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*Alex  
Raymond's  
Original Story*



***The Plague of Sound***



## **A Diabolical Adversary**

**A harsh keening began to pour out of the ceiling speakers.**

**For a few seconds it didn't bother Flash. Then his bones began to ache. He became aware of his skull beneath his scalp, as it ached and throbbed. He fought against the impulse, but finally brought his hands to his ears to try to keep out the sound.**

**Then abruptly it stopped.**

**Pan said something but Flash didn't catch it.**

**"Answer me," said Pan.**

**"I didn't . . . hear . . . what you . . ."**

**"I said, are you ready to comply with my wishes?"**

**Someone screamed. Flash wasn't sure if it was he who had screamed or not . . .**

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**FLASH**  
**GORDON** **Alex**  
**Raymond's**  
**Original Story**

**The Plague of Sound**

**Adapted by Con Steffanson**

**Co-published by Avon Books  
and King Features Syndicate**

**THE PLAGUE OF SOUND** is an original publication of Avon Books. This work has never before appeared in book form.

**AVON BOOKS**  
A division of  
The Hearst Corporation  
959 Eighth Avenue  
New York, New York 10019

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Co-published by Avon Books and King Features Syndicate, Inc.

ISBN: 0-380-00014-8

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First Avon Printing, May, 1974.

AVON TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND  
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MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

## ***The Plague of Sound***





## CHAPTER 1

It was a clear black night and they were several million miles from home.

Their aircar came drifting down through the night sky to land at the edge of the vast mall in the center of the capital city of Estampa Territory. The two square miles of plaza were paved with squares of sea-green tile. Globes of orange light floated above the mall at varying heights—five, ten, fifteen feet—bobbing in the warm breeze.

Flash Gordon eased out of the landed aircar, then turned and held out his hand to Dale Arden. Flash was a tall, lithe, broad-shouldered man in his late twenties, blond, wearing a one-piece evening suit of the style currently popular in this part of the universe. Dale, a slim girl in her middle twenties with dark hair, wore a simple evening dress.

"I'll wait here for you," said a metallic voice from inside their car.

Dale laughed. "I still can't get used to all the servomechs and gadgets here in Estampa," she said as she took hold of Flash's arm. "They're more gadget-ridden than any place on Earth."

"One of the blessings of democracy," said Flash. They started across the mall.

Estampa Territory had, a little over two years ago, undergone a revolution. Now it was one of the few territories on the planet of Pandor which could boast of a true democracy. There were an elected president

and vice president, a parliament, elected local governments, and a good deal more personal freedom than anywhere else on the planet. There was also considerably more technological progress. Too much, according to Dr. Zarkov. The three of them, Flash, Dale, and the bearded scientist, had come to Pandor three weeks ago. They had rented a large villa in the most fashionable part of the capital. The rent was amazingly low, mainly because the president and some of his cabinet were anxious to have a man of Zarkov's abilities look over their country and advise them on the efficiency of the machines and processes they depended on. While the doctor did this, Flash and Dale explored the territory, its beaches and mountains. Tonight they were headed for a concert in the Municipal Hall.

"I have my doubts about this concert tonight," said Dale.

A green-tinted man went by, recognized Flash, and nodded. "Saw your picture on my news wall," he said. "Always been a great admirer of yours." He walked on by.

Flash said, "Hanging around with Zarkov is turning me into a celebrity."

"You're much better known than he is."

Flash changed the subject. "I've never seen an opticoncert before," he said. "I'm curious."

"I still prefer real musicians," said the girl. "Just listening to tridimensional projections of musicians—well, that's not my idea of music."

"Even if you don't enjoy the concert, you can give Doc a full report on the technical end of it."

"Oh, he already knows all about how an opticoncert works," Dale said, "without ever having seen one. He filled me in on it this afternoon, and also gave me some tips on how the whole process could be improved."

They reached the steps leading to the level of the

hall they wanted. The steps carried Flash and Dale smoothly upward. A shining silver-plated robot greeted them, took their tickets, and guided them to their floating seats. The robot had a flashlight built into the tip of his right forefinger. "The concert will begin in 8.7 minutes," the robot told them in a sedate whisper.

The moment Dale sat down, a program popped out of a thin slot in the arm of her chair. She caught the rectangle of blue synthpaper and read it. "Looks like they've added Busino's *Planet Suite #3* to the program."

Flash set his program on his knee, watching the circular stage some fifty feet below. It was completely empty, except for a small black metal ball which stood on three legs at the edge of the stage. "We heard it on Jupiter once," he said. "Very catchy."

"I like Harrison's *Incomplete Symphony* a good deal better, but they won't be doing that until after the intermission."

The dome-shaped hall, which seated twenty-thousand people, was illuminated by dozens of globes of floating light. Gradually now the globes began to dim. When there was more darkness than light in the hall, the black metal ball made a clacking sound. Tiny beams of light suddenly shot out of it and all at once a full orchestra seemed to be sitting on the round white stage. Green-tinted musicians, pink-tinted musicians, all in one-piece evening suits. They were tuning up.

The illusion impressed a good part of the large audience. There were thousands of appreciative inhalations of breath.

The conductor, who appeared to be completely real though he was only a projection, tapped his baton.

"All very convincing," Dale said to Flash. "But I wonder if they can play."

She never found out.

Instead of the light, opening strains of the *Planet Suite*, the hall was filled with a wave of dissonant sounds which smashed at the ears of the audience. The screeching, nerve-shattering noises apparently were coming from the musical instruments in the hands of the opticoncert musicians.

All across the hall people were standing up, some with hands over their ears, others screaming and shouting. The terrifying sounds went on and on for long seconds. The light globes began to pop, scattering fragments of tinted plastiglass down on the crowd.

"Flash," cried Dale, "what is it?"

It was the beginning of the plague of sound.

## CHAPTER 2

The technician was also wearing an evening suit. He was a heavysset green man, with a scowling face, bent over the small control panel. "There's absolutely nothing wrong," he repeated.

The small plastic control room was beneath the stage of the Municipal Hall. Five men were crowded in there with the technician. One of them was Flash, who had just entered. "You mean you don't know what caused those sounds up there?"

Not looking at him, the technician replied, "I keep telling everybody I had nothing to do with it."

A lean man with a shock of white hair turned toward Flash. "You're Flash Gordon, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm Gilfocks, the assistant manager of the hall," the white-haired man said. "There really doesn't appear to be anything wrong with any of the opticoncert equipment. We had a matinee of this exact same concert this afternoon. It went perfectly."

"The second violin was off," said a plump green man with a thick red beard.

"Perhaps," admitted Gilfocks. "Yet there was nothing like this assault on the ears which just occurred up there."

A forlorn man against the wall said, "I'd best start to see about the refunds. Everyone will want his money back now, and we're sure to be sued by half

the audience. One old dowager told me those sound waves cracked her false eyeball."

"Yes, yes," said Gilfocks. "You get going. Try to get as many of them as possible to take rain checks."

"No one's going to want to take another chance on this opticoncert," said the forlorn man as he went shuffling out.

Flash asked the assistant manager, "You didn't expect anything like this?"

"Obviously not. What do you mean?"

"No threats? No blackmail attempts?"

"Oh, I see what you're getting at. But, no, there's been nothing like that, Mr. Gordon," answered Gilfocks. "Since the revolution, things have been relatively peaceful in Estampa."

Nodding, Flash moved closer to the control panel.

The green-colored technician glanced up. "There's absolutely nothing wrong," he said once more.

After quickly checking the panel over, Flash had to agree with him.

Dale took a tighter grip on Flash's arm. "Do you mind if we walk home?" she asked as they let the ramp of the hall carry them down to the mall. "I don't want to be inside anything for a while."

"We'll walk," said Flash. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yes," answered the girl. "But that music, or whatever it was, was painful. Not only that, there was something frightening about it."

"I noticed quite a few of the people around us reacted that way," said Flash. "It's a lucky thing there wasn't more of a panic."

"If that music had gone on much longer, there would have been." She looked up at his profile. "How did you feel, Flash?"

"I apparently wasn't affected the way you were, Dale. I felt more or less uncomfortable, but not frightened, not in pain."

They walked along a mosaic tile walkway. The night sky was turning slightly hazy but hundreds of stars still showed high above them. Somewhere, far beyond those stars, in another planet system entirely, was their home planet, Earth.

"Zarkov will be interested in hearing about this," said Dale.

Flash didn't answer. He was frowning.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "I've got a hunch what happened tonight isn't going to be an isolated incident."

"It's going to happen again, at other concerts, you mean?"

"Maybe concerts, maybe anywhere," Flash said. "It's not over yet."

He was right.

Dr. Zarkov was a huge man in his forties. He had a full shaggy beard, which gave the impression of a life of its own. He was working his rough fingers through the beard, pacing the room. "One of these gadgets they persist in cluttering their lives with actually served some useful purpose," he was saying to Flash and Dale now in his loud booming voice.

It was nearly midnight, and they were in the large living room of their rented villa.

"So the trouble at the concert wasn't the only outbreak of sound, huh?" Flash was sitting in a floating synthglass chair.

"Not at all," bellowed Zarkov. "As I say, a couple of their newsrobots happened to be at the scene and recorded what happened." He strode over to the television wall, which held a six-foot-square viewing screen. "I taped the news reports as they came over. I'll play them back for you with the sound off. No use giving Dale a headache." He flipped the playback switch.

A picture of a complex of dome-shaped factories blossomed on the big screen. Something was already obviously wrong. The buildings were quivering.

Zarkov jabbed a finger at the television picture. "These old air-raid sirens, from pre-revolution days, were still in place. At 10:01 tonight they started shrieking. Watch what happened."

The factory buildings began to shake violently. Cracks appeared, zigzagging across the domed roofs. Soon the buildings were collapsing, breaking into enormous fragments.

"That's awful," said Dale.

Flash was sitting forward in his chair. "Like some terrific earthquake."

"You get the right vibrations going," said Zarkov, switching the screen to black, "and you can destroy anything. That's what sound is, vibrations."

"Like the old story about the opera singer shattering the wine glass with his voice," said Dale.

"Where were these factories?" asked Flash.

After giving his beard a few violent tugs, Zarkov answered, "Five hundred miles to the north of here, coal and steel country."

"Were they working a night shift?"

"Fortunately not tonight," answered the doctor. "That kept the casualties down."

"But people were killed?" Flash stood. "We were fortunate then. Whoever's behind this is apparently capable of tumbling down buildings like the Municipal Hall."

"The one other occurrence," said Zarkov, "involved a cargo ship. Its whistles started wailing, and the thing cracked in half. That was three hundred miles to the south of us."

Flash said, "Maybe they're taking it easy on the capital."

"That occurred to me," said Dr. Zarkov.

"Have you talked to President Bentancourt?"



"He called me about an hour ago. Professes to be completely puzzled by the whole damn business," boomed Zarkov. "Asked me if I thought this would happen again."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I told him," said Zarkov, "it sure as hell would."

## CHAPTER 3

Two days later, Dr. Zarkov acquired a laboratory and workshops. They were located some five miles across town from their villa.

"That goes in the other room, nitwit," Zarkov was bellowing at a robot when Flash and Dale arrived a little before midday. The scientist was standing in the exact center of an empty hangar, hands on hips, superintending the unloading of equipment and supplies from three hovervans. "And you, you clunky bag of bolts, don't you know what *This End Up* MEANS?"

"I'm not a robot, sir," replied the gray-complected man who was struggling with a heavy crate. "It's merely that I happen to have a sallow complexion, which people often. . . ."

"Never mind, never mind." Zarkov turned to shake hands with Flash and hug Dale. "All things considered, it's going very well. I should be at work by nightfall."

Dale spun around slowly, once, taking in all that was going on in the hangar. A dozen robots, or rather eleven robots and the sallow-faced foreman, were carrying in crates and cartons. "So President Bentancourt agreed with your opinion of the sound-wave problem?" she asked.

"He agreed with my view of the best solution," said the doctor. "Which is to allow Zarkov's intellect to wrestle with the problem." He put a big knobby hand on Flash's shoulder. "Do you realize that not one blast-

ed lab in the whole damn territory has been able to get a fix on the source of this sound plague? Not even the Interferometry Center, and they plunked down over two million dollars for that joint."

Flash turned to watch a long sharp-nosed aircruiser being wheeled into the hangar by five green men in overalls. "What's the airship for, Doc?"

"More than one way to skin a cat," boomed Dr. Zarkov, "as they are so fond of saying on Venus. Look at all the oily fingerprints on the cockpit windows." He started toward the aircruiser. "Hey, you louts, don't you own work gloves?"

In the two days since the first attacks of the sound plague, ten more disasters had occurred. A rush-hour train on the newly installed electromagnetic railroad system had started shrieking a few minutes out of the Southport station. The increasing sounds shook the train cars until they cracked and split open, and then sprawled and crashed off the rails. One hundred and six morning commuters had died. Out on the Territorial Thruway, three giant landtrucks hauling fuel had begun vibrating and then exploded, spewing black smoke and throwing shards of jagged metal high into the afternoon air. Landcars, aircruisers, and an experimental submarine were similarly destroyed.

No government or private technical facility had so far been able to find out what was causing the plague of sound. There were numerous explanations, none of them based on any hard information.

Rapidly, panic spread throughout the territory. The strange waves of sound which could vibrate huge buildings into rubble, could fling trains off their tracks, were disrupting the patterns of life in Estampa.

Late the day before, Dr. Zarkov had phoned the president and suggested, at the top of his voice, that he'd like a lab and workshop of his own. President Bentancourt offered a nearby college facility, but

Zarkov turned it down. He wanted things set up his way, his way exactly. The president complied.

Now Zarkov was circling the airship, wiping at the smudges on it with a plastic chamois. "I should have the entire problem solved in under a week," he told Flash. "If we were on Earth, I could lick it in three days at most."

"You have an idea what's behind all this?"

"I have six dozen and one ideas," responded the doctor. "Eliminating the lousy ones, following up on the good ones—that's what's going to fill the time."

Nodding at the aircruiser, Flash said, "I'd like to pilot it."

"That's exactly what I had in mind," said Zarkov. "If I don't track down our sound man by the end of the week from here, then you'll do a little roadwork."

Three days later, the president called an emergency meeting of his cabinet and the top military leaders of Estampa Territory. Flash and Dr. Zarkov were also invited.

President Bentancourt was a short muscular man of fifty. When he saw Zarkov enter the oval meeting chamber, he made his way through the assembling group. "How are you progressing, Doctor?"

Zarkov's voice was subdued. "Not as well as I expected," he had to admit.

The president seemed to grow even shorter. "No one else has had any measure of success either," he said, sighing. "I hoped. . . ."

"Don't give up on Zarkov," said the doctor. "Success is right around the corner, I guarantee it."

Conditions had grown even worse. The waves of strange sound attacked with increasing fury, like invisible harpies rending and ripping. Public buildings toppled, trains were flung aside, planes and aircruisers dropped from the sky. There were growing

shortages of fuel, food, and raw materials. Most transportation was disrupted.

The meeting got under way and all the problems were reiterated. A good deal of talking was done, considerable shouting; the Minister of Agriculture cried. Zarkov sat in his floating chair, hands hidden in his bushy beard. He said very little, and this was in a low mumbling voice. Finally the meeting ended.

As they were leaving the capital building, someone called Dr. Zarkov's name. He turned back, saw Minister Minnig, the president's chief assistant, beckoning to him from a side door of the meeting room. "Let me see what he wants, Flash," Zarkov said, turning back.

Minnig was a lean man of fifty. "I can't talk now, Zarkov," he said, glancing from side to side cautiously, "especially with him around."

Shuffling papers and memos into an attaché pouch at a nearby table was a thin green man. He was General Yate, a supporter of the president at the moment but also a man who might want to rule Estampa Territory someday himself. If not as president, some said, then as dictator.

"Ah, missed one," said Dr. Nazzaro, a rumpled man of sixty-one. He was Minister of Health. Bending, he reached for a fallen memo.

"Get your hands off that, you unkempt fool," said Yate.

Nazzaro smiled and straightened up. "It's too bad we no longer have the cavalry, General," he said. "You'd look good on a horse."

Minister Minnig pulled Zarkov away from the doorway. "Can you come and talk to me?" he asked anxiously. "Not tonight, unfortunately, since I have an embassy dinner I can't miss, especially at a crucial and trying time such as this. But tomorrow evening?"

"I'd really like to spend all my time in the lab. What is it?"

"I can understand that," said Minnig quickly. "Ah,

but your young friend, Flash Gordon. He's as bright as you, Zarkov."

"Well, almost."

"Send him to my home tomorrow night," said Minnig. "At eight, shall we say? It may be nothing, but I think I know something about this sound plague. It's . . . I don't wish to discuss it with President Bencourt yet. But a man such as yourself or Gordon—will he come?"

"I'll guarantee it, Minnig," said Zarkov. "Can you tell anything more about—?"

"Tomorrow night then." Minnig hurried away.

"Huh," said Zarkov and scratched his beard.

## CHAPTER 4

He hadn't expected the aircar.

Flash was extracting his shoes from the shining machine in his bedroom when the pixphone floating beside his bed started its beeping. "Yes?" he said, turning his head toward the small circular screen.

"Your car is here," said the voice of the house computer.

The tinted screen showed a silvery aircar, hovering a foot above the street out in the misty night. "Which car would this be?"

"The aircar to take you to the home of Minister Minnig," said the voice from the phone.

"Minnig didn't tell Zarkov he was sending a car," said Flash to himself as he tugged on his shoes. "Or maybe Doc forgot to mention it." He took his thermal cloak from a chair back, saying aloud, "Tell the car I'll be right down." He'd been on Pandor long enough to be used to talking with machines and gadgets.

"Very good, sir." The phone blacked out, making a faint sizzling sound as it did.

Dale was standing in the doorway of her room when Flash came striding down the corridor. "Sure you don't want company?" she asked him.

"I do," said Flash, grinning. "But Minnig told Dr. Zarkov he wanted to talk to me alone and in private. Hopefully, I'll be back early enough for us to go somewhere for a late dinner." He had stopped in front of

the slim dark girl. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he kissed her.

After a moment Dale said, "All right, I'll stay here in my room and read a book until you come home."

As Flash went out the front door of their rented villa, the house computer said, "I hope you'll have a pleasant evening, sir."

"Thanks," said Flash over his shoulder, "same to you."

The fog was thick. It filled the cobblestone street, seemed to fill all the space between the ground and the night sky.

A whir and a clicking came from the hovering air-car. "Mr. Flash Gordon, isn't it?"

The rear door swung open by itself. Flash saw there was a human driver in the pilot seat. "Yes. You're from Minister Minnig?"

"That I am, sir. Been with him since I was a wee lad. Climb in and make yourself comfortable, sir."

Flash eased into the vehicle and sat on the soft leather rear seat. The door slammed shut and the car rose gently up through the fog.

"Yes, I was a little bit of a tyke when I first began working there," continued the driver. "Well, now, I called it work, though of course my dear departed father, who was driver and pilot to the Minnig family for nigh on forty years, was only humoring me. Allowing me to tinker about a bit." The pilot was a thickset man of about fifty, dressed in a one-piece gray suit and a matching cap.

"You're lucky you haven't been replaced by a gadget," said Flash, leaning back in his seat. "Estampa seems to be very machine-minded at the present."

"Ah, but what can replace a man?" asked the pilot. They were high above the city. An occasional spire or fragment of walk ramp showed through the mist. "It



is my good fortune, sir, that Minister Minnig prefers to have living human beings around him."

The aircar flew through the night. Ten minutes later, it started dropping slowly down toward the ground. "That would be your destination, sir," announced the pilot. "Can you make out the blue light glowing there in the fog?"

Flash looked out. "Yes, is that the front door?"

"It is indeed, sir," replied the pilot. "Do you wish me to get out and help you?"

"No need for that." The door next to Flash popped open, swinging outward, with a click and a hum.

"I'll be ready to take you home whenever you wish, sir."

"Thanks." Flash hopped to the walkway, and located the ramp which curved upward to the blue light. Once there, he touched the red spot in the center of the house's door.

Inside the house, a buzzing started. In about thirty seconds, the door rattled open. "Come in, won't you, Mr. Gordon."

This was not a mechanism but a tall handsome young woman. She had long blonde hair and was wearing a short evening dress.

"Is Minister Minnig in?"

"Yes, he's expecting you," she said, stepping back so he could enter the foyer.

Mist spilled in with Flash, drifting across the faintly glowing yellow floor. "You're—?" Flash said. Zarkov hadn't mentioned anything about willowy young girls with platinum hair.

"Glenna Minnig," she said, with a smile. "I'm the minister's daughter. Come along to his study, won't you?"

The study was a large room with a high, domed ceiling. The floors and walls were made of the same pale-yellow pseudowood. There were three fat red-plastic chairs and a small green desk in the room, all

of the currently popular floating style. Minister Minnig was sitting in the chair nearest the desk, a glass of blue brandy cupped in his left hand.

"Ah, good evening, Gordon," he said in his high voice. "So good of you to come."

The girl stepped back out into the hall and the room's pale-yellow door shut on Flash.

He crossed the room. "Dr. Zarkov indicated you had some information to give us, Mr. Minister, about the possible cause of the plague of sound."

The lean man stood up. "Let me get you a drink first, Gordon."

"No, thanks."

The minister moved to a blank yellow wall, tapped it. A panel slid open and a small, well-stocked bar emerged. He placed his glass on a round green spot and a tiny silver arm lifted up a brandy bottle, poured, and recapped the bottle. "I suppose I wouldn't drink at all," said the minister, with a faint smile, "if I didn't get a kick out of seeing this apparatus work."

Flash watched him return to his chair. "You have some idea of who may be behind this thing?"

After sniffing at the brandy and then sipping it, Minnig said, "I hope you'll forgive me, Gordon. In the heat of the meeting yesterday, I'm afraid I jumped to some illogical conclusions."

Flash came up close to the other man. "Even a hunch might help," he said. "You know Zarkov and I won't act on anything you tell us without checking it out thoroughly."

