

W DONALD E. KEYHOE

Toward grim Gibraltar, Dick Knight sped his sleek Vought. For Europe's craftiest spies were hurrying into that caldron of intrigue just beyond "The Rock"—and Washington's orders had been terse: "Find out why"! But already that sinister sea was red with the blood of rash agents who had ventured too far. And already it was too late for Dick Knight to turn back. For he had defied muted murder—had defied "The Death that had no face"!

SILENT DOOM

NGINES BARELY TURNING the *U.S.S.*Canton rolled in the restless sea, its long, grim hull just one more note in a dreary symphony of gray. On the starboard wing of the cruiser's bridge, Richard Knight stood smoking a final cigarette before the beginning of what promised to be something more than a routine espionage mission.

The tall secret agent glanced down at the starboard bow where, on a special catapult car, mechanics were making ready a sleek Vought scout-bomber, a monoplane of the SB2U-1 type. The Navy red, white, and blue star insignia had been removed from the wings, as had the nose and fuselage bands and other identifying marks. Like the cruiser, the plane was painted a dull bluish gray.

Knight smiled ironically through the smoke that blew back from his cigarette. The Navy was taking no chances of a flare-back. Even the engine and gun numbers had been obliterated.

His gaze strayed ahead, up into the gray, lowering clouds, and on over the dusky sea to the misty wall which enclosed the wallowing cruiser. Thirty miles beyond, almost due east, lay the Strait of Gibraltar—and beyond that was the answer to a three-day riddle. Knight was pondering over the cryptic orders under which he was acting when Larry Doyle, ostensibly his sportsman co-pilot but in reality his agent-assistant, strode out on the wing of the bridge with Captain Becker, commander of the vessel.

Doyle, an ex-Marine pilot, was short, chunky, and possessed of a homely face the belligerence of which was heightened by a broken nose he had received in a long-forgotten brawl. He looked Irish—and was, with the Celt's quick temper and equally quick generosity. The Canton's skipper was taller, spare of form. His dignity, born of years of service, was somewhat relieved by kindly blue eyes.

"No, I wouldn't care to be heading into that murk," he was saying to Doyle. "Even for an ordinary flight, that's mean weather—and when you don't know what lies ahead—" he paused, looked keenly at Knight. "Or

do you? At any rate, now that you're about ready to start, perhaps you can tell me something else—just in case—" He stopped, a trifle confused.

Knight grinned.

"In case we don't come back? Thanks for the suggestion, Captain—but the truth is I'm as puzzled as you are. Doyle and I were loafing at Miami Beach, after a rather rough stretch in the Orient, when that code message came for us to board a specially-chartered Clipper at Dinner Key station. Before we made contact with the *Canton* south of Bermuda, the Clipper's first officer gave me those sealed instructions I've mentioned. He turned out to be a naval intelligence officer working undercover, and he'd flown the letter straight from Washington."

Captain Becker shook his head.

"I still can't understand. The Mediterranean is a caldron of intrigues and war-fever, and you shouldn't be sent into it without knowing exactly what you're up against."

"That's nothing new for us, Captain," Knight answered. "But we do have a hint. We know that secret agents from a dozen countries have all rushed into the Mediterranean for something. Washington heard of the rendezvous for which they were heading—but not the reason. It must be a vital secret—or a plot of some kind. Whatever it is, it's bound to affect the United States. So we're going to take a look-see, and I guess the Vought's ready—they're winding her up." The howl of the inertia starter came up shrilly to the bridge, then the barking thunder of the Twin-Wasp-Junior filled the air. By the time Knight and Doyle had reached the catapult the engine was droning smoothly. The senior agent looked with dry humor at his partner.

"Sure you've thrown away all your love-letters, Lothario? Remember—no identifying marks."

"I've got a mole on my left shoulder," growled Doyle. "Want me to cut it off?"

Knight chuckled, fastened his chute-harness over his leather coat, and climbed into the front cockpit. Doyle settled himself in the rear, pulled the triangular-section Plexiglas enclosure shut. Knight revved up the engine, inspected his instruments, and tossed a salute to Captain Becker, who was leaning over the wing of the bridge with another officer. The captain answered, and Knight closed the front pit "greenhouse" after a signal to the catapult tender.

The *Canton* rolled to starboard, lifted slowly. There was a dull report as the tender ignited the gunpowder charge, and the Vought shot down the catapult track

and into the air. Knight let the ship gain speed as it hurtled along above the waves. He was about to ease the stick back for a climb when a violent concussion of air hurled the Vought skyward. The ship whirled upward three hundred feet, dipped, then fell steeply on the left wing. He caught it, leveled out at sixty feet after battling the controls. A shout of amazement from Doyle made him twist around in his seat.

An enormous wave, twenty feet above the normal level of the sea, was racing along behind them. Throttle full on, Knight zoomed above it. Then, when he stared back, his heart stood still—the cruiser had vanished!

A COLD horror crept over him as he gazed down at the boiling sea. Where the *Canton* had been there was now only a vast, churning whirlpool into which a rain of smoking debris was falling from the sky.

Stupefied, he watched the smoking fragments plunge into the water. The thing was impossible! At the most, thirty seconds had passed between the moment of catapulting and the furious concussion of air. The cruiser couldn't be gone. . . .

But it was!

He saw Doyle white-faced, lips moving, staring down at the steaming waters. Out of the chaos of his mind he tried to focus one thought: How could it have happened?

Only a colossal explosion could have so completely destroyed the Navy cruiser. Such an explosion would have come like a crack of doom, with a terrific detonation that would have cut through the drone of the Wasp like a thunderclap in the night. But there had been no sound above the engine's rumble.

Doyle had partly opened the rear pit enclosure in order to look downward, and Knight saw a jagged hole torn in the Plexiglas. Suddenly Doyle drew in his head, wiped his goggles. He had a sick expression as he glanced forward at Knight, and with a tinge of nausea the senior agent saw a faint reddish mist on the other man's hand and cheeks. It had come from a dark smear near the break in the enclosure, and the prop-blast had sent that gruesome vapor back onto Doyle's face.

"It's blood!" Doyle said hoarsely through the interphone system. "And we were almost a mile away. Think how close we—" he did not finish, but Knight dully nodded. Only a miracle had kept them from being a part of that fragmented mass upon the heaving Atlantic. A moment's wait for the cruiser to roll into position for catapulting another drag or two at

his cigarette—the slightest pause, and they would have been doomed by the ghastly, silent fate which had overtaken the Canton and its crew.

Into the agent's mind came a vision of Captain Becker, with his kindly look of concern. He seemed to hear Becker saying:

"You shouldn't be sent into it without knowing exactly what you're up against."

And now Becker and his crew were gone, wiped out by some horrible thing which must have brought instant annihilation. Only Doyle and he and the Vought remained—without a base to which they could return, facing he knew not what. He banked slowly, gazing into the fast-deepening gloom to the East. The clouds, the wall of mist, all seemed suddenly ominous as though conspiring to hide something dreadful, some fate that awaited them in the fog. Doyle's voice, harsh with emotion, came through the interphone and brought him up with a jerk.

"Dick, what in Heaven's name did it?"

Knight's stiff lips touched his mouthpiece. "I don't know, old man. I haven't the slightest idea."

"Maybe a spy was on board—might have blown up her powder magazines," Doyle mumbled.

"No, we'd have heard such a blast—and there wrasn't a sound above the engine. Besides, that wouldn't have torn her completely apart. She'd have been blown up been on fire sinking. But not—this."

"What are we going to do?" Doyle said huskily.

"We can go ahead," Knight said, his face grim, "or we can make for Gibraltar. The British carrier *Furious* is stationed there, so we could land. I'll leave it up to you."

He waited, sure of what the answer would be, though after the awful thing which had happened he would not have forced Doyle to carry out their original mission. In a moment, Doyle's decision came with a hard and savage note.

"Whatever's ahead must be the thing that 'got' poor old Becker and his men. Let's go!"

Knight pulled his cockpit enclosure shut again, circled above the spot where the *Canton* had been destroyed. He had asked Captain Becker to stop the cruiser at a dead-reckoning position of 6 West by 36 North, a spot in the Atlantic just outside of Gibraltar. The rendezvous of the international spies had been reported as 5 West by 36 N, just inside the Mediterranean, and about twenty-three miles southeast of Gibraltar. By flying straight East along

the 36th parallel, it would be fairly simple to pass over the spot in question—unless the mist thickened and blotted out everything.

THEY climbed to three thousand feet, and the Vought roared ahead, cruising with the air-speed needle exactly on 200. In just seven minutes the lights of Tarifa, at Point Marroqui on the southernmost tip of Spain, passed under their left wing. They twinkled up dimly through the murk, and he felt a tinge of relief at seeing them. It meant that the clouds were thinner here than out in the Atlantic, and they would have a fair chance of sighting their goal.

The nearness of that goal helped him forget the tragedy of the *Canton*, for at this speed it would be only about eleven more minutes till they crossed the fifth meridian. He spoke again into the mouthpiece:

"Turn on the radio, Doyle, and see if you can pick up the Gibraltar station or catch some vessel in the Mediterranean reporting its position. We may hit a wind-drift inside the Strait."

His phones clicked as Doyle switched on the receiver. In a moment the voice of an Italian operator was audible, apparently in conversation from a Mediterranean patrol vessel with the radioman of a freighter. Doyle tuned to the Gibraltar wavelength, but only a steady hum sounded. Knight glanced at the bearing-indicator on his instrument board.

"Hold that," he said to Doyle. "It'll give us a partial check."

Nine minutes passed, and the bearing-indicator steadily shifted until it pointed almost southeast. Knight was peering down into the gloom, expecting to glimpse the lights of a vessel at the rendezvous point—then a blurred shape abruptly plunged out of the night. He whipped to one side so hastily that his tense fingers touched the gun-clamp on the stick. The single highspeed Browning on his cowl spat out a brief stream of tracers. The oncoming ship, a huge flying-boat, pulled up swiftly, and an answering blast of fire shot from its nose-turret.

