaving right now."

"But you ought to see him."

Court's fingers sank into Farr's arm. "Lead the way. If there's trouble, I'll break your back. I won't need any weapon for that."

Farr hesitated then let his shoulders sag hopelessly.

"Very well," he said. "But you're making a mistake."

"Just see that you don't make any," Court said. "Move!"

He kept his grip on Farr's arm as the other turned toward the door, stepped through into a tiny room, and pressed a stud on the wall. The chamber—an elevator—began to move swiftly upward. Presently it stopped. A panel opened.

Cool green light beat in on Court. He saw a shadow looming before him, the shadow of a gaunt short man with a gleaming bald head. He swung Farr before him. "You can break my back if you like, but now you must talk to Tor Kassel," Farr said quietly. "He knows the truth, and you must learn that truth from him."

For a brief interval the tableau held, Kassel standing in mute inquiry before them, Court holding Farr in an immovable grip as a shield.

"All right, I'll listen," Court said. "But talk fast."

A few minutes later the three men were seated in comfortable pneumatic chairs with a photostatic manuscript before them, a manuscript which Kassel had obtained from a secret hiding place in the wall. Court read it carefully. Then he scowlingly touched a signature with his finger.

"The Administrator of Decca signed the document, eh?"

"This is a true copy," Farr said. "The original was delivered to the Throne weeks ago."

"If the Throne got it," Kassel added. "It may have been intercepted."

Court shook his head. "I still don't understand. If Decca isn't planning invasion, what does all the excitement mean?"

"Decca never planned invasion," Farr said. "We of the Underground Group knew that, and we were in constant communication with Decca. It was through us that Decca learned of your resurrection. You were a menace—a man who knew how to build weapons. So Deccan spies were sent to kidnap you before that danger could be realized. They failed. They caught Tor Kassel instead."

"I've been in Decca for weeks," Kassel said. "I know a great deal now that I never guessed before. The Deccans are a peaceful race. They cannot build weapons any more than we can. Their minds were conditioned against it, as ours were, long ago. But they know of the militaristic movement in Lyra, and they have been trying to stem it. This treaty is the latest move, and it seems a useless one."

Court picked up the sheets. "It offers to open all Deccan laboratories, factories—all Decca—to Lyran visitors. Hm-m. 'Peace possible only through complete trust and understanding.... Such lowering of common barriers will help to prove to the most suspicious Lyran that Decca has no warlike intentions.'" He whistled between his teeth. "If this is on the level, it changes the setup a lot. Why is Lyra so convinced that Decca's going to invade?"

WITH a worried gesture, Farr leaned forward. "There is a man, a ruthless man without ideals or gentleness, a man who looks on the human race as vermin, created only to further his desire for power and conquest, who is responsible. You name him, Court."

"Hardony," Court said. "Yes, it would be Hardony. Not Den Barlen. He's honest."

"I suppose Hardony suppressed this treaty so the Throne did not see it," Kassel suggested. "I don't know what his plans are. Perhaps he intends to depose Irele."

Court stood up. Farr watched him keenly.

"Wait," he said. "Let me tell what else we have pieced out. Hardony controls the secret espionage. A spy system is necessary sometimes. But it is like fire. If it gets too large, and out of control, it can destroy. Why is the secret service as large as Den Barlen's army?"

"I wonder," Court said. "Yes, that doesn't look well."

"Preparedness is necessary," the fat man went on. "But you forget one thing. Men of this time cannot build weapons. Why have no steps been taken to investigate Decca's intentions? Why has Lyra been practically cut off from Decca for so long? The answer's clear. Hardony has his immense spy system—with weapons. He'd make sure the weapons stayed in his hands. With it he could conquer a world. In your day that might have been inconceivable. But in this age there are no weapons. The man who brings them into being now has a certain responsibility. Now look. The gates of Decca are wide open for any Lyran to come through. Well, go through them."

If you can find a single weapon in Decca, you'll know that I'm lying."

