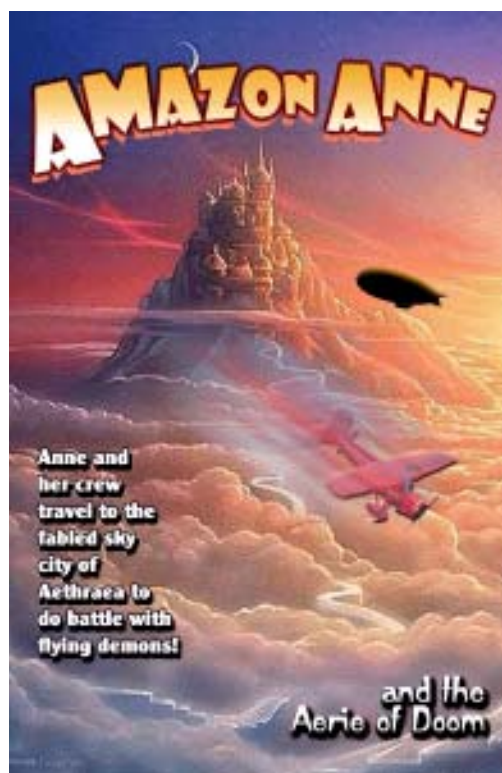


# The Aerie of Doom

by Steve Kaye

*The strange little bird-man needs the kind of help only Amazon Anne can give. Weird flying men hunt him, his home – a mythical city in the sky – is under seige, and a secret army is building, hidden in the quiet hills of Europe. Death zips in on poisoned spears and in the perilous heights of the stratosphere as Anne and her crew struggle to unravel the mystery that sends them plummeting to their doom!*



## CHAPTER ONE: OUT OF THE NEST

The little man with the lone spit curl of black hair set just above his forehead had no recollection of arriving. He stood in the open circular doorway, eyes blinking behind thick spectacles, and wondered.

He turned to look at the quaint nest behind him, a compact apartment filled with comfortable perches set high and low throughout the two rooms. The rooms were nicely furnished with decorative stanchions that held niblets of fruit, flowers, leaves, and seed.

He even saw a chair placed rather regally at the front of the room near a pale-colored table.

He had no idea, however, whose place it was. That seemed very strange to him, and he felt the odd tug of motivation in him. He wanted to know who belonged to this place. More important, he realized he wanted to know where he belonged.

But he did remember his name. Alfonso Ipsolenti. His bulbous nose twitched and he wiggled it, brought a finger up to rub it.

Alfonso Ipsolenti's apartment was somewhere else in the city. Far away, he thought, the desire to know tugging at him again.

He looked out from the apartment and caught his reflection in a steely smooth and shiny wall. Yes, this is how he remembered his appearance to be. He was not particularly tall and quite round with shortish arms and legs. He wore a tula, a common robe the color of saffron, belted across his ample middle.

Alfonso Ipsolenti was pleased with his image. At least that was as he remembered. But he remembered nothing else about how he had come to this apartment and that disturbed him.

He stepped out of the apartment onto a balcony. A towering vista opened to him as he walked along the wide balcony overlooking his home and the grand city of his birth. It was more a parapet, really, lined with squat planters filled with reedy and flowery plants, and no railing at all. The drop was precipitous but Alfonso Ipsolenti had never been afraid of heights, had in fact never thought about them.

The flora appeared uncared for, and this too bothered Alfonso Ipsolenti. One simply did not leave such things undone in the city. So he watered them using a spouted can set aside for the purpose and absently moved from one planter to the next, balancing on the very edge of the balcony. Then he did something with which he was not accustomed. He tripped.

The sensation was unique for him. He felt himself tumble and then fall, and was more curious about it than alarmed.

In his fall, he passed several other

balconies, people smiling curiously as he sailed by. Soon he was enveloped in the ever-present fog that floated throughout the city.

Fear began to rise in him. He was falling – and couldn't stop. He fell nearly seven miles.

While the fall might have seemed endless, and, once the fear subsided, somewhat pleasant, stopping was abrupt and unpleasant. He slammed into the earth with great force, denting the soft loam. He lay there for some time, then climbed out of the hole he had made and shook the dirt from his clothes, then cleaned and reset his glasses.

A crowd of people had formed around him. Their stunned silence greeted him. He smiled, and shook himself head to toe. He had landed in the middle of a town square. A somewhat antiquated town with muddy streets, horse wagons, and small buildings with ornately carved façades.

A large piece of paper caught Alfonso's eye. It was plastered on the wall of a tiny brick shop across the square. It had a large woodcut image imprinted on it of a lovely woman brandishing a weapon and standing provocatively – or so Alfonso thought – with a leg up on a rock. Above her, words were printed in thick, tall letters.

AMAZON ANNE STOPS  
DEADLY MAGICK  
STORM

Distaff adventurer travels the

world to unravel the riddle of an ancient talisman and stops destructive storm in its path.

Alfonso Ipsolenti looked up into the sky, into the thick puffs of clouds nearly seven miles above. His home. He was bewildered at having lost his home so suddenly, and melancholy. Then he looked back at the image of Amazon Anne. An adventurer. She could help him. She could see him returned to his home.

Alfonso smiled with new purpose then turned away from the crowd, his nose twitching, in search of Amazon Anne.

ANY SUNNY MORNING in New York City was a good day for a walk, as far as Travis Dade was concerned. With his jacket tossed back over his shoulder, he made his jaunty way down Broadway toward Union Square. The newspaperman had a keen eye for stories and spotted several on his walk downtown. But he had sworn off the small stuff. His meat was an adventurer named Anne Robson. Now that girl was news. She had saved the world some weeks ago and Dade let them all know about it. His editor, Birch Mallon, had been thrilled with the story. Circulation had spiked nearly double.

"I told you that dame's good for my circulation," the gruff old inkwell had quipped. "And fair to look at, too. Never saw a bad photo of her."

Mallon had been twice thrilled that

day when Dade told him he planned to make Anne his regular beat.

"That's the ticket, boy!" Mallon had said. "You dog her. Get the scoop. Why, we'll have something no other paper in the world can boast. First hand accounts of all her adventures."

Mallon had given him two things right then and there that still had Dade amazed. The first was an excited hug. The second was an expense account.

"Now, don't break the bank, boy," Mallon had said, the tightwad in him rearing its head. "Just remember this is a newspaper, not Aladdin's lamp."

Dade didn't think much about that last comment until later when he realized that last year – in this timeline – a kid named Aladdin had used a magic lamp to try to corner the market on soy-bean futures.

That's something that Dade was still having trouble getting used to. This timeline. The world had been a very strange since The Change. Pockets of different dimensions, or universes, all seemed to share the one planet. New York was, for the most part, mired in the 1930s. Other places around the world were different. Dade and Anne and her crew had visited what appeared to be ancient Egypt in their last adventure, and Buda-Pest in the 1800s. Dinosaurs, he was told, still roamed the Earth in southern Africa, among other places, and mythical Atlantis was no myth. Dade had not seen these stranger places, but he did not doubt their existence. He believed that even the post-millennium world he

had come from was still in some corner of this planet.

But he wasn't in too big a hurry to find it. Travis Dade had found a home here in this retro New York. Even the crazy quilt cultures that dotted the Earth seemed like home to him. He had changed, too. He was clean-shaven now and wore his hair short. He wore a suit and tie, too, and the loose-fitting clothes gave his trim frame a little bulk. In his skivvies he was a rangy man, lean with good muscle tone. Not quite a bantam weight but close to it.

Anne Robson had wanted to change the world back, but that didn't seem likely right now. The strange talisman that had loosed destruction across the globe had been ensorcelled with a binding spell, its power moribund in the grip of strong magicks. Anne had been set on the task of finding the thing by a ungainly eight-foot giant who, in the midst of telling lies, had been true to his word. He had paid Anne for her efforts and he had left the powerful object for her to deal with. Yet Dade and the rest of Anne's crew all felt the man was untrustworthy. He knew far more than he had let on. Dade sensed there was a veil of evil surrounding the man, and his underling, the Enchantra Omani Dahla. Luckily, neither man had been seen in weeks.

Anne had been out of town, too. Upon their return to New York from Buda-Pest she had taken the talisman and boarded her dirigible and flown off without saying where she was going.

She was gone two weeks, returned for a day, then left again. She had taken one of her planes this time and had not been heard from in nearly a week.

ALONE FOR A WHILE, Dade decided to explore this retro New York, and test his memory of stories told to him as a boy. He was delighted to find some of the old places talked about by his grandfather. He had found other places, too. Places his grandfather had never known about. He found friends in these places; people would wave to him and call out a friendly hello.

Dade waved back and hid his uncertainty. He had had other sensations, too. He had seen things in his mind – a tropical paradise in the South Pole; the control panel of a rocket ship, his hands deftly working the levers. None of these things could be real. He had never seen them, had never operated a spacecraft. But his inclusion in these places was unmistakable. These were home, too.

When he had these visions, he shook and sweated a cold sweat. He knew things he shouldn't know, like that time in Buda-Pest. He not only knew where to find the symbol they were searching for, but also what another symbol meant. The crossed keys. Of course, he argued that it was an obvious symbol and that, carved into the stone, it looked like a button. But the truth was he knew it was a button and that it operated a hidden panel and that behind the panel was something of importance. They had found the

plate with the images of a dozen talismans carved into it along with two other images that played a key roll in their last adventure.

Dade had been ignoring the fear he felt about that episode. He couldn't do that now, not after having had so many other similar visions. He didn't know what the visions meant, but they offered information he would file away for when it was needed.

Then the voice spoke to him. He had been thinking hard on how his mind was so full of these thoughts and images that he didn't understand the voice at first.

You begin to see, it said.

Dade had looked around but had found no one else in the room. At the time, he had been in Anne's apartments in the spire of the Chrysler Building, alone.

You begin to see the truth about who you are.

A little frightened, Dade had gotten out of his chair and searched the room.

"Who's there? Where are you?" he had said, his own voice a little shaky.

You will come to us when you are ready.

And that was it. He hadn't heard the voice since. Of course, that once was more than enough.

So to keep his mind off the visions and the voices, Travis Dade took to the bright sunlit streets of New York City, circa 1936, and set out to find some old haunts.

HE FOUND SUCH A PLACE just

south of Union Square called Eddie's. It was a pool hall with a richly cultured clientele. The place had a slight pall to it, a bluish cloud hanging just below dusty steel pendent lamps suspended from the ceiling. The lamps carried bare, low wattage bulbs, shading everything in gray tones. There were half a dozen tables, all in various stages of disrepair, a small bar serving beer and sandwiches, and a cooler with bottles of Yoo-hoo and Pepsi. Men sat around on stools, smoking, pool cues in hand.

A snaky-looking fellow squinted up as Dade entered the room.

"Hiya, Dade," he called across the room, then, cigarette hanging out the side of his mouth, leaned over the table and took a shot. The seven ball clinked twice then found a pocket.

A few others waved and smiled. Dade pulled up a stool and began jawing with them. He had never met them before, but the conversation came easily and memories followed. Somehow he did know them, as if a part of him had lived among them.

"Figured you'd be up on Eighteenth Street at the El station," a squat fellow in a T-shirt and green duck pants said.

"What's up there?"

"Benny just came from there."

Benny stepped forward. He was tall fellow, skinny as a rail. Every stitch of clothing he wore was too short, but he wore each with pride.

"Crazy fella up on the El platform is jumping."

Dade shook his head. "This city gets people who want to jump every day."

Benny snorted. "Not like this! This guys is jumping."

"You mean he jumped? He's dead?"

"Uh-uh. He keeps jumping. He hits the street, dusts himself off, then gets back onto the platform and does it again. A real kook!"

"Where are the cops?" Dade asked, his interest piquing.

"That's kooky, too. This little fella gets around a ring of cops waiting to snare him when he lands. He slips them and gets back to the top. So they set up on the platform, and they still can't corral him."

Some of the men laughed. "Sounds like one of them ghosts to me," one said.

"Ghosts?"

"Sure, we get 'em now and again. Forget you live a sheltered life, Dade. You need to get below Fourteenth Street every once in a while. See how the other half lives."

"The other half?"

"Yeah," Benny said. "The dead half. Ha!"

The boys fell over themselves laughing at that one.

"This jumper real?"

"Real as you or me."

Dade said a quick goodbye and raced out of the bleak hall into bright sunlight. The platform was five blocks north and three east. Not wanting to miss the excitement he flagged a cab and tossed a fiver down on the driver's seat as he gave his destination. The hack made no comment other than to stamp on the gas pedal.

A crowd had gathered on the El

platform and below in Eighteenth street. Traffic had come to a halt. A dozen uniformed policemen were standing below the tracks looking up. The fire department had set up a catch net, eight strong men holding onto the stretched ring, wavering as they tried to stay under the jumper.

More police were on the platform, reaching out to a small, bald man who stood at the outer edge of the platform on a girder overlooking the street. He looked harmless and wore a pleasant smile and was dressed in some sort of red robe the color of sunset.

He jumped.

"Holy mackerel," Dade said.

Women screamed and fainted. Men groaned. The firemen shifted trying to catch the little man.

They missed. The man slammed into the street and stood there for a moment as if frozen in time. Then he looked around. His face betrayed some disappointment.

The police raced up to the man, circling him, grabbing for him. They came up with air. Dade looked over to the staircase leading up to the platform and saw the little man working his way back up.

Dade raced for the stairs and came up onto the platform just as the little man hit the street again. On the platform, the police were divided on what to do. They had stood at the head of the stairs only to have the little man somehow evade them. They had tried chasing him with just as much luck.