Bullets spanged from the dural framework of the forward enclosure, ripped through the upper section of Plexiglas. Knight stood on the rudder, and the Vought jumped sidewise, so that the other ship's tracers curled off into empty air. In his hasty skid, he saw that the plane was a French Loire 70, one of the three-engined monoplane flying-boats France had designed for coastal defense. But though it was French-built the big flying-boat carried the cocardes of the Loyalist Spanish Government, and with dismay he realized that the crew thought they had encountered one of Franco's planes.

The Loire was twisting around, and now another gun was blazing from a port in the rear of the control cabin high up under the wing. Doyle bellowed angrily through the phones.

"Cut in under 'em, Dick! I'll show those—"
"No!" rapped Knight. "We're not here for that. Hold your fire."

The last word had hardly left his lips when like a winged bullet a biplane single-seater hurtled out of the mist. It whirled into a vertical bank as the pilot saw the Vought, and Knight dimly perceived the circle insignia, of Great Britain on its wings. The fighter was a Gloster Gladiator, a type which he knew carried four guns at more than four miles a minute. The pilot's goggled face stared across—a pale blur in the semi-darkness—as he chandelled tightly above the pivoting Loire.

The British fighter had barely passed above the Loyalist ship when a gun pounded up at it from the flying-boat's rear turret. With a steep zoom, the Gladiator pilot fled up into the night, twisting sharply at the top of his climb. The abrupt appearance of the British plane had caused Knight to sheer away to the other side, bringing the Vought again in range of the Loire's noseturret. Machine-gun fire drilled in a fuzzy red line toward the American ship, curved swiftly to follow as Knight renversed. Doyle was cursing like a madman in the rear cockpit. He pleaded wildly through the phones:

"Let me blast that guy, Dick! I'll blow him right out of that turret!"

"We're getting clear," Knight insisted. "I want to find out what's going on."

HE BANKED a few seconds later and looked back. The Loire was almost invisible, a dark hulk circling in the gloom, its crew apparently searching for the supposed attackers. On the sea below it a spot of light suddenly appeared, widened, became a broad neon beam ploughing up through the mist. Knight ruddered away, but the light did not follow. Instead, with a quick swerve, it caught and held the huge flying-boat. The Loire ponderously twisted aside, started to climb. The neon beam, a bright orange-red, followed easily, widening until a large pinkish circle showed on the clouds above. Far out in the edge of the circle, parallel with the Loire, the Gloster Gladiator appeared, cruising at reduced speed. Knight had now climbed above both of the planes.

Suddenly the steady hum from the Gibraltar radio station was drowned by a different, sharper sound, as though a more powerful transmitter had been switched on. For a moment only this carrier wave was audible, then there came a strange, metallic voice.

"Garde a vous," it said with an icy calmness.
"Watch—and see that the Master of Death does not lie."

There was something about that icy voice that made Knight's scalp creep. Every nerve screamed a warning for him to flee, but something stronger than fear kept him there, staring down at the Loire as it clumsily tried to escape the mysterious beam.

The deadly voice spoke again—"Now!"

A swirling jet-black cloud instantly hid the huge ship. A silent concussion shook the sky—and the Loire was gone!

Out of that weird black whirlpool, a million fragments of smoking metal came hurtling. The Vought pitched onto its back, was lifted a hundred feet before Knight could move the controls. A sliver of dural pierced the enclosure beside him, and another piece cut through his helmet. He felt warm blood run down his temple, trickle across his lips.

Half-dazed, he moved stick and rudder until the prop again took hold and brought the Vought out of its stall. He held the stick back until the inverted ship nosed down, then pulled it out of its dive and looked back anxiously. Doyle, too, had been hit. He was holding his right shoulder, and Knight saw blood oozing out on his hand.

The Vought had been struck in a dozen places, but fortunately both motor and prop had escaped. Beyond, a gigantic space had been blasted in the misty night, and a veritable cloud of fragments, all that remained of the ill-fated Loire, could be seen falling toward the sea. The wide neon beam still glowed, but in a moment it narrowed and swung toward the Gloster Gladiator. In a swift turn, the British fighter evaded the light. Knight hastily throttled the Wasp, but he was too late. Like a great, crimson finger, the beam whirled across at the Vought!

THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE

NIGHT TRIED TO PLUNGE ASIDE, but the beam passed across the left wing. He shoved open the throttle, swiftly changed direction. The light probed after the two-seater, began a mad dance in the effort to catch the twisting ship. Knight was about to release a flare, hoping to blind the men below and then zoom above it, when the strange, icy voice again sounded in his phones.

"Find the British plane. I will take care of the Americans after the Englishman is finished."

The beam swerved quickly, but as it moved Knight saw its reddish light reflect from the wings of a diving ship. He shouted a warning to Doyle, pulled up as the other plane came out of its headlong descent. It was an Italian Breda fighter equipped with small pontoons instead of the standard landing-gear. It carried the colors of Italy.

A burst flamed from the Breda's cowl guns, and Knight barely missed charging into the fusillade. There was a berserk roar from behind him, and Doyle's twinmount crashed into action. The Breda shot into an Immelmann. Knight followed through, grimly holding his fire, but just as he reached the top of his zoom another Breda pitched down at the Vought. His hand clenched the Browning trip, and over the scarred cowl he saw his tracers eat into the second ship's flippers. The other pilot kicked off and dived, came back in a terrific chandelle. Knight flung into a sharp bank, cut inside the first Breda's turn just as a barrage from all four of the fighter's guns blasted at the Vought. Doyle whirled his twin Brownings, howling exultantly as the Italian pilot frantically renversed.

"That's enough!" Knight shouted into the phones. "I'm going to shake them off if I can."

He swept the stick back, and the Vought screamed up into the darkness. He had purposely turned the ship north so that it would be headed away from the neon beam, and in a few seconds the two-seater was shrouded in comparative gloom. He climbed a little higher, circled tightly, and looked back. The beam was slowly moving back and forth, piercing the mists to the south and west. Knight thought he saw the two

Bredas diving near the edge of the light, but before he could make sure Doyle gave a wild yell.

"For the love of Heaven—look!"

Knight cast a startled glance upward. Two reddish eyes were glaring down at them from a human skull, and the skull was dropping straight at the Vought!

He slammed the two-seater into a vertical turn and twisted around in his seat. To his dismay, the skull pitched after them, two tiny lines of crimson light focussing on the ship from the weirdly glowing eyes. With a jerk, he stood the Vought on its tail. The skull whirled by and to one side, and as it did he saw the outlines of another Breda, silhouetted against the distant beam.

The skull was mounted on the cowl of the Italian fighter, and now he could see that the light also showed, though more dimly, through its nose and leering mouth. Before he could see any more, the skull turned swiftly, as though on a pivot, and the tiny streaks of light crossed the Vought's tail. The Breda pilot, crouching low in his cockpit, shot his plane up in a tight turn. Knight snapped a flare release, and the dazzling brilliance of a magnesium torch lit the heavens. The flare dropped almost in the path of the climbing fighter, and the pilot skidded hurriedly out of the way.

Bathed in the glow, the Breda was for a second completely exposed. Knight gave a crisp order for Doyle to hold his fire, while he peered down at the other ship. This one did not carry the Italian insignia. Instead, it was coal-black and devoid of markings except for the skull on the cowl. Knight started as he saw the pilot. The man wore a skull-mask, and his eyes had a weird reddish glow!

In his amazement at this discovery, Knight for an instant was off guard. The masked pilot whipped into a furious turn, and a hail of lead tore into the Vought's right wing. Knight threw the ship into a half-roll, changed direction so swiftly that the masked man overshot.

"Judas Priest!" Doyle said hoarsely. "Did you see that? It's a damned skeleton!"

"That's only a mask," Knight clipped back, but his face was tense as he saw the skull-ship charge again. He kept in a fast climbing turn, waiting for the other man to unleash his guns and waste Precious ammunition. If he could only force that masked devil down instead of killing him. . . .

T-t-t-t-t-t-t! The ominous thud of bullets drilling the left wingtip sent him zooming in consternation.

There had been no flash of guns, no tracers, no faint, staccato pound of guns to warn him. But bullets were hitting the Vought!

His zoom gave Doyle an almost straight aim at the mystery ship. The ex-Marine poured out a fierce blast, started a yell of triumph. But it changed, and Knight heard him swearing fluently.

"The yellow devil!" howled Doyle. "The second he even gets a wing scratched he runs."

KNIGHT leveled out, gazed downward. His flare was still burning, though by now it was almost two thousand feet below. The neon beam had disappeared, and the only thing he could see in the water was a small freighter. The skull-ship was now diving at terrific speed toward the Gloster Gladiator, which the other Bredas were trying to bring down.

"Three to one!" the American agent muttered. The Vought was nosed down and the Wasp drumming even before his words were finished. Whoever the fellow in the Gladiator was, he was fighting against that masked fiend in the Breda, and so were they.

Stung by the interruption, the four battling ships seemed to leap upward at the Vought. Knight ringed the first Breda in his gun-sights, but the pilot frenziedly kicked aside as he opened fire. Doyle crashed out a burst at the other Italian fighter, then Knight back-sticked and they stormed through a venomous crossfire. The British pilot had snatched his radio-mike from its prongs, was trying to fight off the skull-ship while he switched on his transmitter. Knight flung a stream of tracer in at the masked pilot, and the black Breda dived under the Gladiator. The Britisher, white-faced, threw a startled look at the Vought, then lifted the mike to his lips.

"Stanley—to the Furious!" The words crackled into Knight's ears on the Gibraltar wave-length. "I may be downed—take my report! Saw French Loire destroyed in mid-air by silent explosion—"

The two Italian-marked Bredas charged in with redoubled fury, but before they had time to open fire on the Gladiator, the masked pilot plunged in and forced them aside. In the same moment Knight heard the icy voice which had spoken before, and he knew there must be a special transmitter in the black ship. The masked man was speaking tensely.