"There are easier ways of checking up." Court was scowling.

Farr leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"I know a way to find out the truth," Court said. "If Hardony's behind this, if he's responsible for the wave of propaganda that's scaring Lyra into war, I'm going to get him."

"He's strong," Farr warned. "His Espionage Corps is powerful."

Court's eyes were narrow and deadly. He looked at Kassel.

"So the ability to create weapons has been bred out of the race! That doesn't help, Kassel! That doesn't help a bit and you know it. Nature's stamped out the effect but not the cause. The source is still here—hereditary desire for power and conquest. There'll always be people like that, maybe."

Kassel was silent, but Farr's fat face was suddenly ugly and malignant.

"And men will always rise to fight such killers," he growled. "Before you leave here, Court, answer me. Are you convinced? Do you intend to build weapons?"

"Not for Hardony," Court said. "No."

"Don't underestimate him," Kassel warned. "You can't return to Valyra, into his power, without taking some precautions. I'll go with you. My name carries weight, and perhaps I can assist you."

"I'm going alone. I don't trust either of you, completely. I want an air-car, Farr."

"But that's reckless."

"If you want me to trust you, give me an air-car."

The fat man nodded thoughtfully. "All right, Court. We'll do it that way, if you want. I advise you to be careful, that's all." He heaved his great bulk upright. "Follow me."

Leaving Kassel staring silently after them, they went through room after room, sparsely furnished, almost ascetic.

"My luxuries exist in dream-worlds," Farr murmured.

He pointed through an archway to a small chamber, the twin of the one far even below, where a heavy couch stood. Near it, on the wall, was a plain silver panel with two levers protruding.

"A movement of my hands and I create my private worlds, you see," Farr continued. "That lever has a timing-mechanism attached, so that I may awake again." He smiled half-maliciously. "The other lever has none, since it controls the guest-chamber beneath the castle. It's a place to which I could always retire if I grew too tired of this world, and sleep forever—until

I died—in my own universes. Here's the roof, Court, and here's the air-car. You know how to handle it?"

COURT nodded, and stepped over the low side and tested the gear. It vibrated into life against his hand. "Which way is Valyra?"

"Due north. Good luck. I may see you sooner than you expect."

But Court did not hear. The air-car rose into the night, leaving the figure of Farr, on the castle roof, below. The dark structure dwindled. A black wilderness, without landmarks lay below. Above him, only the stars blazed.

Court looked at the compass and turned north, speeding into full acceleration. Wind cut against his cheeks, cold and chilling. But it could not cool the dull, smouldering blaze that burned within—the question of who had lied, and who had spoken truth.

The more he considered the possibilities, the more he was convinced of Hardony's duplicity. It would have been easy for the espionage chief subtly to deluge Lyra with propaganda aimed at war. Irelle trusted Hardony, and, though Barlen did not, Barlen could do nothing, especially since he actually did not suspect treason. All this, of course, was on the assumption that Farr hadn't lied. The treaty might have been forged. Tor Kassel? Court had no real reason to trust the physician, either.

Yet, remembering Hardony's cold smile, his utter, ruthless contempt for mankind, Court felt a conviction that the red fox was the enemy to be faced.

But, if so, how could Court convince the Throne? Would Hardony have left any evidence to be found? Not likely.

An hour passed, and another. Court was no nearer a solution when he saw the dim glow of Valyra on the horizon. It was long past midnight, but the rose-and-pearl city still glimmered, with light undarkened. It was never night in Valyra.

But Valyra, for the most part, slept. Even Den Barlen was asleep, as Court found when he reached the officer's home. The guard recognized him immediately, and, saluting, took him into an anteroom where, after a few moments, Barlen appeared, clad in a sleeping-robe.

The giant's yellow beard was tousled. "Court!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been? My men have been scouring the city for you. All the country, for that matter. Are you all right?"

Court glanced at the guard. "May I talk to you alone, Barlen?"