"Yes, Gordon, I do realize that." He was looking not at Flash but up at the dome of the ceiling. "In the hours since I blurted out what I did to Dr. Zarkov, however, I've had some second thoughts. I've also, I must admit, discussed the matter with Glenna. Since my wife . . . well, my daughter is my most trusted confidante." He lowered his eyes, smiling faintly.

"Though I hope you won't tell the president I consult a young girl when I'm in doubt."

Flash turned away from him. He began walking slowly around the room. Stopping, he faced Minnig and asked, "You're sure it's just discretion?"

"What do you mean, Gordon?"

"You're not afraid, are you? Has someone put pressure on you?"

Minister Minnig rose up out of his floating chair. "I fought to build this territory to what it is today, Gordon. And I'm not just using figures of speech; I mean I fought in the streets against the junta which had been oppressing the country for almost a decade. In the years since we overthrew it and set up a democracy I've done battle with a good many people, both verbal and physical battles." With a frown, he sat again.

Flash said, "Maybe they threatened your daughter and not you."

Shaking his head, Minnig said, "I assure you, Gordon, such is not the case. I know you're disappointed, naturally, at coming here and not learning what you hoped. But you have my word: it is second thought and not cowardice which prompts me to remain silent. Silent for now, at any rate."

"Why did you send for me tonight then?" Flash asked him. "You really haven't anything to tell me."

"I believe in meeting a man face to face." With his free hand, he gestured at the blank walls. "Despite all the electronic means of communication I've got, Gordon, I'm still old-fashioned enough to like to look a man in the eye." He paused to sip again at his brandy. "I must admit also that I've heard a good deal about you, Gordon, about your—what shall I call them?—exploits. The things you've done on Earth, on Mongo, and all throughout this infinite universe of ours. As an erstwhile man of action myself, I admire you."

Flash said, "Okay, thanks. But I wish you'd give me some facts instead of admiration."

"I'm sorry, I can't," replied Minnig. "Perhaps, when I've done a little more thinking, a little more cautious digging, I will have something to tell you."

"Meanwhile, more buildings may collapse, more people die."

"I fully realize that, Gordon. But I don't want to accuse anyone falsely, even when there's ample reason for expediency."

Flash watched the minister's face for a moment, then shrugged. "All right. If you decide you have something to tell, let us know." He moved toward the closed door.

"No need to leave so soon, Gordon," said Minnig from his chair. "There are many other things we can discuss beside this terrible sound plague."

"Maybe some other evening," said Flash. "Dr. Zarkov's over at his new lab, and I may as well give him a hand there tonight, since nothing's come of this meeting." He didn't see any way to open the door.

"I really wish. . . ."

The door opened and the lovely blonde girl was standing in the corridor. "Don't keep Mr. Gordon from more important matters, father."

Minnig said, "Yes, you're right of course, Glenna. As you say, Gordon, we must get together some other evening."

"You don't have to commit yourself now, Mr. Gordon." She reached across the threshold and took his hand. Her fingertips were very warm. "I'll show you to the door."

"Good night, Minister Minnig." Flash left the room.

"Thank you for coming," called the minister as the room closed him in.

## CHAPTER 5

“Not much of a night for that, is it, sir?” asked the pilot.

“Walking is something you can do in any kind of weather,” answered Flash.

“As you wish, sir.” He guided the aircar down through the intricacy of ramps, setting it down beside a large artificial lake. “And a pleasant evening to you.”

“Thanks,” Flash said to Minister Minnig’s pilot as he jumped from the hovering vehicle.

Flash had asked the man to let him off some distance from Zarkov’s lab. His recent interview with the reluctant cabinet member was puzzling him. He wanted to walk and think about it.

The aircar rose up and away with a wooshing sound.

Flash strolled down to the artificial gravel path which circled the misty lake. “Something about that chat with Minnig wasn’t quite right,” he said to himself. “Maybe a jog will clear my fuzzy thoughts up.”

There was no one on the path at this hour. Flash commenced running. The entire path was three miles in length. He finished that in seventeen minutes, not winded at all.

“But I still can’t put my finger on what’s bothering me.” He shook his head, then started for Zarkov’s lab, which was roughly a mile to the north of the lake.

He was still a good block from the building when

something hissed at him from behind an artificial tree. Flash kept walking.

"Flash," called a voice.

It was Dr. Zarkov standing behind the tree. "Zarkov?" Flash said as he moved back to him.

"Didn't you hear me hiss at you?"

"I thought maybe this fake tree had sprung a leak," he said. "What's the purpose of all this skulking round?"

"Even with my gift for concise explanation, Flash, I can't fill you in completely now." Zarkov put his hand on Flash's shoulder. "There's no time. The Territorial Investigation Department boys are already enroute to my lab. I snuck out to tell you to use the side entrance. Then get into that big cabinet in the hangar room. I'll take care of a few other little details after you do that. Come on."

"Wait, Doc," said Flash. "Why am I being so cautious?"

"Because you're wanted for murder," Zarkov told him.

Inspector Carr was a tall green man of about fifty, very trim and straight. He wore a three-piece metallic suit and a vinyl cloak. Hands behind his back, he strode through the huge hangar which adjoined Zarkov's work lab. The floating globes of light made his suit glitter. "This is a very unfortunate business, Doctor," he said, bending to look beneath the olive-green aircruiser which rested in this half of the hangar. "I know you are giving a good deal of time and effort to helping our government find the source of this sound plague." He looked up at the burly, bearded doctor. "Any luck on that, by the way?"

Dr. Zarkov slapped a big hand against the side of the long needle-nosed ship. "I'm adapting this baby, with a whole caboodle of special sound-detecting gear, to go find the fellow behind the trouble," he

said. Now that he was not being cautious his voice again boomed. "We'll find him."

"When you say 'we,' are you referring to Flash Gordon and yourself?"

"Flash was due to pilot the ship," bellowed the doctor. "But now, Zarkov must make other arrangements."

"It's all highly curious . . . oh, forgive me. I believe that's Constable Briney at the hangar door with the dogs."

"Dogs? You plan to drag a gaggle of yapping hounds into my bailiwick?"

"Actually these are robot dogs, Doctor," explained the police inspector while crossing the hangar to let in his associate. "The commissioner authorized their purchase only last month. He's quite anxious that we use them every opportunity we get. They cost nearly fifty thousand dollars each."

He touched the door release and the door went rattling up. Constable Briney was a large round man, pink in color. The pair of robot dogs were chrome-plated, highly stylized versions of flesh and blood dogs.

"Fifty thou?" shouted Zarkov. "I could whip up a dog like that for five. You guys were taken, Inspector."

"They're full of delicate equipment." Constable Briney knelt, flicked a switch on the neck of each of the robot dogs. "Especially good at sniffing out fugitives."

"Maybe six thou tops," said Zarkov, "with all the sensitive equipment stuffed in them you'll ever need. Plus a much more functional, and attractive, nose than that plastic atrocity. For another two thousand, I could even rig them up to talk and play the piano."

"We've no need of such accomplishments at the TID," said Inspector Carr.

The two mechanical hounds, making growling and

ticking noises, began sniffing their way around the big hangar.

The inspector watched them for a moment, then said to Zarkov, "Perhaps you can give me some notion of what Gordon's motive might have been?"

"He didn't have a motive," answered Zarkov in an exceptionally, even for him, loud voice. "For the simple reason that he didn't kill anybody."

"Ah, now, Doctor," said Briney. "That won't wash, won't wash at all. This fellow Flash Gordon was seen arriving at Minister Minnig's house this evening. Two of the poor late minister's human servants will swear they saw Flash Gordon enter the house, go into Minnig's study and, before the door was even closed, shoot the poor man down with a blaster pistol."

"Hearsay," said Zarkov, tugging at his beard.

The robot dogs were nearing the cabinet Flash had stepped into to hide.

"We have much more to go on than that," added Inspector Carr. "The minister's security system filmed the whole incident. I am in a position to tell you, Dr. Zarkov, that I have viewed the films myself. They clearly show, beyond any possibility of doubt, Flash Gordon enter the house, walk down the hallway, and into the study." He tapped his green finger beneath his left eye. "I saw Flash Gordon gun down Minister Minnig."

"Trick photography," said the doctor.

The first mechanical hound hesitated before the cabinet door, then moved on. His partner trotted after him.

"The films have not been tampered with in any way," the inspector assured Zarkov.

Constable Briney began chuckling. "We also have a trump card," he said. "We have Mr. Flash Gordon's fingerprints on the weapon."

"It's a big universe," bellowed Dr. Zarkov. "It's possible for two men to have the same prints."



"Possible, but highly unlikely." Inspector Carr shrugged. "I'm afraid we have an airtight case against Gordon. The only thing which puzzles me is—why? What was his motive?"

"Strain," suggested the constable. "All this limelight, being what you might call a celebrity. It's a strain on a man. I recall a few years back we had a vice president who. . . ."

"Baloney," said Zarkov.

Briney blinked. "I'm afraid I don't quite comprehend your meaning."

"I refrain from using a more explicit term."

"Our trackers seem to wish to go into your laboratory for a look around," noticed the inspector.

"All right, they can go in there. Just so they don't chew anything up, or lift their legs."

"They're not programmed to do anything like that," said Briney, trotting over to let the mechanical dogs into the lab.

Inspector Carr resumed his walk around the hangar. He halted in front of the cabinet door. "Constable Briney has a bit more faith in those things than I do," he said. "I always prefer to poke about a good deal myself." He took hold of the handle and tugged the door open.

The cabinet was empty.

## CHAPTER 6

Zarkov watched the police vanish in the fog, robot dogs at their heels. He stepped back, allowed the hangar doors to close themselves. Then he returned to the cabinet and pulled open the door. He pressed a spot on the floor, which caused a part of the rear wall to slide aside. "Damn good thing I had the foresight to make some improvements in this barn," he said.

Flash stepped out of the hidden compartment. "This trip to Pandor was supposed to be a vacation," he said. "Now I'm a fugitive from justice."

"Baloney, as I pointed out to the constable," said the bearded doctor. "I know you didn't murder anybody. Did you?"

Laughing, Flash answered, "No, Doc."

"Was Minister Minnig alive when you got there?"

"Yes, and when I left," said Flash. "I don't know why his daughter didn't tell the police that."

Zarkov's bristly black eyebrows shot up. "What daughter?"

"Minnig's daughter, pretty girl with platinum-colored hair."

"Minnig's a bachelor," Zarkov told him.

"That wouldn't necessarily rule out his having a daughter," said Flash. "And she certainly introduced herself as such, so did he."

The doctor poked a booted foot at the floor. "That stuff I sprayed around on the flooring really kept those tin-can robot dogs from smelling you out. "I'll

have to remember to patent it in this planet system." He walked over to the aircruiser, began absently buffing the fuselage. "We'll forget about this daughter for a minute. Let's try to figure how they got pictures of you doing the old boy in."

"Somebody made up to look like me?"

"Damn good makeup job then," bellowed Zarkov. "He even has your fingerprints."

"Those could be faked."

Zarkov bit his thick lower lip. Then he said, "Well, what in the hell was it Minnig had to tell you anyway? Maybe we'll get some clue out of that."

Flash shook his head. "Minnig went around in circles, something about not being sure any more. He didn't tell me anything at all."

"I'm sure he had something important to pass on," said Dr. Zarkov. "I'm seldom wrong in judging people. I wonder what made Minnig change his mind."

Frowning, Flash suggested, "Maybe it wasn't Minnig."

"Huh?"

"I don't have anything concrete to go on, Doc. Still I had a feeling something wasn't quite right. The whole interview with him seemed a little cockeyed."

"A fake Flash Gordon, and a fake Minnig," mused Zarkov. "That implies an ambitious plot."

"Whoever's behind this wave of destruction must be someone pretty ambitious," said Flash. "Suppose Minnig really did have a good lead to give. They kill him, frame me. It takes the pressure off for a while."

"They're underestimating Zarkov if they think that." He gave the ship a resounding pat. "This baby's about ready to go tracking the source of the sound plague."

"I can still handle that end of things."

"Yes, I'm counting on you," said Zarkov. "You go hunting in the hinterlands. I'll clear up things on this end."

"When will the aircruiser be ready to go?"

"Before sunup."

"So soon?"

"Soon? I've been working on the damn thing for a week, haven't I? If it hadn't been for these nitwit meetings with the president and his cabinet, I'd have been finished two or three days ago."

"The police will be watching our little villa, too," said Flash. "I won't be able to say good-bye to Dale."

"She'll understand," said Zarkov. "She can lend me a hand with my detective work here in the capital."

"You think someone here in Estampa is behind this business?"

Zarkov rested his wide shoulders against the side of the airship. "Someone had to work out this cute trick of making it look like you knocked off Minister Min-nig," he said to Flash. "But I know for a fact the sound waves aren't originating in this territory. You heard me explain all that at President Bentancourt's gathering yesterday. Our sound man obviously has his equipment shielded in some way, but even so, I could have located it if it were in Estampa."

Opening the door of the aircruiser, Flash looked into the control room. "I'm glad you left me a place to sit."

"That's the most compact collection of gear you're likely to find," boomed the scientist. "If any of your local technicians tried to equip a ship as thoroughly as I have, they'd have to hitch a trailer behind." He moved to Flash's side. "You're familiar with most of the basic tracking equipment, but I'll go over the whole lot of it with you before you take off."

"Which way do I head once I do take off?"

"Let the ship worry about that. I've linked the detecting gear with an automatic pilot and given the thing an initial flight pattern," explained Zarkov. "Everything you and the ship find out in the wilds will get back here to me telemetrically. Once we locate the source, then you'll have something to do."

"All I really have to do then is turn around and come back," said Flash. "The ship will have told you what we found out. Then we can send in a task force to take care of things."

"It may not be that simple," said Zarkov. "When you find them, they may not let you come back."

## CHAPTER 7

The light of oncoming dawn showed at the small one-way window above his head. Flash sat up on the air-filled floating cot. He swung his legs over the side and dropped to the floor of the small storeroom. He dressed quickly and went out to the hangar.

Dr. Zarkov was making a slow circuit of the air-cruiser, a soy donut in one hand. Noticing Flash, he raised his other hand in greeting. "I've exceeded even my own high standards," he boomed.

"When do I take off?"

"In a few more minutes." Zarkov brushed soy crumbs out of his shaggy beard. "We went over all the equipment last night, but you may want a second briefing this morning."

Flash grinned. "Not unless you added something new, Doc. I memorized everything the first time around."

"Well, I did toss in a hamperful of kelp sandwiches and fig tea, but you probably know how to handle that," said the doctor. "Remember, Flash, this ship is completely soundproof, which may take a little getting used to." Wiping his fingers on the leg of his work coverall, he reached up to open the door of the cabin. "You should be able to track down the source of these freak vibrations without any trouble."

Stepping around the doctor, Flash climbed into the ship. "You've got it set for the course we discussed last night?"

Zarkov, following his friend inside the aircruiser, said, "Yes, you'll check out the territories to the south first. There's more wilderness over that way, more unsettled areas. I think our sound man is more likely to be operating from an out-of-the way spot. Politics being what it is, especially on Pandor, you couldn't do what this guy's been doing from a big city and not have somebody start talking about it."

Flash sat on the edge of his pilot's seat. "I wish I could see Dale before I go."

"Impossible," said Dr. Zarkov. "Even someone as clever as Zarkov can't sneak you into that villa without some cop or other noticing it."

"You talked to her on the pixphone?"

"Yes, and they've got a bug on it," replied Zarkov. "I managed, being gifted with considerable subtlety, to convey to her that you were safe and not to worry."

"I'll miss not seeing her since we don't know how long this little jaunt is going to take."

"You've got enough fuel for a week out and a week back," bellowed the doctor. "If this crate works as well as it should, though, you'll find our sound man in a lot less time than a week."

Ten minutes later, Flash's ship was shooting away from the capital, heading south through the new morning.

The trouble didn't start for several hours.

And even when it did, Flash wasn't immediately aware of it.

His olive-green aircruiser was passing over a vast stretch of thick jungle country. It was midday. Flash ate a sandwich as he scanned the complexity of dials which surrounded him.

"Nothing so far," he said to himself, chewing and swallowing. "Of course, he may have better shielding than Doc gives him credit for."

He then noticed something he wasn't expecting at all on the dials immediately in front of him. He was losing altitude.

He dropped into the pilot seat, attempting to take over the piloting of the ship.

"Lever's jammed," he said aloud. "Controls are frozen."

Something was definitely wrong. It felt to Flash, as he fought to pull the ship up, as though some force was pulling him down toward the jungle.

He made a swift check of all the pertinent equipment. There was no indication anything was wrong with the aircruiser. Yet the ship continued to drop, heading nearer and nearer to the jungle below.

Flash tried once more to free the controls; the ship kept plummeting downward.

"Zarkov may hate me for abandoning his pet ship," he said as he grabbed up a flying belt. "But I think she's going to crash. I'd rather not be inside when she does."

He reached for his radio mike. "I'll let Doc know what I'm doing." He flipped the talk toggle—nothing happened: "Hello, hello." His radio was dead.

Flash picked up an emergency backpack of food and equipment. Strapping that on, he sprinted to the escape hatch. "Well, let's hope Zarkov is reading about my troubles on his gadgets back in the lab."

He fitted himself into position in the hatch alcove and activated the escape lever.

The mechanism ejected him from the aircruiser. He began to drift down, with the aid of his flying belt, toward the green tangle of jungle.



## CHAPTER 8

Zarkov was in the laboratory heating himself a cup of fig tea when Flash lost control of the aircruiser. Thus he didn't immediately know it had happened. He'd been at his telemetric equipment all morning. This was his first break. He took a sip of the hot tea and tugged at his beard.

A red ball of light began flashing over the outer door of the lab. "A young woman on the steps," said the voice of the lab computer out of a ceiling speaker. "Judging by information stored in our memory files, she might be. . . ."

"I know who she is, nitwit," said the scientist. Dale's picture showed on the viewscreen suspended next to the flashing light.

"Shall I let her in?"

"No, I'll do it." Zarkov strode across the lab, tea sloshing out of his cup, and pulled the door open himself. "How are you, Dale?"

The girl didn't return his smile. "I'm not sure," she said as she entered. "Anyway, I got hold of this just in time." She thrust a cartridge of videotape into his hand.

Pushing the door to the street shut, Dr. Zarkov asked, "What do you mean just in time?"

"Well, you asked me to bring whatever film our house security cameras had on the aircar that picked up Flash last night. How is he?"

"Doing fine the last time I checked. Now what about the film?"

"When I went down to the house control room to get this, there was a man there," said Dale. "He claimed to be a representative of General Yeat. He said he'd come to take all the film for the past day."

"You obviously didn't comply."

"No, I asked to see his authorization," answered Dale. "He said that wasn't necessary. Then I told him I'd put in a call to President Bentancourt's office to find out what this was all about. That caused him to leave without taking anything."

"He didn't try to hurt you, force you to give him the tapes?"

"No, he was relatively polite," said the girl. "Even though he had a head shaped like a gherkin."

"Huh." Zarkov took another slurping sip of his tea. "Yate's with the intelligence wing of the military. Maybe they're looking into the Minnig murder, too."

"But isn't Yate rumored to be against the president?"

"That's another possibility," said Zarkov. "Yate could be out to throw a spanner into the works."

"You think you'll be able to find out who sent that aircar for Flash?"

"A moderately bright robot dog could do that," he told her. "The tough part's going to be getting from the underlings to the big cheese." He set his cup down on a table, tossed the film cartridge high in the air and caught it. "We'll look at this, then I can get started tracking down the car."

"I'll be glad to—oh, you have a call."

A globe of blue light over the other door was blinking on and off. Zarkov went into the next room. He picked up the speaker of the wall pixphone. "Zarkov here," he boomed into the instrument.

On the rectangular phone screen appeared the image of the rumpled, amiable Dr. Nazzaro. "Good

afternoon, Doctor," he said. "I know this probably isn't any business of the Department of Health, but I did want to call and tell you I don't believe Gordon can have had anything to do with the murder of poor Minnig."

"That makes two of us."

Dale came into the room, standing to the rear of the doctor.

"Good afternoon, Miss Arden," said Nazzaro. "I can just see you at the edge of my viewing screen here."

"Hello," said the girl as she moved out of range.

Zarkov dropped the cartridge of videotape to a shelf beneath the wall phone. "I appreciate your confidence, Dr. Nazzaro. Now I must go."

"Yes, certainly. You have a good deal to do, a good deal on your mind," said Nazzaro. "I simply wanted to let you know you can count on me for any assistance I can give. Good-bye for now."

Turning away from the blank screen, Dr. Zarkov said, "Well meaning, but there are very few things Zarkov can't take care of single-handedly."

"Still it doesn't hurt to have another ally in the president's camp," said Dale, "especially if General Yate is going to try to interfere in things."

Zarkov scowled at the wall clock. "Later than I thought," he said. "Better make another check of Flash's ship before we screen this film."

"Would it be all right," asked Dale, "if I talked to him?"

The doctor put his arm around her slim shoulders as they moved into the round room where Zarkov had his monitoring equipment. "Sure, I know he'll want to hear from you."

"I miss him," she said. "If this murder—"

"Hey!" bellowed Zarkov. He bounded across the room, slamming the heel of his hand against a bank of dials and gauges.

"What's wrong?"

Zarkov, muttering, flipped a row of switches. He grabbed up a hand mike, made a spitting sound into it, and said, "Flash—Flash Gordon—can you hear me?"

There was no response.

Dale ran to join Zarkov. "What is it?"

"Flash, come in," Zarkov boomed into the mike. "Flash, do you hear me?"

After a moment he shook his head and set the mike down. He took a step back, hands on hips, and scanned the dials in front of him.

"Why doesn't he answer?"

"I don't know, Dale," said Zarkov. "At this point, I don't know anything. I've lost contact with the ship completely."