"Signores!" he said in hasty Italian. "The Englishman —Stanley—must be taken alive!"

There was a sudden passion in that heretofore icily-calm voice, and Knight saw one of the Breda

pilots stare at the masked pilot. That brief stare spelled his finish. With a lightning turn, Knight centered his Browning and snapped the trigger grip to the stick. The high-speed gun hammered a straight bright line into the terrified pilot. He jumped as though an electric wire had shorted through his body, then the life went out of him and the Breda shrieked down to crash in the waiting sea.

The sight of his comrade's death seemed to drive the other Italian pilot into a frenzy. Disregarding the masked man's order, he hurled his ship in at the Gladiator, guns blazing. With a wild skid, the man in the skull-ship ranged his sights on the charging Breda. The Italian threw one hand before his face, tried to get clear. His head flopped backward, goggles shattered, his sheltering hand and his face a mass of blood. Knight felt a chill go up his spine. The man was dying—was being riddled before his eyes. Yet he was ready to swear that the masked man had not even fired!

A high-pitched, bubbling laugh dinned into Knight's phones. Still gripped with horror, he heard the masked killer's voice:

"Fool—I am still the Master of Death!"

The Englishman, like Knight, had stopped his attack as the black Breda charged at the other. The pilotless fighter went up in a crooked climb, veered sharply toward the Gladiator. Forced to turn swiftly, the Britisher came racing between the two Bredas. The masked pilot banked with a savage skill, apparently intent on forcing the other man down. Doyle's twinguns roared thunderously, and the top of the black Breda's cockpit enclosure vanished under his bullets.

The masked man instantly dived. Knight pitched after him, and the two ships drilled down into the glow of the slowly-settling flare. The skull-ship pulled out sharply at a thousand feet, made as though to renverse away from the light. The wind ripped away the rest of the transparent enclosure, and with it went the skull-mask.

One hand before his eyes, the pilot banked away. As his ship turned from the glare, the man dropped his hand. Knight half-rose in his pit as he saw what was revealed.

The pilot had no face!

A MASS of scarred and twisted tissue, evidence of some horrible disaster, hid the man's eyes except for two hideous dark holes. His mouth was a crooked slit without lips, and Knight could not see any nostrils in the bloated-looking maze of scars. For the fraction of a second, that frightful ruin twitched toward him, then the black Breda raced into the darkness.

Belatedly, Knight turned the Vought for pursuit, but the faster ship quickly outdistanced him and was lost in the night. He pulled up, saw the Gloster Gladiator swinging in parallel with the two-seater. The Englishman beckoned hastily and pointed toward the northwest. Knight nodded, and the two ships roared away toward Gibraltar. The parachute flare had dropped into the sea, and when Knight looked back he could see no lights on the freighter. For a minute he kept close enough to the Gladiator to see its exhaust-flames, then the Englishman blinked his lights and left them turned on. Taking the hint, Knight dropped back to safer distance, hand on the throttle in case of a sudden maneuver. Without glancing around, he spoke into the interphone mouthpiece.

"Are you all right, Lothario?"

"I guess so," Doyle mumbled. "That is unless I've gone clear nuts."

"No, that ghoul was real enough," Knight said grimly. "But how did he destroy that Loire?"

"I've never believed in a real death-ray," Doyle said in a shaken voice, "but after that—"

"It looked like ordinary neon light to me. Whatever it is, I see now why all those foreign agents were rushing into the Mediterranean. The country that monopolizes that secret could master the world."

"And that fiend calls himself the 'Master of Death!"
Doyle grated. "Maybe he's got that notion—thinks
he'll control the world."

"There are too many angles that I don't—" Knight broke off, hurriedly closed the throttle. The British fighter was in a glide, its lights blinking out a code signal. Well ahead, but not more than two-thirds the distance to Gibraltar, the signal was quickly answered. Five minutes later, lights marked the landing-deck of a carrier, and the Gladiator dipped down, obeying the commands signaled by the officer at the stern.

"It's the *Furious*, all right," Knight said. "At least we'll have a dry landing—instead of stalling in alongside the *Canton* as we originally planned."

"Yeah," Doyle said dully. He was silent a moment. "I'd forgotten about Becker and the others—with all this other happening."

A blinker-light from the bridge focused on the circling Vought almost as soon as the Gladiator landed.

"B-l-i-p m-o-t-o-r i-f f-a-m-i-l-i-a-r w-i-t-h c-a-r-r-i-e-r l-a-n-d-i-n-g," came the terse message.

Knight blipped the Wasp several times, then glided toward the vessel. Watching the lighted wands in the landing-officer's hands, he made a careful approach after lowering the wheels which he had retracted immediately after being catapulted. The Vought came in smoothly, hooked the retarding-gear, and came to a quick stop. The landing-crew had barely secured the ship after Knight switched off the engine, when the pilot of the Gladiator came running up to the Vought.

"Before anything else," he said quickly, "thanks for helping me back there. I'd have been down, I'm afraid, if you hadn't jumped in."

"I think the honors are even," Knight answered as he stepped down. He shook the hand the Englishman held out, saw the questioning look in his eyes.

"Perhaps we'd better talk in private," he said in an undertone.

The other man looked at the curious crowd of sailors and marines. He nodded.

"Right—and I've a report to make, too. If you'll both come along—"

The lights went out as he spoke, and Knight and Doyle followed across the darkened deck to a hatch. A minute later they entered the captain's cabin, where a ruddy-faced, slightly younger edition of the typical British sea-dog was waiting.

"One moment, sir," the pilot said. He glanced uncertainly at Knight and Doyle. "I'm fairly certain, of course, that you're special agents for the United States. If you could help me on that point, we could save time—"

Knight thoughtfully wiped away a trickle of blood on his cheek.

"If you'll radio the Commanding Officer at Gibraltar, mentioning a certain 'Q'—"

"Q?" the English pilot exclaimed. He took a closer look at Knight and Doyle. "A hundred pardons," Mr. Knight! I saw you that other time at Gibraltar—I know how you and the others wrecked that Four Faces' scheme to involve us in the Spanish war. But with that blood and oil on your face—"

"That's all right," Knight said pleasantly. "I take it, then, you're in British Intelligence?"

"Commander John Stanley, Royal Naval Intelligence," said the other man. "This is Captain Farrington, in command of the *Furious*. Captain, Richard Knight, the American agent I told you about—and this is Mr. Doyle, the other half of the team."

Farrington shook hands, looked with concern at the blood spot on Doyle's shoulder.

"You've been shot! I'll call the ship's surgeon."

"No, it's only a flesh-cut from a dural splinter," said Doyle. "It's just about stopped bleeding. How about you, Dick?"

"We'll need a little bandaging up later," said Knight. "But right now I'd like to get straight on this hellish 'Master of Death' business."

CAPTAIN FARRINGTON looked at Stanley. "We caught your message about a silent explosion. I can't believe it. Your engine must have drowned the blast."

"No, sir," Stanley replied, his face suddenly grave.
"There was not a sound. I had idled my engine and was spiraling down to see where the light came from."

"Light?" said Farrington. "What light?"

"I'd better start at the first," Stanley answered. He turned to Knight and Doyle. "You probably were there on an observing mission, as I was; I imagine you know as much as I." He faced the captain again. "I reached the assigned location ten minutes ahead of the time specified, so I had plenty of time to circle down from ten thousand feet. Then I saw gun-fire, and discovered one of the Loyalists' Loire flying-boats—the type France lent them—attacking an American Vought."

Briefly, he summarized what had followed. Farrington looked stupefied when he described the destruction of the Loire, and he listened intently as Stanley told of the encounter with the Master of Death. There was a hush as Stanley concluded, and Farrington dazedly shook his head.

"Incredible! The latter part is uncanny enough. But for one of those huge planes to disintegrate utterly and without a sound! It's impossible!"

Knight and Doyle looked at each other, then the senior agent spoke up.

"If you find that hard to believe, Captain, then you had better brace yourself. Less than one hour ago, the *U.S.S. Canton* was destroyed in exactly the same manner!"

All the color went out of Farrington's ruddy cheeks. He plopped down in his chair. "This is not a jest?" he said in a whisper.

"Where the lives of hundreds of men are concerned," Knight said, a trifle coldly, "I don't jest."

"Forgive me," muttered Farrington. "I didn't mean it that way. Surely, this is a terrible blow. If they can destroy a cruiser that easily, they could do the same with this carrier—even the *Hood*, our greatest dreadnaught. Why, the whole Fleet would be in peril."

"It is in peril," Knight said solemnly. "But before we

try to find some defense against this thing, tell me—who is this ogre who calls himself the Master of Death? Can you tell me?"

The two Englishmen looked at each other, then Stanley slowly shook his head.

"We haven't the slightest idea."



HERE WAS A SILENCE, while Knight stared at the intelligence officer. "But why," he said finally, "did he countermand his first order and direct that you be taken alive?"

"I don't know." There was a puzzled sincerity in Stanley's eyes. "It does seem peculiar. I suppose the man is half mad—and madmen change their minds without reason."

"No, there was more to it than that," Knight hesitated. "Suppose we lay all our cards on the table. I'll give you all the information I have—and you do the same."

"Agreed," said Stanley, "with one exception. I am under orders to seize the secret for Britain—if that's possible. If anything leads to it later, I shall have to carry out those orders."

Knight smiled wryly.

"I'll make the same reservation—for the United States."

Then swiftly, he sketched what he knew about the situation. Stanley listened intently.

"That's about what we heard, in regard to the foreign agents," he said as Knight finished. "I learned they were chartering several boats—that freighter was probably one of them. But I've something to add to your story. About three weeks ago we first heard of this 'Master of Death.' One of my agents said there was something going on at Rome—an intense effort to learn who the man was that called himself by that fantastic title. My man couldn't learn any more. Shortly after that, three of our planes failed to return to the *Furious* after an observation flight. They had been sent over to get pictures of certain spots in Spanish Morocco, so we thought they had been shot down by Franco's planes. But that night, we caught a peculiar radio message from the 'Master of Death'

thanking us sarcastically for the use of our planes in a certain test. He said they would not be back."