"What? Oh—yes, of course. Come in here." He pulled Court into his bed-chamber. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Court said slowly, choosing his words. "The only thing I do feel certain of is that you're a loyal man, Barlen." The giant looked at him queerly.

"What is it?" he asked in a changed voice. Court drew out the copy of the

Deccan treaty. "Have you ever seen this before?" Barlen's brows grew together as he read. "Signed by the Administrator of Decca. Odd. No, this is new to me. Where'd you get it?"

"I don't want to tell you that yet. It came from someone who's in close touch with Decca, though. There are a few other things to tell you." Hastily Court sketched his theories. Barlen listened for a while, but presently waved an impatient hand.

"Keep talking: I'll get dressed. This may need immediate action."

Court had a momentary cold fear. Suppose Barlen, not Hardony, was the traitor? Had he come to the wrong man?

Barlen's oath reassured him. "There'll be no proof where we can get our hands on it. But it sounds like Hardony. It's a staggering thought, that Decca has no weapons!"

"They have that death-ray."

"Well, I don't know. But all this is quite possible, Court. Hardony may be planning a coup. He could have seen that the Deccan treaty never reached the Throne. He's been trying to have my organization cut down, and his own built up. Yes, he could very easily be planning to start this war, conquer Decca—and then assume total rule himself."

THAT might be true. It was a puzzling problem.

"But how can we find out?" Court asked. "How can we be sure?"

"There's one way." Barlen hesitated. "Decca certainly has sent spies into Lyra, though I'm not sure, now, that their reasons were militaristic. We've captured a few. They're in Hardony's headquarters. They'll probably be able to tell us something about Decca's plans."

"If they will."

"They will," Barlen said grimly. He threw a cape over his shoulders, buckled on a sword, and strode to the door. "But we'll have to move fast, before Hardony's notified we're invading his headquarters." The giant's voice bellowed through the halls. By the time he and Barlen had reached the outer portal, a dozen soldiers, armed and ready, were running in their trail. Steel clashing, they swung out into the night.

Air-cars whisked the group across the city, to a silent dark building that was Hardony's stronghold. He was not there now, as Barlen had anticipated, but the red-uniformed Espionage Corps agent at the gateway said a pass would be necessary before he could let them enter. Hardony could be notified.

"Do you know who I am?" Barlen roared.

The guard bowed. "Den Barlen. I know you, of course. But I am a Corps man."

"You serve the Throne," Barlen snapped. "So do I! I'll put a foot of steel

through that shiny uniform if you talk back to me! Where are the Deccan prisoners?"

"Den Barlen, I can't permit you to interfere."

Barlen gestured. Two of his men sprang forward and seized the Corps man. Another soldier put a knife to the agent's throat. "Will you take us to the prisoners?" Barlen asked gently.

The agent, it seemed, now was willing. Massaging his neck, he silently led the way, with furtive glances at his captors. But two guards flanked him as he walked.

At a branch of the corridor the Corps man turned left. One of Barlen's soldiers pulled at Barlen's sleeve.

"This isn't the way, Den Barlen," the soldier whispered. "I've heard Corps agents talking. When they speak of taking the left turn at the entrance, that means they're going to Hardony's office."

"All right," Barlen said. "Kill that man." The agent let out a gasping cry. "No! Don't!" He thrust out a clawing hand. "I'll take you to the prisoners! I swear it!"

"Very well." Barlen nodded. "Keep your sword-point in his back and, if there's trouble, push. Now, my friend. The right turn, I think you said?"

Now they walked through the halls in silence, save for the soft tread of wary feet. They descended a spiral ramp, turned again into a narrow corridor and, rounding a corner, emerged into a well-lighted chamber where four agents were playing an intricate card-game. The quartet stared, then sprang to their feet. But swords were at their necks. They dropped their hands and stood motionless.

"Another trick?" Barlen asked.

"No, no! I did not know these men were here! I swear it."

"Barlen!" Court said.

The giant turned his head. "Well?"