## CHAPTER 9

Flash dropped down through the tree branches. Large, brightly colored birds squawked, flapping off their perches. Silver monkeys went scurrying and chattering away.

"Sorry to disturb your ecological balance, fellows," said Flash as he drifted by.

He landed on his feet on the mossy ground and clicked off his flying belt. He checked his position on the instruments built into the thing. "I'm in the middle of the Mazda Territory," he reflected. "And if I remember my maps rightly, there's no major city anywhere in the whole darn territory, no settlement at all within a hundred miles of here."

He reached into his backpack and drew out a small but powerful hand radio. "Let's see if I can contact Zarkov with this."

But the instrument did not work. He pried off the backside of it. The two tiny batteries appeared to have exploded. "And me without a spare." Flash closed up the radio and dropped it into the pack again.

Shielding his eyes with one hand, he gazed upward through the fronds and vines at the hazy afternoon sky. "Zarkov must know something's gone wrong by now," he said. "So the best thing to do is make myself comfortable someplace nearby and wait for him to come and find me. If he doesn't show by dawn tomorrow, I can start trekking south to that nearest settlement."

Surveying his surroundings, Flash noticed a small clearing through the trees. It was about a quarter of a mile away. He started walking toward it.

The jungle grew quieter as he came closer to the clear place. There were no birds around, no monkeys. The huge palm fronds above didn't rustle at all.

Flash was nearly at the clearing when he saw the bones.

Some looked dry and old; some were still fresh and white. They were the bones of animals, half a dozen skulls.

Flash halted. "This doesn't look like a very good place to wait for Doc after all."

He pivoted to walk away.

Something caught his ankle. Looking down, he saw a slithering coil of some silky substance winding around his leg.

He reached for his holster, unsnapped it.

Before he could get his hand on his blaster pistol, he was yanked off his feet. He went crashing through the brush, thorns ripping at his clothes, branches snapping at his face. He was pulled up completely off the ground, left dangling upside down several feet above the sprawled bones.

Again, Flash reached for his gun. But it had fallen out while he was being dragged. "Still got a knife," he said. Twisting, he reached around and opened his backpack. Containers of food came tumbling out. The ruined little radio fell, landing on the skull of a monkey and cracking it. But Flash got the knife.

He strained, did a sort of midair situp. He thrust the blade into the stuff which was wound round and round his legs. It was tough and sticky. The knife did nothing against it.

The silky cord spun around his wrist next, binding his hand against his ankle.

Flash struggled, swinging like a pendulum, trying to wrench his hand free. He was caught tight.

He could see up into the trees now. He got his first look at what it was that had him.

Sitting up there was a black spider. A giant black spider the size of a leopard. It had caught Flash and was patiently spinning a web around him.

The aircruiser did not crash.

It continued to descend after Flash ejected. Soon it was skimming over the treetops, pulled by some invisible force.

The trees parted, the ship heading straight for the ground.

But before it hit, two large sections of earth opened, like enormous cellar doors, and the aircruiser kept going down.

The earthen doors closed tight on the ship.

This was not a cavern beneath the ground. It was a large city.

There were at least fifty people in and around that square when the aircruiser landed. Not one of them looked at it for more than a second; no one approached it.

The citizens of this underground city went on about their business as though nothing had happened. They were young, most of them, all dressed in simple pale-yellow tunics. All of them, men and women, wore helmets of some soft leatherlike material. Each face had a similar expression, a sort of bland, contented smile.

It was very quiet in this city. The loudest sound, now that the aircruiser had landed, was the sound of footfalls on the smooth white streets.

Presently three men approached the ship. They wore helmets similar to those of everyone else, but their tunics were black. They stood looking at the aircruiser for several minutes. Then one of them laughed.

## CHAPTER 10

"No, Dale," said Dr. Zarkov, shaking his head. "That's not the wisest course of action."

They were standing in the middle of the now empty hangar. "All right, it may not be wise," the girl said, "but it's what I feel we have to do."

"Listen to me," he said to her. "I rebuilt that air-cruiser myself, checked it out thoroughly myself. I guarantee you nothing can have gone wrong with it."

"But something did," said Dale.

"Someone made it malfunction," Zarkov said. "It couldn't have on its own."

"I'm not going to let your vanity risk Flash's life."

"Vanity?" boomed the bearded doctor. "I don't have any vanity, Dale. What I have, unlike most men, is a very clear and accurate idea of my own capabilities. When I tell you that the ship was foolproof it isn't a boast—it's a statement of fact."

"Yes, but—"

"Since I know what the facts are," Zarkov continued, "I have to conclude some outside force caused us to lose contact with Flash."

"He's crashed," insisted Dale. "Crashed out there in the wilds of Mazda Territory someplace." She pointed one slender hand in the direction she felt Mazda to be. "We have to go and find him."

"If they can make his ship go down," said Zarkov, "then they can do the same to us."

"I've never known you to be afraid before."



"And I've never known you to underestimate Flash," he said. "Whatever's happened, I'm confident he can handle his end of it."

"What do you intend to do then?"

Zarkov was holding the cartridge of videotape in his hand again. "I'm going to, as I promised Flash, follow up this end of the problem," he replied. "I think I can get to our sound man much quicker this way. Once we learn who and where he is, then we can rescue Flash. That is, if he needs rescuing."

Dale turned her back on him. "It doesn't seem right." Slowly she walked toward the door of the hangar.

Zarkov watched her for a few seconds before going back into his lab.

He heard the hangar door open, then close.

The doctor frowned, giving his beard a few thoughtful yanks.

He shrugged and fitted the cartridge into a viewing unit.

The office was full of robots. They were a glistening copper in color, matching the uncluttered desks they sat behind. There were seven of them in all, each looking very busy and efficient.

Zarkov stood just inside the door of the transport rental office, scowling. When he bellowed, "Who's running this place?" his breath came out in a foggy cloud.

The nearest robot turned his round ball of a head toward Zarkov. "We're all equal here, sir. What sort of transportation do you require? Landcar, aircar, landtruck, airtruck?"

"Information is what I crave," Dr. Zarkov said. He watched his expelled breath condense around some motes of dust. "You've got all your air conditioners on too high, by the way."

"Too high for humans," admitted the robot. "Here,

I'll remedy that." He reached a metal hand under the metal desk.

"I want to find out about an aircar you rented yesterday," said the doctor. "I've tracked the damn thing this far. Now I'd—"

"We can't give out that type of information, sir, unless you happen to be a policeman, a military intelligence agent, a credit investigator, a bank official, or an officer of the federal or municipal court. Are you?"

"I'm Dr. Zarkov," he boomed. "And what I want to know is who rented this aircar from you nitwits." He waved a memo with numbers scribbled on it.

"I take it then you are not a policeman, a military intelligence agent, a credit investigator, a banker, or an officer of the federal or municipal court?"

The first part of the doctor's reply was a chesty growl. Before any words emerged, a door at the rear of the office whirred to one side.

"Why, you're even handsomer than you look on the TV wall, Doctor," said the huge green woman in the doorway. She wore an orange wig, a white vinyl jumpsuit. She was smoking a pink cigar. "And your beard is much fuller. Come in, come in."

Zarkov blinked once before wending his way through the sitting robot rental agents. "And you are, madam?"

"Granola Ben-Sen." She smiled. "I own and operate this little establishment. I've been the sole owner since my late husband, Norge, totaled a skycycle last winter. Rest his soul. How may I help you, Dr. Zarkov?"

"It's important, Mrs. Ben-Sen, that I find out who rented this particular aircruiser from you yesterday." He handed her the memo slip.

"These contact lenses of mine are lousy," she said as she brought the slip close to her broad flat green nose.

"License number MOT-263-Y," supplied Zarkov.

"Registration number 544-8313, air permit PRAX-4809."

"Ah, yes, I remember that one," said Mrs. Ben-Sen. "Come into my little parlor, Dr. Zarkov, and I'll trace this down for you."

Everything in the back room was pink: the floor, the walls, the metal desks, and the two floating rockers. Zarkov seated himself in the darker pink one. "I appreciate your co-operation, madam."

"You're a real personage to me, Dr. Zarkov." She stood smiling across at him, the memo rubbing against her chin. "Great men, even in this wide universe of ours, are rare. So most of us, we everyday people, must content ourselves with viewing greatness at a distance. You can imagine, then, the thrill of excitement which coursed through me when I heard you shouting your name in that deep manly voice of yours."

"Mrs. Ben-Sen, there's some urgency connected with this inquiry."

"Of course, I can well imagine." She went to a pink portable computer against one wall. Hesitating, studying the memo slip and then the keyboard, she finally punched out some questions.

The pink mechanism began making huffing, grinding noises. A tiny bell tinkled inside it. A strip of paper unfurled out a slot.

"Do you think perhaps I'm not oiling my computer enough, Dr. Zarkov?" She approached him with a strip of paper the computer had produced. "It often makes strange noises."

"That's an inferior Plutonian make of computer, madam. They all make strange noises." He bounced up out of his chair to take the information slip. "John J. Connigton, 260 Stockbridge Road, this city. Rented the aircar at 6:01 last night, returned it at 11:07. Huh."

"Do you need this information for some scientific project, Dr. Zarkov?" asked the green woman. "Per-

haps you're only an inch from solving the problem of this horrible sound plague."

Zarkov said, "Thank you, madam."

"I wonder, Dr. Zarkov, if you would indulge a long-time admirer of yours by giving me your autograph?"

"Certainly, madam."

Smiling, Mrs. Ben-Sen began looking around. "Now, let me see, what's something appropriate for a man of your standing to sign?"

Zarkov whipped out an electric marker from the breast pocket of his worksuit. "This will do," he boomed.

While the large green woman was still feeling around the top of her desk, Dr. Zarkov wrote his name in foot-high letters on one of the pale-pink walls.

"Thank you again, madam," he said, and departed.

## CHAPTER 11

The enormous spider continued to spin its web.

Both Flash's legs were bound tightly together. With his only free hand, he attempted to tear some of the webbing off himself.

"Stop struggling a minute, will you?"

Flash twisted around, looking toward the ground. He didn't see anyone.

"Relax." It was a young girl's voice. "Get ready to hit the ground. We don't want to mess up that pretty golden hair of yours."

"Who are you?" began the dangling Flash.

A blaster rifle sizzled.

The image of the spider held for another instant, then it disintegrated, collapsed into sooty dust.

Flash dropped.

He hit the dry grass on his right shoulder. He pushed out with his left hand until he was sitting up on the ground.

"Break anything?"

Flash saw her now. A tall girl of twenty or so with long red hair, wearing a tunic of jungle colors. She carried a rifle under her arm, a pistol and a knife at her wide belt. "I don't think so," he answered. "How do you get this stuff off?"

"It'll dry in a while, then we can break it off," the girl said as she came closer. "I'll help you." She sat on a fallen log, watching him. "You don't know your way around jungles too well, do you?"

"I've been in a lot of them," said Flash. "I shouldn't have let that spider get the drop on me."

"Were you in that big airship that went roaring over a while ago?"

"Yes. It looked like it was heading for a crash, so I jumped."

"Where were you going?"

"Wherever the aircruiser took me," he told her. "You don't happen to know where she crashed?"

"It didn't crash," said the red-haired girl.

Flash glanced skyward. "It's not still flying around up there somewhere?"

"No," she said. "I imagine they've got it at Perfect City by this time."

"Perfect City?"

"There are lots of things you don't know about this part of the world," the girl observed. "You stick with me, and don't get eaten by spiders or anything, and you'll learn."

## CHAPTER 12

Zarkov pulled his dark pseudowool cloak tighter around him, tugged the knit seaman's cap down nearer his ears. The door of the waterfront saloon swung inward as he approached it out of the night fog.

"Welcome to the Song of the Blue Whale," rasped a grizzled waiter. His right arm had been replaced by a bright metal one. "Allow me to show you to a table."

"I've no need for a table," said Zarkov. "The bar will suit me fine."

"Right over there, where those three gruff whalers are punching the cod fisherman," said the waiter, pointing with his metal arm. "I see you're admiring my artificial arm."

"Noticing it's several inches longer than your other arm."

"Aye, and why not, says I? I figured as long as I had to have one, I might as well get one which would add a little something to my reach. It's made of a marvelous substance they call aluminum."

"That's tin." Zarkov went stalking off toward the bar at the far end of the room. At the bar, he pounded his fist on the nearwood counter, demanding, "A mug of grog and be quick about it."

"Coming right up, mate," said the chubby green bartender. He took a plastic pouch from a shelf behind him, pulled a tab, and let its contents fall into a

vinyl mug. In a few seconds, the grog began to steam. "Here you go, mate. One buck."

The doctor slapped a coin down and grabbed up the mug.

He turned to watch the crowd of some forty men in the smoky saloon. The cod fisherman was doing pretty well against the three angry whalers. He'd broken the arm of the largest one and was kicking the middle-sized whaler in the kneecap.

Dr. Zarkov had been on the trail of the man who'd piloted Flash's aircar on the night of the Minnig killing. The man was no longer at the address given to the rental agency. In fact, he'd probably never lived there. But by nosing around, Zarkov had found out who the man might be, what his real name was, and why he'd used that particular address. The trail had led Zarkov on a circuitous course through the capital of Estampa.

Clacking his empty cup down on the bartop, Zarkov said, "Let's have another dose of that swill."

"Right you are, mate."

As he paid for the second grog, Zarkov casually asked, "Has Rizber been in tonight?"

The bartender patted the metal dollar with a fat green hand and raked it off the bartop into his other hand. "Rizber?" he said. "I don't believe so. Seems to me, mate, I heard that he was feeling low."

"Sorry to hear that. I've got that fifty bucks I owe him. Had some luck in a game of whist."

"Half a minute, mate, and I'll see what I can find out." The green man moved down to the far end of the bar, where a half-dozen men in yellow slicker cloaks were gathered.

The cod fisherman had taken care of the second whaler. Now he and the one survivor were slugging it out.

"Yes, mate, Rizber's got a touch of the grippe," the returning bartender informed Dr. Zarkov.



"A shame. I'd like to pay him back, and I'm shipping out tomorrow."

"You can leave the fifty smackers with me, mate. The bar of the Blue Whale is as safe as any bank, which anyone along the oceanfront will testify."

"Can't do that, thanks all the same," said Zarkov. "Where's Rizber laid up? Where's his lodgings?"

"Hold on a moment, mate, and I'll inquire." The bartender went again to the other end of the bar.

The cod fisherman picked up the last of the whalers, and tossed him onto a table around which four midshipmen were playing whist.

"Here's his address, mate." The green man handed Zarkov a greasy slip of wrapping paper. "Give my best to Rizber. Tell the lad we all miss him around the Blue Whale."

"That I will."

The four midshipmen jumped up and went for the cod fisherman.

Zarkov left the place, stepping out into the swirling fog.

According to the splotched piece of paper, Rizber had a room in a house a few blocks from the Blue Whale. Taking huge steps, Zarkov arrived at the dreary nearwood house in less than five minutes.

There was only one light burning in the low sway-back house. That was at the rear. Peering into the fog, the doctor determined he could get to the back room by walking along a narrow wooden catwalk which hung out over the black foggy ocean.

Quietly, he started along the catwalk. As he neared the yellow window, he slowed, ducking down. He took a quick look into the room.

There was a sick man in there sure enough. He looked the way the elusive aircar pilot was supposed to look. He was lying on his back on a floating cot.

Zarkov rose up, kicked out the windowpanes with

one big booted foot, and stepped over the sill into the room. "I want to talk to you, Rizber," he bellowed.

The man sat up in bed. "Dr. Zarkov, isn't it?"

"Damn right it is."

"Good," said the man. "I've been waiting for you." He pressed his fingertips against his opposite wrist.

An odd whirring sound came from inside the sick man. Then he exploded with terrific force.

## CHAPTER 13

"We won't be able to stay here long," said the red-haired girl. "But for tonight it's safe."

"Safe from what?" asked Flash. He and the girl were at the entrance of a cave. Twilight was coming on, darkening everything in this rocky stretch of jungle forest. They had traveled roughly five miles from the place where the girl had saved his life.

"The slaves for one thing," she answered. Turning to him, she said, "Before you meet the others, I ought to know your name."

"I'm Flash Gordon," he answered. "Perhaps you ought to tell me who you are, too."

"I've heard your name before," said the girl. "I would have thought a man of your reputation could handle himself better in the jungle. Letting a lumbering old spider entrap you! My name is Jillian."

"That's all?"

"That's all," she said. "Jillian."

"He'd like to know more about what we're up to," said a lanky young man who now appeared from the shadowy interior of the cave. He had silver hair and was dressed in a rough tunic and leggings. "He's wondering if he can completely trust you."

"And is he really Flash Gordon?" Jillian asked the long thin young man.

"He is," he said. "He's puzzled as to how I know what he's thinking."

"Tad reads your mind," explained Jillian.

"A valuable knack," said Flash.

"There are a few of us on Pandor," Tad said. "And most are slaves. In answer to the questions you're about to ask, Flash, we'll let Sawtel explain things to you. Come in. We were going to eat our evening meal a half hour ago, but I sensed Jillian was returning with company so we waited."

Ducking, Flash followed the two of them into the cave. A low rocky tunnel sloped downward for about fifty feet, then widened into a large cavern. A portable stove glowed in the center of the rock room, a single floating globe produced dim orange light.

A tall old man with a white beard sat next to the stove. He stood as Flash approached. "Tad assures me you are to be trusted," he said, holding out his gnarled hand. "I am Sawtel."

"He tells me you're all to be trusted, too," said Flash. "Maybe you can tell me what's going on out here in the jungles of Mazda."

Squatting down on the stone floor, the old man said, "We're building an army."

"Do you have more than three soldiers?" said Flash, sitting near him.

"We have over a hundred so far," answered Jillian, still standing near the end of the tunnel. "We recruit new people nearly every day."

Sawtel sighed. "It is a long, difficult process."

Tad bent over to poke at the birds which were being cooked on the portable stove. "Flash would like to know the purpose of our army."

"That is simple," said Sawtel. "We are going to destroy Perfect City. There must be no more slaves."

"I came out here," said Flash, "searching for the cause of a series of disasters that have been plaguing the capital of Estampa Territory. Disasters caused by someone who is able to use sound and music to cause severe destruction."

"That would be Pan," said old Sawtel.

Jillian moved closer to the three men. "Pan is growing more ambitious then," she said. "It's what we've been afraid of, Sawtel."

Nodding, the old man said, "It is as I suspected when I fled Perfect City. He will not stop until everyone on this planet is a slave."

"Flash wonders what you were doing in Perfect City," said Tad, reading Flash's mind once more.

"I helped him build it," answered the old man.

## CHAPTER 14

Strong hands took hold of his shoulders and pulled him out of the black water. Dr. Zarkov sputtered as he was dragged across a strip of rocky beach. Blowing out salty water, shaking his dripping head, he said, "I didn't expect an explosion."

Inspector Carr thrust a hand under Zarkov's soggy elbow, helped him to his feet. "You've got a nasty cut over your right eye, but I don't see any other outward signs of damage. How do you feel?"

The doctor swung his arms back and forth to shed some water. He grimaced, then grasped his beard in both hands and wrung it out. "I may have a couple of cracked ribs."

Nodding at a police ship which was hovering nearby, Carr said, "One of my men can run you over to the nearest Emergency Center."

"I know how to fix a broken rib," boomed Zarkov. "I don't need a pack of limp-wristed medirobots poking at me." He looked up at the place where the house had been. A few tiny flames still crackled on what was left of the floor. The walls and the roof were gone.

"Apparently, the explosion blew you clean out of the place and into the sea," said Inspector Carr. "Lucky thing, or you might well have burned up before you regained consciousness."

"Anything left of Rizber?"

"Who?"

"The fellow in the house," said Zarkov.

"My men found nothing to indicate anyone else was in there," said the inspector, frowning. "Nothing at all, which is odd."

"I'll take a look around up there."

"Are you certain you're up to it?"

"I'm up to it." Zarkov went crunching along the narrow beach until he came to a wooden ladder leading up to the street. He winced twice as he climbed.

Following him, Inspector Carr asked, "Might I inquire, by the way, what you were doing down here?"

"Checking out a lead." Zarkov began working his way out on what was left of the wooden catwalk.

"A lead, eh? Anything to do with the source of our plague of sound?"

"No, with the killer of Minister Minnig."

"I know some scientific fellows are independent spirits," said Carr as he went cautiously after Zarkov. "But if you have some information which might help us you should turn it over to us."

"Right now I don't have anything," said Zarkov. "A few minutes ago, I had the man who piloted Flash Gordon's aircar on the night of the murder."

"Gordon arrived on foot, according to our reports."

"Not that Flash Gordon," bellowed Zarkov, "the *real* Flash Gordon."

"Oh? There's more than one?"

"By now that should be obvious even to your tin dogs." Zarkov dropped to his hands and knees and began edging along the catwalk toward the floor of the exploded house. He took a flashlight out of his pocket, flicked it on.

The inspector stood and watched as Dr. Zarkov went slowly and carefully over the floor. "My people will make a thorough check of this whole place, you know."

Zarkov made a snorting noise and went on exploring.

"You have any notion of what sort of bomb it was? We haven't found any fragments of it yet," said Inspector Carr. "I'd say it was somewhere in the right hand side of the bedroom there, under the bed perhaps."

"Inside Rizber," said Zarkov over his shoulder.

"Beg pardon?"

"The bomb was inside the man I came to see." With his broad nose just a few inches from the blackened boards of the floor, Dr. Zarkov moved his fingertips across the wood.

"Implanted in the fellow somehow?"

The doctor rose up to a kneeling position, hands resting on his hips. "What bothers me is there's absolutely no sign that a human being was blown up in this room."

"Perhaps my people will find some trace with their equipment."

"They won't find anything Zarkov didn't find."

"Surely, Doctor, working in the dark with only a hand light, and after you yourself have just been blown into the ocean. . . ."

"I was the only flesh and blood creature in this room tonight," said Zarkov.

"What was the other fellow then?"

"A machine."

"You mean a robot or an android?"