"Could you take a bearing on the sending station?" Knight interrupted.

"No, it was over too quickly for the operator to check it. However, we did get ranges on other messages, though that did not aid us. The transmitter was moving—probably in a plane, as tonight."

"How many other times has the Master of Death struck?" asked Knight.

"Twice that we know of. One of our destroyers disappeared, and also a submarine. Each time, we received one of those gloating messages. A search failed to reveal any traces of the missing vessels."

"Whoever he is," growled Doyle, "he must be on the Fascist side of the fence. Maybe—"

The phone rang sharply. Captain Farrington answered, then his face went tense.

"Why didn't you fire on him—get planes up after the devil?" he said in a harsh voice.

The receiver diaphragm squeaked and crackled. Farrington swore under his breath.

"Very well, then. Send down the parcel at once." He dropped the phone, turned to the others.

"Your planes were followed here—by that black skull-ship! The officer-of-the-deck reports it came in against the wind, without a sound, spotted the deck with a beam of red light and flew past before anyone could fire. The pilot dropped a parcel. It's marked for you, Commander Stanley."

Stanley looked startled. And when an orderly appeared a minute later he hastily took the package and opened it. A wad of cotton batting was disclosed. He spread it apart, then jumped back, his face ashen.

A plastic mask of a woman's face lay there. Its contours had a marked beauty, and instead of empty slits, eyes as blue as sapphires looked up at the four men. Captain Farrington stared from the mask to Stanley's stricken face.

"What is it, man? I don't understand."

"My wife," the younger man said hoarsely. "This mask is an almost perfect duplicate of her face."

He picked it up, looked on the back to see if there was any message.

"Wait!" said Knight. "Hold it up toward that light again."

Stanley did so, recoiled with a strangled cry. For when viewed against the light, the mask appeared as a leering skull! HE DROPPED the thing from his trembling fingers. Then, Knight retrieved it, examined it carefully.

"Clever construction," he muttered. "It's been made to fit some kind of a frame. I've an idea there was a light behind it that could be switched on or off."

"But why?" Stanley whispered.

"Where is your wife now?" Knight countered.

"In London—I had a message from her only this morning, at Gibraltar."

"Then she's safe, at least. This must have been made from a photograph, or several of them, rather." Knight looked shrewdly at the Englishman. "Does this give you any better idea of the identity of the Master of Death?"

Stanley helplessly shook his head.

"For some reason," said Knight, "the man hates you—and evidently your wife. Think back. You must have known some one who—"

"There was such a man," Stanley broke in. "But he's dead—thank Heaven!"

"Who was he?" Knight said quickly.

"An Austrian—Stephen Brauer."

"How was he killed?"

"In an explosion. He was a research chemist. That was seven years ago—in London. He had come there from Austria to work. But why discuss Brauer? I tell you he's dead."

"A chemical explosion," Knight said, half to himself. "That would explain those horrible scars—"

"What do you mean?" Stanley said, white-lipped.

"When the black Breda pulled out of that dive," Knight replied slowly, "it tore off the cockpit enclosure, and also the skull-mask the pilot wore. I saw then why he wore a mask." And with grim detail, he described the ruin he had seen.

"Brauer—alive!" Stanley clenched his hands convulsively, made an effort to hide his emotion.

Farrington took his arm. "Suppose," he said not ungently, "you give us the whole story?"

Stanley sat down, eyes fixed on the beautiful mask.

"I met Brauer in 1931. He'd come over from Vienna, and approached the Royal Navy with an idea for a faster-burning explosive than T.N.T. His ideas sounded good, but we were suspicious of him. He explained that Vienna was now only a mockery—that he hated the present government and wished to become a British citizen. He was more than a chemist—he also had some ideas for silencing airplane engines. For some reason, you see, he hated noise, and he was interested in aviation as well as chemistry.

Finally, the Admiralty arranged an experimental laboratory for him—but I was assigned to keep watch on him, though I pretended to be cooperating on his scheme for cutting down the exhaust noise on our planes.

"I was engaged to be married, and one day Brauer met my fiancee. He was a moody, neurotic fellow—but he changed completely after he met her, and in a week I could see he had fallen madly in love with her. The upshot of it was that he tried to make her break off our engagement and marry him. When she refused, he flew into a rage and swore he'd be revenged on both of us. The night before the wedding date I received a call, supposed to be from my senior officer, telling me to meet him at Brauer's laboratory at once, that they'd found the man was a spy. As I approached the building, I saw a man—I thought it was Brauer hurrying inside. A second later there was a violent explosion and the building burst into flames. A body was found later—unrecognizable, of course—but on the basis of my evidence it was believed to be Brauer. A search was made of his lodgings, and information was found indicating that his helper was implicated in some scheme. We supposed the man had fled, but now I suppose the body we found must have been his."

"IT PROBABLY was," agreed Knight. "Brauer must have been somewhere near, waiting to set off the blast. It looks as though he intended to kill you and place the blame on his helper. Perhaps the helper discovered that and rushed to the laboratory to confront Brauer—and Brauer had to set off his bomb prematurely, to kill the other man."

"It may have been like that," Stanley admitted.
"But I wouldn't have thought it humanly possible for anyone to escape from that explosion alive."

"Hate gives a man uncanny strength sometimes," said Knight. "He must have been frightfully mutilated. The strange part is that he wasn't seen later, or that some hospital didn't report his case."

"It was foggy—that's how I mistook the helper for Brauer, I suppose. And it's fairly certain that he must have had connections with a clique of secret agents. They no doubt took care of him."

"And he's evidently been planning all these years to revenge himself," Knight added. "His allying himself with Italy, as seems obvious, would be motivated by his desire to even the score. He evidently hates all Englishmen."

Stanley nodded dully. Doyle fingered the mask.

"I guess he dropped this to get you to worrying—maybe he figured you'd dope out who he was. But how did he come to be carrying the thing, anyway?" Knight pointed to the edges of the mask. "You can see where it's been torn from a support. His hatred must be such an obsession that he kept one of the objects of his hate before him all the time. It must have been mounted in his cockpit, where he could flash a light behind it and turn it into a skull whenever he wished."

Stanley shivered. "I'm afraid for my wife—what if he had some idea—"

"I'll radio London and arrange for her to be guarded," interposed Captain Farrington. "But right now the main thing is to find that madman and get his secret. I'm going to order two squadrons up at dawn to make a careful search of this area—and if they can do it, the Insurgentheld islands, too. But now I'd suggest that these gentlemen get their wounds bandaged. And perhaps a little brandy wouldn't hurt any of you. Take care of them, Commander, and then we'll discuss our plans."

Doyle's homely face lit up at mention of the brandy. He and Knight followed Stanley from the cabin. Half an hour later, their cuts cleansed and bandaged, they were sitting down to a snack of sandwiches and brandy-and-soda, when a junior officer hurried up to Stanley and saluted.

"The Captain wishes to see you, sir—and the Americans. We've just had an S.O.S.—from Lieutenant Clarke."

Stanley jumped.

"Clarke! Are you sure?" He whirled to Knight and Doyle. "That's one of our missing pilots. Come along!"

Doyle gulped down the rest of his drink, snatched a sandwich, and trailed after the others. They found Captain Farrington and the navigator poring feverishly over a map of the western Mediterranean. From up on the flying deck came the rumble of engines being started.

"No island along that line, sir," exclaimed the navigator. "It must have come from a vessel of some sort."

Farrington turned haggard eyes on Stanleys

"An S.O.S. came in ten minutes ago—the radio officer recognized Clarke's voice and Clarke identified himself. He tried to add something but was cut off. The radio officer heard sounds of a fight, then the transmitter was switched off. However, he had time to take this bearing."

Knight saw the line they had drawn. It ran almost due south.

"Somewhere between here and Spanish Morocco," said Stanley. "How many planes are to make the search?"

"Too many might defeat the purpose," replied Farrington. "I thought if you three men—" he glanced at Knight and Doyle. The two Americans quickly assented, and in another minute they were shifting back into flying-gear and following Stanley up to the flight-deck.

"I'll take off first," said the Englishman. "We'd better fly at different altitudes—and I'll blink my lights if I change. If you see anything, signal me with your lights—give me an 'ST' and I'll follow you."

"Okay," said Knight. "I'll cruise at 200, so you'll have to hold the Gladiator down a bit. And we'd better keep low or we won't be able to spot anything."

"I'll hold three hundred feet—you take five hundred," Stanley said fastening his goggles over his eyes. "The *Furious* will be following that bearing-line, and the skipper will have a squadron of fighters ready if we call for them."

STANLEY vaulted into his ship, and the deck officer gave him the takeoff signal. The Gladiator roared down the deck and up into the darkness, and a few seconds later the Vought raced after it. Knight climbed to five hundred, leaving the bullet-torn Plexiglas shoved back so that he could lean out and peer down at the sea.

The course was 173, leading about twenty miles to the east of Point Almina, on the rocky little isle of Ceuta. Knight's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. It was possible the radio operator had made a mistake, and that the message had come from an Insurgent station on Ceuta, a stronghold of Franco's forces. But to fly over that area would probably mean quick attack by a flight of Insurgent ships and A-A batteries on the coast.

He opened the Wasp a trifle until he caught the flash of the Gladiator's exhaust stacks almost directly below. Ten minutes passed, and the dim flare of the other ship's exhaust began to fade out. Knight frowned. They were running into light fog again, and not only that, Spanish Morocco lay just about ten miles ahead. At their speed, three minutes would bring them to the rugged coastline southeast of Tetuan. He nosed down, trying to keep the Gladiator in sight, then started to blink the lights in a fear that Stanley had forgotten the nearness of the African continent. The mist had thickened, and he could barely make out the British fighter.

Then, without the slightest warning, a neon-red light streamed out from the fog ahead. Knight shot the two-seater up swiftly, shading his eyes from the glow. As he twisted around at the top of his zoom, he heard the rear-guns clatter.