"That man!" He pointed at one of the agents. "I know him. He's the Deccan spy who tried to kill me in the Green Tavern."

"What? A Deccan?"

"Yeah," Court said. "It's odd he's wearing Hardony's uniform, isn't it?"

Barlen's nostrils dilated. Disdaining to use his sword, he strode across the room, his great hand falling on the agent's shoulder. The man screamed as Barlen's muscular fingers tightened.

"Talk!" Barlen whispered, and death stared from his eyes. "Speak the truth or I'll crush your bones into splinters! Who are you? Hardony's man?"

Words spilled out. "Hardony gave me my orders. I obeyed him. I harmed no

one. The weapon was a sham."

"The death-ray?" Court moved forward, his eyes widening. "But you killed two people with it. I saw them fall."

"They were in Hardony's pay," the man gasped, writhing. "A—ah—my shoulder. The—the weapon—it was harmless. It sends out a ray of light, nothing more. Since then I have hidden here, as Hardony commanded."

"A good way to convince me I should build weapons for Lyra," Court said. "And it worked. I saw a supposed Deccan kill ruthlessly with a death-ray. Yes, it worked—almost."

"We'll see the prisoners now," Barlen said. "The real Deccans." He was smiling wolfishly.

A quarter of an hour later Barlen's air-car again was skimming through the dark, Court beside the yellow-bearded giant. Beneath them, Valyra glowed in deceptive calm,

"I'm convinced," Barlen said. "And I'm acting. My men are ready for mobilization and they'll obey me. I'm ordering the arrest of Hardony and the imprisonment of his Corps leaders."

"The Throne?" Court asked.

"There's no time even to tell Irelle. Hardony will learn of our visit to his headquarters. We must strike before the red fox can move."

CHAPTER IX

Plotters At Bay

STANDING before the private-beam televisor in Barlen's home, Court watched while the orders went out. He was a spectator now, passive and waiting for—what? He did not know, but he sensed a growing tension in the air.

"Find Hardony! Arrest him for treason, by Den Barlen's orders, acting for the Throne. Arrest all Espionage Corps leaders. Action!"

To Barlen's well-trained army, in a thousand branch and district headquarters, the command was sent out. Barlen touched a switch, stood up, and nodded briefly at Court.

"Stay here. I'm going to Hardony's home. I'll get in touch with you."

"I'll go with you."

"No, stay here where you'll be safe. You know things you haven't told yet, and your evidence will be important. That means your life's important too. Stay here."

Without waiting for an answer Barlen strode out, leaving Court alone to chafe and wonder.

He did not have long to wait. Within ten minutes the televisor screen

leaped into brilliant color. Irelle's blue eyes looked into Court's.

"Where is Barlen?" she demanded. "Looking for Hardony," Court said. "He's arresting your redhead for treason." "So it's true, then," Irelle said. "Barlen's jealousy has boiled over at last. Well, the orders are countermanded. You will remain where you are till my own men come for you."

"Barlen's jealousy?" Court stared at her. "Hardony's a traitor. Barlen's got proof. And I have too."

The red-gold crown of hair shook from side to side. "I don't believe that. Hardony is loyal. I'd stake my life on it."

"Then you'd lose your life. He's responsible for trying to start a war with Decca."

"Oh, you're mad," Irelle said. Her hand reached to break the connection.

Court spoke in time to stop her. "Wait, Irelle!"

She hesitated. "What?"

"You won't have to send your men for me. I'll come to you. Furthermore I'll bring with me proof, indisputable proof, that Hardony's planned to depose you and take your place."

A shade of doubt came into Irelle's blue eyes. "Proof? It cannot exist."

"Give me five minutes. If I can't convince you in that time, then act."

"I do not wish to wait."

"I'm coming to the palace," Court snapped, and clicked the televisor into darkness. He went out, finding a guard at the street entrance.

"Get me an air-car."

"You can't leave, Ethan Court."

"I'm ordered to report to the Throne," Court said. "Tell Hardony when he returns."