Zarkov nodded vigorously, water splashing from his beard and hair. "An andy, yes."

"Well, if that's so, Dr. Zarkov, we're sure to find some traces."

Zarkov stood completely up and came back to the inspector's side. "Nope," he said. "This particular android was designed to destruct completely and leave no trace."

"What does that mean?"

"It means somebody is willing to go to a hell of a lot of trouble to get rid of me," answered Zarkov.



## CHAPTER 15

Day began with sunlight bursting through the jungle.

Flash was already awake and sitting outside the entrance of the cave.

"What do you figure to do now?"

He turned, grinned at Jillian. "You don't have to ask; just have Tad read my thoughts."

The tall girl came out into the morning. "He likes you," she said. "So he's respecting your privacy."

"I want to get a look at the Perfect City," Flash told the girl. "I have to find out if this Pan guy is the man behind what's happening in Estampa."

"I'm really afraid he is." Jillian sat beside him on the grass. "All Sawtel told you last night is true. Pan is . . . well, I guess crazy is the word."

"You think, though, he's not simply out to destroy Estampa?"

"No, if Pan's doing this he's doing it to gain more power," replied the girl. "Soon now he'll probably issue an ultimatum. Turn over Estampa Territory to me or I'll destroy it all. Something like that. Then, after he conquers Estampa, he'll move on to another territory."

"According to Sawtel, Pan once lived in Estampa. Maybe he is only out for revenge."

Jillian shook her head, her long red hair sweeping from side to side. "No, Pan is out for a lot more than that."

"How many people live in his Perfect City?"

"We calculate there must be at least two thousand slaves, possibly ten to fifteen others who don't wear the helmets. They'd be his inner circle, people he trusts to some extent."

"And the whole setup is underground?"

"Yes. As Sawtel explained, when he and Pan first came up with the idea, the Perfect City was going to be some kind of a retreat. It was to be an oasis with none of the distractions and noises of your average urban area, a place where people could come and live a quiet life. Artists, musicians—creative people especially."

"How did they finance it?"

"Pan had family money, a whole lot of it," Jillian said. "Sawtel had done extremely well as an industrial technician. He put in a good chunk of his own money. And he never realized what Pan was really aiming at, not until it was already happening."

"Who invented the helmets?"

The girl looked at the ground. "The basic idea was Sawtel's. But he intended the helmet to be used only to help the mentally ill," she explained. "Pan had other ideas, plus enough skill to be able to adapt the mechanism."

Flash stood up. "Where did these two thousand citizens come from?"

"About five hundred are the original people who came out when the city was first opened," Jillian said. "The rest Pan has recruited. He recruits by raiding settlements in the surrounding territories. That's really why we've started to organize, to free friends and family from Pan."

"Can't the governments of the territories involved do anything?"

"A territory like Mazda isn't like Estampa," she answered. "There's very little organized government at all, and what there is is pretty weak and ineffective."

In other territories the people are ruled by dictators or venal juntas. Those kinds of governments don't depend on votes and they're not interested in helping a few hundred people from the outlands."

Flash asked, "Someone you know is a slave?"

"My brother, yes."

"I couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation, Flash," said the long, lanky Tad as he came out of the cave. "We're not ready to make our move against Pan, but I can guide you to Perfect City."

"Okay," said Flash, "I accept your offer."

Jillian got up from the grass. "I was going to offer to guide you."

"If you both have the time," Flash said, grinning, "I'd appreciate having both of you help out."

"Let's make it unanimous," said Sawtel, appearing in the cave entrance.

## CHAPTER 16

The tower was swaying. Then, suddenly, it snapped about ten floors from the top and began to fall to pieces. None of the people working in the giant office building had time to get out. They fell with the crumbling tower, hundreds of black splotches in the early morning sky.

Dale shuddered and turned off the television wall.

She made another aimless circuit of the room, sat for a moment in a floating chair, then got up.

"So far they've left the capital alone," she said to herself. "But everywhere else, all across Estampa, it's terrible."

She wandered down a hall.

"A little brunch?" asked the kitchen as she went by. "You didn't have any breakfast, you know."

"No, thanks."

The villa seemed enormously empty, even though it was full of servomechanisms and talking gadgets. But it felt empty with Flash gone and Zarkov off at his lab being so darned pigheaded.

Dale reached out toward a closet door.

The wardrobe opened. "What does miss wish to wear?"

"A flying suit," said Dale.

The green rental agent ran a comb once again through his wavy red hair. "Going all alone, are you?" he asked Dale.

"Yes."

"And how long do you want the airship for, miss?" He dropped the plastic comb into a pocket of his plaid jumpsuit.

"At least a week."

"Maybe you'd be interested in our 20-20 Plan," said the green man. "Are you familiar with our 20-20 Plan?"

"No."

"Well, miss, this is basically how it works." He gestured at the dozen or more airships which surrounded them on the rental field. "You sign up for one of our shipshape ships and agree to use it for at least 20 full days. We then let you have it for only \$20.00 a day, plus a few small additional charges required by law."

"I don't think I'll need it for that long. A week will be fine."

"A week's going to cost you \$32.00 a day plus."

"I only want it for a week."

"Okay, miss. We always give the customer what he or she asks for." He fished out his comb once more. "Only trying to save you a little money. Where will you be flying to?"

"Mazda Territory."

His red eyebrows went up. "Mazda, is it?" From another pocket he extracted a small vinyl book. "I was afraid of this," he said when he found the page he'd been looking for. "There's an extra charge of \$6.00 per day if you're going to Mazda. There's a little red star next to Mazda here, see, which means we designate it a Hazardous Area."

Dale pointed at a medium-sized beige aircruiser. "That's the one I want," she said. "Can we start filling out the papers?"

"That's a very powerful ship," said the rental agent. "For young ladies we usually recommend. . . ."

"Here are my flying licenses and permits." She

handed him an accordion pack of them. "I'm qualified to handle it."

"My goodness," said the rental agent, "I guess you are. And what's this one here? A Presidential Courtesy card signed by President Bentancourt himself. My goodness! Come on into the office and I'll speed everything through for you, Miss Arden." As he led her back to the plastic dome of an office he combed his hair again.

Dale sat tensely in the pilot seat. "We're just about to arrive at the place where Dr. Zarkov lost contact with Flash," she said to herself, glancing at the screens of the ground scanner. Thick jungle showed, with no sign of any crashed aircruiser.

She began to feel vaguely strange, to have trouble breathing. "What is it? It's like . . . some kind of . . . it's like some sound I'm aware of but can't quite hear."

Dale found she no longer had control of the ship. It was being pulled down out of the sky by some powerful force.

"I could jump free," Dale said. "But I have a feeling I'll find out more if I stick with the ship."

She leaned back in the chair and waited.

## CHAPTER 17

Dr. Zarkov made an impatient fretful sound as the escalator ramp slowly carried him up to the third-floor level of the Government Data Center. "Snail's pace," he muttered. Snorting, he commenced striding up the ramp on his own power.

The third level was a labyrinth of pale-yellow corridors. There appeared to be no doors anywhere. Zarkov stomped rapidly along a succession of twisting, curving walls. Here and there on the seemingly blank walls were small round dots of color. Before a small blue dot, the doctor stopped finally, hands on hips. "Now is that blue bell blue or not?" He decided it was, reached out a knobby finger, and poked the dot. At the same time he recited a string of numbers.

The wall quivered and whirred. A portion of it, about the size of a door, moved aside, revealing a large room beyond. Zarkov walked on in. "Color coded dots. What a nitwit way of running things."

"Good morning, sir. How are you this bright sunny morning?"

"It's raining out," boomed Zarkov.

"Oh, really?" said the talking computer who'd greeted him. "Now why didn't somebody tell me that."

Zarkov ignored the large machine stretching along one wall, and crossed to the other end of the room where there was a bank of smaller computers side by side. "Which one of you is the light industry expert?"

"I am," responded two of the computers at once.

"I'm interested in mechanical men!" bellowed Dr. Zarkov. "Androids, simulacras."

"That's my department," said a computer with a pale-green front. "Ask me anything, anything at all. I've got all the info you'll ever need."

Zarkov eyed the mechanism, tugging at his bushy beard. "I want a list of all the companies in this territory who are engaged in the manufacture of robots and androids or their components," he told the computer. "Include any companies who've gone out of business in the past five years."

"Coming right up."

"Can you separate the list into robots and andies?"

"Why, sure, a cinch."

Dr. Zarkov scratched at his chin through his whiskers while he waited.

The pale-green computer gave a buzzing noise, then two thin sheets of plastic paper unfurled out of a slot in its front. "Here you go."

Zarkov quickly scanned the lists. "Good," he said. "Now give me a list of all the major clients of these companies for the past five—better make it ten years."

"Curiosity bug's really bitten you, hasn't it?" said the computer.

Zarkov snorted by way of reply.

The second list was inching out of the slot when a harsh voice behind Zarkov asked, "What the devil are you doing here, mister?"

Turning, Zarkov said, "Good morning, General Yate."

The thin green man came across the room. "I asked you a question, mister," he said. "You may be a pet of the president's, but that doesn't give you the right to come nosing around in our files."

"I've got all the proper permits and clearances." Zarkov reached toward a side pocket in his worksuit.



"Go slow, mister." The general's hand moved toward the holster which held his blaster pistol.

Before he reached the gun Zarkov's powerful hand had snapped out and caught the general's wrist. "Don't ever try to pull a gun on me, Yate," said Zarkov, his voice unusually low.

With his other hand Zarkov produced his papers and ID chits. "Everything is in order, Yate." He held the packet up close to the general's nose. "I strongly suggest you go on about your business."

"Your friend the president," said the general as he pulled free, "is going to hear about this little manhandling incident."

"You better get the hell out of here before it turns into a man-punching incident, Yate."

General Yate left.

"That was nifty," said the pale-green computer.

"I'll take that list." Zarkov grabbed the pages he'd been reaching for when the general had intruded.

Zarkov, his various worksuit pockets crammed with lists, was striding down another blank corridor.

On his left a piece of wall slid aside. "Dr. Zarkov, do you have a moment?"

It was the rumpled Dr. Nazzaro of the health ministry. "I suppose so," Zarkov said, going over to the open doorway.

"I simply wanted to ask how you were," said Nazzaro. "When I came in to do some checking in the contagion files my computer mentioned you were here."

"Word sure gets around."

"Computers tend to be gossips," said Dr. Nazzaro. "Tell me, though, how you're feeling. I understand you were in a serious accident."

"Not as serious as they hoped," said Zarkov. "It was only a little explosion."

The ruffled man chuckled. "I'd already heard you were indestructible. This confirms it," he said. "Do you have any idea who tried to kill you?"

"The same people who murdered the minister," said Dr. Zarkov. "The same people who are behind the plague of sound."

"Do you know who they are?"

"I'll find out."

## CHAPTER 18

"I hope you're watching out for spiders," said Jillian, dropping back to walk beside Flash on the narrow jungle trail.

"I'm counting on you to protect me," he said, grinning.

The girl asked, "You think you can persuade the government of Estampa Territory to take action against Pan?"

"Yes," answered Flash.

Glowing yellow birds went swirling up through the spade-shaped leaves high above.

"I mean, even if he isn't the cause of the troubles they've been having."

"If what you've told me is true, I'm sure something will be done."

The red-haired girl frowned. "Don't you believe us? Do you think we've all been lying to you?"

"Before I suggest a raid on the Perfect City," Flash told her, "I want to get a look at it myself. That has nothing to do with you or with Sawtel and Tad. It's simply the way I operate."

"I see." She started to stride away.

He caught her arm. "There are a few more things I want to ask you, Jillian."

"Why? I'll probably only lie," she said. "That's what you seem to think."

Several years of adventuring through the universe had taught Flash never to argue with a girl when she

was angry. "Sawtel knows the layout of the Perfect City pretty well, doesn't he?"

Eventually, after nearly a minute of silence, Jillian answered, "He ought to. He helped design most of it."

"Then he can tell me how to get inside the city," said Flash, "and how to explore it, with the least chance of being detected."

"He could." She shook her head. "But I don't think you'd stand a chance of making it. Even if one of the slaves didn't spot you, one of Pan's security mechanisms would. You'd have an easier time strolling into a bank vault unnoticed."

"The only way I can find out whether Pan's behind the sound plague is by getting inside the Perfect City."

"No, that's not the only way. Tad can find out, by sending his mind exploring," Jillian told him. "That would be much safer."

"How close does he have to be to his target?"

"He gets the best results when he's within a mile of the person he wants to read," she replied. "He has, though, a much greater range than that."

"Maybe he can help on a preliminary probe," said Flash.

"Jill, Flash." Tad was running back along the trail from up ahead.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"There's a scouting party coming this way," said the lanky young man. "At least six slaves. They're still about a mile or so away, gives us plenty of time to hide."

"Six of them, four of us," said Flash. "Not bad odds for an ambush."

"They'll all be armed," said Jillian. "It's best just to keep out of their way."

"I want to capture them, all six of them if possible," said Flash.

The girl asked, "Why?"

"They may give me the key to the city," Flash said.

The slaves came in all sizes. Two of them were well over six feet tall. They were walking along a curving trail single file, moving silently over the tough yellow grass. Six men dressed in simple tunics, each one wearing one of the nearleather helmets. The upper portions of their faces didn't quite blend with the lower. Their eyes were wary and watchful, but their lips wore bland, mindless smiles. Two of them, a man at each end of the scouting procession, carried blaster rifles; the others carried handguns. They did not speak, did not acknowledge each other's existence beyond not stepping on each other's heels.

A single leaf fell, a bright yellow-green leaf shaped like a giant heart. It came spiraling down through the hazy afternoon, brushing gently against the last man in line.

Then came Flash Gordon.

He plummeted out of the tree branches over the trail. His feet hit the rifle bearer full in the back, causing him to gasp and stumble forward.

Flash chopped the rifle from the slave's grasp as he landed.

Growling, the blank smile still on his face, the man swung a fist at Flash.

But the grinning blond man was no longer there.

As the blow whizzed harmlessly by, Flash reached out and dealt him another chop. This one to the slave's neck.

The man stiffened, then went slack.

Flash ripped off his helmet as he fell.

While Flash had been occupied with the last rifle man, Tad had taken care of the first.

The lanky young man had used a different kind of surprise. He yanked the lead slave up off the ground with a lasso of vine which pinned the man's arms to his side.

Tad relieved the man of his rifle and of his helmet before letting him drop back down to the jungle trail.

Jillian, meantime, had concentrated on two of the slaves who carried only handguns. Stationed by the side of the trail, masked by thick brush, she had waited until the instant Flash struck. Then she fired twice. Each crackling shot snapped a weapon out of a slave's hand.

Sawtel was not as good a shot. It took him five tries, from his place of concealment, to blast away the guns of the remaining two men.

"Stick around," Flash said to the nearest slave.

After rubbing at his singed hand, the chubby green man was about to dive into the brush.

Flash caught him by the shoulder, spinning him around.

He ripped off the helmet which made the man a slave of Pan. Then Flash blinked and dropped the helmet.

The chubby green man began to change. He grew taller. The color of his skin turned from bright light green to a soft cocoa brown; tight-curling dark hair began sprouting on his bald head.

"Hey, daddy," the man said, "I'm glad that's over."

## CHAPTER 19

Zarkov slouched slowly around the long worktable in his lab. He chewed absently on a kelp sandwich as he scrutinized the array of lists, charts, and maps he had spread out on the table. Grunting, he leaned over and crossed out another name with his electric pencil. "We're narrowing it down," he muttered.

A red globe commenced blinking. "Policeman to see you," said the lab computer, showing him a picture of Inspector Carr.

"Let him in." Zarkov reached out to cross another name off one of his lists.

"I hear you made threats against the life of one of our military dignitaries," said the inspector as he came in.

"Come to drag me off to jail, have you?"

Inspector Carr smiled. "Officially I can't approve of your conduct," he said. "If you carried out your threat, at least partially, I would personally be quite pleased. What exactly are you up to, Doctor?"

Setting his sandwich down on a small patch of clear space on the table, Zarkov said, "I'm finding out who tried to blow me sky-high."

The inspector moved along beside the worktable, studying the various lists and charts. "We found absolutely nothing to indicate an android was used to destroy that house, you know."

"Exactly," boomed Zarkov. "Which proves my point."

"I'm not certain it does."

"You've investigated a good number of explosions, Inspector. I'll bet this is one of the first ones where you didn't find even a smidgen of the bomb used, nor anything at all of one of the victims."

"True, Dr. Zarkov," admitted Carr. "As for the other victim, well, you did get a pretty nasty jolting in the explosion."

"He was no hallucination," said Zarkov. "If you won't accept the idea of an andy with a bomb inside him, then what the hell blew up the house? Do you think I was smoking in bed?"

"I'll grant this is an unusual case," said the inspector. "Yet I'm wondering if you're not going off on less than fruitful tangents."

"Everything Zarkov does is fruitful," he assured him in a booming voice.

The inspector's exhalation of breath was almost a sigh. "What progress are you making?"

"Right now," said Dr. Zarkov, "I'm narrowing down the list of possible people behind this. I've got it down to a few pretty interesting possibilities." He picked up a list. "For instance, what do you know about a place called Paradise Park?"

"It was an amusement park, quite a sophisticated setup as I recall," replied Inspector Carr. "They were located in the middle of several wooded acres out on the edge of the city. The whole place closed down over two years ago."

"You failed to mention the most important point," Zarkov told him. "Paradise Park was staffed completely by androids, and a goodly number of them were replicas of famous people, historical figures and celebrities."

"Yes, that's true. Still I don't see—"

"Paradise Park shut down two and a half years ago," said Dr. Zarkov. "As recently as two weeks ago they were ordering android components—zubertubes,



shunt coils, gudgeon pins, autosyn transmitters, synth-flesh and so on."

"Perhaps they intend to reopen the park."

"Perhaps they built a simulacra Flash Gordon."

Inspector Carr poked his tongue into his cheek, his left eye narrowing. "It sounds far-fetched."

"But it doesn't sound far-fetched that a man like Flash Gordon would commit a murder?" boomed the doctor.

"I've told you I was greatly surprised by the murder of Minister Minnig," said the inspector. "By the way, do you think Miss Arden knows where Gordon is hiding out?"

"I have no idea. Why?"

"She managed to slip out of that villa of yours without my watch realizing it."

A scowl touched Zarkov's broad face. "Where'd she go?"

"We were able, some time after she left, to learn what she'd done," said Carr. "She apparently rented an aircruiser this morning and took off for the Mazda Territory."

"Damn," said Zarkov. "That was a nitwit thing to do."

"You have some idea of why she did that?"

"If I don't crack things on this end pretty soon, I'm going to have to do that myself. Blast."

"I wish you could see your way clear to cooperate a trifle more with us, Doctor."

"When I catch the murderer, I'll turn him over to you," promised Zarkov. "Now I have to get back to work on my lists."

A few minutes after the inspector left the blue pixphone light began flashing.

Zarkov, with an impatient snort, dropped a handful of papers and went to the phone. "Yes, what is it?"

The screen came to life. "Doc, I have only a few

minutes," Dale said. "I'm on to something. Can you meet me right away?"

The doctor watched her image for a long second. "Where are you?"

"At a place called Paradise Park. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes," he replied slowly. "I'll be there in half an hour."

"Oh, good. I'll meet you just inside the main gate." Her image faded away.

Dr. Zarkov kept looking at the empty screen, tugging at his beard.

## CHAPTER 20

The large ivory-colored room was filled with silence. No sound from outside penetrated the series of high oval windows. The footfalls of the tall man who paced the room were completely silenced by the ivory carpeting. He was wide-shouldered, nearly forty, with a stiff upright posture. His dark hair was thick and curling; a beard and moustache circled his mouth.

At the end of the room a colossal pipe organ had been built into the wall. The organ, too, was ivory white. Frowning slightly, the bearded man crossed silently to the organ. He sat on the bench, but with his back to the keyboards.

"It's nearly time for my first message to those fools in Estampa Territory," he said aloud.

He turned toward the instrument and activated various switches. Losing his rigid uprightness, he slouched, hunched, as he began to play. Wild, jarring music began to come from the huge organ. The tinted oval windows rattled.

Suddenly the bearded man stopped playing and spun angrily around. "I've told you not to intrude when I'm playing."

"Oh, were you playing?" asked the heavysset green man who was standing in the middle of the room. "I thought you were only polishing the keys."

Turning off the pipe organ, Pan stood and glared

down at the man. "I don't know why I suffer the pain of having you around, Manyon."

"Because I am so very efficient, Master Pan."

"Additionally, I don't appreciate the way you say master," Pan told him.

"Not enough awe and reverence, Master Pan?"

Pan said, "I can strap a helmet on you, too, Manyon."

"But you won't," said the green man. "Then you'd have no one to take care of all the little details. Have you been working on your ultimatum speech to Estampa?"

Pan made a vague gesture. "I was trying to compose my thoughts when you burst in."

"How you can think with that calliope tooting is beyond me."

Pan came stalking toward his underling. "I want no more slurs about my music out of you, Manyon."

"Forgive me, Master Pan." Manyon scratched his earlobe. "By the way, I've written out a little rough draft which might help you."

A pout had formed on Pan's thin lips. Saying nothing, he held out a hand.

Manyon gave him two sheets of ivory paper.

Pan took them and walked over beneath an amber-tinted oval window. He read over each page twice, slowly. Then, sighing, let the hand with the pages in it fall to his side.

"Not up to your usual high standard?" inquired the green Manyon.

Pan glanced at him, one eye nearly shut. "Somewhere in here I discern the germ of an approach. I'll work on this crude skeleton you've patched together, and something viable may emerge."

"Don't take too long to flesh it out, Master Pan," suggested Manyon. "We've picked tomorrow afternoon to intrude onto the Estampa airwaves."

"Yes, leave me now and I'll set to work."

"Not yet, Master Pan. I have something further to report."

"Well, what?"

"Looks like we've caught another aircruiser," answered the green underling. "It's being directed here right now."