Unconcerned, the little man was

coming up the stairs again and the police had crowded around the turnstile to try to grab him.

Dade yelled, "He's going over there!" and pointed down to the far end of the platform.

That was enough to start the police running. Dade backed off to the opposite end and watched as the little man gained the platform and turned unmolested in Dade's direction.

A train rattled to a stop behind the reporter just as the little man started out to the edge of the platform.

"Here now," Dade said. "That's no way to do it."

Startled, the little man stopped and looked at Dade. "Why, it's the only way I can think of to find her. I was told that she comes when strange things happen or people are in trouble."

Dade shook his head as if to clear it.

"You mean to tell me you're playing yo-yo here just to find a dame?"

"I must find her. It's life and death." The little man was so earnest that Dade almost believed him.

"Who is it you're looking for? Maybe she's in the phone book."

"Phone book?"

"Yeah. We look up her name, see."

The police realized by now they had been tricked and were running back. The train doors had opened behind Dade. People filed out but no one was ready to climb on they were so preoccupied watching the little man.

"Of course," the little man said, his nose twitching slightly. "A directory. Will you show me to one."

"Sure, sure. What's the frail's name?"

"Anne. Amazon Anne. She must help me."

Dade laughed. "Oh, brother, have you got luck. I can take you to her door."

The little man's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That would be most helpful."

"Hold it, you two!" one of the policemen yelled.

Dade reached out and grabbed the little man's arm and yanked him toward the train. A short spear went thunk into the wooden platform just as Dade pulled the man aside.

Both Dade and the little man looked up into the sky. The police had stopped and looked up, too.

Several men in variously colored robes floated in the air. They all had weapons in hand or strapped about their belts. One of the men had a hand-ax in his fist pointed right at the little man on the platform. Seeing this, the crowd below screamed and ran for cover.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE STRANGE REQUEST

**D**ADE PULLED AT THE little fellow again and dragged him into the train just as the doors closed. The hand-ax bounced off the steel door.

Outside, the police had drawn their service revolvers and were shooting at

the floating men. The train pulled away.

Dade saw that they had a car to themselves. He looked out the window and watched the police engage the floating men in combat. The men in the air had shields as well and seemed able to fend off the police bullets.

"Oh, dear," the little man said, looking out the window back at the receding platform. "I hope they won't be injured."

"Hey, friend, they were trying to kill you."

"Yes, of course. You see, I left."

"Uh-huh. And you're not supposed to do that, huh?"

"Oh. no."

"Come on."

Dade took hold of the man and exited the car, moving forward in the train. The next car had several dozen people who gasped as Dade stepped inside.

"We get out with a crowd, see," Dade said. "That way if your friends are following maybe they don't spot us."

The little man nodded.

"You got a name?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "Alfonso Ipsolenti."

"Swell."

The train stopped three times before they got to the Forty-second Street station. Dade took Alfonso under his wing and guided him onto the platform. He rushed the little man down the stairs and across traffic to Lexington Avenue and the main entrance of the Chrysler Building.

"Please," Alfonso said, stopping short. "You told me you can take me Amazon Anne."

"And I can," Dade said, scanning the sky. "But let's hurry and get inside."

Dade moved for the revolving doors, motioning for the little man to follow, but he was gone. Searching the crush of people making their way cross-town Dade could see nothing of the little man's bald head. Something caught his eye and he turned and looked into the building. Inside the lobby, beyond the revolving glass doors Alfonso stood patiently waiting.

"Where'd you go?"

"You said to hurry. Now, please, is this where I will find Amazon Anne?"

"That's right. You see, I work with her. So why don't we go on up and get someplace safe and talk this over."

Alfonso smiled. "I am very happy."

AT THE END OF THE BANK of elevators was a special car reserved for Anne Robson and her crew. Dade removed a key from his pocket and slipped it into the lock beside the call buttons. They waited less than a minute before the automatic car arrived and they got in.

"This will take us up to Anne's headquarters," Dade said.

Alfonso continued to smile.

The car let them out at Anne's seventy-first floor apartments. They walked into the central room. There was a spiral staircase set off-center in the room, a seating area with many

comfortable chairs, no two alike, and tables of artifacts. There were several large bookshelves and doors leading off to other rooms.

Atop the staircase was a narrow balcony, off of which were several more doors. The balcony curved in a semi-circle, following the outer wall of the building that slanted inward, and ended in many more shelves of books. Staircases at either end of the balcony lead up to a third floor with its own, narrower balcony. The main floor had a clear view all the way to the top.

Alfonso was immediately drawn to the triangular windows set in the outer walls near the floor out of which was a spectacular view of New York City. He crouched low into one of the window wells and sat watching the city for several long minutes while he made what to Dade's ear sounded like cooing noises.

"Will you bring Amazon Anne to see me now?" Alfonso asked.

"She's not here right now," Dade said, flipping his hat off and tossing it onto a chair. "Why don't you have a seat and tell me your story while we wait for her."

Alfonso stood up. "I am hungry."

"Okay. I'm no cook, so why don't we go down a flight to the Cloud Club?"

"In that small room?" Alfonso asked, cocking his head toward the elevator.

"Sure."

"Hmm. Very well."

The elevator door opened and another man stepped out. Edwin Bartholomew Chesterfield the Third

was a thin man, although a bit taller than Dade. His face was longer and thinner, too, but he had large bright green eyes and the look of an innocent child about him. He cut a dapper figure in a well-tailored suit and buff colored hat.

He stopped just inside the room. "Oh, hello," he said.

"Hello, yourself. We're going down to the Cloud Club for grub. You'll want to be in on this. Alfonso has been jumping about town looking for Anne."

THE CLOUD CLUB TOOK UP several stories just below and had ceilings nearly as high as in Anne's headquarters. The main dining room was airy, despite the heavy square wooden pillars dotted about the marble floor. The three men walked in past a giant mural of the city of New York and were shown to a table next to an arched window. The painted yellow walls gave the room a sunny, cheery feel. Across the room life size black glass silhouettes of automobile workers lined one wall above several tables.

The room furnishings meant nothing to Alfonso Ipsolenti. He sat himself next to the window and looked out on the peerless vista of New York.

A thin young man in black slacks, a pressed white apron, and starched white shirt stepped up to the table. Dade nudged Alfonso and said he could place an order for food with the young man.

"I would like flowers, nasturtiums if you have them, nuts, leaves, an

apple, and seed," Alfonso said cheerily.

The waiter stared at the little man as if he had forgotten how to move.

"We have a wildflower vinaigrette salad," he offered hesitantly.

"Sure," Dade said. "Hold onto the dressing, though, and sprinkle some nuts and seeds over it."

"Of course, sir."

Chesterfield and Dade ordered steaks then let the waiter escape to the kitchen.

Dade let the little man enjoy the scenery for a few more minutes then nudged him back to the question at hand.

"Listen, Alfonso," Dade began, "Anne's the kind of girl who'll go to bat for you if you're in trouble. But she's not around just yet, so you'll have to tell us your problems. Understand?"

"Oh, yes," Alfonso said, with a sharp nod.

"All right. So ... go ahead. Why don't you start with those floating men."

"Well, it begins before then, of course. I should explain that. I live in a wonderful city called the Aerie. I am quite content there with my friends and the work of tending my gardens. It's a lovely city. Of course, yours is quite strange compared to mine, but lovely in its own way I suppose."

"That's kind of you to say so," Dade offered, throwing a smile at the little man. Chesterfield had twice tried to make a comment but Dade cut him off with a look and a toss of his head.

"Well, I have found that for the past year things are not as cheery as I had believed. The city has not lost any of its loveliness, but there is a darkness about it now. I am not quite sure how to explain it. Still, I have my gardens."

Alfonso's nose twitched suddenly and he rubbed it with stubby fingers.

"I have been disoriented, you see. I know who I am, but I am uncertain about other things."

"I know the feeling," Dade mumbled.

"Well, I woke up one day fully dressed and standing in someone else's nest. I had no idea how I had gotten there."

"Nest?" Chesterfield asked.

"Oh, a nice enough one to be sure, but not mine. The plants were not well tended so I set about to water them. And that is when it happened."

"What?"

"I fell."

Dade and Chesterfield shared a blank look.

"Why, such a thing has never happened to me. It has never happened to any of my kind. We do not fall."

"Why is that?"

"Because we can fly."

Chesterfield stood up and was about to step away from the table when Dade grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"Four men," Dade told him with all sincerity, "floating in the air just tried to kill our friend here on the Third Avenue El. I saw it with my own eyes."

Chesterfield sat, readjusted his nap-

kin and turned back to Alfonso.

“What happened after you fell?” he asked politely.

“Well, I fell for quite some time and then I hit the ground in a village in a place called Europe. That’s where I learned about Amazon Anne and decided to come find her.”

“Listen, let’s call her Anne or Miss Robson, all right? She’s not partial to the other.”

“Certainly.”

The waiter returned with their meals and departed as quickly as decorum would allow.

“Now you want Anne to help you do what, precisely?” Chesterfield asked.

“I need her to help me find my way back to the Aerie. I am sure she will be able to.”

“Sure, she can do that. But just where is it?”

“I am not entirely certain. You see, it is in the sky and thus moves a little every day.”

Dade expected to have to grab Chesterfield again, but the accountant had put down his knife and fork and was leaning forward on his elbows, deep curiosity etched on his face.

“The sky?” he asked. Alfonso nodded.

The little man nodded, looking at the utensils with his head cocked strangely. Then he picked up two spoons and arranged them in his chubby hands like a pair of tongues. He was quite adept at eating in this manner.

“There is a fabled city in the sky,” Chesterfield began, “that roams about

the heavens. Well, actually, there are several fabled cities in the sky, but no one has ever seen them.”

“Hence the fable,” Dade said, chewing on his steak.

“Yes. The one I’m thinking about is called Aethraea. A paradise of glistening towers and mythical creatures.”

“He doesn’t look too mythical to me.”

“Oh, there are many strange and wonderful people in the city, quite different from my kind.”

Dade thought about that for a moment. “Say, you’re telling us you fell out of the sky and didn’t get hurt?”

“Yes, I fell. I do not believe I got hurt.”

That seemed odd to Chesterfield until Dade explained the rest of the events at the Third Avenue El.

“Not a scratch on him,” Dade concluded.

Chesterfield asked, “How did you get here from Europe?”

“A boat. A rather large one, actually. They let me pay with these.” Alfonso reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of jewels that glistened in the sunlight pouring in through the window. Dade took one and was surprised to feel how light they were. Each was a brilliant golden color, some with hints of violet or crimson or jade, as if they were fragile droplets of a rainbow made solid.

“These grow in our city and are quite common. We called them *auraea rubies* and we use them for decoration. But they attract attention with ground dwellers.”

“Sure they do. In fact, why don’t you pocket those so we mere mortals don’t get sidetracked.”

“Who were those men at the train station?” Chesterfield asked.

“I do not know. They did not seem to like me jumping off of that structure. Oh! You mean the elders. They were sent to .... remove me.”

“He said he’s not allowed to leave,” Dade told Chesterfield.

“I should think not. If the stories I’ve heard are true, Aethraea does not show itself in our world very often. Once every thirty years or so. And it doesn’t stay around long. It is supposed to be peopled with all manner of creatures who exist in a paradise but hide to protect themselves from the rest of the world.”

“And they’d kill to keep Alfonso from coming back?”

“Perhaps once you leave and are tainted with the outside world you cannot come back.”

“Sounds like there’s something wrong in paradise!”

“Oh, there is, but I do not know what.”

The maitre d’ came over carrying a heavy black telephone. He plugged one end into the wall and placed the receiver in front of Dade.

“A Captain Albert for you, sir.”

Dade lifted the receiver, listened for a moment, then dropped the phone.

“Holy mackerel! Anne’s radioed from Brazil. She’s in trouble and needs us to fly down right away!”

### CHAPTER THREE: ATTACK OF THE FLOATING MEN

D ADE TOSSED SOME BILLS on the table then he and Chesterfield hustled Alfonso out of the dining room to their elevator. Quickly he used the special key and pressed the call button. The elevator doors snapped open and they got in.

“We’ve got to stash this guy some place safe,” Dade said to the accountant, pressing one of the four buttons on the panel. The elevator lurched into action.

“You are going to meet with Miss Robson?” Alfonso asked.

“Yeah, but things are pretty hot where she is. You’d be safer here.”

Alfonso shook his head. “Oh, no. I must see her. I must get her help.”

The doors snapped open again and the three piled out.

“He might be safer with us,” Chesterfield offered.

Dade scrunched his face in thought. Captain Albert had said Anne’s call had come more than an hour ago and that the pilot had spent the time readying the dirigible and trying to track down Dade and Chesterfield. He had the dirigible airborne now and would arrive at their headquarters in fifteen minutes. There was no time to find a safer place for Alfonso.

“Okay. The little bird goes with us. Up to the platform,” he commanded.

Chesterfield balked. “We’re not driving out to the Brooklyn airfield?”

“Uh-uh. The ship’s airborne and will be here in minutes.”

A strange shade of green passed over the accountant’s face. He looked upstairs and toward the far end of the balcony where a panel was deftly hidden in the wall. Through that panel and up a narrow flight of corrugated metal steps was a landing that opened onto a platform. From there the men would board the airship via a rope ladder, dangling seventy-five stories above the bustling streets of New York City. The thought of it made the accountant quail.

“What’s the matter with you? You’ve gone up that way before,” Dade said.

“Yes. But at the time I was being shot at.”

“Wait here a second. I’ll get a gun.”

“Never mind.”