"The Throne—oh!" The man signaled. Soon an air-car slipped silently toward the ramp on which they stood.

"Shall I go with you, Ethan Court?" Without troubling to answer, Court sent his vehicle lancing up. Against the black sky he saw the palace on the mountain, and headed for it. But the seconds seemed to drag past, lengthening into eternities, before he reached his destination. Even then, no answer had occurred to him. He had to stop Irelle from countermanding Barlen's orders. But how?

There was no proof, no tangible evidence, nothing that Hardony could not explain away. But after Barlen had struck, after his men had raided and captured vital places, there would, Court thought, be evidence enough. Hardony must not wiggle out of this trap.

So he hurried to Irelle in the great tower room under the transparent dome. In the dim light he saw a silver-gowned figure seated before a television, silent and motionless.

She turned. Her quiet voice dismissed Court's guide. As the door swung down. Irelle rose.

"I've waited," she said. "Your proof?"

COURT gave her the Deccan treaty. She held it under a shaft of pale light, studying it intently. After a time she looked up. "Well?"

"Decca never intended to invade Lyra," Court said. "They have no weapons. Hardony built up the whole idea through propaganda."

She looked thoughtfully at the paper.

"How do I know this treaty is a true document? That Decca sent it?"

"You didn't receive it," Court said. "Hardony kept you from seeing it. He wants a war, so he can get the power he'd never achieve in peace." Watching her averted enigmatic face, Court went on quickly, telling her what had happened—more than he had meant to tell.

When he had finished, he knew that he had failed. Irelle was silent.

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

"No. For Decca wants war, Court. So many things prove that. Only by being strong, by being able to resist, can Lyra survive."

Court groaned. Had his words meant nothing to her?

"They have no weapons!"

"So you say." Her voice was doubtful. "But even if they have none now, they may arm themselves later. Two nations can have peace only if each is strong."

"My race thought that," Court said grimly. "It didn't work. There must be a common trust and understanding—not the piling up of weapons on each side till there's an explosion."

She looked at him. "Are you a coward. Court?"

Presently he answered her "Maybe. There are some things I'm afraid of. Shall I tell you what one of them is?"

He took her arm and led her to the curve of the wall. In the dim light the metal circlet on her brow sent out faint gleamings.

There was a cold, hard knot inside of Court. Looking down at the rosy jewel that was Valyra, he saw the, fragile bridges and domes crashing into horror beneath the impact of bombs from the sky.

"There's your city, Irelle," he said. "It's afraid now, but it's still a good place. It has good people in it. But they can be turned into people who

aren't—aren't nice at all. People who are afraid, and who hate, and who want to kill because they think that's the only salvation for them. Who can become too blindly stupid to realize that there's always a rebound. You can burn the cities of an enemy, but the enemy will come back. Maybe, after a while, you could ravage Decca, but unless you killed every Deccan, Lyra, in the end, would be destroyed too."

His voice was very low. "Men don't forget, Irene. It's been along time since there was war on earth, and you don't know much about it. You've got pretty pink cities and shiny uniforms and bright swords. Do you, think war is a duel?"

She moved a step away from him. Court's hand on her arm tightened.

"They who take the sword, shall perish by the sword," he said. "There were races in my time who learned the penalty. It was my job to fight those races. I did fight them. Yes, I was a soldier, Irele. That's glamorous, to you. For all you know about war is shiny uniforms and shiny swords. You don't know what weapons are."

Something cold and horrible crept into the room from the darkness where stood stars that had watched the earth for a long, long time. She might have been a marble statue for all the emotions she showed.

"You don't see real weapons coming," he said. "You can't dodge them. You hear a noise, and you drop in the mud, and maybe you fall on something that was a man, before it was torn apart, and before it began to rot. Then you wait. You're alone. You're all alone. It doesn't matter whether you're a hero or a coward, it doesn't matter whether you're the Throne of Lyra or a scared kid. For if a bomb's coming, you can't stop it. It doesn't fall only on battlefields. It doesn't fall on soldiers alone. Bombs can rain down on Valyra, Irene, on civilians, right here! If a bomb misses you, or just tears a hole in your body, you can get over that. Afterward you want to kill the people who drop those bombs."