"Bredas!" bawled Dovle. "They're after Stanley!"
Knight pitched back toward the red light, which as before had partly penetrated the murk, but without revealing the source from which it came. Three or four Bredas were milling madly around the Gladiator, obviously trying to force it down.

Stanley had pulled up to four hundred feet, was battling desperately to break through. Knight saw his wing-guns blast at the nearest Breda. The Italian fighter slipped off, but the pilot caught it before it hit the water. Stanley then hurled the Gladiator between two Bredas, whipped around in a tight bank as a third one charged into his way. Knight ringed the last Breda in the Browning sight, tripped his gun. In the weird glow, he saw the pilot pitch sidewise in his cockpit. The Breda nosed down, went onto his back, and crashed into the sea with a roar that came dully through the din of motors. Another Breda spun furiously on its wingtips, darted in at the Vought.

Until this moment, none of the Italian pilots had opened fire, but as this one saw the Vought he loosed a murderous torrent from all four guns. Doyle swerved the rear-mount, raked the Breda broadside. Flames burst from the Italian fighter's cowl, streaked back onto the pilot. The unfortunate man sprang up, clawed his way over the side. His chute billowed out as he dived, but the silk was already on fire. Flame ate swiftly through the top, and the doomed Italian vanishd in the misty sea.

Knight's plunge had carried him beyond the fight. He renversed, came back with the Wasp wide-open. From somewhere behind the neon-light, machineguns pounded fiercely. He was forced into a hasty turn to the left. The Vought roared away from the light. Gloom was about to swallow it up when a rugged cliff suddenly appeared dead ahead. Knight slammed the stick back, heart pounding as the Vought screamed up past the face of the cliff. The ship started over into a loop. He rolled into level flight, sent the Vought thundering away from the rocks. It had lost speed, and it settled dangerously close to the sea. Against the murky redness beyond, he, saw the battered hulk of an old wrecked freighter. It lay on his right, apparently on a submerged reef. On the left, briefly seen as the red glow abruptly shifted, was a large bell-buoy with a light at the top. It was rolling sluggishly with the waves. The Vought was now picking up speed. Knight climbed, saw the two remaining Bredas frantically darting in at Stanley's ship. The Englishman was charging in the direction of the cliff, and Knight kicked in front of him, crashing out a burst to warn him off. Thinking the fire had come from a Breda, Stanley whirled his Gladiator into a lightning turn with his cowl guns blazing. The Vought's Wasp skipped a beat, broke its steady thunder. Knight flung the ship aside, pitching a burst at the closest Breda as he turned. He heard Doyle cry out hoarsely. He whirled, thinking Doyle was hurt, but the other man was staring down at the British fighter.

Knight froze. Stanley was racing straight for the precipice!

THE SECRET OF THE CLIFF

HOUGH HE KNEW IT was too late, Knight seized his hand-mike and snapped the transmitter switch. Even as he did, he saw the Gladiator zoom to escape the rocks. Through the reddened fog he dimly saw the fighter twist sidewise and strike the cliff. There was a flash, then darkness, and the Gladiator was gone!

Knight stared toward the spot, but the neon light below stabbed up and caught the two-seater, blinding him. He banked as swiftly as he could, with the motor missing badly. Then the Vought shook under a sudden hail of lead, and in consternation he felt the rudder go slack.

Using the ailerons and stick, he managed to hold the bank. He was turning away from the cliff when with a final dismal bark the engine went dead. Almost in the same instant, the neon light vanished, and the Vought was lost in darkness. Knight shoved up his goggles, glided the craft carefully. He was not sure, but he thought they were headed toward the derelict. If he could stall in near the wrecked vessel, they would have a place where they could hide while they decided on. the next move.

"Be ready to unfasten your belt," he flung over his shoulder at Doyle.

Doyle's answer was lost in the boom of the buoy's mournful bell. It came from close by, and Knight swept the stick back as he saw the buoy flash under

the right wing. Bracing himself, he stalled the Vought above the waves, then threw one arm before his face.

The ship struck flatly, dug its nose into a wave, and stopped. Knight was tossed against the instrument board, but his arm took most of the shock. He snapped open his belt, turned, and saw Doyle jerking at the flotation-gear control.

"Let that go," he said hastily. "They'll be over here looking for us in a minute or two. If she goes down by then, so much the better—maybe they'll think we went with her."

Doyle clambered out onto the wing. "And where the devil are we going?" he demanded, peeling off his coat.

"To that wrecked freighter," Knight said in an undertone. "I think it's over this way."

He had discarded both his coats, was about to kick off his shoes when a muffled throb sounded from not far away. Voices sounded indistinctly. With a whisper to Doyle, he lowered himself into the water, struck out for the derelict. He heard Doyle splash into the waves, but he was unable to see him in the dark. The throbbing sound grew louder. He redoubled his efforts to reach the wrecked vessel, then realized that he had lost his way. Treading water, he tried to orient himself. There was no sign of Doyle. Holding his breath, he dropped his feet down; but the water was over his head.

The throbbing now became a loud rumble, and as he came up, he was electrified to see a dark hull slowly moving toward him.

It was a big submarine!

The next moment a voice spoke sharply in Italian. "There on the starboard beam—turn on the light."

The neon light swung from a skyward tilt down to the water, spotted the sinking Vought. Knight heard a volley of explanations and with dismay saw Doyle between the submarine and the plane. Doyle started to swim away, but a pistol instantly barked.

"Over here, *Signor* American!" ordered a man near the neon light. "Unless you want a bullet through your head."

Doyle cursed him but sullenly swam to the side of the submarine.

Meanwhile, Knight had hurriedly maneuvered to pass around the stern of the vessel, but the sub was too long. He grasped at a brace on the fan-tail, hauled himself up, panting. Silhouetted against the light was a long narrow catapult projecting up from the after hatch. Forward he could see Doyle being dragged aboard and hustled toward the conning-tower.

"Where is the other man?" an officer demanded.

"He went down, damn you!" Doyle snarled.

"Perhaps he did—perhaps not," retorted the Italian. "Ah, here comes one of the boats. We can leave the search to them."

Knight flattened himself on the fan-tail as a motorboat with a spotlight in the bow came alongside the submarine.

"We caught one of them," said the officer who seemed to be in command. "The other may have drowned, but make sure."

"Si, signor," replied an ensign in the boat. "But be careful going inside—the big door will not fold all the way."

THE neon beam shifted, and with a start Knight saw an opening in what had seemed to be a solid cliff. A high, folding door, made like an accordion and well camouflaged to look like rock, was drawn back so that only a third of it was extended flatly. In this flat part, there was a large hole, near the top.

"Per amor di Dios!" exclaimed the submarine commander. "That fool dived clear through!"

"No, he tried to turn at the last moment—and saved his life. The plane crashed through sidewise and toppled into the water. He was only bruised—luckily for all of us, *Signor*."

"What do you mean by that?" said the officer.

"The pilot was no one but Brauer's hated Englishman—Stanley. That is why that Austrian devil ordered the Bredas to fend him away from the cliff."

"Excellent news, Ensign!" exclaimed the sub commander. "Now that our mad friend has achieved his purpose, the rest should be easy. We also destroyed the freighter and the two motor boats those spies had chartered—so *Signor* Brauer's scheme to get other nations interested if we failed him will not bother us any longer."

He gave an order, and the sub slowly forged ahead, the neon beam shifting from side to side. Knight glimpsed the derelict to starboard, the bell-buoy to port, and he knew there was a channel leading to a cavern inside the cliff, a channel not shown on regular charts. The wrecked vessel had evidently been left on the reef to help mark the passage instead of buoys which would excite suspicion.

There were dim lights moving around far inside the cavern. He crawled to the opposite side of the fan-tail as he saw that it would be away from the huge door on which men were already beginning to work. The

submarine slowly glided into the hidden base, and by the shifting neon-beam and the hooded lights inside he could get a fair picture of the cavern. Its dome was so high that it was lost in darkness; he estimated it must be at least two hundred feet above the water. There was a wide ledge on the right toward which the submarine was carefully making its way. He could not be sure, but he thought the cavern was almost half a mile long. The neon light, swerving across the base, seemed to reflect from water at that distance.

The ledge was a wide shelf of rock obviously well supported, for it was covered with boxes, fuel drums, portable military huts, and a variety of supplies. Men were stringing lights on the rocky walls at the back of the shelf, and still other workmen were connecting a large communication cable which came up out of the water like a long snake. Two hundred yards from an improvised dock, where a crowd of uniformed Italians waited, there were rows of small tents, seemingly quarters for the enlisted men. Between this point and the dock, a number of Bredas were secured, and farther on Knight saw some larger ships, flying-boats and an amphibian. His heart sank still farther as he realized there were nearly five hundred men in the base, not including the crew of the submarine.

He kept on the side away from the ledge, praying that no bright lights would be turned on. Huge rope buffers had been adjusted, and in a moment he saw a line whiz through the air. Another line followed, and soon after he felt the vessel grate to a stop against the heavy buffers. The crowd shoved along the ledge toward a gangway which was being pushed to the side of the sub. Knight lowered himself into the shadowy waters, knowing all eyes would be momentarily focused on Doyle and the group by the conning tower. He took a deep breath, dived, and swam as hard as he could to a point where the rock shelf curved. Here, where it narrowed near the entrance, there were a few boxes but no tents or huts. The only men near that spot were the ones working on the big door sixty yards away, and he could barely see them in the gloom. He cast a hurried glance toward the crowd, drew himself up, and crawled across the dark ledge until he was hidden by a turn in the jagged wall.

"What of the second man?" he heard a voice demand in Italian. He tensed as he recognized the unmistakable tones of the Master of Death.

"My men are searching the inlet and the reef, *Herr* Brauer," the Italian commander answered quickly. "He probably drowned—"

"It is not important," the Master of Death said curtly. "This English swine is the one—that one I have waited all these years for!"