"Where's this one from?"

"We believe it's another from Estampa."

"Those fools in Estampa," said Pan. "They must know more about us than you think."

"Not according to our sources in the capital, Master Pan."

"The other ship," said Pan. "All the equipment in it was built for the express purpose of finding me."

"It didn't help, though," reminded Manyon. "We found their ship before it found us."

"The ship, but not the pilot. Where is he, by the way? You've had a day to hunt."

"It's a big jungle out there, Master Pan. I wouldn't worry, though. I've sent out several scouting parties."

A smile appeared on Pan's face. "Perhaps we'll be more fortunate this time," he said. "Perhaps the pilot will be aboard."

## CHAPTER 21

Dale saw the jungle open up before her. She moved her hand down from her throat and began breathing again. She'd been certain her ship was going to crash.

The craft continued its downward journey. A large opening had appeared in the ground itself. Dale's air-cruiser passed through it.

"What is all this?" the girl said.

Her ship leveled out and passed over ivory-white towers and spires, curving white walkways. There was an entire city down here—a large, precisely laid-out city—all of it a spotless white.

"And no noise," Dale realized.

The engines of her ship had turned off and it was drifting silently down now. Dale could hear no other sounds. Everything inside had ceased to tick, whir, and hum. Outside it seemed absolutely quiet.

Yet there were people out there. Men and women, moving about. But there was no noise, not a sound.

"They're all dressed exactly alike," Dale said.

All the citizens of this spotless and silent underground city were dressed in simple yellow tunics, with helmets of soft nearleather on their heads.

Frowning, the girl said, "And they're all smiling, but there's something unnatural about those smiles. They're not quite right."

Silently her ship had landed in what appeared to be a public courtyard. There was a large white pseudomarble fountain which shot up plumes of tinted

water, making not a sound. The courtyard itself was paved with white squares of tile that seemed to absorb the sound of the feet which passed across them.

Her radio began to speak to her. "To anyone in the ship," it said in a strange new voice, "listen and obey. You have exactly two minutes to step out of your craft with hands held high. Should you fail to comply you will be stunned into unconsciousness."

"End of the line," the girl said, rising out of the pilot seat.

She crossed to the cabin door, opened it, and stepped out into the white silence.

Sawtel thrust his gnarled hand into the last of the slave helmets. "There," he said after a moment, "this one is through working, too."

Tad was watching the black man who had been green. "Show business," he said. "You're an actor, an entertainer."

"You're real hep, cat," said the black man.

"Well, I read your mind," admitted the lanky Tad.

"You're not jiving me are you, daddy?"

Tad looked puzzled. "I can read your thoughts easier than I can understand your conversation, Mr., uh, Flip. Is that your name?"

"You got it, man."

"Why do you talk like that?"

"Man, that's the way everybody in show biz on my home planet beats their chops, daddy," explained the entertainer. "I been gigging around with those dudes so long I got me the same line of jive, you dig?"

"It reminds me of something I read once," said Tad.

"Well, man, it's like a variation of the way they talked back on a planet called Earth," said Flip. "Way they laid the scam on each other in a crazy era known as the forties and fifties. I ain't exactly sure when that was, but those cats really swung, you know. That's nuff said about me—who are all you dudes?"

"Don't you know?" Flash asked him. "You were sent out to capture us, weren't you?"

Flip winked at the pile of disabled helmets. "I don't remember everything that went on while I was wearing that crazy lid, daddy," he replied. "With that thing on, I just did what they told me, tommed around, and did just exactly what they told me with a happy grin. We was supposed to round up any strangers, that I know, and bring them in for processing."

"Pan is always recruiting," said Jillian, who'd been talking with some of the other freed slaves.

The other five men were standing in a half circle on the jungle trail. Now one of the tall ones said, "I think I'd simply like to head for my own territory now. How about you, Lando?"

Lando, the other tall one, said, "Well, I don't know, Marc. If these people hadn't saved us by taking those helmets off, we'd still be slaves. Maybe we ought to join this rebel army the young lady's been telling us about."

"You can join," said Marc. "As for me, my wife and three youngest kids are back home. That's where I'm going."

"We won't stop you," Sawtel said. "Anyone who wishes to join us can; those who don't may go. We aren't like Pan. We want only volunteers."

"Well, then," persisted Marc, "I'm leaving for home." He slapped his rifle. "Nobody's going to recruit me again."

"Before you go," Flash said to him, "I'd like your clothes."

"Huh?"

"Flash wants to get inside Perfect City," said Tad. "He needs a disguise."

Flip shook his head at Flash. "I played a year there, man, and you ain't missing nothing."

"I'll trade outfits with you," Flash said to the tall man. "We're about the same size."



Marc eyed him, then said, "Sure, why not? The sooner I get out of this slave tunic, the better."

"Yeah, and this flash cat's got hisself some fine and mellow threads," observed Flip.

While Flash and Marc moved off the trail to exchange clothes, Jillian turned to the black man. "I don't quite understand why you . . . why you weren't yourself."

"See, chick, I'm a mimic," said Flip. "Don't ask me how come, cause I don't right know. But ever since I was a kid, I been able to change my shape, change my looks. I pretty soon found out I could use the knack to earn me some bread, you know. Where I grew up, you learn that bread is your only friend. So ever since then, I been giggling around the universe. You dig what I'm laying down so far, chick?"

"So far."

"Okay, so my last gig before doing a year or so at PC was on a touring aircruiser. So dig, I am doing my schtick, impersonating some cat, when we happen to pass over this jungle. And wham, blam, we get sucked right down into Perfect City. I am so scared that before I can think to switch back to my own natural self, these dudes slap one of those slave beanies on my head." He shrugged. "That's how come I been trucking around as a fat green cat all this time. I like my own self better."

"What next?" Jillian wanted to know.

"Oh, I'm going to stick with you dudes, baby," said Flip. "A cat with my talent, you going to need me."

"Just what I was thinking," said Flash as he stepped back onto the trail dressed in the slave tunic.

## CHAPTER 22

The platinum-haired girl crossed her trousered legs, looking out at the long afternoon shadows which cut stripes across the artificial lagoon and the artificial pirate barge. "He's taking long enough," she said. A stun rifle rested across her knee.

"You know how brainy people are, lots of things on their minds, never punctual." A small yellow man was standing in among a group of frozen waiters, watching the entry gate of Paradise Park.

The two of them were inside a restaurant in the defunct park. Five waiter androids in white suits, each one looking convincingly human, were grouped near the entrance of the kitchen. They'd been turned off and left there when the park closed. All had a patina of dust, and the headwaiter had a nest of tiny red spiders in his mustache.

"He may not take the bait," said Glenna. "Maybe he knows where the girl really is, Hasp."

The yellow man said, "He doesn't know. She never told him. She's mad because he didn't rush off to Mazda after her missing boyfriend."

"He's taking a long time to get there."

On the far side of the lagoon the android simulacra of Dale Arden was pacing anxiously, turning her head again and again to look at the unlocked nearwood gate in the high wall around Paradise Park.

"They sure did a good job on that one," observed

Hasp. "I'd like to meet the real thing, even if she is a brainy type."

"You couldn't even make an impression on that nuts and bolts version," Glenna said.

"You're too brainy, too, Glenna. You spend altogether too much time thinking."

A hooting commenced high above them.

Hasp hesitated, then went to the open doorway of the mechanical restaurant. "Now who the hell is that?"

"What is that?" Glenna, stun rifle in hand, came over to look up at the afternoon sky.

"Airtruck," said Hasp, pointing. "What's it say on the bottom of the thing? 'Mott's Electronics.' We're not expecting a delivery, are we?"

"Of course not. There isn't even anyone in the workshops to handle it."

The big flying truck was setting down beside the lagoon. It honked again.

"That couldn't be Zarkov, could it?" asked Hasp. "Trying some brainy trick."

"It doesn't look like him, does it?"

The burly driver was a clean-shaven man with shaggy blond hair. He realized the two people were watching him and waved in their direction, shouting something.

"Go get rid of him," Glenna ordered.

The Dale Arden android had stopped pacing.

"You're better at getting rid of people, Glenna," said the yellow man, holding back.

"Honestly, Hasp." She walked out of the restaurant and straight toward the truck. "Yes, what do you want?"

The big driver waved once again. He shoved open his door and jumped to the ground. "Got this load of gudgeon pins for you people. Where do you want it?"

"There's some mistake." Glenna stopped a few feet from the man. "We're expecting no deliveries."

"Huh, that's funny now." The blond man reached

back into the cab of his truck for a small stack of papers. "This is Paradise Park, isn't it?"

"Obviously," answered the platinum-haired girl. "But we didn't order anything."

"Well, then maybe I better talk to. . . ." He squinted at the blue sheet on the top of the pile. "Mr. Reiser-son, I guess."

"We have no Mr. Reiser-son here."

"Could be this doesn't say Reiser-son," admitted the driver. "Our office robot's got a lousy handwriting. Here, Miss, see if you can make it out."

"All right." She stepped up close to him. "Where?"

"Keep looking at the paper," said Zarkov. "This is a blaster pistol you feel nudging your side. Get your pal over here right away."

"You're Zarkov?"

"I shaved off my beard," he told her. "At certain times sacrifices are necessary. Now get him over here."

Glenna beckoned at the yellow man. "Hasp, come over here quickly."

## CHAPTER 23

Flip adjusted his gait until he was in step with Flash. "Who you want me to be, man?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," answered Flash.

The impersonator was watching a silver monkey go scampering through the twilight branches. "Am I digging you, Flash, baby?" Then he snapped his fingers. "Hey, I read you. You mean you want me to impersonate one of these cats in PC. I'm hep, but which one?"

"I want to get a look at any labs or workshops Pan's got," said Flash. "And there has to be someplace where he's got the equipment he's using against Estampa."

"You're sure he's the dude who's jumping bad with Estampa, daddy?"

"From what I've heard about him so far, Pan seems to be a pretty likely candidate."

Frowning, Flip trekked along the trail in silence for a moment or two. "Like I said, man, when you got one of them slave lids on you ain't too sharp about what's happening round you. There's one section of PC, though, where none of us slave cats was allowed. The cat who ran that was a big green dude who always wore a smock, a white smock. He didn't have no helmet, 'cause I recollect he had a shiny bald noggin. Yeah, he was the chief technician or something like that."

"Can you impersonate him?"

"No sweat, daddy," Flip assured him. "I can do ev-

everything but that white smock. Like I say, don't ask me how I do it, 'cause I ain't got the foggiest. My old mom always told me I must be a mutant of some kind, but I think she said that mostly to put my daddy down, you know. Anyways, man, I'll be your chief technician."

"Still, if they don't allow slaves in that area, I'll be kept out myself," said Flash.

"They didn't let us regular cats in," said Flip. "But there was a crew of workers, sort of an elite corps, maybe. Cats who probably had some kind of technical background before Pan caught them. I could get you in that way, as a new lab flunky."

"Okay, fine. We'll try that."

"Flash!" It was Tad. He came running back along the trail from his position up ahead. "We're getting close to the Perfect City and I'm picking up something."

Flash slowed. "What?"

"They've captured another airship," said the lanky young man. "It was from the capital of Estampa."

Flash placed a hand on the boy's arm. "Who was in it, can you find out?"

"A girl," replied Tad. "You know her, Dale Arden."

"Damn. What was she doing out here?"

"Looking for you."

"Zarkov wouldn't send her out here alone."

"She did this on her own," said Tad. "She felt, far as I can make out from reading her thoughts at this distance, that Dr. Zarkov should have come hunting for you right away. When he didn't, she rented this air-cruiser and came looking for you herself."

"Yes, that's Dale all right." Flash stopped completely. "Where is she in the city?"

"They've taken her to Pan," the boy said.

"This changes our plans," said Flash.

Dale didn't see him at first.

Then the enormous pipe organ far across the room began to play.

The girl hugged herself. The music was strange and unsettling.

The large-clad figure at the keyboards played for another full minute before ceasing and turning to stare at Dale. "Welcome to Perfect City," he said. "I am called Pan." He left the organ bench to move silently across the ivory-white carpeting. "Did you enjoy my playing?"

"Enjoy is not quite the right word."

"You don't look like a fool, Dale Arden. I hoped you might understand what I'm doing in my music."

"I understand it, but that doesn't mean I necessarily enjoy it," the girl said. "Is that why your people brought me here—to be an audience?"

"I don't enjoy flippancy in anyone, most especially in women," said Pan as he drew nearer. "Though perhaps Flash Gordon has different tastes."

"Is . . . do you have Flash here?"

Pan laughed. "Not yet. He should soon be here, however. My slave patrols are scouring the jungle for him," he told her. "I do, though, have the ship Dr. Zarkov put together for him."

"You seem to know all about us."

"My dear, you're universally famous," laughed Pan. "Besides I have people in Estampa who are loyal to me. I have no difficulty in learning whatever I want to know about the capital."

"Are you the one responsible for the plague of sound?"

"Of course, my dear."

"Why?"

"For the good and sufficient reason that I wish to rule not merely this city, but the entire planet," he said. "Now I have Perfect City, but eventually I will rule a Perfect Territory and someday a Perfect Planet."

"Tomorrow the world," murmured Dale.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Something I heard in a history class on Earth once," the girl said. "So you don't intend to go on destroying Estampa?"

"If I destroyed it all, there'd be nothing left to rule. No, as a matter of fact, you've arrived at a most auspicious time, Dale Arden. Tomorrow I deliver my first message to Estampa. They must either surrender or continue to suffer."

The girl turned away from him. "Why did you pick Estampa as your first victim?"

"Perhaps because it's the most democratic territory on this planet," answered Pan. "Or perhaps it's only because I was born and raised there. It was there they laughed at me, at my music, and at my ideas."

"Is the idea for Perfect City yours?"

Pan said, "Basically, yes. I had some technical help in working out the details. Not only, you see, did the fools in Estampa not understand me, they didn't even realize how horrible the grating vibrations of their machines were, the discordant blare of what they call civilized urban life. All the ticking, whirring, honking, hooting, clanging, banging, roaring, clattering of their cities. It's a wonder it doesn't drive them all mad."

"Apparently it did in at least one case."

Laughing once more, Pan said, "No, my dear, I am not mad. I am one of the sanest people you will ever meet." He gestured at the high oval windows. "What I have caused to be built here is a city of harmony. A quiet and peaceful place in which to live and create. It takes a good deal of sane and rational thinking to accomplish what I've accomplished so far."

"The people who live here," Dale said, "they don't do it voluntarily, do they?"

"Children and fools. Most people are, you'll find, no wiser than children and fools. They don't know themselves at all, have no notion of what's good for them.



So an idea like Perfect City must be imposed on them until they learn it is the best possible way to live. In harmony, in quiet and tranquility."

"They walk around as though they're in a trance. How do you manage that?"

"I invented, with a small amount of technical help, a helmet which controls them by playing a continuous and specific vibration," he explained. "Someday, I assure you, there will be no need for the helmets at all. They are only a temporary measure until these fools come to realize what's good for them."

"I see."

"Now, my dear," said Pan as he walked back toward the pipe organ, "I think you had better tell me exactly what you and Flash Gordon and Dr. Zarkov are up to. What's been found out about me, what steps Zarkov intends to take against me."

"Suppose I refuse to tell you anything?"

"Oh, you'll tell me all I want to know." From the bench he picked up a slave helmet. "One way or another, my dear, you'll tell me."

## CHAPTER 24

Zarkov grunted. He reached up to tug at his beard, then remembered he didn't have a beard any more. "Who are you working for?"

The platinum-haired girl said, "I have nothing to say, Zarkov. Sorry."

They were in the android workshop on the Paradise Park grounds. An assortment of mechanical men were laid out on top of worktables, making the place look something like a morgue. Hasp, the yellow man, was tied and gagged and stretched out beside a headless mechanical pirate. The Dale Arden android, turned off now, was leaning against a wall.

"Do you people have Dale Arden?" Dr. Zarkov asked Glenna.

"I don't know anything about her." She was seated on a floating bench, legs crossed.

Striding up to within a yard of her, Zarkov bellowed, "I've got you. Talk or not, I've got you."

She shrugged her left shoulder.

"Estampa Territory being relatively enlightened," said Zarkov, "there's no death penalty. But there's still prison, and as an accessory to murder you'll get the same sentence as the actual killer. A life sentence."

"I—I'm not connected with any murder."

"We'll forget about what you and your little chum had in mind for Zarkov," he boomed. "There's still the matter of the murder of Minister Minnig."

"I was nowhere—I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were nowhere near the scene of the murder," said Dr. Zarkov. "That's right, because you were with the simulacra Minnig pretending to be his daughter."

"That's not true," said Glenna, uncrossing her legs. "Even if it was, that's no crime."

"It makes you a conspirator in the plan to kill Minnig," he said. "That means a life sentence with no possibility of parole for at least twenty years."

"I'm not easily frightened, Doctor," the girl said.

"You know what my reputation is on this planet."

"Grossly exaggerated."

"Be that as it may, it means I have influence—with the president, with the police. I can see to it you get better treatment, a lighter sentence."

Glenna smiled. "When Pan takes over, your influence won't be worth anything at all."

"So that's his name, is it? Pan. Well, that fits in with his interest in music and sound," said Zarkov. "So he's planning to take over this territory?"

"You'll learn all about it quite soon."

"Pan's going to issue an ultimatum?"

"Exactly," answered the girl. "Then, Doctor, things will be quite, quite different. You, should you still be alive, will have no influence at all. Whereas I—"

"Yes, you'll be in a position of power. Or so Pan promises you now."

"He'll keep his word."

"A man who can do what he's done is not going to worry about a promise he made to you."

"We shall see, Doctor."

From the pocket of his trousers the burly doctor took a small silver disc. "We'll see what your friend and associate over there has to say." He set the disc on the table and picked up a coil of wire.

"What is that thing?"

"Little gadget I thought up." He started winding wire around the girl's ankles. "I call it a truth bug."

"You're going to use it on me, too?"

"Hands in back of you now, please. There, that's fine." He tied her wrists together. "No, I'm giving you a chance to talk of your own free will."

"Very considerate," said Glenna, completely tied up now. "I'm betting on Pan."

"Yes, I can see where you'd have to. Otherwise all the stupid things you've been doing wouldn't make any sense."

He walked over to Hasp and clapped the silver disc against the side of the yellow man's temple.

Zarkov leaned closer to Hasp. "Give me his name again," he said.

"We take our orders from General Yate," he repeated, his eyes were closed and his voice was a monotone. The truth disc was clamped to the side of his head.

Zarkov looked over at Glenna, but she would not meet his eyes. He asked Hasp, "What's the purpose of all this?"

"When Estampa Territory falls," droned the yellow man, "Yate will be second in command."

"Where does this guy Pan come in?"

"He will rule."

"Where is he now?"

"Somewhere in Mazda Territory."

"Where exactly?"

"I don't know the exact location. But I have heard it called Perfect City."

"Perfect City, huh? Is Flash Gordon there?"

"I don't know."

"What about Dale Arden?"

"I don't know."

Dr. Zarkov straightened up. "What were you supposed to do with me?"

"Stun you."

"Then what?"

"General Yate is going to come for you."

"Come here to Paradise Park, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Were you supposed to contact him first?"

"No, he was confident we would succeed. He will arrive at sundown."

"Where will he show up?"

"We were to meet him in Workshop Three, next door."

"Is he coming alone?"

"I don't know."

Reaching out a large hand, Zarkov detached the disc. He dropped it into a pocket, went back to Glenna.

"Changed your mind about using that thing on me, Doctor?"

"No. Do you want to tell me what you know about Yate and the rest of Pan's followers?"

"I have nothing to tell you."

Nodding, he fished a roll of surgical tape out of another pocket. He gagged the girl, using a handkerchief as a pad. "I'll keep your appointment with the general," he said.

Zarkov turned out the lights in the workshop and stepped out into the beginning twilight.

Workshop Three was even larger and more cluttered. Androids in various stages of repair were stretched out on most of the worktables. Twists of bright wire, slivers of metal, discarded transistorized android sections were strewn carelessly on the floor.

"They do good work, but they don't keep a very neat shop," Zarkov said.

He went through the entire workshop, switching all its windows to black so that no one would see in from outside. That done, the doctor began to roam about. "I should have an hour or more before Yate shows up."

On top of a small portable computer, he found a spill of photos and drawings. They were all of the late Minister Minnig; several of the drawings gave the exact dimensions of his head, the exact coloration of his hair, eyes, skin. "So they did make a simulacra of Minnig," mused the doctor. "Now if I can find some evidence that they did the same thing for Flash."

He uncovered nothing, however.

Then, behind a pile of component cartons, he noticed the door of a cabinet. With one grunting shove, he pushed the cartons aside. He pulled the door open.

Inside the large deep cabinet stood a completed android. It was, down to the beard, he'd until recently had, an exact replica of Zarkov himself.

"Huh," he said aloud, "I wonder what they were going to do with that."

"I'll be glad to tell you," said a voice quite close behind him.

## CHAPTER 25

Flash knelt on the tough grass, watching the old man's hands drawing a map on a sheet of plywood. Flip was squatting next to him, and Tad and Jillian stood close by. "If that's the layout," Flash said, "then I had better aim for the control rooms first and get a look at what Pan is using to cause the sound plague."

Sawtel tapped the rough map of Perfect City with the tip of his pen. "According to what the lad can learn by reading the thoughts of those within the city," he said, "Dale Arden is now being held here. This is a tower building once known as the civic center complex. Now I fear Pan refers to it as his palace."

"Couple of miles from the control area," observed Flash.

"By following these underground tunnels and passageways, yes," said the old man.

"Once we get Dale," Flash said, "I want to get out fast." He ran a finger across the map from the palace to the tunnel. "Out this way here."

"Exactly," said Sawtel. "So if you intend to find out what you can about this new infernal machine of Pan's, you had best do it before you search for Dale Arden."

"We can forget the gizmo, daddy," suggested Flip. "I mean, you want to get your chick on out. I can dig that."