GENTLY Court swung Irele to face him. "Do you wish me to make bombs for you to drop on Decca?"

Fear blazed in her eyes, purple now, and deep. For a second he held her there, and then, against the backdrop of the rose-pearl city, they came together. Irele had said that she would never kiss Court again, but she had lied.

She was afraid, and she clung to him, for a little while. The moment did not last. Court knew it could not last. But a feeling of desperate futility rose in him as he heard a murmur and a sound of approaching footsteps, and knew he had not changed her.

Irele drew away. She gestured. The great room grew lighter. Through the rising doorway came two figures, Hardony, red-hair ruffled, a twisted sneer on his face, and behind him, a sword pointed at Hardony's back, Barlen.

The door slipped down. "Stand still, red fox." Barlen growled. "Treason to the Throne needs the Throne's decision. I think it will be death." He nodded toward Irele. "'Have you found evidence?" Court said quickly.

"I need no evidence to run my sword through this traitor's throat," Barlen snarled. "The Deccans have no weapons, and never had. Hardony planned to foment a war and become ruler. Can you deny that, red fox?" Irelle moved forward to stand beside Hardony, who turned his head to meet her calm gaze.

"Can you, Hardony?" she asked.

He was grinning. "Why should I, Irelle?" he asked. "All of it is true, but two things. I would have served you loyally and I would have made you ruler of a world."

"You hear him," Barlen said. "He'd have a war!"

Irelle smiled a little. "And you, a soldier, are a man of peace?"

"I fight for honor, not for gain," Barlen said.

Court saw the movement too late. Irelle had moved a few paces toward Barlen. Abruptly, without warning, her hand flickered up from the folds of her gown. A dagger caught the light's blaze. Its flashing gleam flicked down. The gleam was quenched in Barlen's back.

The giant snapped erect. He swung about to face Irelle, his countenance twisted with sudden amazement. The sword rattled from his grip.

He opened his lips but only blood came out. He fell face down, and was still.

Irelle caught up the sword and swung it, hilt-first, into Hardony's waiting fingers. As Court sprang forward, the steel point darted up, poising, waiting, quivering with thirst.

"It isn't wise, Court," Hardony said.

"You killed him!" Court whispered, staring at Irelle. He still could not believe. He stood motionless now, frozen in the grip of surprise.

Irelle took Hardony's arm and drew him, step by step, across the room. Court followed, but the sword still pointed unwaveringly at his heart.

"Irelle," he said. "Wait."

"No."

"Why?"

Still guiding Hardony, she smiled with a queer, sly triumph. "Because I knew, Court. I knew all along what Hardony intended. That Deccan treaty—I suppressed that myself. Hardony was going to make me ruler of Decca, and ruler of the world in the end."

"You fool!" Court said.

"Perhaps. I know only that I must conquer. Conquer and rule. Even as a child I dreamed of power. There were voices in my blood that whispered to me, that told me stories of past greatness and future triumphs. I must

rule!" Now a relentless, terrible madness burned behind the white beauty of her face.

"Barlen's soldiers are outside that door, Irelle," Hardony said.

She glanced at him. "We're going the other way, by the terrace." She opened a panel in the transparent wall and guided Hardony through. "It will be wiser to have my own men around me, when Barlen is found. Though—" she nodded at Court—"though I will say that you killed him, and no one will doubt the Throne's word. As a prisoner, there may be ways of inducing you to build weapons for us,"

COURT took another step forward. Irelle and Hardony were gone in the dark. With reckless haste he sprang to the gap in the wall and darted through. He was on a terrace. Beyond its wall he could see Valyra below.

He saw shadows, two forms moving swiftly, and a larger shape, a bulky ovoid that looked like an air-car.