The three men climbed the spiral staircase and went to the end of the balcony. Dade pressed a small depression on the molding and part of the wall slid away. Dade led the way up the metal stairs to the landing, the outer walls angling in closer as they rose through the spire. There, he operated a heavy wheel lock. A panel of the outer wall folded down with a hydraulic whine. Metal rails unfolded. A cold wind whipped at them as the wall fell away slowly. When the platform had locked into place the three men stepped out onto it.

Chesterfield clung desperately to the rails and would not move more than a foot beyond the safety of the landing.

Dade, too, was not anxious to wander too far out. Little Alfonso, however, went to the very end, completely unconcerned with the drop below him. He smiled broadly.

“Quite windy,” he yelled, “but very much like my home.”

His face bore the look of utter contentment.

Dade looked up at the faint sound of thrumming motors approaching. The dirigible was floating overhead, settling into position. Its bulbous body was partly encased by a superstructure of ornate, gothic metalwork. An expansive gondola, fitted with a pointed bowsprit, protruded from the forward keel of the airship. A second, smaller gondola protruded from the aft keel, a biplane dangling underneath. Four huge propellers set aft twirled lightly. There were four other, sleeker casings affixed to the superstructure, too. These housed some sort of jet-style engines that gave the dirigible added speed when needed.

A rope ladder uncoiled and dropped to within inches of the platform. The men made their way up. Despite his roundness and shortness of arms and legs, Alfonso was quite nimble in climbing the ladder. He awaited the others patiently, standing in the open hatchway enjoying the view.

Once inside, two crewmen slid the hatch shut, saluted smartly, and returned to their duties. Dade hurried to the wheelhouse, the others following, to find Captain Albert at the controls. Normally, the captain was a jo-

vial sort, but he looked somber now. His considerable bulk looked knotted, poised to act if needed. His red hair and beard, neatly trimmed, made it look as if he were on fire.

"There ye be, lads," he said grimly. "We've got to make time. Miss Anne is in some difficulty."

"Did she explain?" Chesterfield asked.

"No, lad. She gave me instructions to find ye both and take ye to a spot in Brazil where she would meet ye. Ye know the girl by now. It's her wont to be tight lipped." Turning, the burly captain spotted Alfonso. "And who be this little fellow?"

"I am looking for Miss Robson," Alfonso said. "I need her help."

Captain Albert shook his head. "First things first, little man. We'll do what Miss Anne needs then see what we can do for ye."

MOTORS SPINNING TO FULL speed, the rudder heaved over, the great airship began to turn away from the city and climb. Alfonso pressed close to the giant floor-to-ceiling windows that arced in a half circle about the wheelhouse to give a seemingly endless view of the world from above. The little man sighed.

"Can we sail higher?" he asked.

"She's got a ceiling of nearly four miles," Captain Albert said proudly.

Alfonso's face crinkled a little. "Oh, dear. That's not near enough to get me home."

"One thing at a time, little man."

Dade turned his head quickly. He had heard a muffled thump against the hull of the ship. For a moment he heard nothing but the thrum of the engines and was about to pass it off as imagination when he heard three more thumps. These were louder and had come from just above the gondola.

"I heard 'em, lad," Captain Albert said, noticing Dade's look of concern. "Grab onto a rail, boys. We have to shake off some birds."

They had just taken hold of the safety rails when Captain Albert spun the wheel hard over. At the same time he stopped two of the engines and pushed the others to full speed. The airship banked hard to the left and rolled, lifting the gondola up and to the right.

Straining to hold on, Dade saw several bodies fly away from the airship, tumbling toward the city below. They were just passing over the East River, the water a dark, sparkling blue.

The bodies tumbled for a few moments then slowed to a stop, hanging in mid air. Dade noticed their robes, then, and the shields and spears in their hands.

"The elders!" Alfonso cried.

"Captain, get this tub going! These guys can fly!"

The dirigible had righted itself and was climbing. Captain Albert manipulated several switches on his control board, waiting a moment, then flipping them again. His face curled in swallowed anger.

"Get to the weapons locker, boys."

They've muddled with my engines. We won't be able to outrun them."

Chesterfield had just turned toward the wide central staircase, below which was a weapons cabinet, when the gondola's main door slid open. Three robed men alighted, dropping into the ship as if stepping off a curb. Their eyes went immediately for Alfonso Ipsolenti.

"You have betrayed the Aerie," a narrow-faced, bird-like man said.

"I did not," Alfonso argued. "I did not choose to leave my home. Thinking on it, I believe I was banished."

"You must pay the penalty." Chesterfield moved between the little man and the Aerie elders. "Do not interfere, ground dweller."

"He says that like he's cursing," Dade said, taking a step in front of Captain Albert, blocking as much of the pilot as he could. The burly man had motioned surreptitiously for Dade to change his position. "Well, I could show him a real blue streak."

"Silence," the bird-like man said. "We are Imperium Elders. By law we have the right to take this man for punishment."

"I want to go home," Alfonso said, "but not as your prisoner."

Another of the elders stepped forward. He held a large belt with a round metal buckle. He held it out toward Alfonso, who swallowed hard and took a step back.

Dade felt Captain Albert nudging him then as something heavy slapped against his hand.

"Use it, lad," the captain whispered. "Up against yer shoulder."

Hefting the object, Dade lifted it to his shoulder like a rifle. It was fatter than a rifle, though, with a muzzle nearly three inches across. The butt was heavily padded and there were two molded handles set in the center of the long barrel. A delicate trigger was in a thin guard close to the rear handle.

The thing weighed ton, Dade thought, as he tried to hold it steady. The elders froze at the site of the weapon. Then they slowly brought up their shields. Dade remembered that the police had fired many shots at these guys and somehow those shields deflected the bullets.

"I think it's time for you to leave."

Chesterfield nudged Alfonso back out of the line of fire, his eyes wide and very white.

"We want ..."

The elder didn't get the chance to finish his thought. Dade fired. A huge puff of white powder spat from the end of the strange blunderbuss with a heavy whomp! sound. The crazy thing kicked like a mule and Dade was nearly tossed on his backside.

"Fire again, boyo!" Captain Albert cried.

Dade triggered the weapon again and then a third time. The gun had reloaded from some inner magazine.

Whatever this thing tossed, it wasn't bullets. They all could follow the streaking movement of a pancake-sized object that sliced across the cabin and smacked into each of the elders'

shields. The power of the shots knocked the floating men off their feet and sent them flying back out the gondola door, tumbling down through the sky.

“Close up them doors, lads!”

The two crewmen jumped forward and slid the doors closed with a slam.

“What the hell is this thing?” Dade asked.

“I call it a panzooka. It tosses out a high velocity pancake that can knock a man down, or out. I keep it at the wheel – just in case.”

“Some pancake! What’s in these things?”

Captain Albert grinned boyishly. “They have a wee bit of grapeshot in them wrapped up in heavy rubber. Enough to give a powerful sting but not enough to penetrate the ship’s envelope.”

A loud thump was heard from above.

“They’re coming in through the tophatch.” The captain motioned to one of the crewmen to take the wheel. “I’ll see to the engines. The lot of ye get some weapons and defend the ship.” The burly pilot waved to the other of his crewmen and the two disappeared into the back of the gondola.

Chesterfield already had the weapons locker opened and pulled out clubs and bolos and a double-sided battleaxe.

“We need to check the docking gondola, too,” Dade said, lumbering up with his panzooka.

“I’ll go topside,” Chesterfield said.

“Where shall I go?” Alfonso asked.

Dade and Chesterfield thought for

a second, then shared a look and grinned. Dade pushed the little man into the weapons locker and slammed the door shut.

“And keep quiet!” he commanded.

DADE TRUDGED TO THE BACK of the dirigible and down to the docking gondola. The doorway leading down into the gondola was open and a whistling cold wind poured in. More of the elders had already gotten inside.

The reporter didn’t bother with searching the small gondola. Instead he shut the door against the wind and turned back down the hall. The invaders were in one or more of the rooms that exited off the dimly lit corridor.

The panzooka became heavy and difficult to carry. It sure wasn’t meant for use in the field, Dade thought. Of course, Captain Albert could lift it with no problem, but that didn’t help Dade.

Kicking open several of the doors along the corridor, Dade found nothing. He was about to turn away from his search when a rustling noise reached his ears. He spun wildly just in time to see one of the elders falling on top of him. The man had been up in the darkness of the ceiling.

Dade kicked at the man and tossed his bird-like frame over his shoulder. Then he hoisted the gun to his shoulder and fired. The shot smacked the elder in the head, sending the man careening at an angle into an open door.

One hand dragging the gun, Dade went to the fallen elder. The man was

dazed and bleeding from his hawkish nose.

“Alfonso falls seven miles and nothing. You get a little smack and you bleed like a stuck pig.”

“Traitor ...” the elder said, slurring woozily.

Dade grabbed the man around the waist and was not surprised to find he weighed very little. He was able to tote the man and lug the gun down the hall back to the docking gondola. His plan was to toss the elder off the ship.

Dade threw open the door and tossed the bird-like man down into the gondola. He had taken three steps down the ladder when he saw nearly a dozen more of the elders climbing in through the open floor hatch.

Throwing the gun to his shoulder again, Dade pumped off more of the shot-filled pancake rounds. The elders were tossed about the narrow room as the pancakes ricocheted off them. The room filled with a light mist of white powder that swirled violently in the wind from the open hatch.

Waving away the powder, Dade saw that he had knocked unconscious all of the bird-like invaders. Quickly he locked the door to the gondola then climbed down and began shoving the elders out the hatch. The wind caught each in turn and whisked them away.

The last two were still groggy as he dragged them to the hatch, but they were beginning to waken. The first fought back, although he didn't have the strength. The last held onto Dade and tried to wrestle him, but he lost his

footing and tripped. Dade stumbled, too, and the two men fell out of the hatch.

Frantically, Dade reached out and grabbed the ladder dangling from the bottom of the gondola. Wind scoured his face and he felt his grip loosening.

Revived, the elder flew up to him and tried to pull Dade from the ladder. Dade punched the man several times in the face and tried to kick him, but the wind whipped at him too furiously.

Dade's fingers slipped. He lost his grip but managed to grab the lower rung just in time. Again the bird-like man attacked him.

Dade wanted to pull himself back to the ladder and lower himself into the biplane, but harassed as he was he couldn't coordinate his movements. He slipped again and plunged.

He struck the back of the plane just behind the cockpit. Again the elder attacked. In the distance, Dade could see more elders flying toward him.

Dade swung with a heavy fist and knocked the elder into the cockpit. Desperately, Dade crawled forward and got his feet into the cockpit. Beneath the folds of the elder's robe Dade saw a belt similar to the one the first elder had tried to give to Alfonso. Dade ripped it away from the man then took hold of his robes and tossed him off the airplane. The man plummeted earthward, tumbling head over heels.

The others were almost upon him now. Dade scrambled up the ladder and into the gondola. He got the hatch shut just as thin hands were reaching

inside. He spun the heavy wheel lock then found one of the elders' fallen spears and jammed it into the wheel to keep it from turning.

With a club and an ancient flail in hand, Chesterfield had followed Dade up the staircase from the main gondola then left the reporter who went down the central corridor that led to the living quarters and back toward the docking gondola. Chesterfield continued up the staircase, which narrowed as he ascended. He was inside the structure of the airship now, a framework of light metal girders crisscrossing the interior like a rib cage. Heavy, bulbous bags filled the spaces between girders.

The stairs ended at a small platform and a ladder that climbed into the vaguely glowing upper reaches of the envelope. Leaving the flail behind, Chesterfield ascended. He was within a dozen feet of the top hatch when an elder swooped down on him, jabbing with his spear.

The accountant fended off the blows, swatting with his club. The elder over reached and got inside Chesterfield's range. Clubbing the spear, Chesterfield sent the weapon clattering to the platform below. Angered, the bird-like man darted in and Chesterfield clubbed him as well.

The blow sent the man flying back against one of the balloons, where he bounced, unconscious, back to Chesterfield. The accountant snatched the senseless man out of the air and dragged him up to the top hatch.

Heavy winds made it difficult to open the hatch. Pressing his shoulder against it, Chesterfield forced open the metal door and it slammed against the outer hull. He had to wrap his feet around the ladder to prevent his being sucked out.

The elder was taken by the wind so suddenly that Chesterfield tried to catch the man. He grabbed hold of the man's robe, feeling a belt beneath the folds. Then the wind kicked again and the man was gone, Chesterfield still holding the man's belt.

He closed the hatch and locked it, then descended the ladder. Weapons and belt in hand he ran down the stairs to the main gondola. Dade was there and he had helped Alfonso from the cabinet.

Captain Albert had just entered the wheelhouse again when he stopped and pointed out through the expansive windows.

"Look! There's more of the beasties!"

More than a hundred of the elders were flying toward the airship.

"We've got the ship locked tight. What about the engines?" Dade asked.

"Soon. But we need a bit more time."

Dade shook his head. "I don't think they're going to give us the time, Captain."

Captain Albert turned and pointed up the staircase.

"To the cannon men!" he bellowed.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
IN THE LAND OF THE JINJI

“CANNON?” DADE ASKED astonishedly.  
“Aye!” Captain Albert turned to his men. He ordered one to finish with the engines, and the other to stay at the wheel. “Mind yer level, and keep the voice tube clear, lad. I’ll give the order to hard over.”

The captain turned and thundered to the back of the gondola and disappeared through a set of doors. Dade followed. Inside he found radio equipment and motors. Captain Albert was on a small open elevator platform that was just lifting off the deck and rising a couple of dozen feet to a heavier platform overhead.

“Take the other one, lad,” Captain Albert said, pointing at the deck.