HIS voice lost its chill calm, rose to a note of frenzied triumph. Knight pulled up cautiously beside a jutting rock in the cavern wall, and looked around the edge. Stanley was back against one of the larger portable huts, held there by two armed guards. Standing before him, hands curling like talons, was the Master of Death.

In place of the skull-mask he had lost, he wore a molded wax face that might have been taken from a tailor's dummy, and under the dim light, he appeared to be woodenly handsome. But Knight shuddered as he thought of the horror which lay underneath. The man's eyes flashed oddly when he turned his head, and now it was plain that there were glass lenses in the eye-slits of the waxen face. Evidently Stephen Brauer's eyes had been injured in the explosion, and instead of wearing ordinary glasses he had put the correcting lenses in the masks which hid his ruined features. It was these, Knight now knew, which had caused his eyes to shine so weirdly during the first battle, when the neon-light inside the skull on the cowl had reflected back on the lenses.

For several moments, the Master of Death stood before his prisoner, his hands quivering as though in a mad rage to grip Stanley's throat. Then he slowly forced them to his sides.

"No," he muttered, in his own tongue. "Seven years have I waited—I will do as I planned."

He made a peremptory motion, and the guards hustled Stanley into the hut. The submarine commander, a tall man for an Italian, came up to the masked Austrian, fumbling nervously with his mustache.

"Now that you have your prisoner, *Herr* Brauer, I should like to have the rest of the formula."

The Master of Death whirled on him angrily.

"Nein! It is only one-half the bargain! She is still in London."

There was a madman's fury in his mention of Stanley's wife, and the Italian officer hastily stepped back.

"But I told you—our agents will soon be able to spirit her out of England. They must work carefully—"

"And until then, I keep the formula where it is safe—in my brain." A crazy laugh came through the parted lips of the mask, then abruptly Brauer's voice

regained its icy composure. "Have no fear, *Signor* Latti, I shall keep my word. After my revenge on those two, I will have nothing to live for. Your Italy can have every secret I possess."

He turned, glared through the mask lenses at Doyle, who stood dripping, surrounded by a half a dozen armed Blackshirts.

"Take this meddling American inside, also. I have an idea he will be of use."

"But, *Herr* Brauer," objected Latti uneasily, "I must question him and Stanley to learn how much they know of your work—and also what has happened on the *Furious*."

"Very well," the Master of Death said coldly. "Question him now—then let me have him."

He stalked into the hut, and Latti ordered Doyle taken inside. Knight waited until he saw Latti go into the building and close the door. The awe-stricken crowd began to disperse and resume their work.

The American agent had lost his Navy issue automatic, but he still had a .38 short positive in a clipholster under his left arm. If he could steal to the rear of that hut unseen, there might be a way of surprising Brauer and Latti. It all depended....

HE SPUN around, jerking the .38 from its holster. Thirty feet away, one of the men who had been working on the big door was striding toward a supply shed near the dock. Knight held his breath. The workman, a Blackshirt with dungarees over his uniform, was almost abreast when he halted abruptly, staring down at the ledge.

Too late, Knight saw he had left a watery trail behind him. The man lifted startled eyes and saw him. Knight leaped, frantically hurled the pistol as the other man started to yell. The gun caught the workman in the jaw, and he staggered back with a groan. Knight brought him down with flying tackle, then raised his fist for a silencing blow. But it was not needed, for the Italian's head had hit with enough force to knock him senseless.

Knight pulled him back into the darker shadow, quickly stripped him of dungarees, shoes, and his black shirt. There was no time to take his uniform. Knight peeled off his own wet shoes, shirt, and trousers, changed with fast-moving fingers. Up on a scaffolding, floated into position behind the folding door, men were completing their makeshift repairs, and he knew they would be coming along the ledge in a minute or two. He took the unconscious man's cap,

put it on so that it hid the bandage on his head. Jerking the visor over his eyes, he thrust his pistol under the dungaree coat and stole toward the first group of huts.

There were men on the dock, mostly the crew of the sub, which he had noticed bore no markings. But they were not paying any attention, and the only hazard he feared at the moment was heing stopped by some officer. He was fairly certain that the first huts were quarters for the officers of the secret base.

He took a quick glance toward the planes at the edge of the rock shelf. With one exception, the seaplanes were Bredas equipped with folding wings for submarine use. Forward of the conning-tower of the sub, he saw what looked like a large round tank. It was open, and mechanics were taking out a small Macchi two-seater seaplane, its wings folded. Men in hipboots pushed the little plane to the shelf, where other mechanics unfolded the wings, locked them into position, and began a routine examination.

"At least, the hangar did not leak this time," Knight heard one of them say with relief. He slid in between two large boxes, hurried toward the hut where the prisoners had been taken. It was more solidly built than he thought, for he could hear only an angry mumble through the walls. He was stealing past, toward the side in deepest shadow when suddenly the door opened. A man started out. It was the masked Austrian.



NIGHT STEPPED BACK, and the other man stared at him through the glass lenses of his waxen mask.

"What do you want?" he said coldly.

Some of the ice left Knight's heart. The semi-darkness had saved him from recognition.

"I was told to inspect the light-wiring, *Signor*," he mumbled in Italian. Beyond Brauer he saw Doyle and Stanley, carefully guarded, and Latti at one side. The two prisoners were not facing his direction.

The Master of Death made an impatient gesture.

"Very well, go ahead with your work; we are leaving. Now Captain Latti, if you will have those two taken to my laboratory, I shall show you how to make them talk."

Knight stood aside. There were too many men nearby to attempt a rescue in the open. Already, the Master of Death had walked by him, and the guards were bringing out Stanley and Doyle.

Suddenly there came a stentorian shout from the direction of the great door: "Entrance closed! Turn on the lights."

Knight tried to avert his face so that the prisoners would not recognize him and give him away. But before he could retreat, a 500-watt lamp blazed up from a pole nearby. The masked Austrian went rigid as Knight's face was brightly illuminated.

"Seize that man!" he shouted. "It is the other American!"

A dozen Blackshirts came racing up from the dock. Knight's hand had flown under his coat, but he saw it was useless to resist. Helplessly, he raised his hands. Stanley and Doyle were looking at him in utter dejection, and he knew they had been hoping he might save them. Captain Latti gazed at him incredulously.

"But how—he is wearing one of our uniforms," he sputtered. "Are you sure—"

"I would know him anywhere!" the Master of Death said icily. "It was he who almost shot me down tonight. I saw his face clearly under that flare."

An Italian petty officer took Knight's revolver, then searched him while two others covered him.

"Nothing else, sir," he reported to Latti.

Latti confronted Knight angrily. "How did you get in here?"

Knight did not speak. The other man struck him a vicious blow.

"Answer me!" he cried, rocking Knight's head with another blow, but the Master of Death stopped him.

"Not that clumsy way, *Signor*. I will show you a much more efficient method."

Latti grudgingly nodded, turned to one of his officers. "Have the base searched. He must have overcome one of our men to get that uniform."

The officer saluted. Knight's arms were twisted behind his back, and with a gun prodding his ribs on each side he was marched along behind Doyle and Stanley. They came to a windowless structure made of stone from the wall of the cave. There was a smoke vent at one side. The masked Austrian unlocked a heavy door, closed it when the others had entered. Knight shot a quick glance about the place. It was fitted up as a chemical laboratory and workshop. At the other end was what at first appeared to be a large model plane, but as Knight's eyes raced over its

burnished dural fuselage he realized the sinister truth. It was an aerial torpedo, with some unknown means for guiding it to a target.

The explosive container, which formed most of the fuselage, was about four feet long and ten inches wide, with small gyro-actuated controls. The wings were very short, but powerfully made. A curved panel just aft of a one-bladed propeller had been left open, permitting a view of several knobs, dials, and switches.

A compact, cylindrical battery stood on the floor near the aerial torpedo, and Knight surmised that the winged projectile was driven by an electric motor. This accounted partly for the silence with which the Master of Death had struck. There were holes of varying size in the counter-weight stub on the propeller, with some sort of adjusting screw, apparently a means for silencing the sound of the blade. But there was still no indication of how Brauer had contrived a silent, flashless explosion.

AS KNIGHT was shoved toward a door at the rear of the laboratory, he glimpsed an opening in the propboss of the aerial torpedo. Something like a round, staring eye was visible, and he could see wires running through the hub, evidently leading to some connection with the control panel.

The Master of Death unlocked the rear door, revealing a space hollowed out of the cavern wall. Rusty iron rings set into the rock showed that this place had been occupied many years ago. There were initials and cryptic marks chisled crudely in the walls, and Knight guessed that the cavern had once been a hiding-place for Mediterranean pirates, probably only recently discovered by Brauer or the Italians. Its entrance had been enlarged and fitted with the massive folding door.

Knight's hurried inspection of the place was cut short by a cry from Stanley.

"Clarke!" the Englishman groaned. "What has this fiend done to you?"

A half-naked figure lay on a narrow table, his arms and legs secured by ropes which ran underneath. His face was ghastly, and his eyes held a fixed, unearthly stare.

"Stanley!" he whispered, as he heard the commander's voice. "Good Heavens—has he finally caught you?"

His staring eyes shifted, but they did not focus on the other man. Stanley looked at him in horror.

"Blind!" he said hoarsely. He jerked around toward

the masked Austrian, oblivious to the gun jabbed into his ribs. "You've done this, you butcher!"

"He will not find it so easy to reach the radio and call for help next time," the Master of Death said with a grim amusement. He turned, looked coldly through his mask at Latti. "I warned you he should have been chained—or killed. He nearly gave away the whole secret."

"He will be tried and executed," Latti muttered. "There was no need for this."

"Stanley!" the blinded pilot said huskily. "Does England know? Have they found out about this place?" Stanley glanced sidewise at the masked Austrian.

"Don't worry," he answered soothingly. "You'll soon be out of here, old fellow."

"You're lying," cried Clarke dejectedly. "They trapped you they'll get everyone the whole Fleet. They've got some frightful new explosive that's ten times worse than T.N.T.—and it doesn't make a sound. They fire it in regular torpedoes with infra-red eyes that guide by the heat of the ship's funnels—and aerial ones they catapult—"

One of the guards moved menacingly toward the blind Englishman, but the Master of Death stopped him.