There was an air-car on the terrace! Who, then, was near?

The shadows seemed to dance before him. He heard a faint, warning cry, and the running of hurried feet. As he sprinted forward, he glimpsed a tangle of struggling, dim forms. A wild exultation sprang into life within him. There was a chance now to save a nation!

He saw Hardony drive his sword straight through the body of someone. He saw the victim seize 'the sword's hilt in a' desperate grip, keeping the weapon sheathed in his own body, and resist Hardony's furious tug. Then Court had reached Hardony.

His fist thudded solidly into the red fox's face, shattering bone and bringing blood spurting from riven flesh. Hardony went staggering back, a thick yell rising in his throat. He recovered, came back, his eyes searching for the sword.

Irelle flung herself at Court, clawing, kicking, her hair a bright flame against the dark.

Court had no time. He had a job to do. He slammed a solid blow against her jaw, and heard her body fall. Then he turned on Hardony.

Hardony tried to dodge, to double back into the tower room, but Court was too quick. Court went in relentlessly, no expression on his face, no light in his steady eyes.

His hands found their goal—Hardony's throat.

Fists battered at his face. A leg hooked itself behind Court's and tripped him. But he did not loosen his grip when he fell. His fingers only closed the tighter.

Sudden panic filled the red fox. He tried to scream but could not. Frantically he attempted to wrench free.

"Court!" he wheezed. "Don't—don't!"

"You wanted war," Court said. "Well, this is war."

Finally Court let the body drop from his fingers. Already reaction was making him feel cold and sick. He went back to the man who had been run through by Hardony's sword.

But the man was not yet dead. It was Farr. He looked up at Court, his fat face twisted in pain.

"Followed you," he gasped. "Thought some way—I could help. Well—there was!" His chuckling laugh ended in a groan.

Farr's gross hand reached up and took Court's. The tiny eyes were steady and questioning.

"Court," he said. "Court. Can you save Lyra?"

"Yes," Court said. "There will be no weapons made. I'll tell the truth and the treaty with Decca will be signed."

"But—Irelle—will not sign?"

"There will be peace," Court said. "I promise you that."

Farr nodded contentedly—and died. . . .

* * *

She lay still and lovely on the couch in the tiny room beneath Farr's castle. Her silver gown had been arranged, and her unbound hair, cloudy as spun red gold, draped the pillow. On her brow the metal circlet of the Throne took the light and gave it back in a dull glitter.

Court looked down at her. His throat hurt.

"I suppose there'll always be people like you, Irelle," he said. "There's a madness in your blood. You can't be convinced. But you've got to be stopped. So Lyra will have a new ruler tomorrow. It won't be Ethan Court, but it'll be somebody who wants peace."

The long lashes did not stir on the ivory cheeks. Court dug his nails into his palms. "Can you hear me, Irelle?" he said softly. "You're going into your own worlds now. You can dream whatever dreams you want, and they'll be true. But you won't be able to hurt anybody now. You'll never waken from your dreams. I must make sure of that. No, you'll never waken. Forty years from now, fifty, maybe, I'll come down here and look at you, and you won't know I'm here. You'll grow old and die some time, but you won't know that. Irelle—my darling!"

ETHAN COURT bent and touched his lips, for the last time, to the soft crimson ones of the sleeping girl.

"I should have killed you, Irelle," he whispered. "But this death is easier for you. I wonder if you ever knew that I loved you?" Her blue eyes were veiled. Court turned and went out of the room, staggering as he walked like a drunken man. He closed the heavy door and locked it with Farr's key. He

pressed his forehead against the cool metal.

There was so much to do now, so much to do, lest all that had been gained be lost for want of a man who would speak the truth freely. But the road ahead was clear, and peace, not war, lay at its end.

The elevator lifted Court steadily toward a world of life and promise. Beneath him, in a bare little room of Farr's castle, Irelle lay in the sleep from which she would not wake again. He left her nothing . . . except dreams!