Dade saw another large grate, stepped onto it, and pushed a button on the top of a post sticking out of the platform. He rose to the upper level. Captain Albert was hunched over a lighted brass control panel with buttons and levers, a voice tube, and a double-handled engine order telegraph that matched the one in the pilothouse. Along the lengthy platform, disappearing into the gloomy curve of the ship’s hull, was a line of small cannon.

“We can automate these, boyo. But we’ll need to line them up.”

The captain operated several levers sending the cannon sliding forward toward the hull. Metal encased port-holes irised open down the length of

the platform. The cold wind whipped into the ship for just a moment before the cannon slid into the holes, plugging them. Another panel slid down revealing a large rectangular window.

Working more buttons, the captain loaded the cannon.

“Got more grapeshot. That’ll knock ‘em out of the sky.” Captain Albert flipped the rubber stopper from the voice tube and whistled into it. Then he double pumped one of the handles on the telegraph, bringing lever to rest on the words Hard Over Larboard. In a moment the other handled, powered by an unseen hand, double pumped and came to rest on the same words.

“Hold on,” he told Dade.

They both grabbed onto railings just as the great airship jerked to the left. Slowly the floating men came into view. They were close now, flying hard for the ship.

Captain Albert manipulated the telegraph again and stopped the lever on the words All Stop. The engines died instantly.

“This’ll be a wee bit loud,” he warned as he pushed a button.

The cannon erupted in a string of explosions that rocked the ship. In turn, each cannon shot back on springs then bounded forward again to be reloaded by mechanical gantries.

A second wave of explosions erupted. Dade had thrown his hands to his ears, but the echo and the reverberation through the ship shook him mercifully. The shock waves jostled him to the edge of the platform, and he caught

himself just in time before falling.

Captain Albert pushed another button and the guns went silent. Outside the window the lifeless bodies of several elders floated in empty sky. There were only a few bodies. Dade could see many of the elders flying away from the ship.

The captain blew into the voice tube again then spoke. "Have ye got the engines back running, lads?" The crewman at the other end answered affirmatively. The burly man let out a relieved sigh. He gave navigation orders to the crewman and told him to start up the jets. They were late and Anne needed help.

They were heading back to the pilothouse when a sudden thought came to Dade and he asked, "Hey, does this rig have a name?"

"Yes it does. The Novus."

That figured. If Dade remembered his Latin, the word meant renewal or change. If any name was appropriate for their transportation across this strange, new Earth, it was Novus.

THE GREAT AIRSHIP CLIMBED to its top altitude and cruised smoothly south by southeast, chasing the lower continent. The men had a chance to rest and eat, and then prepare for their landing in Brazil. Not knowing what they would find or what they would need, they checked all of their equipment from ropes and pulleys to weapons to the laboratory equipment in Anne's onboard atelier.

Dade spent some time in the pilot-

house watching the ocean pass below them. He wracked his memory of the Caribbean he remembered before The Change. Things were different below. Several of the islands had changed. One was in fact much larger than it should have been, dominated by an enormous mountain. Cuba seemed to be nowhere, or rather now it was attached to Florida below the Keys. The Devil's Triangle, once an empty and sometimes stormy section of the Atlantic Ocean, now had several small islands in it.

Despite the difference between this world and the one he remembered, the strangeness of it all was quickly fading. He felt at home here.

For a number of hours, they examined the three belts the floating men had left behind. Alfonso had never seen such belts before and Chesterfield was unwilling to experiment by strapping one on. In the end, they left them in Anne's workshop for later.

The northern coastline of South America came and went. Beaches gave way to forests and farmland. The jungle encroached on all of it and eventually overtook every square foot. They passed over the La Gran Sabana mountain range and the Roraima peak and began the long slide down into the Amazon basin.

Wide, pale grasslands peaked out of the jungle and ran like playful children in all directions before the jungle again enveloped them. Hundreds of rivers fingered through the country. They finally came to the roaring great river.

Along this stretch it had widened into a delta but, fed by mountain born rivers and streams, it was building power and depth as it raced toward the Atlantic.

A round expanse of grassland appeared ahead a few miles north of the river. The jungle enclosed it on all sides, the great living canopy overhanging the edges of the sunlit area.

Captain Albert pointed to the spot below. "There she be," he said. "Monte Alegre is just south, on the river."

The great airship Novus settled over the grassland, hovering, drifting slightly to avoid the few trees that dotted the land. After many long minutes the dirigible dropped the few remaining feet and landed with a heavy whomp!

The men set about immediately to outfit themselves. They gathered up rifles and backpacks filled with food supplies and ammunition. Dade and Chesterfield changed into safari attire complete with pith helmets and machetes sheathed at their sides. Captain Albert would stay with the ship to see to its safety and readiness. Alfonso insisted on joining the others.

A short staircase was lowered from the main gondola doors and Dade took a tentative step outside. Chesterfield followed and helped Alfonso down.

The grass was quite high and golden and it swayed in a soft, warm breeze. There were thousands of wildflowers about, all of them in bloom. The men looked around feeling as if they were inside a giant bowl. The jungle sur-

rounded them with a foreboding blackness.

Unexpectedly, the grass parted a few hundred yards away and Anne Robson stepped into a small clearing. She raised a hand and waved and jogged toward the men. It had been weeks since they had seen her. Dade was a bit surprised by her appearance. She seemed so small running through the grass. But as she neared he realized it was simply her body's perfectly symmetrical composition that gave her the appearance of smaller size.

While no Amazon, she was a strong, healthy girl, of indeterminate age. She could have been twenty or forty-five. She stood as tall as Dade, perhaps an inch shorter than Chesterfield. She had a curving, leggy figure that was accentuated by sleek black boots, a pair of light green gabardine pants, and a tailored safari shirt that fitted crisply to her figure. A swoop of long hair fell across her face. It was café au lait in color, with a hint of red highlights, and a shade darker than her sun-bronzed skin. Her face was pretty with small features. But her eyes were another matter. They were large and round and ice blue in color, and they sparkled with flecks of silver.

She gave the men a lopsided smile, the only thing uneven about the girl, and waved again. At the gondola she shook hands with her friends and was introduced to Alfonso.

"He's a strange little guy, Anne," Dade said, "but he's in a real jam." He explained the events of the past

twenty-four hours and was surprised to find Anne receptive.

"You will be safer in the dirigible," she told Alfonso.

The little man shook his head, and his whole body wobbled slightly. "I have come so far. I do not want to lose you now. You are my only hope."

Anne nodded with resignation. "Stay close. We will investigate your troubles in time. There is something I must first attend to, and I will need help."

After retrieving a portable chemical analysis kit from the dirigible she set off back into the jungle. The men followed, Chesterfield and Dade carrying the scientific equipment between them. As they walked, they did not notice the movement atop the dirigible.

Anne cut through heavy vines and low swung branches making her own path. They spent two hours cutting their way through the jungle before they found a small clearing. There were thatched huts arranged in a circle about a central fire pit. Heavy branches held platforms overhead with smaller huts. As they looked around they could see dozens of the little homes, all of them a bit lopsided and wilting now, as if they had been abandoned some time ago.

There were men on the ground, too, dozens of them, all dressed in grass skirts and wearing intricate, black tattoos. And they were all dead.

#### CHAPTER FIVE: AVENGERS OF THE DEAD

"**H**OLY MACKEREL!" DADE cried. "These are the guys who attacked us a few weeks ago in New York."

"The Jinji tribe."

"There must be a hundred of them," Chesterfield said, mentally counting the corpses.

"One hundred and twenty-two."

"I don't see any children, or women."

"There are none," Anne said. "I am uncertain if there ever had been any."

"Then how does the tribe sustain itself?" Dade asked.

"They mate with women of other tribes," Chesterfield informed, "either by choice or by force. The children grow up in the other tribes and then the males are taken back into the Jinji tribe when they become of age." He grinned sheepishly, then added: "I studied up on them after they attacked us."

"All right, professor, any idea why they died?"

Chesterfield knelt beside one of the corpses. It seemed frozen in agony, and had not yet begun to decompose. Despite the heat and the close jungle air there was no foul smell.

"Jackson Crafter promised to help you," Chesterfield reminded Anne, "against the Jinji. Could this be his man's work, Bruno?"

"I do not believe Bruno had that kind of power," Anne said thoughtfully.

"And he's gone now, so there's no

way to ask him.”

Anne lifted the portable chemistry kit and set it down next to a group of three corpses. All of them were frozen with agonized looks on their faces.

Quickly she unlatched the shining metal case and flipped open several tiers of chemical bottles. A tray slid out with a small, powerful microscope. Anne took several bottles of liquid, removed drops with an eyedropper, and combined them in an empty bottle. The liquid changed color with each new addition. Then she took a clean eyedropper and filled it and squeezed its contents into the open dead mouth of the nearest corpse.

The dead man’s lips were purple-brown in color and rigid despite the fleshiness of the mouth. As the liquid touched the dead lips a greenish foam rose from the mouth. Anne repeated the process on each of the three corpses.

Watching, Dade felt a chill go up his spine. The wind went rustling through the closely packed trees making a hollow sound. The canopy shook slightly. Dade glanced about the jungle, above and all around him, feeling dark eyes on him but seeing no one.

Then a soft, high-pitched hum rose up all around them. It was a distant but sweet sound, and seemed to come from everywhere at once. Dade noticed Anne’s slender throat bobbing slightly as she concentrated deeply on the corpses and her experiment.

“They have been poisoned by their own blow darts,” she announced, folding up the chemical kit.

“So they killed each other?”

“I did not say that. They have been poisoned. What killed them – if anything did – is still a mystery. They are not decaying despite having been in this heat for days, and that suggests unnatural influence.”

“Are you saying they are not dead?” Chesterfield asked.

“I believe they are alive but they will be dead if we do not act quickly.” Anne held out several phials of a pale liquid and an equal number of eyedroppers. “Their lives have been suspended by some magicks and then they were poisoned. When the magicks wear off the poison will take effect.”

“That sounds good to me,” Dade said. “You may remember they almost killed you, me, and Chesterfield.”

“They are not to blame for that, or for their current predicament. They only sought to protect the goddess.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring the question, she handed out the phials one to a man and instructed to squirt an eyedropperful of the antidote into the mouth of each of the Jinji tribesmen. Alfonso took a phial along with the others and began administering the antidote. They finished their task quickly and returned to the clearing.

“We can do no more for them now. They are at least out of immediate danger.”

“Yeah, unless some jungle animal decides to eat them.”

Shaking her head, Anne said, “Animals are nowhere near this site. The

magicks frighten them and keep them away.

Anne motioned them to the far side of the clearing where into the thick trunk of a tree had been carved a narrow staircase that wound up to a wide wooden platform. They climbed up the age-slickened trunk to find a stone altar with a soot-blackened brazier set below it. The metal pot still smoldered with pink coals, wisps of smoke lifting lazily in the dead air. On the altar was a carved stone figure of a pregnant woman holding an axe and an oval shield. The child in her belly wielded a dagger.

Anne removed the pendant from around her neck and showed it to the others. It was a perfect match for the stone figure on the altar.

"They are her worshippers?" Chesterfield asked.

"No, more like her protectors, keepers," Anne corrected.

She reminded them that she had gotten her pendant nearby a month ago at the exact moment The Change was occurring. It was clear to her then that the trinket had great significance, especially since the Jinji had chased her half way around the world to kill her and, presumably, retrieve it. After the events of their last adventure, Anne was certain the talisman had great power and she needed to learn more about it. Hence her trip back to the dangerous jungles of Brazil and the Jinji tribe. She had to know more about the powers they were facing.

"Well these powers must be some-

thing," Dade said, "if they can knock down a whole tribe of mad killers. We shouldn't hang around."

"I want to take a few more samples before we leave. But we should do it quickly. They may awaken at any moment."

Anne went rapidly about collecting samples from the fallen Jinji, the soil, some of the bushes and leaves, and from the gruelish mess in several cookpots that had congealed in the now cold firepits. Chesterfield offered his help.

Alfonso was curious about so lush a place, and said so. Bird-like, he moved from flower to bush to tree touching and sniffing the strange new flora. He took hold of one thick leaf, so darkly green it was almost black, and bit a small corner from it, chewing the thing tentatively. His face soured and he dropped the rest of it.

Anne had just packed up a batch of samples and had turned to collect more when she stopped, head cocked slightly.

"We must go," she said quietly.

Dade went to retrieve the chemistry kit.

In a very still voice, Anne commanded, "No. Leave it. Follow me."

Dade fought the urge to look around. Those eyes he felt on him earlier were boring into his head now. His neck itched, anticipating the sudden arrival of a poisoned dart.

Anne led the way out of the clearing, circling around the altar tree, keeping it behind them. The jungle was

thick and she used a heavy stick to help make a path through curtains of drooping branches and dangling vines. Arrows of yellow sunlight stabbed into the murky underbrush where the group noisily made its way.

She led a sudden course change, cutting across the jungle at a severe angle, then she stopped. Her delicate hand held up, she pointed towards a huge tree with twisting exposed roots and a sinewy trunk. Without a word, Dade went to the tree. Chesterfield tugged at the sleeve of Alfonso's robe and motioned for the little man to follow.

Anne turned away from the tree and disappeared into the jungle.

"Where ...?" ask Alfonso.

"Shhh!"

There was movement in the jungle that the men could now detect. The barest snap of a branch, the light crunch of bare feet treading on underbrush, the rhythmic wisp-wisp sound of grass moving.

Dade saw a flash of something back along their trail. A peripheral movement caused him to turn his head involuntarily. A crunch. Dade whirled his head around in the opposite direction.

"We're surrounded," he whispered.

"Come," said Anne, appearing behind them. She was down in the low brush, fronds and vines covering her.