"Once we save her," said Flash, "we may not have a chance to see anything else."

"Could be we'll capture Pan ourselves," said Flip.

"I can't count on that," said Flash.

"Okay, man, then I'll do my fat green technician bit," said the impersonator. "And we'll get us on in that way. I sure hope I can swipe me a smock once I get inside."

"You'll emerge at this spot," the old man told him, indicating the map. "The wardrobe and supply rooms are only a matter of yards away."

"That's cool. Maybe I'll grab me a warm winter coat while I'm at it." He put his palms flat against his cheeks, concentrating. Very gradually the color of his skin began to change to a bright glistening green. "Um, that's not quite it. Too much yellow. Yeah, cool, that's got it now." Flip's features quivered, seeming to melt momentarily and then reform in new shapes. His hair retracted, and soon his green head was completely bald. Holding out his green hands in front of him, Flip said, "Yeah, that ought to do it."

The day was now waning. As the light began to drift away through the trees, giving way to dusk, Flash and the now green Flip left the others.

"Good luck," called Jillian.

"Man," complained Flip, "what a low-down wardrobe room this is. Not one full-length mirror."

"Pan probably doesn't want to encourage vanity," said Flash.

They had traveled this far in safety, using the tunnels and the secret passways which the old man had told them of.

"Do this thing fit okay? I mean, man, do I look nice and mellow?"

"That you do," said Flash.

"Let us commence then, Flash, baby." Flip, dressed in a technician's smock, moved cautiously to the door of the room. "Get one of them nutty smiles on your face now."



The first few slaves they encountered in this area of Perfect City paid no attention to them. They were able to move through several corridors without hindrance or trouble.

"I thought you were already over in Control C, Marek?"

Flip tugged at his bright-green ear, studying the man wearing a dark helmet who was coming their way down the pale-yellow corridor. Out of the side of his mouth he whispered to Flash, "I think Marek is my handle." In a louder voice, he said, "Good evening, how have you been keeping yourself?"

The man's eyebrows raised. "Uh ... fine," he said and passed on by.

"Could be I ain't got the voice down just right."

"Tad got us a location on Pan right before we left the jungle," said Flash. "This should still be his dinner and rest time."

"You know that and I know that, but I'm wondering does this Marek dude know that."

The corridor they were traveling along ended. A series of ramps supported on beams crisscrossed the huge three-story-high room which lay before them.

"From the few thought hints Tad was able to pick up," said Flash, "Pan's got his newer equipment in that section over there. That agrees with Sawtel's speculations." He nodded his head at an orange ramp which led to a doorway high up on the far wall.

"So let's us truck on over there and see if we can bluff our way in for a look-see."

They were halfway across the orange ramp, about a hundred feet above the floor, when a plump green man stepped through a doorway and onto a ramp which connected with theirs. Flip noticed him first and coughed into his hand.

"We got some trouble," he whispered to Flash.

It was the real Marek coming straight toward them.

He stopped, crying out, "What's the meaning of this?" and pointing a green finger at Flip.

"Must be one of those funny coincidences we're always reading about," said Flip.

The chief technician was obviously puzzled. But he realized something was wrong, something strange. From a pocket of his white smock, he pulled a small gold whistle. He thrust it between his green lips, blew into it.

Neither Flash nor his companion heard anything. The slaves, though, obviously did. Doors started to open all through the huge building. Slaves, carrying stunguns and blasters, came running out onto the colored ramps.

"Got me a notion," said Flip. "I'll dig you later." He left Flash's side, ran to the edge of their ramp, and leaped over.

Before Flash could take a step after him, a half-dozen slaves had reached him. Flash pivoted to face them. His foot snapped out and kicked the stungun out of the first man's hand. He walked into him, punching hard. The slave groaned and dropped to his knees.

Flash went after the next man. He got in two short jabs to the man's ribs.

Another half-dozen slaves were coming at him from the other direction.

Two of the heaviest slaves jumped on him at the same instant. Another brought his gun barrel down on Flash's head.

Flash went down under the blow. The weight of the two slaves pinned him to the smooth surface of the ramp. He managed to bring up his knees and pinwheel out of their grasp.

At the edge of the ramp, three more slaves leaped for him.

Suddenly there was nothing underfoot. All four of them, tangled and struggling, were in midair beyond

the edge. Flash twisted, striking out sharply with his elbow, as he fell. He managed to get himself on top of the heap when they hit the next ramp some fifteen feet below. Kicking, he jumped free and began to run.

But more of them were running for him from both directions on this new ramp.

He went over the edge of this one voluntarily.

He landed on the sky-blue ramp, ten feet further down. Inside his head he was going over the map Sawtel had drawn for him. There should be an emergency exit two ramps over from where he was. The trick was to get there.

At least fifty slaves were involved in the chase, more appearing every minute. None of them spoke or cried out. There was too much silence in their determined pursuit of him.

"Now if—" began Flash. He was stopped stiff where he stood, three good paces from the edge of the ramp.

One of them had used his stunpistol. Nearly a dozen of the slaves piled on Flash before he realized what had happened.

## CHAPTER 26

Letting his hands fall slowly to his sides, Zarkov turned around. "I'm slipping," he said. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I was already here." The thin green hand of General Yate held a blaster pistol aimed at him.

"Funny I didn't notice you."

"I was lying on that far table," said the green general. "You, no doubt, mistook me for an android." He smiled briefly. "I couldn't resist surprising you; I've been here for some time."

"You should have come to the rescue of your underlings."

"It was more amusing for me to wait and listen."

Wagging a thumb over his shoulder at the android replica of himself, Dr. Zarkov said, "You were going to tell me what this knicknack is for."

"Part of a contingency plan, Doctor," replied Yate. "Tomorrow afternoon, Pan will cut in on all broadcasts heard here in the capital."

"Going to present his terms, is he?"

"Exactly. Our esteemed President Bentancourt will be given a certain amount of time to capitulate. Should he be too stubborn it may be necessary to remove him from office—to remove him quite suddenly."

"The same way you tried to remove me down by the waterfront."

The thin green figure nodded. "No matter how busy

the president is, he will not refuse to see a man of as much importance as yourself. Minutes after you arrive, there will be an explosion."

"You think the vice president and the cabinet will be easier to deal with?"

"We have reason to believe so."

Zarkov's thumb wagged again. "This gadget's all finished?"

"Except for activating the bomb mechanism. That will be done tomorrow."

"Going to leave him in the closet until then?"

"You're certainly concerned with this, as you call it, gadget, Doctor," Yate observed. "I suppose you identify with it. As a matter of fact, he'll be picked up later this evening and taken elsewhere. If the president behaves at all sensibly there will be no need to employ your duplicate as an assassin."

Dr. Zarkov took a step backward. "What about the real me?"

"Now that I've stepped in, we can follow through with our original plan. You will be rendered unconscious and taken to a safe hiding place," explained the green general. "After Pan takes over, as he surely will, you will have a choice to make. You might find it to your benefit to work with us."

Zarkov scratched his cheek where his beard used to be. "That's an interesting idea," he said, brow furrowed. "A man who's been able to accomplish what this guy Pan has, utilizing sound, I'd like to get together with him."

"Once Estampa Territory has fallen, you'll get your chance, Doctor."

"I imagine there'd be a—let's say, a salary involved?"

"Pan rewards his followers well."

Zarkov scratched his other cheek. "Well, now," he said. "Perhaps I ought to tell you what's wrong with

this andy of yours, why it's not likely to fool the president."

Yate's eyes made a clicking blink. "You mean he's seen you since you shaved your beard?"

"Yeah, I talked to him just before I came over here," answered Zarkov. "It was the prez who helped me get the airtruck in a hurry." He cleared his throat. "That's the main problem; the other thing is the eyes."

"What's wrong with the eyes?"

"Wrong color," boomed Zarkov. "At least the left one is."

"I hadn't noticed that." Yate stepped closer to Zarkov.

The doctor swung down swiftly with his hand, delivering a chopping blow to the green man's gun wrist. At the same time he shoved back into the standing android with his buttocks.

The mechanical man came falling out of the cabinet like a felled tree. The head hit against Yate's head, hard, and there was an echoing clanging sound.

"Curiouser and curiouser," muttered Zarkov. He stepped on the fallen general's arm, kicking the gun away with his other foot.

He dragged Yate out from under the replica of himself. About to throw a punch to the green general's jaw, he hesitated.

A thin wisp of smoke was curling out of Yate's ear. A loud purring rattled his chest.

"I'll be damned," said Zarkov. "This one's an android, too." He thrust out a foot, tipping over the simulacrum General Yate.

The android fell to the floor. Its eyes clicked shut as more smoke swirled out of its ears.

"If he's an andy, too, then who the hell is Pan's confederate?" Zarkov knelt to make a few adjustments in the fallen android.

## CHAPTER 27

Flash opened his eyes and everything continued to be black.

He was lying on a smooth padded surface in an absolutely dark room. He could see nothing of his surroundings, but he had a feeling of enclosure. He knew he was inside a room of some kind.

Slowly he pushed himself up to a sitting position. The darkness pressed all around him. Flash raised one hand above his head, keeping it there. He rose to his feet, feeling a little unsteady. There was, as he had sensed, no ceiling immediately above him.

He had the impression, though, that this was not a large room. With one hand above him and one held out at his side, he began cautiously to move ahead. Seven paces brought him up against a padded wall. Flash ran his hand over the soft pliant surface. "No windows or doors here," he said to himself.

He worked his way along the wall, going to the left. In eight sideways paces he came to a corner of the room. He proceeded to explore this next wall. It, too, was blank and padded. Finally, when he reached the fourth wall, his exploring fingertips touched a large oval window of synthglass. He checked this final wall out and concluded, "A window, anyway, but nothing that feels like a door."

Flash returned to the single window, ran his hand across and around it. There seemed to be no way to open it. The tough glass wasn't the kind you could

break. "Looks like they dumped me in here through the roof. Either that or there's a concealed door in one of these blank walls."

The absolute blackness continued for some time. Flash had returned to the center of the room, was sitting crosslegged on the floor. "Doesn't seem to be any way out of here. So we'll have to wait and see what Pan has in mind."

Another hour went by. Flash had a good time sense, even in this black room where there were no visible clues to the passage of time.

Flash stiffened, alert. The room was growing lighter very gradually. This protracted dawning of light allowed him to see what sort of place he was in. As he had figured in the dark, it was a room about fifteen feet square with one large window. The walls, he now saw, were ivory-white, as was the floor. The pale-blue light which was filling the room emanated from light strips set flush in the ceiling.

Flash sensed Pan's presence before he actually saw the man. He turned, and there was the tall bearded man on the other side of the tinted oval window.

"Good evening, Flash Gordon," said Pan, a smile on his lips. His voice came to Flash out of the ceiling.

"You're Pan?"

"I am called that, yes."

"And you have Dale Arden prisoner here in your city," said Flash, watching the man.

"She is here," answered Pan, "but as a willing guest rather than as a prisoner."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Now perhaps, but soon you will share her outlook and feelings," said Pan, laughing "I can assure you of that." He leaned close to the window. "There are a few things I must know, Flash Gordon. If you will answer a few questions for me I will be most appreciative. How did you get here?"



Flash shrugged and turned up his palms. "I came to, and here I was."

"I don't relish flippancy," said Pan. "How did you get inside Perfect City? How did you get into the restricted areas?"

Unless Pan was bluffing, he didn't know the part Flip had played. Which might mean Flip had been able to get away when the slaves attacked him. "I had a hunch you had some kind of underground headquarters in this area," answered Flash. "Once you snatched my ship, I knew I was in the right spot. For the past day I've been searching for some kind of entrance. This afternoon, I saw some of your men coming out of a concealed tunnel."

"Indeed? And how do you come to be dressed as one of my slaves?"

"Is that what you call them? I waited until one of them strayed from the pack, then jumped him. You should find him out in the brush someplace."

"The helmet you were wearing," said Pan, "had its works ripped out."

"Seemed to me I'd better do that before wearing the thing."

"Are you aware," Pan inquired, "that six slaves did not return from a patrol whose purpose was to search for you? Not one, Flash Gordon, but six! Would you have me believe you overpowered a half dozen of my men?"

"No, I didn't," said Flash. "Maybe they just got tired of their perfect life down here with you and took off."

"Quite impossible," said Pan. He moved back a few steps from the watching window. "You were in the capital of Estampa when I caused the first of my sound manifestations to occur."

"Yes, that's right."

"Then you are fully aware of what I can do with sound," Pan said, smiling, "Unless you discard this insolent attitude and tell me all I want to know, I'll—"

He finished the sentence by throwing a switch on a control panel beside him.

A harsh keening began to pour out of the ceiling speakers.

For a few seconds it didn't bother Flash. Then his bones began to ache. He became aware of his skull beneath his scalp as it ached and throbbed. He fought against the impulse, but finally brought his hands to his ears to try to keep out the sound.

Then abruptly it stopped.

Pan said something, but Flash didn't catch it.

"Answer me," said Pan.

"I didn't . . . hear . . . what . . . you . . ."

"I said, are you ready to comply with my wishes?"

"I've told you how I got here."

A new sound commenced and drilled into his skull, harsher than the one before. It rattled his bones, shaking him like a cat shaking a mouse in its teeth. Someone screamed. Flash wasn't sure if it was he who had screamed or not. His body felt as though it was contracting. Clutching at his stomach, he toppled forward.

" . . . talk . . . ?" Pan was asking him something.

"What?"

"Will you talk now?"

"No."

"This can go on for a good long time," warned Pan as he flicked another switch.

But it didn't. The next howl of noise was so harsh and intense that it pushed Flash down into unconsciousness in less than a minute.

## CHAPTER 28

Fog came rolling in across the harbor. The floating globes of light which illuminated the waterfront streets and rampways were blurred. A private air-cruiser dropped quietly down through the mist to settle on the landing area behind a dark silent warehouse dome. There were no other aircraft on the landing lot.

The door of the cruiser swung open. A medium-sized man in a rumpled two-piece flying suit got out and went shuffling toward the dome. The door mechanism recognized him; a panel in the warehouse wall slid aside.

Dr. Nazzaro took out a ptyochief and rubbed at his forehead. "We're very near," he said, "very near to victory and complete control."

As he made his way through the hallway, the floors and walls of each section glowed faintly for an instant before he entered it and turned dark again when he had passed.

At the very center of the warehouse was a circular workroom. When the rumpled Minister of Health was inside it, the door closed and six globes of light began to glow.

Sitting next to a floating worktable was a large synthwood carton. Dr. Nazzaro hurried, in his shuffling way, to the closed crate. "In a way," he said, "I hope we don't have to use this. I've developed almost a fondness for President Bentancourt, fool that he is. Perhaps he can be persuaded to surrender to Pan."

Dr. Nazzaro lifted the lid. "Ah, excellent. A beautiful likeness of that egocentric Zarkov. The arrogant nose, conceited curl of lip, the ridiculously opulent beard. Yes, this will certainly fool Bentancourt. I must remember to make certain the voice blares out loud enough."

Leaving the lid open, Nazzaro reached over to the worktable to pick up a black instrument case. "A few simple procedures will activate the explosive mechanism, then our blustering friend will be ready to serve us."

He leaned over the crate.

Two powerful hands shot up and caught his wrists.

Nazzaro's mouth opened, but only dry gasps came out.

"Arrogant nose, huh?" said Zarkov, sitting up so that his nose was inches from the rumpled Nazzaro's. "I'll agree with you about the beard, since it isn't mine."

"Isn't yours?"

"I borrowed it from your andy." Keeping his strong grip on the other man, Zarkov climbed out of the crate.

"Borrowed? I don't understand. The Yate android called me only a little more than an hour ago to report all was well, that you were stunned and a prisoner on a barge out in the harbor, with Glenna and Hasp standing guard."

"A few simple procedures were all it took to find out what your Yate andy knew, and to get him to phone you and tell you what I wanted him to," said Zarkov. He let go of the rumpled Nazzaro, shoved him back, and tugged a pistol from his worksuit pocket.

Regaining his balance, Nazzaro smoothed his hands over the many wrinkles in front of his suit. "Apparently I underestimated you, Doctor."

"Apparently," agreed Zarkov. "You'll find I'm not an egomaniac at all, but simply a man who always tells the truth about his numerous abilities."

"Then you've suspected me?"

"Not until I found out Yate was just a bucket of bolts," replied Zarkov. He tugged at his beard with his free hand and part of it detached from his chin. "Then it occurred to me you were one of the few other people who could have known Flash was going to call on Minnig, and that I was going to be looking for the guy who piloted that aircruiser. So I was expecting you to lift that lid, Nazzaro."

"This is all very disheartening." Nazzaro kept rubbing at his clothes.

"What did Pan promise you?"

"A great deal more than I have now."

"You were supposed to be a good man, Nazzaro, efficient and loyal."

"Even a good, efficient, loyal man can want more than he has," said Nazzaro. "Especially after I met Glenna, I began to think—"

"Same old story," boomed Zarkov.

"Where is she?"

"Turned over to the police," said Zarkov. "Inspector Carr is talking to her right now. Speaking of whereabouts, I want to know where Dale Arden is."

"She is being held by Pan."

"Where? In that nitwit Perfect City of his out in the Mazda jungles?"

"In Perfect City," said Nazzaro. "I can assure you, however, that it is a wonderful place."

"What about Flash Gordon?"

"I know nothing about him," the rumpled man said. "Pan has his aircruiser, but not the man himself. At least, according to the most recent intelligence I have from Perfect City."

"Where have you got the real General Yate stashed?"

"He, too, is in Perfect City. Our android simulacra replaced him nearly three months ago."

Zarkov plucked the truth disc out of a pocket. "I'm

going to pay Pan a visit," he announced in his booming voice. "You're going to communicate with him, using whatever regular channels you have set up, and tell him all goes well, that arrogant egocentric Zarkov is snoozing on a barge, and the imitation Zarkov is all loaded and ready to go for tomorrow. Then you're going to tell me all about Perfect City and the best way to get inside the nitwit place."

"I'm not—" The disc was slapped against his temple and Nazzaro didn't finish the sentence.

## CHAPTER 29

Sawtel's head was bent low. He stood, slightly bent, in the jungle darkness. "How are they faring now, Tad?" He did not look directly at the lanky young man.

"Flip is still at large in the city," answered the mind-reading youth. "He has some kind of plan. His thoughts are a little jumbled, but from what I can gather, he's pretty confident it will work."

"A plan to rescue Flash and the girl?" asked the old man.

"Yes, but there's no way of telling whether or not it'll work."

"Flash remains a prisoner?"

"Pan has used torture on him," said Tad. "Torture involving some of his sound-wave instruments. Flash is unconscious at the moment and Pan has left him. But he intends to return and interrogate him again. I sense that he will not, no matter what Flash tells him, let him live."

Jillian approached the pair. "You know the secret ways in and out of the city, Sawtel," she said. "You know the concealed passageways that'll take us right into Pan's lair. Come on and tell us how to get to where Flash is being held—Tad and I will go in."

The old man's beard fluttered as he shook his head. "It's dangerous," he said, "very dangerous."

"Forgive me," said Tad, "but I've just read your

thoughts, Sawtel. I believe we should try what you're thinking."

"What is it?" asked the red-haired girl looking from one to the other of them.

Sighing, Sawtel said, "I know how to get to the control sector of Perfect City. With any luck I could get to the control rooms and turn off a few things."

"You mean," asked Jillian, "like the slave helmets?"

"Yes," answered the old man. "With any luck, as I say."

"And while you're doing that," suggested Tad, "Jillian and I can go into Pan's palace and make a try at getting Flash, Dale, and Flip out of there."

The freed slaves who'd stayed with them watched in silence.

"I suppose," said Sawtel, "that since I left Perfect City I've really been a coward. Yes, there's no use arguing about it. I could have done what I'm contemplating now at any time. Instead, I wasted months gathering an army."

"Sure," said the girl, "it would be a lot safer with several hundred crack guerilla troops to help us. But we can do it—I think we've got to. I don't want to let Flash Gordon die."

"Seeing it all go awry," said the old man, more to himself than to them, "I suppose it did something to me. I had such hopes for what Pan said we were going to do, and then all at once I realized that none of it was true. I shouldn't have run then—I should have fought. Stopped him right then."

"We'll stop him now," said Jillian.

After a few seconds Sawtel nodded. "Yes, that is what we will do," he said. He tapped Tad's arm. "Read my thoughts now. I'll give you the safest route into the building Pan has styled as his palace."

"Yes, I'm getting it," said Tad, eyes half-closed. "Wait, Sawtel, go back and think me through that tunnel under the sewage plant again. Okay, got it." He



opened his eyes and laughed. "No, you needn't worry. I'll follow Jillian's orders and not do anything impetuous."

"I didn't realize you'd catch that fleeting thought," said the old man, smiling. "But as long as you did, do be very careful, both of you. We know what Pan's done to the cities and the people in Estampa Territory, what he's doing to Flash Gordon. You two must proceed with great caution." He held out a gnarled hand to the girl. "I'll need a stun pistol."

Jillian reached into her rucksack. "I hope you won't need to use it."

The old man took the weapon and said nothing.

Jillian turned toward the watching freeman. "You can wait for us out here if you like," she said. "If everything goes well, maybe some of your friends and relatives will also be free soon."

A few minutes later the three were moving through the night, closer to the buried city.

## CHAPTER 30

Time had passed. Flash knew that. He awoke in utter darkness once again.

He sat up, hurting, feeling as though his skeleton was somehow outside his body. His head ached and, when he tried to stand, he found himself swaying.

Carefully Flash lowered himself to the padded floor. "There's got to be a way out of here," he told himself. "I can't let Pan. . . ."

The pale-blue light started illuminating the room. The control room beyond the oval window blossomed with light as well.

"You don't look rested, Flash Gordon," said the voice of Pan, laughing.

The laughter came rasping out of the ceiling speakers.

Flash made himself get up and face the bearded man.

"Apparently, my first persuasive treatment was not sufficient," observed Pan. "I see you're still able to stand."