"Let the fool rave. He can do no harm now."

He faced Stanley, who was watching him savagely. "You see, I was not the numbskull some of your British experts thought when I said the most deadly weapons of the future would all be the silent ones." His voice held a mixture of hatred and gloating as he went on. "A silent plane! That was the simplest of all. A vacuum box for the exhaust to pass through—and the engine is completely muffled. I did it five years ago—and the Americans are just waking up to the idea. Their onebladed propeller could be just as silent. It's merely a trick of neutralizing the propeller roar by sounds of varying pitch made when the slipstream passes through that device in the counter-weight. I had the idea when you were spying on me in 1931, just as I had the idea of a silent explosive, one with such a terrifically fast rate of burning that the soundwave of the blast would be inaudible to the human ear. I found the key to it in the laboratory your government so kindly furnished me. But it was not until last year, here in this hell-hole, that I discovered how to create with it a completely nameless powder."

"Herr Brauer," Latti interrupted, "we are wasting valuable time. I must know how much the Americans and British have learned."

The Master of Death turned on the Italian fiercely, then controlled himself with an obvious effort.

"Untie that fool," he ordered one of the guards, pointing to Clarke. "Then put this smart American in his place."

Knight's blood ran cold as Brauer's eyes sardonically rested on him. The Master of Death laughed.

"So you do not feel so brave now, *nein?*" He stalked over to one corner of the hollowed-out space where a number of gleaming torpedo war-heads reposed behind a heavy wire grating. He returned in a moment wearing a heavy chemist's apron and gloves. In one hand was a small bottle, in the other a tiny glass funnel.

"Fasten the others to those two rings," he ordered the men guarding Doyle and Stanley.

Doyle fought back, knocked one man over. But he was finally subdued by a blow in the stomach. He hung, gasping, hands tied above his head and to the iron ring, while Stanley was likewise overpowered and secured. Knight had watched tensely for a chance to break into action, but Latti had his pistol out and the two remaining Blackshirts did not relax their vigilance. Clarke's bonds were untied, and one of the Italian soldiers started to guide him across the chamber.

"Take him outside," directed the Master of Death.

AT THAT instant, the blinded Englishman whirled and made a frantic leap at him. Brauer sprang back, hurled the bottle. It struck Clarke on the forehead, shattered. Acid ran down his face, smoking as it ate into his flesh. A scream of agony burst from Clarke's lips, and he tottered back, clawing at his face. There was a sharp report, and his cries ended. He slumped to the floor a few feet from where Latti stood with smoke curling from his gun.

"Schwein!" raged the masked Austrian. "Why did you shoot him?"

"You devil!" Latti said hoarsely. "You could stand there and see him eaten alive by that acid?" It was obvious that the Italian did not relish alliance with Brauer and that only the desire for the formula sustained it.

"I could see him cut up inch by inch!" snarled the Master of Death. "If you are so squeamish, get out!"

Fury darkened the Italian officer's face, and for a second Knight thought he would shoot down the other man. Then Latti slowly lowered his pistol.

"No, Signor," mocked the Master of Death, "don't

forget there is still the formula for Brauerite. Il Duce would be very much annoyed if you deprived him of the secret when it was about to give him power over all his enemies."

Latti turned and without a word left the laboratory. The Austrian sent a sarcastic laugh after him, turned to the gaping Blackshirts.

"Take off the American's dungarees and tie him on the table. Then get out of here, and take the corpse with you!"

Knight cast a desperate look around him, then hopelessly submitted as he was stripped to the waist. He was quickly stretched on the table, and his legs tied as Clarke's had been. He took a deep breath, held it as a rope was passed across his middle and looped around both wrists. One of the guards knelt, avoiding the broken glass on the floor, and fastened the rope under the table. The Master of Death waited until they were finished and had left, then he leered down through the mask-lenses at Knight.

"Now, if you will just be patient, while I go for another supply of vitriol"

Stanley groaned. "May Heaven forgive me! Knight, I brought this on you—I fired on you by mistake when you tried to drive me away from the cliff."

The Master of Death chuckled.

"I am indebted to you, Stanley. I have needed a human guinea pig or two for my experiments—so that I'll not make any mistake on you, later."

"You murderer!" rasped the Englishman.

"Murderer?" said the Austrian. "Ah, you think I am going to kill you? No, that would be too easy—a few hours, perhaps a few days of torture—and it would be over. Do you think I have waited seven years just for that?"

Stanley looked at him with a new dread. The Master of Death slowly lifted the waxen mask, and the Englishman cringed at sight of his ruined features.

"You find it hard to look?" the Austrian said harshly. "It makes your stomach sick—you feel as though you might faint You trembling English pig! That is what your face will be when I am through with you!"

All the color fled Stanley's cheeks. Brauer dropped the mask back over his face, stood glaring at the man he hated.

"Like mine—or worse! I'll learn when I'm finished with these two meddling Yankees just what I need to know. Your face will be a masterpiece, I promise you—and I shall have an audience to watch me work! A very lovely audience!"

Stanley's jaw fell. "You fiend, you wouldn't—"

"She will be here, tied to one of those rings and when I am through it will be her turn. A woman with a death's-head for a face! I'll give you back to each other—you can return to your damned England after this brief war is over and Italy has ruined her. But you'll live in a hell that will never end—as I have lived. Behind masks, afraid to see a mirror, wishing for death and afraid to kill yourselves "

BRAUER'S VOICE had risen to an hysterical screech. He broke off, shaking, then turned and went into the laboratory. Knight began a desperate attempt to loosen his right arm, and the veins stood out on his forehead. But in a moment he had shifted what slack there was to the right side. He twisted his head, looked feverishly for the spot of acid which had spilled onto the edge of the table when the bottle broke. He had seen it just before they had tied him to the table, a dark splotch slowly eating into the wood.

In another second, the strand of rope which encircled his wrist was pressed hard against the spot. He heard Doyle mumble something to Stanley, heard the two men struggling against their bonds. The Master of Death came back with another bottle of sulphuric acid. He set it down on the floor, picked up the tiny glass funnel he had put on a chair.

Knight lay motionless, fighting back the wild impulse to act instantly. There was a faint warmth on his wrist, and he knew that a speck of acid had touched it. That meant the rope must be partly severed

"Dick!" came Doyle's frantic voice. "Try to kick loose. Don't lie there and—"

"Stille!" grated Brauer. He threw a ferocious look at the ex-Marine. "Unless you want what I gave Clarke."

In the second or two that his head was turned, Knight pulled with all his might at the loop on his wrist. For one heart-breaking instant he thought it was going to hold, then it parted with a jerk.

The Master of Death whirled just as Knight's freed hand shot toward his throat. He jumped back, but the agent's fingers closed on his apron and jerked him over the table. His mask fell off, and a wild yell came from the scarred slit that was his mouth.

Knight swiftly raised his left hand, bringing with it the severed rope which had gone underneath. He whipped the rope about the Austrian's neck, gave it a terrific pull. Half-strangled, the Master of Death tumbled across Knight's legs, pawed madly at the

loop about his throat. Grimly Knight held on, and in a few moments Brauer slumped to his knees. His fall pulled the rope away, but he lay motionless, breathing stertorously.

"Thank Heaven!" he heard Doyle whisper.

Knight sat up, hastily untied the rope at his feet, and swung his feet to the floor. He bent over the Austrian, took his gun, and ran toward the two prisoners. He had Doyle almost freed when from outside there sounded a sudden commotion, as of men running toward the laboratory.

"Stay there—pretend you're still tied up," he warned Doyle. Then he leaped back and stripped off Brauer's long apron and gloves. Lifting the Austrian to the table, he looped the ropes about his arms and legs, tucking them under so that they appeared to be tied. Pulling Brauer's black shirt up over his face, he snatched up the fallen mask and ran for the other room. The gun was under his belt, but he had barely slipped the mask over his face when the outer door burst open.



ATTI AND ANOTHER OFFICER came in, panting, with at least twenty Black-shirts behind them. Knight stepped a trifle to one side, to avoid being caught in the bright glare from out on the base.

"The *Furious*—we must have warheads for the torpedoes!" Latti said breathlessly.

"What has happened?" Knight demanded, imitating the slightly accented Italian Brauer the Master of Death used.

"The British carrier—steaming straight this way!" Latti's eyes were filled with alarm. "They are using their searchlights. They must know part of the secret. If they turn their guns on this place—"

"Nonsense!" Knight said coldly. "They are only cruising aimlessly. I just forced the truth out of that American."

"I'll take no chances!" Latti flung back. "The *Furious* must be sunk before her planes can get into the air—even if it starts another world war!"

He rattled off an order, and the Black-shirts hurried into the rear with padded bomb-conveyors devised to

fit the charges of Brauerite. Knight stalked in on the heels of the first group, stood beside the partly covered figure of the Austrian. Only two of the Blackshirts glanced at the table, and they quickly shied away from that ominous-looking form. Latti stood at the connecting-door giving crisp directions as the warheads were taken out.

"The first one to the Macchi.... the second and third to the amphibian the rest to the submarine, Lieutenant!" he snapped his fingers at the officer supervising the work. "See that two of the underwater torpedoes are loaded in case there is any more difficulty with the projector for the aerial ones."

"Si, my Captain!" The lieutenant said, then disappeared. Knight stole a side glance at Doyle and Stanley, saw them watching tensely. He was thanking his stars that the last warhead was being taken out and that nothing had betrayed him.

But then, without warning, Brauer flung the shirt from his face.

"Latti!" he shouted. "Kill that devil with the mask!"
Knight jumped back, snatched the gun from under
the apron. Latti stood paralyzed with amazement,
made a belated attempt to draw his pistol. As though
shot from a cannon, Doyle hurtled across the room.
Latti went down, and his pistol clattered on the floor.
Doyle grabbed the gun, jumped up and covered Brauer
and the Italian officer.