The others lowered themselves and followed her. Their path twisted several times, following the cover. Then the ground dipped below them and

they slid into a narrow, moss-covered ravine almost five feet deep.

"Alfonso!" cried Chesterfield in a hoarse whisper.

The little bird-like man was gone.

"How could he ...?"

Anne held a finger up to her lips. She pulled the men in close to her. "Follow this to the end. You will have two hundred yards of jungle and then the grasslands. Go quickly back to the dirigible. I will find Alfonso."

She did not wait for a reply. She squeezed past the men and melted into the gloomy rainforest.

They listened for a moment but heard no sounds. Encouraged, they followed the path, their feet silent on the mossy trail. When the ravine ended, sloping up to the jungle floor, they kept low and used as much of the underbrush as they could to hide them. More sunlight was streaking down at them. They could see slivers of the grasslands ahead.

Dade was feeling a little more sanguine when suddenly Chesterfield halted and he ran into the accountant. A Jinji warrior blocked their path, spear in hand. Dade balled up a fist and took a step toward the native but Chesterfield grabbed his forearm and stopped him. There were other Jinji warriors. Some carried spears and some held blowguns up to their mouths, and all of the weapons were pointing directly at them.

CHAPTER SIX:  
STALKED BY DEATH

SEVERAL OF THE JINJI passed without seeing her. Anne had curled herself into a ball beneath a thick bush and watched the grass skirts swish-swish by her. She waited several moments, anticipating more tribesmen but none came.

Anne did not know where Alfonso had gone. At first she thought the Jinji had captured him, but she got no sense of that from the snatches of conversation she intercepted.

The little man was unfamiliar with the jungle and easily could have wandered off. But Chesterfield had kept him close, and presumably safe.

A hint of saffron passed between two trees several dozen yards ahead of Anne. The color stood out in the dark green and black tones of the jungle. Squinting, Anne could see that the color belonged to a robe and that the robe was weaving between the maze of heavy tree trunks. Alfonso's path was aimless and growing frantic. At least the little fellow doesn't make any noise, Anne thought.

She waited a moment for more Jinji to cross her path then crept out of her hiding place and crossed toward the saffron-colored robe. The little man did not see her approach. He yelped with a chirping sound as she grabbed him and dragged him to the ground.

"We must away!" he whispered.

"Yes. But not this way. Come."

She tugged at his robe as he tried

to pull away from him. Then she pointed toward a heavy, twisting tree trunk. The sinewy folds of the thick roots formed a small hole in which they could secret themselves.

"Why here?" he asked settling into the dank, cramped space. Anne was almost on top of him and it made him nervous.

"Too many. Keep your voice down. In a few minutes we'll climb the trees and make our way above them to the edge of the jungle. From there we will be able to get back to my ship. Do not worry about falling."

"I never worry about falling," he said.

Anne looked at the little man, whose fat little body and short arms and legs made him look so bird-like.

"In case we have no time later, tell me from the beginning what you need."

Alfonso's face lit brightly and his small round shoulders heaved as if a heavy weight had been lifted.

"I have been looking for you for a month," he said. "I believe you are the only one to help me." He started his story describing his sudden awareness of being in the wrong place in his home city leading to the fall, the search, and his happy meeting with Dade. He told of their escape from the elders – the floating men – and of the attempt to capture the airship.

"What is it you think I can do for you?"

"Return me to my home, the Aerie. Your Mr. Chesterfield said its name is

Aethraea. We call it the Aerie.”

“I will try,” she said, looking into his troubled eyes. “But there’s more.”

“Yes. My world is different somehow. I do not know why. I was disoriented before my fall, which really should never have happened. I would like that explained, too.”

“You cannot tell me anything about these changes?”

“Our society operates without leaders. We have the elders, and they help to turn ideas and wishes into reality. They organize. On occasion, they have been known to discipline. But my world is, well, idyllic, compared to yours.”

“A paradise.”

“It used to be. There are some elders who follow one who has ... made many lone decisions of late. He leads these others.”

“He rules your city?”

“I suppose. But we have never had a ruler. And there are things I have seen. Things have been built that I do not believe should have been. I seem to remember standing alone against some of these changes. I am disoriented a little still.”

“What has been built?”

“Large buildings that are not houses. Most of our structures house the different people we have in the Aerie. We all grow our own food, make our own robes and the like. Many of the people have been made to grow food not for themselves, but for others, and deliver it to these new buildings. Disagreement is not tolerated.”

“No,” Anne said, “it usually is not in

Paradise. If you are in their way, why have they not tried to kill you? Why kick you out of the city instead of removing you permanently?”

“Kill? Oh, no. They would not do that. We do not die. Not the way you mean. When it is our time, we become one with the sky.”

“You don’t fall, either. Until you do.” Anne rubbed her chin, thinking, and forced herself not to make the high-pitched hum she absently made while deep in thought.

“Can you help me find out what is wrong with my home?”

Anne nodded. “First things first. We have to get to the airship.”

THE JINJI HAD BEEN ABSENT for some time. Anne risked a look out of her hiding place and saw no one. She motioned for Alfonso to follow.

Anne led the little man away from where Chesterfield and Dade had been, circling around to the grassland from another direction. She was still miles from her airplane, the one she had flown down here, and the dirigible was the safest place for them now.

They had gone little more than a hundred yards when the jungle exploded with sounds of animals screeching and tree limbs crashing. Anne stopped short and looked overhead just in time to see several figures swooping down on them.

A round shield caught Anne in the forearm and sent her flying. Immediately she kicked out with her legs and felt a heavy thud as she connected with

soft flesh. When she hit the ground, she rolled and, sliding, reached up and grabbed a dangling vine. Her momentum and the tensile strength of the vine helped carry her in an arc off the ground to a low, fat tree limb.

Several men with long, narrow faces and saffron-colored robes floated just above a prone Alfonso. She had never seen them, but Anne knew these to be the elders of which Alfonso had spoken. One of the floating men touched down on the ground. He turned just enough for Anne to see an angry red gash across his face from ear to the opposite cheek. It was a new wound and clearly caused him pain.

The scarred elder wrapped a belt around Alfonso then hauled the frightened little man to his feet. The others stood with spears ready, menacing Anne.

Not waiting for them to attack, Anne grabbed another vine and swung in a wide arc around the tree. Her swing carried her down toward the elders, who had begun to turn away and lift into the air.

Anne's boot caught one of the elders in the shoulder and the man tumbled head over heels in the air and slammed into a tree trunk. A spear passed her head with a zip as she bounced to a stop upon another limb. Scrambling, she got the base of the tree between her and the elders.

Another spear was thrown. By the time Anne dared peak out from behind her protection, the elders were airborne and out of reach. The scarred elder had

a firm hold of Alfonso while two of the others helped the last man, who was still groggy from Anne's kick. They climbed up into the canopy and were gone.

She wasted time and swallowed the anger rising in her. The Jinji were still in the area so she could not debate options. She had to follow the little man.

Nimbly, Anne began climbing. Like a monkey coming home, she scampered from branch to branch, tree to tree, using vines when needed to cross a gulf. In moments she was two hundred feet above the soft, decaying jungle floor. Just overhead, the canopy hung like some giant sculpted roof.

Anne ducked between branches and poked her head out into the sunshine. The elders were a quarter of a mile away and flying away from the dirigible. Standing, Anne looked out on the rolling fields of leaves and the large, bright flowers of the jungle canopy. It stretched for as far as the eye could see, never quite meeting the bright blue horizon.

Bouncing from limb to limb, Anne began following. The elders flew slowly, but they made greater progress than Anne could. Soon she would lose them. If her internal compass was intact, she would soon pass beyond where her plane had been moored at a small dock on the wide Xingu River that fed into the Amazon.

For a moment, Anne thought that the elders had gotten so far ahead of her that they were starting to dip below the horizon. Then she realized

that they were landing somewhere. Dropping off the canopy, Anne got closer to the jungle floor and began swinging through the trees on vines and running over the large tree limbs, making far better progress.

Within ten minutes she was at the edge of a small clearing. The elders had landed by a strange craft and were securing Alfonso inside. There were more elders here than had kidnapped Alfonso; too many for her to attack.

The craft had a long keel with a bulbous cabin at one end that swooped away into a forked tail that pointed up in a thirty-degree angle. The front part of the craft had a sweeping prow that narrowed to a curved tip. One of the elders went to this narrow end where a padded bench lay along the keel's spine. There were footholds and handholds, like handlebars and pedals that branched off the bench. The elder lay down on the bench, head forward like some living figurehead.

It was large enough to hold all of them. With one at the head of the craft, and another holding onto the keel, the four others and Alfonso crammed inside of the cabin. The man at the head, lying on the bench, operated the pedals with his sandaled feet, twisted his wrists slightly on the handlebars, and the craft lifted off. It moved ponderously, straining for every foot of height. To Anne it looked like a giant airborne snail.

They would not be able to go far in the craft, nor stay aloft long. Anne noted their direction then turned and

plunged back into the jungle.

#### CHAPTER SEVEN: ISLAND FLIGHT

**A** GAIN IN THE TREES, Anne made fast time by running along the twisted and crossed branches of the great jungle forest, or swinging from vine to vine. She made her way back along the trail she had followed then veered north. The trees thinned and she was forced to take to the ground. Keeping to tall bushes and fallen jungle debris, she reached a thick line of trees unseen. Beyond this was the Xingu River.

She paused for a moment, taking in her surroundings, looking for landmarks. The river was quite wide at this point and fairly calm. The soft hush of distant running water lightly echoed in the canyon made by a thick wall of trees on either side. Upstream a sharp bend took the river out of sight into bright yellow sunlight. At the shore was a large rock shaped like a top, the tip balancing in another rock embedded in the shore. Anne recalled that the plane was on the other side of this landmark.

She ran the mile to the rock in little time and continued on to the bend. Her plane was still there, a gleaming steel Lockheed 5B Vega fitted with pontoons just below the wheelshrouds. The dock was rotting and moss-covered as if the jungle were encroaching on it despite the sun.

Anne unlocked the hatch and

climbed in and squeezed up into the raised cockpit. In moments she had completed her checklist. She slipped out again and pushed the plane away from the dock, hopping lightly to the pontoons and climbing back into the plane. Within a minute the engine turned over and the propeller leapt to life and the plane was speeding down the watery runway.

Airborne, Anne piloted the plane into a steep climb to get above the trees. Atop the rolling jungle landscape she banked the plane back toward the clearing the elders had used. It took only a few minutes to gain the grassy area where she again banked and followed in the direction the elders had taken.

The minutes dragged. She wondered if she had not remembered accurately. Then a speck appeared on the horizon. Anne did not push her motor. The plane had far too much speed compared to the heavily laden craft.

On the pilot console was a framed glass rectangle. Anne pushed a button and the rectangle flipped up and extended with a slight metallic whine on a metal arm. The glass came to rest almost directly in her forward view. She pushed two other buttons and the glass fogged over and took on the color of the sky. A dial beside the buttons gave the image focus.

The speck was larger in the glass but obscured by a glare. Anne reached up and flipped a visor in front of the small ceiling windows above her. Then

she flicked a switch and the image jumped. The speck was now quite large in the glass, and unmistakably the craft she wanted. An experimental television camera and zoom lenses mounted inside the wing provided this new image. A small electric meter beneath the window showed red numerals indicating Anne was four miles behind the small craft.

A flickering movement ahead caught her attention. It was barely visible to the naked eye. As she approached she saw there was a silvery sheen to the sky hanging across the blue like a translucent curtain. Anne had passed through enough of these to know they usually offered no trouble. In this new world, ever since The Change, the planet had altered and had seemingly gotten larger, and it was divided into regions cordoned off by mild energy fields. Passage between the regions was simple, as was communication, despite the fact that each region could be vastly different, as if dredged up from a different time period. New York was stuck in the 1930s; Brazil was in some timeless, almost prehistoric age. And there were many more.

They were coming up on the northern limit of the continent. The jungle faded below and became grasslands which rose up in short craggy peaks only to slide away to sandy beaches. Out over the deep blue water Anne spotted a tiny white island alone in the vast Atlantic expanse.

The elders' craft passed through the

energy barrier, disappearing from her screen. Two minutes later Anne flew through the barrier as well. The sun was not so bright on the other side. Heavy white and gray clouds mushroomed across the sky. It took several minutes for Anne to spot the elders' craft, which had begun to descend.

For a moment she wondered if they had seen her, for they had vanished. Then, as they cleared the clouds, she saw that the ocean was now filled with a sweeping arc of large islands below them and that the craft was lowering toward one of them.

ANNE DROPPED HER PLANE onto a tidal pool and skipped along under power to an empty dock, one of more than a dozen – most of them occupied with small fishing boats – along this stretch of shoreline. Several children ran out to greet her, catching her thrown mooring line, and accepting small coins to watch her plane.

The elders' craft had landed on an empty stretch of rocky beach some half mile away. Anne raced toward the spot and arrived in time to see Alfonso being led off by the four elders from the jungle. The other two stayed with the craft.

They had not realized that they were being followed. Their movements were arrogant, and their treatment of Alfonso was rough. They pushed him along cruelly, and the little man did not fight back.

They hurried out of the beach district walking along a rutted dirt road

passing old homes and fishmongers, and moved into the center of a town. A trader's bazaar was in full swing and impeded their progress. The bird-like elders roughly shoved eager merchants aside in order to pass. Alone, Anne weaved her way more easily through the throng as they begged her attention in a myriad of languages.

"Fine linen for you, miss," one called.

"Lovely jewels for such a pretty thing," a crone offered.

Holding aloft a small black box a rotund fellow said, "Pass the barriers without fear. Know the unknown before you cross. Storms, mountains, enemies are all revealed with this modern marvel."