His laughter filled the room.

Flash made no reply.

"You no doubt realize," continued Pan, "that I am only amusing myself with you, Flash Gordon, showing you what power I control. There actually is no need to persuade you with sound to tell me what I wish to know."

"You're going to have to use something, Pan."

"Exactly," Pan said. "But I have merely to put this on your handsome head and you will do whatever I ask." A slave helmet dangled from his hand. "To show you how effective this little piece of headgear is, I've brought along someone to watch this current interrogation."

"Dale," said Flash.

The girl was beside Pan now. She wore one of the slave helmets. She glanced casually at Flash through the tinted glass, a bland smile on her face.

"Say hello to Flash Gordon, my dear," suggested the smiling Pan.

"Hello, Flash Gordon," said Dale in a level voice.

"Damn you, Pan!" Flash charged at the oval window, slamming both his fists against it.

Then the sounds started again. Worse, much worse, than before.

Dale continued to smile.

Manyon, Pan's heavysset green aide, walked cautiously across the living room of his own private suite. Glancing around, he got down on all fours to pull a palm-sized music-playing unit out from under a sideboard. Then from a pocket in his nightrobe, he took a microcassette that had been smuggled in to him that morning.

Smiling, the green man settled down in a floating armchair and inserted the cassette into the player in his hand. He thrust the earjack into one green ear, leaned back. Jazz music, with blaring brass and tinny piano, poured into his ear. Popular stuff, the kind of music Pan did not allow in Perfect City. Manyon closed his eyes, tapping his fingers on the chair arm in time with the music.

"Fool, is this how you spend the eve of my greatest triumph?"

Manyon's eyes flapped open. The earjack popped out of his ear. "I was merely checking over prior

speeches of yours, Master Pan, to locate further brilliant phrases of yours for use in—”

“Enough of your simpering, Manyon.” Pan stood a few feet from the seated man, a dark cloak wrapped around himself. “Do you have the keys to the prisoner cells?”

“Of course, Master Pan,” replied the green man. He got up, letting the little cassette player drop to the chair seat. “You know only you and I have the keys, since I am the most trusted—”

“I want the keys to the room where Flash Gordon is,” demanded Pan. “Also that of Dale Arden’s place of imprisonment.”

“Here, sir, is the key to Flash Gordon’s interrogation cell,” said the green man. He took a ring of keys from the pocket of his robe. “But surely you remember, Master Pan, that Dale Arden is now a slave and does not require locking up.” He tilted his head to the right, eying his employer. “In fact, I had the impression you were with Flash Gordon at this very moment.”

“Which is why you thought you might get in a little illicit listening, dolt.” Pan strode up to Manyon, gripping the green man’s shoulder. “Let me make something perfectly clear to you, Manyon.”

“What, Master Pan?”

“Well, for one thing, daddy, I ain’t Master Pan. You dig? And now I’m going to turn into you for a while, dude. So forgive me for this.”

Manyon’s mouth formed an O. He had the impression, as he fell to the floor from a blow to the chin, that he’d been slugged by himself.

## CHAPTER 31

The corridor was long and straight, lit by strips of pale-yellow light. Three slaves in black tunics moved silently along it. After their noiseless passage, it was empty.

A minute passed, then a circular section in the floor of the corridor lifted partially. Sawtel, alone now, emerged and pulled himself up. Once he'd shut the round trap door there was no trace of it.

The white-bearded man began making his way along the hall.

A lone slave appeared at the far end. "Halt there," he ordered. "Who are—?"

Sawtel's stunpistol flashed out of his tunic and quietly whirred.

The slave took one step in the old man's direction before freezing.

Sawtel ran to the stunned man. "Now, if I remember rightly there's a door right about here." He pressed with his gnarled fingers at the smooth ivory wall.

A section of the wall eased open. Straining, the old man tumbled the slave guard into the cubicle beyond the secret door. "You'll be able to get yourself out of there shortly."

He continued on his way. Three corridors branched off the end of that one, each lit with a different color of light. Without hesitating, the old man chose the hall which glowed in pale blue. This one curved and zig-zagged down and down.

"Final bend coming up," said Sawtel to himself. He slowed, scanning the blank wall. "Yes, here." He pressed and another concealed door opened to him.

This time the old man stepped into the wall. A very narrow passageway was hidden there; there was no light. Sawtel needed none, for he knew where he was going.

When he came to the end of the dark passage, the old man stopped and listened. Then he reached out, pressing his fingertips against the padded metal.

A huge room opened before Sawtel now, filled with bright machinery and an intricacy of metal catwalks and walkways. There were three slave technicians in the room, all with their backs to the old man.

"You'll soon be free," the old man said to himself as he fired his stun pistol.

Slowly the nearest slave began to slide from the workstool he'd been working on. As his stiffened body toppled over sideways, his right hand brushed an electric screwdriver from his table.

The screwdriver hit the metal leg of the stool and made a pinging sound.

The other two technicians spun, reaching for the blaster pistols strapped to their sides.

Sawtel's stun pistol whirred again.

"Now to get to work," he said, moving into the room and bypassing the three stunned figures. "I should have had the nerve to do this all by myself long ago."

He climbed a metal ladder, inched along a catwalk, and stopped in front of a complex control panel. After studying it for several seconds, the old man turned off a dozen switches and toggles. "There now," he said, chuckling. "Now, there are no more slaves." He twisted a finger into his beard. "Better make certain there won't be any more again."

With considerable agility, Sawtel hurried down the ladder to the worktable. He selected a silver hammer and went rapidly back up to the panel controlling the

slave helmets. "This ought to do it," he said, and began smashing.

Everything was different in the white square in the center of Perfect City. The silence was gone. People were talking, shouting, calling to each other.

"What's happened?"

"Something's broken down."

"We're not slaves any more."

"Let's get off these damn helmets quick."

"What could have happened?"

"It could be a trick, another of his cruel tricks."

"Trick or not, we're not slaves."

"Let's get him!"

"Let's get Pan!"

"The hell with that. Let's just get out of here!"

"Yeah, he's right. Let's get out."

"We'll have to fight our way out. There's no way to open the exit ways."

"There is—look!"

"Look, they're all opening."

"There's the jungle up there."

"Let's go, let's get out of here!"

"It may be a trick."

"I'll risk it."

"Look, he's made it. He's outside and nothing's happened."

"Come on, I'm going too."

Noise filled the streets and the ramps. The people who had been trapped there by Pan were free and they swarmed away from Perfect City. Laughter echoed through the spotless streets.

"He's done it," said Tad, a few minutes earlier.

"Is he all right?" asked Jillian.

"Yes," answered the lanky boy. "Sawtel's going to remain in the control room for a while longer. He has a few more things to take care of."

The two of them were making their way through a tunnel beneath the building which housed Pan and his pipe organ.

"What about my brother?" asked the red-haired girl.

"He's working here in the palace," said Tad. "We'll find him soon."

"Let's get to Flash Gordon first," said the girl. "He's been suffering much more."

Tad held out a restraining arm. He frowned, eyes nearly closed. "No one in this corridor now," he said after a moment. He touched the wall and a portion of it slid aside.

"Listen to that," said Jillian.

The shouting and laughing of the freed slaves could be heard dimly in the corridor they had stepped into.

"They're realizing they aren't slaves any more," said Tad. "Most of them are going to leave Perfect City right away."

"Do you know where Pan is?"

"He's stopped torturing Flash again," answered the youth. "He's in his sanctum playing his pipe organ. Dale Arden is with him."

"Then we'll have a chance to get to Flash."

"Yes," said Tad. "We can go there. But wait."

"What is it?"

"I've just picked up Flip's thoughts." Tad laughed. "He even thinks in that old-fashioned jargon. But he seems to be about to rescue Flash himself. Yes, that's what he's up to, so we can concentrate on your brother."

"You're sure Flash is okay?"

"Yes, Flip can ... oh, no, you can't ..." The boy stopped, his face white.

"What's wrong, Tad. What's happened?"

The boy didn't answer for a moment. "I ... it's nothing. I happened to catch one of Sawtel's thoughts. It's nothing to worry about, Jillian. Let's get moving."



“She took hold of his hand. “Tad, what did you find out?”

“It’s nothing,” Tad answered. “Really. Come on, I’ll lead you to your brother.”

The girl hesitated, then followed him.

## CHAPTER 32

Bare green feet were coming down through the ceiling.

Flash had been lying sprawled on his back. Pushing with his elbows, he began to rise. "Now what?"

"Be cool, daddy, and don't flip your wig like. The marines have landed, you know."

Flash shook his head, trying to clear some of the pain out of himself. "Flip, is that you?"

"Nobody else but, man. In person and in the flesh. I'm impersonating this cat name of Manyon who's a big wheel here in PC." He dropped to the floor. "They been giving you a bad time, man?"

"Not so good," admitted Flash.

"Okay, you think as how you can climb out of this here hole through that opening up there?"

Narrowing his eyes, Flash glanced upward. "Yeah, with a boost from you."

"Good enough, daddy." Flip linked his now green fingers together to form a stirrup.

Flash stepped on it with one foot and pushed upward. He had a few seconds of dizziness, but was able to catch hold of the edge of the opening in the ceiling. "Got it," he said as he caught hold of the rim of the exit hole.

"Way to go, daddy," said Flip. "Now I sure hope you can tug me on out of here."

Flash rolled across the padded metal roof of the cell he'd been confined in. This was a corridor up here,

white-walled and lit with strips of pale-orange light. He went back to the opening and was about to reach his arms down for Flip to catch.

"Here now, what goes on?" A tall black slave was trotting down the corridor toward him, hand hovering over his holster.

"Sounds like something's going on wrong," said Flip down in the cell.

Flash stood to face the charging guard. "You better listen to the man down there," he said, pointing at the opening.

"You're Flash Gordon," said the slave. His gun appeared in his hand, pointing right at Flash.

Tensing, Flash threw himself sideways. A shot from the blaster went sizzling through the spot where he had been.

"Surrender," shouted the slave.

Flash rose to make a dive for the black man. But another wave of dizziness hit him. He took one step and stumbled.

Down in the cell Flip was making a concerted effort to jump up and get a grip on the edge of the opening. "Higher, man, jump higher." He was not succeeding.

The slave took careful aim at Flash with his gun. Then he straightened, beginning to laugh. "Hey, what happened? What am I doing this for?" He ripped the helmet from his head. "You okay, friend?"

Flash stared at him. "What's happened to you?"

"I'm not quite sure, friend," replied the slave. "Except this helmet just turned off and I don't work for Pan anymore. Anything I can do for you before I take off and get myself far away from here?"

"Can you help me haul my friend up out of there?"

"Sure thing, friend." The big black man knelt beside the opening. "Grab hold, buddy."

Flip had returned to his natural self now. "Hi, brother," he said, catching hold of the proffered hand.

In a moment he was standing beside Flash. "Much obliged, daddy."

"Nice meeting you," said the freed slave as he wandered off.

"That's very cool," said Flip. "What you think done happened, Flash baby?"

"It could be that only that guy's helmet broke down," said Flash. "I think, though, that maybe Sawtel decided to come into the city and take a hand."

"You mean like he maybe got to the central controls and cut off everybody's water at the same time, man?"

"We can soon find out," said Flash. "Do you know where Pan is holding Dale?"

"Yeah, man," replied Flip. "I know this place inside and out now. She's up in his music room."

"Where he controls the sound plague?"

"No, that's over in the control area. I mean like where he plays music, you dig? Seems like this cat is fond of laying down sounds on a pipe organ. How do you like that, a pipe organ?"

"Can you lead me there?"

"Oh, yeah, daddy. Just follow along in my wake." Flip began walking rapidly along the corridor.

"Thanks for bailing me out," said Flash. "How'd you manage it?"

"Well, when all those dudes jumped us, I said to myself, Flip, my boy, if you wasn't a carbon copy of this technical cat, they wouldn't know who you was maybe. So I whipped off my white smock, changed into a bland-looking pink-colored slave and started yelling like the rest of them. You will recall I was wearing my old slave threads under that smock." He jabbed a finger to the left. "We go this way, baby."

There was noise in the new corridor they'd entered. The slaves who worked there were talking among themselves, helmets held in their hands or tossed on the metal floor.

"Looks like it is all of them, then," said Flash.

"That's very cool," observed Flip. "No more slaves."

He beckoned Flash to follow him up a stairway. No one paid much attention to the two of them.

"Anyways," continued Flip, "I did my slave bit for a while until I wormed my way into this-here building. Then I kind of skulked around and listened to this and that. I remember this Manyon cat and that he was pretty high up in the flunky ranks. So I did me a little snooping and found out he might have a set of keys to unlock your prison. Then I did one of my best impersonations yet. I swiped a cloak out of a vacant suite of rooms and I came on to Manyon like I was Pan himself. Fooled him long enough to get the keys."

Flash grinned. "I'm glad I got the benefit of some of your finest performances."

"Oh, man, I'm good all the time," said Flip. "But, yeah, I think I'm really zinging tonight." He slowed down and stopped. "We got to go careful now. We're getting mighty close."

## CHAPTER 33

President Bentancourt sat at his semicircular metal desk, forlornly shuffling through reports on the effects of the plague of sound in his territory. He pushed back, stood up from the desk, and walked with shoulders hunched to the window of his office. Ribbons of fog were floating by through the dark. Hands behind his back, he stood watching the night. "What's become of Zarkov?" he mused. "It's been hours since he was here, with his beard shaved off and demanding the loan of an airtruck. I wish he'd told me exactly what he was. . . ."

Honking sounded outside his window. An airtruck was circling the executive building.

Down below in the courtyard appeared two secret service men, waving their arms at the president and shouting. "Get away from the windows, sir."

Bentancourt opened the window, cupping his hands to his mouth to call down, "It's not an assassin, it's Dr. Zarkov."

The truck landed on the sparkling black flagstones of the courtyard. A moment later, Zarkov leaped from the cab.

The president leaned further out the window. "Now he seems to have a beard again," he said. "Or at least part of one."

"Come on down, Prez," invited the doctor in his resounding voice.

There were four secret service men in the foggy courtyard now, forming a tight circle around Zarkov.

When the president reached the outside, a fifth secret service agent hurried to his side. "You shouldn't have exposed yourself out here, sir."

"Nonsense, I trust Dr. Zarkov."

"We suspect this fellow's wearing a fake beard, Mr. President, and may not be—"

"I've cleared up this end of things for you," boomed Zarkov as he strode over to President Bentancourt.

"Don't touch the president," cautioned the secret service man.

Zarkov grunted at him and went over to yank open the rear of his airtruck. "Exhibit A," he bellowed. "This one's name is Hasp, nothing more than an underling." He hefted the bound-and-gagged man out of the truck, tossed him to the nearest secret service agent. "Be careful with this next one." He hopped up into the truck, then leaped out with Glenna in his arms. He stood in the fog and explained to the president. "This is the gal who helped frame Flash Gordon for the killing of Minister Minnig. They used an andy simulacrum of Minnig and another one of Flash. I'll give you all the details when I get back from the jungle."

The platinum-haired girl was still gagged, but her flashing eyes told what she thought of the burly scientist.

"Jungle?" said President Bentancourt.

"Mazda Territory," amplified Zarkov. He handed Glenna over to another puzzled secret service man. "Let me explain my truckload of crooks first." He reached in and tugged out the General Yate android.

"Yate was plotting against me, too?"

"This isn't Yate; it's another andy." Zarkov let the mechanical man clang to the flagstones. "Inspector Carr is out at Paradise Park right now cleaning out their andy factory. He'll give you more dope than I've got time to."

"You mean," asked the president, "that the murder of Minnig is tied in with the sound plague?"

"Obviously." Zarkov jumped into the shadowy interior of the truck once more and came leaping out carrying the tied Dr. Nazzaro. "Here's the local mastermind behind the whole thing. He's in cahoots with a guy calling himself Pan."

"Nazzaro?" said Bentancourt, taking a step back.

"The real Dr. Nazzaro, too," Zarkov told him, "and not a facsimile."

"I don't understand," began the shaken president.

"Simplest thing in the world," said Dr. Zarkov. "And I've been on several dozen different worlds. Nazzaro wanted more power and more money. Pan made him an offer. He took it."

"Then that was what was behind all this? More than just destruction?"

"You'll find almost all destruction has a motive behind it," boomed Zarkov. "Tomorrow Pan was going to issue an ultimatum. Turn over the territory to him and his boys or the sound-wave destruction would continue."

"He can still issue an ultimatum," pointed out the president.

"No, because I'm going to fly out to his jungle hideaway and take care of him before he gets the chance," said Dr. Zarkov. "I guarantee it." He gave Nazzaro to another of the secret service men. To one who was empty-handed, he said, "Call your military field and tell them to get an aircruiser ready for Zarkov. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Shall I—?"

"Yes," the president told him. "Whatever he wants."

"I'll see you sometime tomorrow." Zarkov trotted toward the cab of the airtruck.

In a moment, it roared off into the misty night.

Looking at the three prisoners and the spread-eagle android, President Bentancourt said, "I still don't quite understand about his beard."



## CHAPTER 34

Dale suddenly realized the music she was listening to was dreadful. Strangely enough it had seemed beautiful only a moment ago. She looked curiously around her, noticing that everything seemed different.

Pan was at the gigantic pipe organ, completely immersed in his music and paying no attention to the girl.

Quietly she left the white chair she had been sitting in. Moving her hands slowly up, she lifted off the slave helmet. For some reason, it no longer controlled her. Perhaps it's some trick of Pan's, she thought, some new kind of torture. She stood watching the musician's arched back. But if it is, he doesn't seem to be paying too much attention.

The terrible music continued to pour out of the pipe organ, wild and awful.

Whatever's happening, reflected the girl, I've got to take advantage of it—got to get away from here. She took a few careful steps toward the doorway. Then she remembered Flash. "Oh, lord, I'd forgotten about Flash," she said to herself. "Pan's got him locked in that torture room." Recalling what she had watched Pan do to Flash, the girl shuddered.

Pan's long-fingered hands rose and fell over the organ keys, swooping like hunchbacked birds of prey.

I can't remember where the door to Flash's cell is, Dale thought. But Pan must have some kind of key, some way to open that awful room.

She saw a pistol now. A blaster pistol with a silver barrel left by Pan on top of a pseudomarle table near the pipe organ. If I can get hold of that, I can force him to free Flash.

Dale started moving slowly and carefully toward the weapon.

She was still ten feet short of it when Pan suddenly wheeled around. "You're not attentive enough, my dear," he said. "I wish . . ." He shot to his feet. "What's happened to you slave helmet? Get it at once. That is an order from your master."

Dale sprinted, making a desperate grab for the bright pistol.

Pan anticipated her, reaching the weapon first. He snatched it up and pointed it at the girl. "Stay right there, my dear," he shouted. "As lovely as you are, I won't hesitate to shoot you down."

Dale let her hands fall to her side. "Give orders while you can, Pan," she said.

"What are you insinuating, my dear?"

"I was just thinking that it would be too bad for all your plans if my helmet was not the only one that had stopped working."

Snarling, Pan came to her and grabbed her arm. "What do you know about this? Is this some scheme of that fool Zarkov?"

"I don't know," answered the girl.

The bearded man shoved her away and ran to the far wall of the room. He pressed his fingertips to certain spots, causing a section of wall to move aside and reveal a bank of seven television monitoring screens. "Stations nine and ten report to me," he demanded.

Only silence answered him.

Angrily Pan jabbed at buttons beneath several of the screens. Images appeared on the oval screens. Sound issued from speaker grids. "What's this?" asked Pan. He heard the talking, shouting, and laughter of his slaves as they departed Perfect City. "Nothing's

working—none of the helmets.”

The seventh screen remained black. Pan, an angry rumble in his throat, pushed at the control buttons beneath it over and over. “Come in, control room. Come in, I say.”

“Things are falling apart,” said Dale.

Pan turned and slapped her across the cheek. “I told you I won’t stand for any flippancy.”

The girl fell back.

“It’s your fault,” accused Pan. “You and Gordon and that fool Zarkov.” He raised his hand to strike her again.

“That’s enough, Pan,” said a grim voice.

Pan’s head pivoted, scowling. “Gordon!” He said that one word, then turned the pistol toward the big blond man who was striding toward him.

Dale acted. As hard as she could, she brought down both hands across Pan’s gun arm.

The bearded man howled in pain, letting the silver gun fall.

Flash was on him. He grabbed Pan by the front of his dark tunic. Hit him on the jaw, once, and then again.

Pan staggered backwards, his black cloak billowing out. He ripped the garment from his shoulders, and threw himself at Flash.

Flash dodged the charge, giving a chopping blow to Pan’s neck as he sailed by.

Pan went down on his knees.

Flash stood over him, watchful.

All at once Pan butted up with his head, taking Flash hard in the pit of the stomach.

His breath knocked out of him, Flash staggered backward across the ivory floor.

With a roar, Pan grabbed the pseudomarble tabletop and sent it cartwheeling straight at Flash.

Flash couldn’t avoid it in time. He fell, cracking his head against the hard tabletop.

Pan had the pistol in his hand again, but he did not use it on Flash. Instead he ran for the doorway. "Out of my way or you're a dead man," he told Flip, who'd been standing near the entrance to the room.

"Okay, man." Flip moved aside.

Pan ran along the corridor.

Tossing the pseudomarle circle away from him, Flash got up and went running in pursuit.

"Sorry I didn't grab that dude, Flash baby," apologized Flip as Flash went by.

"We'll get him now."

But when Flash reached the corridor there was no sign of Pan at all. The long ivory-white hall was empty.

## CHAPTER 35

Dr. Zarkov dashed across the foggy airstrip in great leaping strides. "Is it ready to go?"

A captain in the Air Service was trying to keep up with him. "Well, yes, Doctor," the young man replied. "You must realize this isn't a truly good flying night. I mean to say, even with all the sophisticated equipment in our military air-cruisers, we still tell our boys not to go up in a heavy fog like this unless it's a national emergency at least."