The four men who were carrying out the last war-head backed up, eyes bulging, as Knight whirled toward them. Helpless, and afraid to drop their burden for fear of setting it off, they stood there openmouthed.

"Put it down—carefully!" he snapped in Italian. "Now, back up—behind that grating."

Brauer, Latti, and the four Black-shirts were quickly crowded into the enclosure. The Master of Death was cursing insanely. Knight covered them while Doyle released Stanley. The Englishman ran toward the outer room.

"Wait!" Knight clipped out. "You can't do anything alone."

"But the *Furious*. You heard what Latti said! They'll be killed—blown to bits!"

"Not if we use our heads. Take Latti's gun and cover the prisoners. Don't shoot if you can help it."

"How are we going to work it, Dick?" Doyle cut in hastily.

"Take Latti's uniform coat and hat," baid Knight.
"Your trousers are dark enough—by the time we get

near enough for them to see they're wet you'd be recognized anyway. I'll take a look outside."

He hurried to the outer door, made a guarded inspection. The huge folding door was still closed, but the submarine was almost ready to cast off its lines. Men were racing up the gangway, sprinting toward the hatches. The projector for the aerial torpedoes was pointing up at an angle of sixty degrees, and he saw that one of the winged missiles was already in place at the bottom of the catapult track.

He tore his eyes from the sub, looked toward the planes. The Macchi's engine was being warmed up, as were those of two or three Bredas. Mechanics were working on the motor of the amphibian, which seemed to have balked. He turned and ran back to the rear space.

"Go ahead—you and Stanley—to the outer door!"-he told Doyle. "I'll be there in a few seconds. We'll pretend we're guarding Stanley when we go to the ships."

As they obeyed, he lifted the mask, looked grimly at the six prisoners.

"I'm going to walk backward to the laboratory entrance, and I'll be aiming every second at that warhead. If any one makes a break before the lights go out, I'll blow you all to smithereens!"

HE STARTED backward, pistol trained on the nose of the gleaming shell of Brauerite. As he reached the connecting door Brauer crouched, but three of the Blackshirts wildly dragged him back.

"Dumkopf swine!" he screamed. "He's tricking you—he'll never blow himself up!"

Knight stepped back out of sight, whirled, and ran at top speed. At his signal, Doyle and Stanley started outside.

"There comes one of Latti's officers!" Stanley said in a tense voice.

"Motion to him!" Knight said swiftly to Doyle. "Signal him to go ahead."

Doyle flung up his hand, pointed toward the submarine. The officer, apparently coming to see what had detained his commander, turned and hastened back to the dock. The bright lights dimmed, went out.

"Run!" Knight muttered. "Head toward the dock until we're opposite those ships. Doyle, you and Stanley try to get the Macchi. I'll cover you and grab one of the Bredas."

A wild yell from the direction of the laboratory split the air just as they came abreast of the planes.

The mechanics around the Bredas turned and stared. Knight dashed toward the largest group.

"The prisoners have escaped! Head them off!" All but two of the men ran for their rifles. Doyle raced toward a Breda which was just being swung around for taxiing out. A blow from his fist sent one mechanic headfirst into the water. Before the other man could recover from his amazement, Doyle had leaped onto the wing and was slugging the pilot. The frightened Italian tumbled out of his pit, splashed in beside the mechanic.

Doyle hit the throttle, and the Breda lurched away from the ledge amid a bedlam of yells from the Blackshirts. A petty officer came dashing back from the direction of the laboratory, and Knight saw Brauer and Latti charging toward the ledge followed by the rest of the men who had been captured.

"The Macchi!" Knight shouted at Stanley. He dropped a mechanic who had snatched up a rifle. The Macchi pilot had been waiting beside his ship, evidently for final orders from Latti. He darted under the wing and jumped at Stanley, clawing a gun from under his flying-coat. Knight fired pointblank, and the pilot tumbled back, shot through the head.

By now a terrific hubbub had arisen, echoing through the huge cavern. Stanley made the rear cockpit of the Macchi in a wild spring, and Knight vaulted into the pilot's seat a split-second later. Over near the dock, a Blackshirt swung a pivoted machinegun, but an officer knocked it aside before he could fire.

"Imbecile!" he shrieked. "You'll hit the Brauerite bomb! We'll all be blown to pieces!"

Knight seized the throttle, shoved it open. The Macchi forged out under the drive of its silenced motor. A spot of reddish light flickered across the right wingtip. Knight jerked a look back and saw the Master of Death hurtle over a fallen Blackshirt and scramble onto the wing of the black skull-ship. The neonlight in the skull had already been turned on, and a mechanic was scurrying out of the cockpit. Brauer tore a pair of goggles from the man's head, fastened them over his slits of eyes.

The clatter of a machine-gun broke through the din of voices. Doyle's ship was in the air, twisting around toward the ledge, and a terrified Italian gunner was blasting at the Breda. At the same time, another Breda which had already taxied out came racing across the gloomy water. It zoomed the instant its pontoons broke free, then whipped into a turn, plunging after Doyle.

Knight held the Macchi onto the step until it was streaking at well above flying speed. He pulled the stick back, then tripped the muffled guns before him. No tracers showed, there was nothing but the vibration of the guns to indicate they were firing. But the Italian pilot gave a sudden leap, stiffened, and fell over his controls. His ship pitched headlong into the water below.

THE submarine was now half-way through the opening, and Knight could dimly see the crew at the folding door making ready to close it as soon as the undersea vessel was past. He pulled up to Doyle's level, hurriedly waggled his wings. Doyle shot after him as he nosed down to pass through the opening. The fantail of the sub was passing the door, as the vessel put on more speed. Knight flung a burst above the heads of the doorcrew, and the men scattered madly.

A vicious thudding into the wings told him that muffled guns were firing from somewhere behind, but he dared not look back. He crouched over the stick as the Macchi raced into clear air, then zoomed up into the darkness. The sub was a black shadow about to be swallowed up in the night—and not ten miles ahead searchlights were methodically sweeping the water from what he knew must be the *Furious*.

Two tiny red spots showed in the darkness, and Brauer's grim skull-ship plunged through the entrance to the secret base. Knight saw Doyle's Breda skid aside, vanish in a tight chandelle. The skull-spotlight twitched to the left, passed over the Macchi's wing. Knight zoomed, banked above the submarine.

"Drop a flare!" he shouted back at Stanley.
"Can't find the releases!" the Englishman yelled.
"Dive lower—we've got to finish that sub!"

Knight made a desperate search of the cockpit, trying to locate the flares. He had already found the bomb-pull, with a safety-catch to make certain the lethal charge of Brauerite was not dropped by error. But unless he could see the target

T-t-t-t-t-t-t! Another burst from silent, masked guns cut through the Macchi's wings. He felt the rudder pedals quiver as the bullets raked back across the tail. With a swift renversement, he was out of the fusillade. But he had hardly banked when a dazzling light blossomed directly overhead. Doyle had dropped a flare!

The black skull-ship was two hundred feet on the right, circling swiftly, and the submarine was almost out of the channel. Knight hurled the Macchi after the

vessel, climbing at full-throttle. Like a shot, the Master of Death plunged in at them. Doyle pitched down under the flare, but before he could get into range another Breda streaked out of the cavern base and drove him to hasty defense.

Machine-guns were tilting up from the submarine, and aft of the conning-tower Knight saw a crew frantically preparing to launch one of the aerial torpedoes. The sub was also swinging to launch a full-sized underwater torpedo.

Knight pointed straight toward the *Furious*, pawed at the bomb-pull. Once the bigger torpedo was launched, he knew that the infra-red eye would guide it straight to the British vessel, and all on board would be doomed.

His fingers closed on the safety-catch, snapped it open. The Macchi was almost in line with the sub when like some apparition from Hell the black skullship plunged straight into its path. Knight's heart turned to ice as he saw the scarred horror of Brauer's face glaring over the cowl.

The vengeance-mad Austrian meant to crash them head-on and explode the bomb in mid-air!

WITH a frenzied jerk, Knight stood the Macchi on its tail and pulled the release. The Austrian skidded wildly, fell into a spin. For one instant, Knight thought Brauer's ship would hit the falling bomb. One instant of freezing dread—waiting the blast that would hurl the three of them into eternity. Then he saw the bomb plunge on down toward the unmarked sub.

Under the glare of the drifting flare, the doomed vessel lay starkly revealed.

Knight had one last glimpse of terrified men diving into the sea, of Brauer pulling out of the spin. Then the deadly bomb struck!

A jet-black cloud whirled out over the sea, and skull-ship and submarine vanished! From the center of that black cloud a terrific geyser spouted up. Prepared though he was, Knight was slammed half-way out of the seat. He clung to the stick, staring dazedly down into the inferno of hurtling wreckage. The thought of Doyle wrenched his gaze from that scene of horror. He turned, felt a great thankfulness as he saw his partner's ship twisting in toward them through the turbulent air currents. The other Breda was wobbling down to a landing in the sea.

He started as Stanley violently thumped his shoulders. The Englishman was pointing back toward the base, a look of awe on his face. Knight looked back. The whole face of the cliff was sliding down, as the tremendous concussion loosened some hidden fissure. The rumble of the avalanche swelled to a roar—then finally slowly faded away.

From the approaching *Furious*, searchlights swept over the sea, rested upon the pall of dust which hid the wrecked base. The shroud of dust lifted, disclosing a vast slide of rock where the opening had been. There was no sign of life.

"Wiped out—to the last man," Knight muttered. He saw Doyle signal toward the *Furious*. He gestured back, and side by side the two planes began long power glides to land beside the carrier.

Once Knight looked over his shoulder. Stanley was staring back at the heaving sea, and he knew what the Englishman was thinking. Stanley shivered, turned and saw Knight watching him.

"Think what it would have been," he said huskily, "if the secret of that vulture of silence had lived! It would have meant the end of civilization. He'd really have been the Master of Death!"

Knight slowly nodded.

"You're right—but Death finally proved the real master!"