Anne slipped through the crowd, her eyes constantly on the elders. They pushed their way out of the concourse to a rude brick-faced building and down a half flight of steps to a heavy wooden door. Anne watched from a vantage point behind a colorful booth as the door opened and Alfonso was shoved inside. The scarred elder gave lengthy instructions to the man who had answered the door then, with two of his companions, turned, climbed up the steps and re-entered the street. Anne noted the address then followed.

Without the little man, the elders made better time through the streets. They made several turns before mounting a low hill to a small cottage. Anne circled around the hill and approached the cottage using a stand of palm trees for cover. She darted the last few yards to the corner of the house then

crouched low and crept toward an open window. The elders were inside, their faces red and sweat beads on their skin. It was warm and their quick stride had exercised them perhaps more than they were used to. Two more elders were inside, sitting at a table. One had stood as the others entered.

"We have him," the scarred elder said to two others sitting at a table. "Have you made the arrangements?"

"Yes," answered the elder still sitting at the table. He was a beady-eyed man with features like the others and a long hooked nose. "A ship leaves tomorrow morning. It is on the opposite side of the island, but it will take you where you need to go."

"You had no trouble?"

The beady-eyed man snorted and held up a handful of the *auraea rubies*. "These will open any door for us."

"Australia," said the scarred elder, his mind in thought. "That will keep little Alfonso out of the way until it is too late. Pity his kind do not die as others do. But this will be as good. Almost."

He sat, pleased with himself.

"He has found friends," one of the others reminded.

"And look how helpful they have been." He poured water into a small bowl and drank greedily. "We will return to the flier shortly and bring Alfonso to the ship. You," he said, pointing at the one who had made the arrangements, "you will take us to this ship and accompany us to this Australia."

BACKING AWAY FROM THE house, Anne scampered down the hill and ran back to town. Reversing her course she found the aged brick building where Alfonso was being kept. The guard was still posted outside.

She turned up another street and found a narrow alley that fed back along behind the brick building. She crept down the muddy, weed covered path to find the rear of the building unguarded.

Anne slipped up to a rear door, which was locked, and then to a cracked window. Opening this, she climbed into a narrow room that may have once been a bedroom. The room door opened onto a hall which led toward the front of the building. Lightly stepping on the old floorboards Anne found a cramped staircase extending down to a dark basement hallway. At the end of the hall a square of pale yellow light fell out of an open door.

Anne eased up to the door ducked her head around the jamb to look inside. An elder happened to be standing inches from her face and saw her. Startled, he jumped back a step and gasped.

Anne leapt into the room and threw a hand over his mouth to keep him from screaming. The man struggled and tried to bring a fist down on the girl's head. Anne swiveled behind the man then, with one hand on his mouth and another wrapped around his chest, heaved him up into the air. With a sweep of a long leg she knocked the man's feet from under him and brought

his head crashing down against the floor. Instantly the man went limp and silent.

Alfonso Ipsolenti was seated in a chair nibbling on some nasturtiums.

"Oh, hello," he said, smiling.

Anne threw a finger to her mouth. She took a chair and brought it close to Alfonso and sat beside him. She whispered to him.

"Are you all right?"

"Quite well. The elders are taking me home. Satraps told me so."

"Who is Satraps? Is he the one with the scar on his face?"

"Yes. He is the leader I told you about. He has come to bring me home."

"No. They are taking you to Australia to get you out of the way."

Confused, Alfonso said, "But Satraps told me ...."

"He lied. We have to get you out of here."

"But ...."

"You do want to go home don't you?"

Alfonso nodded, a deep look of puzzlement on his face. "Of course. It is why I sought you out."

"Then you must trust me."

She stood and held out a hand to the little man. He accepted it and followed her out of the building rubbing his bulbous, twitching nose.

#### CHAPTER EIGHT: CANNONS OF DEATH

THE CIRCLE OF JINJI warriors tightened in a knot around Dade and Chesterfield.

The men were armed but there would be no time to raise the guns and fire if the natives attacked. Dade felt something wash through him, a warm wave that calmed him. If he was to die he'd take as many of these grass-skirted heathens with him, he told himself. He squeezed the gun in his hand and the muscles in his arm twitched with readiness.

"What did you do to our fallen ones?" one of the black-mouthed warriors grunted.

"Tried to save them," said Chesterfield, his voice a little tremulous.

The Jinji raised his spear and jabbed it menacingly. He growled, "You kill them!"

"They were affected with the same poison you use on your blow darts," Dade accused. "Maybe you killed them. We gave them the antidote."

This concerned the leader. He had not known about the poisoning of his fellow tribesmen.

"Why did you give the antidote?"

"We don't want to kill you," said Chesterfield, proudly. He looked sharply at Dade, who was about to disagree.

The leader grumbled then yelled, "You defile the Virago and her altar!"

Dade shrugged. "You've got us there, smart guy."

Suddenly the jungle seemed to come alive. The Jinji noticed and turned, seeking an enemy. The trees swelled and pressed in close. The ground shifted, rising, falling, twisting the vegetation. Terrified, the Jinji bunched in a circle. When the vertiginous movement ceased Dade and Chesterfield were gone.

CHESTERFIELD'S EYES CROSSED at the first sign of the jungle's strange behavior. He swooned, wrapped in vertigo, and crumbled to the rotting underbrush. Dade fell beside him, finding a spot on the ground to concentrate on. His stomach churned at what he caught in his peripheral vision.

When the world stopped spinning, he looked up and saw a man in a black robe and a blood red hood that covered his head. Omani Dahla!

Anger swelled in Dade and he stood up, fists balled.

"What are you doing here?"

Dahla held a hand up. "You are not seen, but you may yet be heard. Bring the accountant and follow me. Quickly, before they discover the ruse!"

Dade looked around him and saw only jungle. The Jinji were gone. But were they? The jungle seemed to undulate slightly as if they were behind some sort of curtain.

"Do not tarry!"

Dade bent and helped Chesterfield to his feet. The accountant was wobbly, but regaining consciousness he understood they needed to flee. Dahla led the way.

Dade did not trust the Enchantra. A fancy name for a wizard, Dade thought, and not something in which he would have believed in a month ago. But he had seen Dahla work his magicks and knew the man was genuine. He did not know, though, if the man could be trusted. Had he helped them in their last adventure? Or had it only looked that way? The man had his own agenda, that was clear. Ultimately, Dade did not trust him. Except that, now, he had to.

As quietly as they could manage, the trio cut their way through the jungle and out onto the grassy field where the dirigible rested. The airship lay atop a slight rise, nestled in grass half a mile away.

A whistling sound alerted the men just as a spear fell from the sky and stabbed the earth beside Chesterfield's foot.

"They've found us!"

Behind the trio the Jinji tribe were pouring out of the jungle at a dead run, chucking spears and spitting darts from their blowguns. The air became thick with the tiny barbed missiles whizzing by them. They ducked low and ran.

"Cast a spell!" Dade cried.

"I need a moment to prepare," replied Dahla, breathless and stumbling in his long robe.

"We don't have a moment!"

The air cracked with horrifying thunder, shaking the men off their feet. They tumbled and rolled as something heavy whistled past them overhead. Another explosion, behind them,

rumbled the earth. Again the air cracked and whistled and exploded.

Dade risked a peak above the grass. Several grass fires were burning behind them. The Jinji had scattered. Looking toward the dirigible he could see the cannon ports open, two of them smoking.

"Captain Albert," Dade cried, "I love you."

The trio climbed to their feet and ran to the dirigible. A ladder awaited them and they climbed up and slammed the door shut. Arms took hold of them and hoisted them to their feet. Looking up, both Dade and Chesterfield were greeting by a shocking sight. The birdmen were here and they held Captain Albert at the point of a glinting machete.

One of the elders stepped out from the rear of the gondola, smiling. He wore a half-hood up on his head that covered his crown. He was bald except for a few wisps of wiry hair and his nose looked as if it had been broken several times. His smile offered no warmth, only cold evil.

"A most interesting vessel, indeed," he said. "Take us up, we are returning to the Aerie."

ONCE AIRBORNE THE HOODED elder operated a small machine that was propped up against the control panel in the pilothouse. It glowed with a blue light from several opaque glass bubbles dotted about the device. One of the bubbles opened and a tube extended out of it close to the man's mouth. He spoke into it and voices returned out of

the machine from unseen speakers. Satisfied, the man shut down the machine and turned back to his captives.

He gave orders to the others and to Captain Albert's two crewmen. They hesitated until the captain nodded for them to comply.

The airship did not rise more than a few thousand feet then began to drift down to lower elevations. Three hours later they were settling on the shore of an island. The ship had barely touched down when several more of the elders came aboard, and then lifted off again in a steep climb. Leading the new group was the man with the ragged scar across his face, Satraps. His eyes stopped on Dade and Chesterfield, his face twisted into a cruel smile. He stepped close to them, radiating power and hatred.

"Our prey appears to have fled, though he could not have done so alone. Your friend ... this Amazon Anne woman ... she is helping him."

Dade shrugged. "Could be."

Satraps swung so quickly Dade did not see him move. The hand caught him on the side of the head and he dropped to the floor grating. Pain knifed through him but he did not lose consciousness.

Satraps nodded and two others lifted Dade to his feet.

"My name is Satraps and I am the ruler of Aethraea. You will not cause me trouble. If I had my way, I would open the doors to this vessel now and throw you and your kind out. You don't fly, do you?" He reached over to a small

table and took the three belts Chesterfield had placed in the weapons locker. The other elders had found them earlier. "Perhaps you would prefer to wear these?"

Dade noted the belts were the same as the other elders wore. If they could get three more, wrest them from the elders, they might be able to escape the dirigible. Of course, that would mean landing somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. He did not want to jump from this frying pan into that particular fire.

Satrap tossed the belts to another of his clan and the man put them back in the weapons locker.

"For now, you will live, and you will stay on the ship. We return to Aethraea. Your colleague will surely go there with Alfonso Ipsolenti. Your presence will help ensure his safe return to his countrymen," he added with a wry grin.

"This ship will never make it!" Captain Albert cried. "I've told the others such height is impossible for her."

"Then you had better learn to fly."

At a signal, several of the elders shoved Dade and Chesterfield into chairs at the small table at the foot of the stairwell. They were not tied nor were they particularly well watched. For the most part they were ignored as insignificant.

"Notice who's missing?" whispered Dade.

Chesterfield's brow creased in confusion. Then his face lit. "Dahla!" he snarled.

"Looks like he's got us into another

fine mess!"

#### CHAPTER NINE: READY FOR WAR

**H**UMMING, THE STEELY Vega lowered to tree top level just above the Aragon Forest, the majestic snowcapped Montañas de Pirineos filling the horizon ahead. As the forest ended the Vega dropped low above a shimmering blue lake. A wide river fed into the lake from the west. Several dozen small fishing boats, most of them under furled sails, dotted the calm water.

Anne banked the plane and pointed them north, toward shore. A small village set back from boat docks came into view. One dock was set off from the others and had a large wooden building erected at the end of it. Anne set the plane down on the still water then taxied over to this lone dock.

The plane bumped the side of the dock and Anne hopped out to secure her own mooring line. Alfonso followed.

A small crowd of women and children began to file down to the dock from the town.

"Stay here," she commanded, then went to the townsfolk. Alfonso could see the smiles of the children and toothless grins of old women. The younger women, though, looked on Anne less charitably, jealousy glowing redly in their eyes.

She spoke to them for a moment then returned.

"They know you?" asked Alfonso.

"Yes. I maintain many depots across the world to supply me with fuel and other things of importance in times of need."

Anne went to the building and unlocked the heavy wooden door. Alfonso pressed close but could only catch a glimpse of the dark interior. He did see a pump and a long hose, which Anne brought out of the building and uncoiled toward the airplane. She put the end of the hose into the plane's fuel tank then went to the building and began pumping by hand. After half an hour of pumping the tank was again full, and she returned the hose to the building. For several long minutes Anne was inside clattering about in the dark. When she came out she carried a heavy canvas belt with more than a dozen small pockets arranged around it along with a gunbelt and holster, which she strapped to her waist. She removed the gun from the holster, a small model Mauser "broomhandle", and checked the top-loading cartridge box.

"We must go," she said.

Alfonso slumped noticeably.

"Can we not rest? Eat something?"

Anne suddenly realized they had been travelling non-stop for more than a day. She gave the little man a lopsided grin and apologized. She knew where they could get some food and rest.

In the village, they settled on straw mats outside the home of an old woman who was thrilled to be serving the trav-

elers. She brought plates of cheese and meat and vegetables pulled that moment from her garden. Alfonso enjoyed the feast, eschewing the meat but trying the local cheese and finding it satisfactory.

Sated, he sat back on the mat and wondered at his adventure. He had gone half way around the world and back again. After escaping the South American island, they had flown across the Atlantic, hopscotching along the string of islands that stretched from the Guyanas to Portugal.

Alfonso was able to direct Anne to the little town from which he had started his adventure. They had found the faded and torn newspaper plastered on the mortared wall and the small depression he had made landing. This captured Anne's interest for a time. She had several electronic devices with her and attempted to take measurements around the hole but could get no reading at all.

She said that even if Alfonso could not die from such a fall, he still should have been gravely injured. For long moments she stared at the hole, her throat bobbing gently and a soft, high-pitched hum rising around them. Alfonso found the music of it soothing.

Next she turned her attention to the sky, which was clear and blue and cloudless. Alfonso was crestfallen. The Aerie had moved on, but to where he did not know. Taking readings of the prevailing winds and other weather measurements, Anne determined the most likely direction the floating city

would have traveled and set off in pursuit.