"This is a national emergency," Zarkov boomed. He pulled himself up into the cabin of the olive-green ship.

"Even so, Doctor, I mean to say—"

"With Zarkov at the controls, there's nothing to fear," Zarkov assured the young captain. "Who the hell is this?"

Seated in the black nearleather chair next to the pilot's seat was a chrome-plated robot. When it noticed Zarkov, it brought its shiny fingers up against the forehead of its ball-shaped head in a clanging salute. "Ratlin-203-AP at your service, Colonel."

"I'm not a colonel, you nitwit pile of junk." Zarkov scowled out at the young captain, who was uneasily standing on the misty field. "Who the hell is this?"

"Your copilot, Doctor."

"I don't need a copilot." The burly doctor began to check the controls.

"Regulations, Doctor," explained the young Air Service captain. "On any occasion when there is fog in excess of—"

"Okay, okay," bellowed Zarkov. "I'll put up with him. I don't have time to toss him out. Stand back now, Captain, and I'll get this crate in the air." He activated the lever which slammed the cabin door shut.

"We haven't yet," pointed out Rattlin-203-AP, "gone through the twenty-seven prescribed preflight takeoff procedures, General."

"Shut up," suggested Zarkov. He glanced at the controls, flicked on the engines, and guided the heavy ship along the runway.

"I don't mean to nag," said the copilot robot. "You'll understand I'm sure that this fastidiousness was built into me. Is there anything else I might do to help out? Perhaps you'd like me to help you get your beard stuck on better."

It reached a chrome hand toward Zarkov's face.

"Watch out," warned Zarkov as he jerked his head out of reach. "It's not my beard."

"Oh, really?"

The aircruiser bounced twice, then rose into the fog.

Zarkov's eyebrows moved closer together. "Huh," he muttered as he watched the monitor screens of the ship's infrared scanners.

"Someone you know down there?" inquired the shiny robot.

The two small rectangular screens mounted on the control panel showed the Mazda Territory jungle they were flying over. A stream of people was moving along a jungle trail. Men and women, all similarly clad.

"Some kind of migration," the doctor decided. "But from where?"

"Possibly this Perfect City we're seeking."

"That's the most logical conclusion." Zarkov

scratched the imitation beard, causing more of it to detach. "Which would mean something's gone wrong out there."

"We might," suggested Rattlin-203-AP, "drop down and make inquiries. I've had quite a good deal of experience conducting public opinion surveys. You see, before I was assigned to the Air Service I worked for the Welfare Department."

"Maintain a judicious silence for a while," Zarkov told the mechanism. "We're going all the way to Pan's hideout."

Rattlin drummed his metal fingers on his metal thighs. "They all look quite pleased."

"Who, the people down there?"

"Yes," answered the robot. "I can't help concluding that whatever may have happened, it was not a disaster."

Zarkov said, "It's possible Perfect City has fallen. Do you know what Flash Gordon looks like?"

"Oh, yes, Major. We all got pictures of him, front view and profile, a few days back," said Rattlin. "Because he's wanted for murder."

"He's not wanted for murder any more."

"Oh, really?"

"Keep your glass eyes on those screens and if you spot anyone down there who resembles Flash, give a yell."

"Noryl," said the copilot robot.

"What?"

"All military robots have eyes made of noryl plastic," said Rattlin. "Has the murderer of Minister Minnig been apprehended then?"

"Yeah, by me." Zarkov scanned the control panel. They were still two hours from Perfect City.

"That's not him." Rattlin had his ball head tilted toward the scanner screens. "No, that's not him, either."

Zarkov thumped the robot on its hollow elbow. "Just tell me if you *do* see Flash Gordon."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant. As I explained earlier, I'm programmed to be efficient," said Rattlin, "so there's nothing much I can do about it. No, that's not him."

Zarkov concentrated on his flying.



## CHAPTER 36

Pan stepped out of the wall.

His head swiveled as he took in the state of the control room. "Where are the fools who are supposed to be on guard here?" he demanded aloud.

He went bounding across the room, climbing up on the catwalks. Before he even reached the section of controls which activated the slave helmets he saw what had been done.

"Smashed—everything smashed."

The bearded man halted before the ruined control panels, gently touched the broken dials, the battered knobs and switches. "It will take weeks," he said, "even for someone of my technical skill to repair this wanton destruction."

Further along was a bank of scanner screens which gave views of the streets of Perfect City. Feet dragging, Pan moved to those. "Even if I do repair all this," he mused, "what good is it? The streets are empty, my Perfect City deserted."

He walked away from the disheartening images of the empty city. Slamming a fist into his hand, he said, "But I still have my sound-wave equipment," he said. "With that I can humble this entire planet. I can make them send me as many new slaves as I wish. I can make Perfect City flourish again."

Then he heard it. Distant, several rooms away from where he stood. A faint hammering.

In his anger, Pan had forgotten that there must be

someone who had done all this damage, forgotten that this someone might still be here.

His fingers tightened on the grip of his blaster pistol and he went running along the catwalk.

Three rooms later he saw the old man. High up on a catwalk, pounding a delicate oscillating device to ruins with a silver hammer. "Stop that, you old fool," roared Pan as he jogged out along the narrow catwalk.

Sawtel lowered the weapon in his hand to glance at his former partner. "I've been expecting you, Pan."

The ruler of Perfect City halted five feet from the white-bearded old man. "Who are you?"

"Yes, I suppose long months of living in the jungle have changed me," said Sawtel. "I am Sawtel."

Pan took one more step forward. "And you're the one who has done all this damage, the one who has tried to destroy what was, after all, our mutual dream."

"This was no dream of mine, Pan," the old man told him. "Not what you've done here. Had I been less of a fool and less of a coward, I would have done what I'm doing now before I fled."

His gun aimed at the old man, Pan looked around him. "You realize what you've done? Tomorrow I am going to deliver my message to those fools in the capital of Estampa. Should they not capitulate, agree to my terms, I will use this sound-wave equipment to destroy their city," Pan said. "But look. You've destroyed most of this, too, Sawtel."

"It's mine to destroy," he said. "Most of what you've had your slaves build in this room was based on my inventions. I never intended any of this to be used for the purposes you have used it."

Pan laughed. "No, and that's why you will live and die a fool," he said. "You create something which can give you absolute power, a weapon that no one can withstand. Then you stuff the notes in a drawer and go on to a new problem. Granted, Sawtel, that many

of the ideas I have used are yours, but you never would have been able to do what I have done.”

“Yes, that’s one of the few consolations I’ve had.”

Pan gestured with the gun. “Well, it’s all over now. Get away from there. I see you’ve left a few of the machines in working condition. Perhaps I’m—”

The old man threw himself toward Pan.

The blaster crackled, and the old man’s side burst into tiny flames.

Before Pan could fire again, Sawtel fell into him. “Watch out, you fool!”

Sawtel grasped the catwalk rail and saved himself from falling.

However, Pan caught nothing but air in his clutching grasp. He fell straight down through the network of catwalks, a fall of a hundred feet. He landed face down and did not move again.

The old man, using the catwalk railing, pulled himself along. “There’s still time to do what I intended.”

It took him several long painful minutes to drag himself the twenty yards to the huge machine he had not yet harmed. It was, he had deduced, one of those which manufactured the waves of sound which had been used to topple the towers and ramps of the cities of Estampa.

Sawtel was unable now to use his left arm. But with only his right hand he began to make adjustments to the dials and controls. Everything seemed to be closing in on him. The control room, which had been large, now only extended a few feet on each side of him. Beyond that there was only a soft blurred darkness. A darkness which kept inching closer to him.

“I must do this.” The pain from the deep wound in his left side began to work its way through his body, making him clench the fingers of his right hand and cry out.

He lived less than five minutes more, just enough time to set the machine and throw the necessary switches. It began to hum faintly as Sawtel sank to the catwalk. Then darkness closed in completely.

## CHAPTER 37

"We'll find them around the next turning," Tad had said a few moments earlier, a smile breaking out on his face.

Jillian's brother was with them now, a tall red-haired and freckled young man in his late twenties. He walked along the palace corridor close beside the girl, one arm around her waist.

Flip appeared first, moving with an elated sort of walk which was almost a strut. "Hey, you cats missed my best gig," he called when he came around the bend and recognized Tad and the girl. "I was a wow, really boffo."

"Have you seen anything of Pan?" asked Flash.

Tad said, "He's over in the control-room area and—" He stopped speaking, closing his eyes and shaking his head slowly from side to side.

Flash left Dale and moved close to the lanky boy. "What is it, Tad?"

Tad did not immediately reply. His face had turned deathly white. "They've met," he began, then stopped. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. "We have to get out of here fast, out of the palace and out of the city."

"Something's happened to Sawtel?" said Jillian.

"If he's in trouble," said Flash, "we have to help him, Tad."

"No, there's nothing to be done," said the boy. "It's

too late. You must believe me. We have to get clear of here."

Flash watched him for a few seconds, then said, "Okay, let's go."

"There's a way out right down here," said Flip. "I remember from Sawtel's map." He pushed at two spots on the corridor wall and a doorway appeared.

When they were running down the secret exitway, Jillian asked Tad, "What did you see? What's going on?"

"Outside," said the boy. "When we're outside, I'll tell you."

They had a mile to run.

No one was left in Perfect City now. No one except the two dead men. The familiar silence had returned to the spotless white streets and lanes. The ivory dome which covered the city and held back the earth above it had a large black rectangle cut into it now. The main exit had been left open when the freed slaves took their leave. A single night bird came fluttering down through the opening, its scarlet-and-gold feathers the only touch of color in the whiteness of Perfect City.

And for a moment the only sound was the flapping of its wings. The bird landed on the tiles of the square and began exploring with its yellow beak. It went ticking slowly across the square.

A harsh discordant sound began, much like the sounds which had been heard across Estampa. The noise grew louder, more intense, more insistent.

The scarlet-and-gold bird took flight, frightened. It never reached the night sky outside. A wave of sound hit it and the bright bird dropped back down to the white ground.

The buildings began to shake, faintly at first. Then the swaying increased. There was a huge snapping

sound as a ramp cracked in half. Then another, and another.

The palace building was the first to fall. It crumpled slowly in on itself, like a snow figure left out in the sun. Next a slender tower broke across the center. The city became a kaleidoscope of fragments. Everything was tumbling, falling, smashing to the ground. The ground itself was cracking.

Rubble clogged the spotless white streets, filled the twisting lanes. Clouds of white dust began to swirl upward.

Finally, the control-room area broke apart and the destructive waves of sound stopped. Once again there was silence.

Dust continued to billow up, lifting above the remains of Perfect City and spilling out into the darkness of the jungle.

## CHAPTER 38

Jillian watched a moment longer, then turned away and began crying.

Her brother followed her, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Take it easy now, Jill."

She twisted out of his reach and walked along the jungle path to Tad. "You knew this before," she accused. "You knew it when we first went into that damn city. You could have stopped him."

The lanky boy shook his head. "I only knew then what Sawtel was considering, Jillian," he told her. "I read his thoughts and one of them was that he would try to destroy Perfect City."

"You let him commit suicide."

"I can read people's thoughts," Tad said. "I can't control them."

"But you could have told me, told Flash," she insisted. "Then we could have saved him, dragged him out of there if we had to."

"Sawtel was determined to destroy Pan, too," said the boy. "I don't think he was completely certain he would try to destroy the city until he'd met Pan."

"Is that what happened?" asked Flash.

"Yes," answered Tad. "That is what I picked up just before I told you we must get out of there fast. Pan, when he knew what was happening to his slaves, went to the control area. He found Sawtel there and shot him."

"You didn't tell me that before," said Jillian.



"We had other things to do," said Tad. "Sawtel was able to shove Pan from a high catwalk. I received no more thoughts from Pan after he fell. So I know he was dead. Sawtel was dying and he decided to bring Perfect City down with him. He set Pan's instruments so that the destructive sound waves would concentrate on Perfect City itself."

"We could have been trapped in there ourselves," said Jillian's brother.

"I think, Iyan, that Sawtel knew I'd be able to warn you and that we'd get out safely," Tad told the girl's brother.

Dale glanced at the opening in the jungle through which they'd witnessed the fall of the city. She crossed to Flash, taking hold of his hand. "I can't forget," she said to him, "that I stood by watching while Pan tortured you."

"That's all over, Dale," he told her.

"Hey, cats," inquired Flip. "What now?"

"Iyan and I will go home," said Jillian. "I suppose you'll be heading for your home territory, too, Tad."

"I'd sort of like to visit the capital of Estampa," the boy said. "Could I tag along with you, Flash?"

"Sure, you're welcome to join us," said Flash. "What we have to figure out now is how to get back there. When the city was destroyed, the captured air-cruisers went with it."

"I hope we can catch a lift," said Flip. "I don't think much of footing it all the way there."

"Are you going to the capital, too, Flip?" the red-haired girl asked him.

"You bet, chick," he answered. "After what I been through, I figure I'm ready for the big time."

"Yes, that's him," announced the chrome-plated robot.

Dr. Zarkov took a few seconds to realize what Rat-

tlin had said. He'd developed the habit of ignoring the robot. "Flash?"

Rattlin-203-AP tapped a scanner screen with the tip of a metal finger. "Flash Gordon, as I live and breathe. Directly below us and traveling in the company of two very attractive young ladies. I assume the raven-tressed one is Dale Arden."

"Raven-tressed?" Zarkov squinted at the screen the robot had touched. "They put too big a vocabulary into you. Yeah, that's Flash and Dale sure enough." He tugged the slowing lever back, set the course indicators for a U turn.

"Going to be very difficult to set her down in this wilderness," observed the robot.

"Not going to," said Zarkov, throwing another switch. "We'll hover and I'll go down the ladder."

"Ah," said Rattlin-203-AP, "that hadn't occurred to me."

The burly scientist had the aircruiser turned around now. He guided it down toward the treetops.

"They've noticed us," the robot pointed out.

"They ought to," said Zarkov. "This thing is making so much noise it's shaking the leaves out of the trees." He had the aircruiser as close as he could safely get it to the treetops. Setting the controls for hover, Zarkov unstrapped himself from the pilot seat.

"Ah, look at all the expectant smiles on their faces," said Rattlin. "I trust they won't be disappointed."

"The arrival of Zarkov is rarely a disappointment," he told his mechanical copilot. "Now I'm going to climb down the ladder and see what Flash is up to."

"Very good, Captain."

"You stay right where you are," Zarkov said as he lowered himself into the ladder hatch. "Fold your hands in your lap and don't fiddle with anything while I'm gone."

He climbed down out of the ship.

## CHAPTER 39

Flash held out his hand. "Doc," he said with a grin, "what brings you to this neck of the woods?"

Giving one more uneasy glance up at his hovering aircruiser, the doctor let go of the ladder and dropped five feet to the ground. He strode across the rough grass to his friend. "I've got a nitwit robot looking after the ship," he said, shaking Flash's hand, "and I don't quite trust him. I expected to find you in Perfect City."

"There is no more Perfect City," replied Flash.

"Huh," exclaimed Zarkov, giving his beard a ferocious tug. It came off in his hand.

Dale came over to him. "Doc, what's happened to you?"

"I had to disguise myself," he answered. He frowned at the girl for half a minute. "That was a nitwit thing to do, by the way, Dale. Coming out here on your own like that."

"You're probably right." She gave him an impulsive hug. "Now tell me about your whiskers."

"Well," said Zarkov as the frown faded from his face, "first I had to impersonate a truckdriver and then I had to impersonate myself."

"Hey, daddy, are you in show biz?" asked Flip. "Slip me some skin."

Zarkov eyed the black actor. "Who's this?"

"This is Flip," said Flash. "It'll take a little time to explain his particular talents to you, Doc."

Dr. Zarkov looked up to make sure the aircruiser was still there. "We can talk on the way home," he said. "Or is there some reason to stay on here in Mazda Territory?" -

"No, we can head for home. This end of things is cleared up and finished."

"So is my end," said Zarkov.

Flash turned to Jillian and her brother. "Do you want to travel with us? I'm sure Doc will be happy to drop you off in your home territory."

"Just a minute," said Zarkov. "They may live at the ends of the galaxy."

Jillian smiled at the beardless Zarkov. "Not quite that far," she said. "But we don't need a lift anyway. Iyan and I want to travel on foot, see who else we run into from our home area. A good many of our people were also captured by Pan, you know."

"Okay, then," said Flash, "good luck to you. I appreciate the help you gave me."

The red-haired girl ignored his proffered hand, hopped up, and kissed him on the cheek. "Good-bye, Flash."

"No matter where we go in the universe," said Zarkov in a murmur.

"I trust I'm doing a satisfactory job," called Rattlin from the cabin of the aircruiser.

"Great, great," bellowed Zarkov.

They were all seated in the rec room of the ship, except for Flip who was up sitting next to the robot and studying the images on the scanner screens.

"So you didn't run across General Yate in Perfect City?" Zarkov asked Flash.

Flash shook his head. "No, but then I wasn't looking for him."

"He's all right," said Tad. "Though not too happy about having to travel back to Estampa on foot."

"How do you know that?"

"Tad can read minds," explained Flash. "From a considerable distance."

Zarkov stroked his chin, studying the boy. "You'll have to teach me that trick," he said to him. "I've always figured that with a brain like mine extrasensory perception should be a cinch."

"It's not exactly a trick," said Tad. "I really don't know why I'm able to do what I do. No more than Flip understands his gift."

"He's got a wild talent, too?"

"Flip can change his shape," said Flash. "It came in pretty handy out in Perfect City."

"Well," said Zarkov, "you sure collected quite a crew together for yourself, Flash. A mind reader, a shape changer, and that amazon girl."

"I'm not as much of a loner as you are."

Zarkov said, "I did handle my end of things pretty much single-handedly." He twisted his head to check on his robot. "Except for that nitwit the Air Service stuck me with."

"They don't," asked Dale, "want Flash for murder or anything now back in the capital?"

"No," Zarkov boomed. "I solved all that ridiculous business, cracked the case."

"Who was it I had my interview with that night?" Flash wanted to know.

"An android," said Zarkov. "A pretty good one, too."

"The girl was real, though," said Flash, "wasn't she?"

"Yeah, she's in custody now. She and her partner were all set to use a stun rifle on Zarkov, but I out-foxed them."

"So they had an andy duplicate of Minnig," said Flash, "and one of me and another of General Yate."

"Right, plus one of me." Zarkov scratched at his whiskerless face. "They had a bomb inside my andy. They were going to use it tomorrow, or rather today, to blow up the president if he didn't give in to Pan's demands."

"You pretended to be the android simulacrum of yourself?" asked Dale.

"Did a good job, too," said Zarkov. He nodded in the direction of Flip in the cabin. "As any actor will tell you, it was a real challenge. I had to be not the real me, but an android replica of myself. So I had to be a little less the real authentic Zarkov. I brought it off beautifully, though, and got my hands on Pan's head man in the capital."

"You haven't mentioned his name," said Flash.

"It was Dr. Nazzaro."

"Who?" said Dale.

"Right," said Zarkov. "He was so bland and non-descript you hardly paid attention to him. But he was always around, or checking in with me on the pixphone. He arranged for the killing of Minnig, and for the attempt to do me in."

"I thought," said Dale, "you told us they only wanted to stun you."

"On that particular occasion," said the doctor. "This was another time, down along the waterfront."

Flash locked his hands behind his head, leaning back in his chair. "I don't think there'll be any more trouble. Only Pan and Sawtel knew how any of the stuff in Perfect City worked. They're both dead, and the city is destroyed."

"It's a good thing," said Zarkov, "there aren't more scientists of my caliber on this planet. Every time a brilliant mind goes blooey you get trouble."

Tad asked, "Will you all be going home immediately?"

"To Earth, you mean?" said Flash.

"I'd like," said Zarkov, "to stick around Estampa about three and a half weeks more."

"Why three and a half?" Dale asked him.

"That's how long it'll take me to grow a new beard."

## CHAPTER 40

The porter robot said, "Oops!" and dropped the trunk on Dr. Zarkov's foot.

The bearded doctor narrowed his left eye, studying the chrome-plated robot. "I know you," he boomed.

The mechanism reached toward the fallen trunk, then straightened up and saluted. "Rattlin-203-AP, at your service, Admiral."

It was a warm clear afternoon, some three weeks after their return to Estampa's capital. Zarkov was standing next to a pale-yellow plastic wall which circled the takeoff area of the capital city spaceport. "How come you're working here?" he asked Rattlin.

"Well, in a way," said the robot, "it's your fault, Colonel."

"My fault?" bellowed Zarkov. "How so?"

"After you cleared up the plague of sound troubles," replied Rattlin-203-AP, "everyone around here took to feeling very secure. One thing led to another and the Armed Forces Committee cut the Air Service budget by a third. That phased out all robots attached to the AS. I was lucky to pick up this job here, though I'm sure things will swing back and I'll get a chance to go up again." He bent and hefted up the dropped trunk. "Nice to have run into you, Captain. Bon voyage."

"Thanks," said Zarkov.

Dale walked up to him. "That robot looked awfully familiar," she said.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Dr. Zarkov. He raked his fingernails over his new growth of beard.

"Does your new beard itch?"

"No," said Zarkov. "Where's Flash?"

"Some reporters got wind of the fact we were leaving and they caught him in the terminal dome over there."

"Funny they didn't try to interview me on the eve of our departure from Pandor."

"You issued a statement yesterday saying you wouldn't grant any interviews, remember?"

"Only a nitwit of a reporter would believe anything like that," he said.

"Here he comes." Dale waved to the rapidly approaching Flash.

"Giving out interviews, huh?" said Zarkov. "Quite a celebrity."

"Mostly," said a grinning Flash, "they wanted to know about you. So I told them they could talk to you all they wanted."

Zarkov looked around. "So where are they?"

Flash put his hand on the doctor's shoulder and led him toward the boarding ramp. "Flip came down to see Dale and me off," he said. "And when I told him how you felt about reporters, he agreed to stand in for you. He makes quite a convincing Zarkov."



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