Resting now in the small village on Lake Aragon, Alfonso let his mind wander as he stared at the clouds. Anne had gotten up to stretch her legs, nervous energy powering her. She walked the length of the small village, a gaggle of children at her heels. Behind the village were low rolling hills covered in whispering grass. These were the beginning of the foothills to the Montañas de Pirineos. Wandering, Anne climbed one of the hills, her eyes fixed on the purple-hazed mountains. At the crest she saw grasslands sweep down into a wide valley, then up again to rocky hills dotted with stubby trees. The valley was filled with goat and sheep herds. She looked around to see that the children had not made the climb with her.

Something at the foot of the far rocky slope caught her eye. It was a building of some sort, and a large one. She remembered the canvas belt she wore and pulled a small pair of binoculars from one of the pockets. She could see now that there were two large wooden buildings with no windows and wide, airplane hanger-sized doors.

Several men were patrolling the front of the structures. They were tall and lean with narrow faces. One man floated around the corner of the building and pointed to two of the others who turned smartly and marched off.

Anne settled in the grass and watched. After a time, two long airships of the snail-like design she had

seen in South American floated down to the ground near the guards. Several men hopped off and began unloading crates made of some light gray-colored material. The floating man returned and lowered himself to one of the crates, which he opened. He pulled a long device out of the crate and turned it several times inspecting it before replacing it in the crate.

Back in the village, Anne found the crone that had served them lunch.

"Who are those men across the valley?" Anne asked.

The old woman's smiling face collapsed and she lowered her head. "We do not know. Several men have died going to find out. We do not go any more."

Alfonso stirred, awaking from his long nap. He saw Anne's face had grown stern.

"Is there trouble?" he asked.

"Yes. Do your elders use weapons?"

"Oh, no! We have no need of weapons."

"You mentioned others in your city not like you. Are they elders?"

"The elders are different from my kind, and there are still more beings, some you might find hideous, but they are quite peaceful. None would use a weapon."

"But the elders are the ones who have begun changing things in your city?"

Sadly, Alfonso said they were.

"We must hurry."

AIRBORNE AGAIN, ANNE WAS care-

ful to avoid the valley and the snail-like aircraft importing weapons. From a distance, using the dashboard mounted scope, she saw a steady stream of the aircraft as they floated down out of the clouds.

"The Aerie is nearby," said Alfonso, dreamily. He stared up through the ceiling window, his short neck stretching as if reaching out to the unseen city. Absently he removed his glasses and cleaned them and began preening himself. His bulbous nose twitched and he absently rubbed it.

"It must be," said Anne, "if those craft are any indication."

She circled around before getting too close to the other aircraft and used clouds to help keep them under cover. She continued circling this way for nearly an hour, always rising.

Once above the clouds they were exposed but she had flown them far enough away from the others so as not to be seen.

"We are reaching our top ceiling," said Anne, tapping on the altimeter. They were more than five miles high. The cabin had become cold and the air was a little thin. "Can you see your home yet?"

Alfonso had become sad over the past hour, distraught over not finding the city.

The sky was shockingly blue and clear. It looked as if they could fly forever engulfed in blue. Thick, puffy white clouds were far below them, unreal at that distance. Anne noticed a sheen in front of them, just a light shim-

mer that she caught out of the corner of her eye. Looking for it, the thing disappeared, but when she let her eye wander it flickered in her vision. It was a wall that stretched far above them and disappeared into the clouds below them.

"There is a energy barrier in front of us," she told the little man. "This may be the way to your home."

Alfonso sat forward, straining to see.

"I cannot tell. Oh, so many things have changed." The man was near tears.

Ignoring him, Anne pulled back on the stick and gained a little more altitude hoping the city would appear soon. Alfonso said he had fallen seven miles. If Aethraea were truly that high they would never make it.

The shimmering wall was near. They could not mistake it now. Alfonso shrunk back in his seat as they approached, warily watching. In an instant they were through.

For just a moment they saw something large floating in the distance. Then the Vega's engine sputtered and coughed for half a second then simply died. Forward momentum stopped instantly as if the plane had been snared by an unseen hand. Then the craft began to nose over and the left wing began to tip. The plane picked up speed and, powerless, began a hurtling slide toward the earth.

CHAPTER TEN:  
THE HELL FURNACE

**H**ER HANDS A BLUR, ANNE worked the controls of the Vega. She had pulled on the stick and jostled the throttle to no avail. Now she set several dials and clicked toggles.

The plane had halted its roll but was still in a sliding fall, and picking up speed.

Anne left the controls and stepped down into the main cabin. There were four seats and behind those an open area with racks of parachutes and the thin, square jumper packs. Below these footlockers were affixed to the deck.

Anne took two jumpers, strapped one to her back, then ran forward to get Alfonso. She pulled the little man down out of the cockpit and put the jumper on his back. Shoving him toward the cabin door, he balked.

"I cannot fly!" he said.

"With these you won't have to. We'll fall for a bit then pop them open. Follow my lead. We'll glide down."

Shaking, Alfonso tried to protest but could not. Anne muscled the cabin door open and pushed the little man out. He began tumbling as he fell away from the plane. Anne jumped out the door and felt the plane race past her. She looked down at Alfonso and saw that he was falling faster than she was – except, she wasn't falling! She was hanging in air. Flying.

Instantly, Anne turned herself over

and willed herself into a dive. After a moment she picked up speed and caught up to Alfonso. The little man was curled into a ball, his face fighting back fear. He looked over to Anne with hopeful eyes. She reached out and took his arm. In a few moments she had slowed their descent and then was flying the two of them higher.

The large object she had seen passing through the energy barrier was the city of Aethraea. They had fallen away from it. Anne judged it might take them hours to reach it.

Shock wearing off, Alfonso said, "You can fly!"

Anne smiled. "I believe anyone can in this dimension. Machines do not work, combustion engines specifically, I suspect, but people fly."

"Then why can I not?"

"I don't know. You have been affected by something. Perhaps when you lost consciousness – just before waking and falling – someone drugged you or put something on your person."

"I have only this robe and my sandals. Nothing to make me lose the power of flight."

"We'll find out, Alfonso," said Anne, soothingly.

The air was warmer up here than it should have been, and the sun was bright and fair. More clouds had rolled in, big puffy things that obstructed their view of the city, giving them only occasional glimpses as they approached.

Aethraea was an astounding place. It had a bizarre mix of architecture,

with spires and domes and pagodas and at least one pyramid shape. All of it was built of a light gray-colored material. Every building had balconies and seemingly hundreds of windows. The city looked smooth, unadorned, until they flew closer. Anne could make out figures etched into the gray building material.

Several of the snail-like fliers sailed up toward the city and disappeared beneath its bubbling base. Anne changed their course and flew up underneath the city in the wake of the fliers. Clouds kept them hidden until the city blistered into view directly in front of them. The same gray construction material comprised the underbelly of Aethraea, giving it the appearance of a large rolling cloud. But from the bottom center of the city came a hot red glow.

"I do not like this," said Alfonso, looking at the glowing area.

They skirted around out of the flight path of the fliers, staying close to the bottom surface and using the swells to hide them. As they neared they saw the glow came from a cavernous hole cut into the base of the city. There were dozens of exposed tiers that ringed the hole with beings made tiny by their distance working on each. Overseers lashed at the workers. Fires blazed and the clang of metal and the roar of furnaces could be heard. Even from a distance Anne and Alfonso could feel tremendous heat radiating out of the hole. The snail-like aircraft they were trailing lifted into this cavern and landed

on one of several floating platforms.

Anne flew to the edge of the hole and slipped up onto a lower tier, lowering the bird-like man with ease. It was an empty catwalk that partly circled the cavern. Together, they took stairs up several flights, looking for an exit. The closer they got to the top tier the more populated it became.

"I will need a robe," Anne said.

Hundreds of robes had been abandoned by workers who slaved, sweating and burning, at hot machines. Anne scooped one up and slid it over her head. They continued to the upper levels, now no longer being furtive. Finally they spotted a door that appeared to lead away from the boiling madness.

"You do not know what this is?" she asked.

Alfonso shook his head. The workers were making weapons, that much was clear, and there were fires burning. That did not make sense to Anne. Fires required combustion. If her surmise was correct, combustion engines should not be able to work in this dimension.

Hanging above the center of the hole was a gigantic oblong-shaped device. Around it were several large lights that throbbed with a silvery, greenish-black color. There were several tiers of these lights, all of them thrumming to an individual beat. The movement of the lights was hypnotic.

"Have you ever seen that before?"

Again, the little man shook his head.

"It is a generator," a voice said behind them.

Anne whirled to find Omani Dahla, the Enchantra. The man was dressed in a saffron robe as they were. His head was bare and he looked self-conscious about it. It had been a month since she had seen Dahla. The man did not show his face often, preferring to hide it beneath a blood red hood.

Dahla was a youthful, somewhat attractive man, although his head was bald. Thick, black sideburns grew from his temples down to his chin. A ring of black hair rounded his head, connecting the facial hair. His eyes were green and cat-like. There was the hint of a smile in those eyes now as he looked at Anne. But his face was etched with concern.

"What does it do?"

Dahla let out his breath a little and she could see relief wash through him. She would trust him, even if just a little.

"It creates a gateway to another part of our world."

Anne nodded. "A part of the world where combustion is possible and weapons can be built and used."

"Do they wish to take over my city?" Alfonso asked.

"No. They already have that," Anne said. "They are a planning an invasion of the surface world. They have a storehouse of weapons on the ground already."

"There's more." Dahla detailed everything from his first appearance in the jungle to their surprising survival on the flight up to the city, beyond the

dirigible's design limits. He had kept himself hidden, listening, and following the others as they were taken to a large hall. "From what I overheard, the generator is keeping the city here on this plane, otherwise they would have slipped out of our existence by now. If that is true, then I believe this must be the fabled city of the sky called Aethraea. If not for the generator, they would have disappeared for another thirty years."

"Then we have to destroy the generator."

"Will that stop the elders?" Alfonso asked weakly.

"If we destroy the generator then they won't be able to make more weapons. Your city will be safe."

"Not as long as Satraps is still here."

"Then we'll have to remove him, too. Dahla, where is this hall you mentioned?"

Outside the door, he said, were several passages to the city's surface. They were to take the blue one. From there they would have to fly across town to a place called Rever. There they would see a circular building. The dirigible was docked there and the crew would be inside. Alfonso said he knew the place.

"They are waiting for you, Miss Robson," Dahla said.

"Good. Then we won't have to waste time on introductions. Do what you can to destroy the generator, Dahla. Then get to the ship."

THE PASSAGES OF WHICH Dahla

spoke were large tunnels suitable for flying. Holding Alfonso close, Anne lifted into the blue passage and followed the gentle curves to the surface. Alfonso instructed Anne to gain some height; he needed to take his bearings. Anne had begun to climb when she noticed movement on a wide balcony a few feet below them. A familiar feeling stabbed at her.

Twisting in mid-air, she dove back to the balcony. No one was there, but curtains fluttered in an open doorway. She set Alfonso down and pushed through the curtains. The room inside was surprisingly large. Alfonso had said most apartments were small with large balconies. The beings of Aethraea spent much time out of doors.

Another open doorway beckoned. She followed through that and froze. Towering over her were three fierce creatures with red, cracked flesh and long animal-like faces. Their brows arched devilishly; they had nubs for ears. Each wore a long white robe. Their claw-like hands were folded in front of them and cloven hooves peaked out from beneath their robes.

Seeing her they ducked their heads on long, sinewy necks, their pointed shoulders rising as if in defense. Their eyes averted and they turned away slightly. Anne could see now the thing that had been familiar. Each of the creatures had a pair of reddish black wings stabbing out from their robes. The wings were small and scalloped, the ends finished in a deadly fine point.

They were sad creatures, now that

she looked at them. Their eyes hung low and were watery. Their cracked red flesh was mottled with black streaks as if ancient tears had stained their faces.

At St. Catherine's in Buda-Pest she had seen statues that looked like these creatures. She had wondered at their placement in an orthodox church. Their appearance here was even more startling.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"We are of no concern." The creature's voice was a deep baritone, beautiful she thought, and laced with sorrow.

Alfonso stepped into the room and smiled. The creatures turned away, their bodies slumping. One began to sob.

"What do you know of this man?" Anne asked.

"Our shame, our shame!"

Anne grabbed the lanky elbow of the speaker and spun him around. Because he had slumped he was now at eye level with her. She pressed close to his snout.

"Tell me."

"We had little choice. We could not be cast out again." One of the creatures wept. "Ours are ancient ways, ancient knowledge. The elders ... required our assistance."

Anne thought about that for a moment. "You banished Alfonso."

"No!" Another of them began weeping. "But our order did remove his power of flight, temporarily."

"How?"

“A poisonous tincture of curruo – an herb. It was sprayed on him, put on his clothes. It is in his skin now.”

Alfonso fingered his robe, eyes wide with horror and hope.

“I could fly again?”

“Yes. Remove the robe. We shall give you clean clothing. It will take a little time for the curruo to leave your system, but you will fly again.”

Alfonso stripped off his robe as the creature disappeared into another room, followed by the others who continued to sob.

“Who are these creatures?” Anne asked.

“I know little about them. They are called Niebos Kaduk. Very old. They are not native to the Aerie but they have been here as long as the city has been in the sky. They are the apothecary of our city.”

“They do not fly.”

“Not all creatures fly here. Most do, but not all.”

Only one of the creatures returned. He carried a robe and gave it to Alfonso, his head bent low.

“There is no forgiveness for our sin,” he said to the little man. “We have come to see that over time. And yet we sin anew.” He uncurled his long fingers to reveal several leaves. “Chew these. They will speed your recovery.”

“Tell me your name,” Alfonso said, taking the leaves.

“I am Nachash, and I beg forgiveness.”

“You’re doing the right thing now,” Anne said. She had much to ask these

creatures. Their appearance in two vastly different places ignited her curiosity. Something nagged at her, some pit of knowledge long buried.

“Who are you?” she asked.

A long black tear streamed down his face. “We are the vanquished ones.” He turned to leave, his head bowed and his body slumped, but paused at the curtain and looked back at her. “There are others of us. Elsewhere. Beware of them and their power.”

#### CHAPTER ELEVEN: BATTLE FOR THE SKIES

ALFONSO HAD NOT RE-gained his flying strength by the time they reached Rever, although he chewed steadily on the thick green leaves given him by Nachash. Rever turned out to be an open area of the city with a large park, several lakes and streams, and dozens of small airborne thickets of delicate *auraea rubies*. A number of small buildings circled three sides of the park, decorated with streamers or banners or flags, each form sweeping off in graceful curves and shapes. The fourth side provided a fantastic open vista on an endless blue sky splattered with great white and gray clouds. Dumped into the center of the park was another building. A plain square many stories high and windowless. Atop the building another structure with large doors and several windows. The snail-like fliers entered the wide doors and many elders patrolled the roof. The dirigible

floated just above the roof, entangled in a web of mooring lines.

Anne settled them on a nearby balcony and watched the activity on the building below.

“How do we get in? That way is too well guarded.”

Alfonso pointed to the base of the building. There were several small doors and lines of people streaming in and out.

“They have us bring food.”

ON THE GROUND, ALFONSO approached several people – heavy, gray gargoyle-looking creatures that seemed made of stone. Their features were cold, but their eyes warmly welcomed Alfonso’s greeting. After a moment of bartering, they gave the baskets of vegetables they carried to him and Anne and bid them good day.

Armed with the produce and disguised, Anne and Alfonso joined the long lines heading into the building. They waited two hours before being passed inside into a large, open hall.

An inspector carelessly riffled through the contents of their baskets and pointed them to one of the two dozen lines at the far end of the room. They waited, shuffling forward in small steps, until they reached an elevator platform. They were herded onto the platform along with dozens of others, also carrying baskets.

“We got lucky,” said Anne as the elevator lifted.

“No. I have delivered this type of food before. These will be accepted at

the eighth floor kitchens, and will get us closer to our goal.”

While in line, the two had discussed where Anne’s friends might be kept inside the building. Alfonso did not believe there were floors below the main floor. He had seen the various kitchens and living quarters for hundreds of elders, none of which he felt were suitable for holding prisoners, and he knew that there were meeting halls on the upper floors. The little man believed the others would be kept there.

The elevator stopped and dozens of people exited, mechanically moving down a corridor and into a stark white kitchen. Anne and Alfonso followed and delivered their baskets and were shoved along with the crowd back into the hallway. Rolling away from the line of people, Anne led Alfonso to an open door that led to a stairwell.

“They keep you grounded in here,” Alfonso said, answering Anne’s look of confusion at seeing stairs. The existence of elevators had also piqued her curiosity.

“Where do we go?”

“Another eight levels, I believe.”

The staircase was wide with a central airshaft. Anne lifted the little man and flew up the shaft. At the topmost level she flew up over the rail and gently settled on the landing.

All the doorways were open and wide. Most of them were slightly rounded despite the blocky nature of the building. Anne peaked out into the main corridor to see several large doorways that opened into empty meeting

halls. There was no one in the corridor.

"Come," she said.

They searched each of the areas then went further down the hall and found a heavy set of doors. These were made of thick oak and carved deeply with images of animals and cherubs and flowers. The wood was old and well oiled.

Astonished, Alfonso said, "We do not have such things in the Aerie."

Anne put a hand on the door then stopped.

"How do you feel?" she asked Alfonso.

"Well," he replied.

For a moment a sweet, high-pitched hum filled the hall. Then Anne pushed the doors. They moved on silent hinges and swung open completely, thumping lightly against the wall.

"At last we meet," cried a voice in the distance.

Dozens of elders descended from the ceiling. Each wore the saffron-colored robes, now unbelted, and held heavy lances aimed at the new arrivals. Alfonso gasped and took a step back, turning to flee, when he stopped short. Dozens more of the lance-wielding elders stood crouched and ready in the corridor.

The hall was large and open, save for a handful of massive square columns. A huge skylight took up a portion of the high, vaulted ceiling. Through it Anne could see the dirigible. Along the back wall was a raised platform atop which sat a massive chair of

oak inlaid with hundreds of the auraea rubies. A man stood in front of the chair.

"Come," he beckoned, his voice echoing strangely. "There is so little time."

Anne and Alfonso began the long walk toward their host.

"Surely you can fly, Miss Robson. Enjoy the sensation while you can. I'm afraid that pleasure is denied our little busy-body."

Anne turned to Alfonso. He smiled. "I will be fine."

Over his shoulder Anne saw her friends tied with heavy ropes to thick wooden posts along a wall a hundred feet away. The two crewmen looked unconscious and Captain Albert and Dade had clearly been beaten. She could see their bruises even at this distance. Strain was apparent on Chesterfield's face.

"Find a way to free my friends. I will deal with Satraps," said Anne softly, and lifted into the air.

"There, isn't that better?" Satraps asked jovially.

Satraps stepped down from his throne, the ugly scar on his face throbbing redly. He wore a light gray robe, belted about the middle, and floated across the floor with a casual, confident air.

"You've seen your friends, of course," he said. Even as he neared, the quality of his voice did not change. It echoed as if he were far away. "They were rude. Yes, quite rude. I will be asking them to leave shortly."

The far wall cracked and then be-

gan to issue a metallic whine as it extended away from the building. The wall lay down flat to form a deep, open balcony overlooking endless sky. The posts on which Anne's friends were tied began to slide on a track toward the edge of the balcony.

Satrap held a small black device in his hand. He shrugged with a dark smile.

"When we returned to the Aerie they flew, tried to escape. But I was so looking forward to their reunion with you, I just couldn't let them go." His dark features seemed to glow evil. "Since they enjoyed their moment of flying so much, I thought I would give them this last opportunity."

Anne launched herself at Satrap. He had expected it and backhanded her across the mouth. Airborne, she spun head over heels almost on a pivot. She allowed herself to spin completely around and brought her foot up in a vicious kick to the side of Satrap's head. The man screamed in pain and brought his hands up to his head.

Righting herself, Anne grabbed for the black device and took it, even as Satrap pushed the button.

The posts to which the captives were tied popped off their tracks with a loud thump! But the button had been pushed a second too early and the men toppled to the smooth gray floor just inches from the balcony's edge and a fall into oblivion. In an instant Alfonso was there, working at the ropes.

"Get to the ship!" Anne cried as Satrap smashed a heavy boot into her

midsection.

Anne crumpled and skidded out across the floor toward the edge of the balcony. Satrap was on her in an instant. She tensed, prepared to grab at the man's boot if he struck, but he stood above her and laughed. Then he took several small bulbs from deep within the sleeves of his robe and threw them at her. They shattered over her spreading a wet, slightly sticky substance on her exposed skin and clothes.

"One last flight, Miss Robson," he said.

Suddenly Alfonso was there in front of her. He stood two feet shorter than the scarred elder, but barred Satrap's way. Anne could see Dade and the others were now free and were fighting with stolen lances and shields toward the dirigible.

"Leave her be," the little man commanded.

Fury exploded in Satrap. His face blistered with hatred.

"Meddler!" he screamed, lifting Alfonso into the air by the folds of his robe. "These sheep cared nothing for my plans until you started asking questions! But you are too late now, little one! My plans are set! The city is mine! You have no place! Leave my city!"

With a great heave, Satrap lifted Alfonso over his head then threw him off the balcony. Anne leapt into the air instantly and seized the little man. For a moment she hung in space then, her ability to fly suppressed by the concoction Satrap had thrown over her, she plunged toward the earth. At the

last instant she reached out and grabbed the smooth edge of the balcony. She dangled by the slippery grip of her fingers, holding Alfonso in the other hand, as Satraps floated smugly toward her.

"Take hold of my legs," she said to Alfonso. "I need my other hand." Below them the clouds parted and the earthen quilt of distant farmland and forests came into view.

"I thank you, Miss Robson. You have occupied my unwitting enemy long enough for me to complete my plans, and now have brought him back to me for punishment."

About to crush Anne's slipping fingers with his sandals, Satraps suddenly stopped and took a startled step backward. Before him Alfonso rose up on the air currents, free of the withering tincture that had stolen his flight.

"I said to leave her be."

Eyes black with hatred, Satraps roared. And then he screamed. So occupied with Alfonso, he had not seen Anne reach up. She grabbed hold of Satraps' belt and with a mighty heave threw him off the balcony. Screaming, Satraps plummeted earthward. Left in her hand was the elder's belt.

"He ... he ..." Alfonso stammered.

"He wasn't one of you," Anne said. "He needed the belt to fly."

"But how?"

"No time. I must get to my ship."

ON THE ROOF, DADE AND THE others were fighting off the flying elders. They had commandeered clubs and

more lances and were making their way toward the dirigible.

"Stop!" Alfonso yelled, running out onto the roof. "Satraps is gone. He is ... no more."

The shock of the announcement stilled the elders. Leaderless, they were uncertain what to do.

Anne and the others ran to the airship and boarded. Captain Albert and his crew hurriedly made their preparations.

"We have little time, Captain," said Anne. "If Dahla has accomplished his mission ...."

"Dahla! You found him?"

"Later. We must get away from Aethraea as soon as we can."

Alfonso floated up to the gondola door.

"You can fly again," she said. Alfonso's face lit up brilliantly, before a darker thought crossed his mind.

"Will your friend succeed?"

"He will."

Alfonso nodded. "Then it is over."

"Yes. Your city will disappear from our world for thirty years. You will have that time to set it right again."

"Thank you."

The dirigible creaked and lifted into the air. Alfonso waved goodbye and followed the ship out of the city.

"You're leaving Dahla behind?" Dade said. "Not that I question that decision."

"He will come."

On instructions from Anne, Captain Albert put the Novus into a steep dive. They had just passed beneath the city

when a small section of the cabin seemed to flicker and Dahla appeared. He ran forward to the captain.

"We need more speed! The generator is about to explode!"

Captain Albert did not know about the generator, but at the mention of an explosion he pushed the engines to greater speed. Long minutes passed as they dropped further away from Aethraea. Soon the city was but as small as a toy hanging in the air.

"Dahla," Anne said, "what did you do?"

"It had to be destroyed," he said.

"But the city!"

Along the port side and above them the sky ignited in a brilliant flash of red. Clinging to handrails, everyone watched as a jet of flame shot out from beneath the city. In a moment the flame died. Then the city flickered and faded from view. At the same instant, the air shimmered around the dirigible and the sky turned dark. Rain pelted the tall glass of the pilothouse.

"You could have destroyed the city!" Dade said, confronting the Enchantra.

"No. As soon as the generator was destroyed the portion of the city in which they were making weapons reverted to their natural dimension. A dimension where combustion is not possible and flying is."

"Oh." A light came in Dade's eyes. "Say, Captain, if engines don't work up there how is it this bird kept flying?"

"They're not combustion engines," Captain Albert replied.

"What are they?"

"Now, lad, whyn'tya stick to what ye do and leave the engines to me."

They landed two hours later in a grassy field. To the south were grape and olive groves. They searched fruitlessly for Satraps' body for two days then flew back to Aragon and dismantled the weapons warehouse. The guards had fled and there was no sign of their aircraft.

"Well," Chesterfield said happily, holding one of the captured belts, "at least I won't miss flying."

He started to buckle it around him, but Anne snatched it away from him.

"These will not help you fly. Flying comes naturally to most beings in Aethraea. This belt is a smaller version of the generator they devised, but I suspect it is adjusted for use by native Aethraeans alone."

"You mean it won't work for me?"

"I mean that it creates a portable field that pierces dimensions and that, if it is not attuned to your body and vibratory wavelength, it might tear you apart."

Chesterfield dropped the belt and took a step back.

"Never mind! If I want to fly I'll just give old Captain Albert a call!"

AT THE FLOYD BENNETT Airfield in Brooklyn, repairs to the airship Novus were well underway. Captain Albert supervised his crew and another dozen workmen as they set about reworking the airplane gondola. A gleaming new Lockheed 5B Vega was just now taxiing in from the runway. At its controls

was the café au lait-haired Anne Robson.

Pausing in his work, the robust Captain Albert noticed some movement at the far end of the field. It was a black horse, a giant of a beast, something that might even be able to carry the captain himself, galloping full tilt.

Atop the shining brute, a man clung for dear life. He screamed and pleaded for help. As he neared, Captain Albert could see the man was dressed in a green jerkin and brown leggings.

He passed Captain Albert in a blur, the horse's hooves booming and shaking the tarmac. Dust billowed up in great clouds.

A small leather packet slapped at Captain Albert's feet.

Then out of a clear blue sky a crash of thunder rumbled and a bolt of lightning shattered the senses. A blood red flame shot down at an angle and swept across the top of the horse. The man clinging there burst into flame and then ash in almost the same instant. Captain Albert ran to the man but it was far too late. He looked up and saw that the stallion had disappeared. It was nowhere to be seen on that flat, vast expanse.

He returned to find Anne with the leather packet open in her hand. Its contents surprised the dirigible pilot. He looked expectantly at the woman.

"Hurry, Captain Albert," she cried. "There is great danger. We haven't a moment to lose!"

THE END

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