



# RICHARD KNIGHT *in* FALCONS FROM NOWHERE

by DONALD E. KEYHOE

*Through the growing twilight sped a powerful Northrop, and from its front pit peered Richard Knight. He saw no other ship in the sky; the secret of their mission was safe. But Richard Knight was unaware that an unseen hand was reaching through that descending pall to tear away an invisible veil—to loose upon him a hideous fate that had never before been faced by man. That fate was the 'doom of stone'—and it had been streaming across the boundless wastes of eternity since the dawn of time.*

## CHAPTER I TRAITOR WINGS

**L**IKE A BLUE METEOR, the special Northrop two-seater roared over Harper's Ferry, its air-speed pointer quivering on 250, its gyro-pilot holding a steady course to Washington. Dick Knight looked up through the transparent cockpit enclosure and searched the cloudless sky. There was not another ship in sight;



evidently his suspicion that they were being followed had been unfounded.

With the gyro guiding the plane, he sat back and indolently dipped a well-blackened briar into his tobacco pouch. An amused glance at the cowl mirror showed Doyle comfortably dozing in the rear seat, his head lolling sidewise, his crooked nose—relic of a Shanghai brawl—tilted skyward. The ex-Marine's homely features had a foolishly happy expression, as though he were dreaming of something pleasant.

Knight lighted his pipe, exhaled a huge cloud of smoke, and waited. He did not have to wait long. Doyle's happy expression vanished. His eyes popped open and he sat up with a howl of indignation.

"For th' luvva Pete! If you've got to set off that incinerator in here, open a vent!"

Knight grinned, cranked open a small panel so that most of the smoke was sucked out by the wind. Doyle looked at him aggrievedly.

"You're a fine pal. Here I was dreamin' about a swell blonde, and you cut loose with a gas attack. *Phew!* I thought we were back at Chicago, flying over the stockyards."

"Where's that cast-iron stomach you brag about?" said Knight.

"It bailed out," growled Doyle. "And I got a good notion to do th' same thing."

Knight shook his head with mock regret. "I'm afraid, old man, you don't appreciate the bouquet of a finely aged pipe."

"Aged is right!" snorted Doyle. "It must've been handed down for generations. No pipe ever got that bad in one man's lifetime."

"Cheer up," said Knight, "we're almost to Washington; one whiff of the political atmosphere, and the pipe, will be sunk."

"I've got my doubts," Doyle retorted. "But if we're gettin' that close, I'd better be checking up on phone numbers."

He took out a little red notebook in which several mysterious symbols were marked.

"Boy, if that grass widow is still living at—" he broke off as a high-pitched buzzer suddenly rasped from under Knight's instrument board.

The tall secret agent leaned forward. One of several tiny numbered bulbs was glowing with orange light. He switched on a small radio speaker, and as he set the dial on a special high-frequency a nasal voice became audible:

"Seven—Five—Ninety . . . Seven—Five—Ninety. *B to Q . . . B to Q.*"

Knight's bronzed fingers lifted a hand-mike from its prongs. "Ten—Q—Okay," he said tersely.

There was a brief pause, then a different man spoke, in a quick but guarded manner:

"*B to Q. Change from plan. Approach high, land at Field Two.*"

Knight recognized the voice of Major General John Brett, Chief of Army Intelligence, with whom he and Doyle worked as free-lance agents.

"Okay," he answered, and pronged the microphone.

"I knew it!" groaned Doyle. "Every time I get set for a rest from this crazy business, something pops."

Knight laughed. "Never mind, Lothario. This may not be serious."

"Lothario, huh?" grunted Doyle. "You've got a nerve, the way you hotfooted it out of Chi when you got that wire."

Knight's whimsical face had sobered. "That wasn't from Benita," he replied. "Her name was signed to it, but I knew it was from Brett. And some one else knew it, too—I'm positive we were toiled to the airport."

"A fat lot of good it did 'em," said Doyle, looking back at the empty heavens.

KNIGHT nodded, but his eyes were wary as he surveyed the sky ahead. General Brett's message had said for them to land at Boiling Field. The Chicago telegram had mentioned Washington Airport. It had been signed by Benita Navarre, the pretty Spanish senorita whom the newspapers had called the "Girl from Lost Valley." Doyle and he had rescued her and others of a lost Spanish settlement from a Rocky Mountain canyon in which they had lived all their lives. Benita's great-grandfather, the Duke of Navarre, had established a small community there after finding gold back in '49. An earthquake had closed the only exit, and until a few months ago the descendants of the lost Spaniards had lived in the isolated valley, unable to scale the precipitous cliffs, and entirely in ignorance of the modern world. Since then, as a ward of General Brett and his wife, and with her share of the ducal fortune to aid her, Benita had quickly adjusted herself to modem ways, though there were still times when she showed a naive amazement at some new discovery. A faintly worried look came into Knight's sunburned face. Fate had twice brought Benita into the tangle of espionage which was his real life, though he passed for a well-to-do idler, a sportsman pilot, and globe-trotter, with Doyle as his sidekick. To his dismay, the girl had developed a passion for the plots and counterplots of

international spying, and from the use of her name on the telegram it appeared that Brett was finally acceding to her request to become a special agent.

He was still thinking about it when the tall white shaft of the Washington Monument showed from the haze ahead. The late afternoon sun reflected from the Potomac, from the Capitol dome and the windows of countless buildings, as the Northrop raced toward the city. Knight emptied his pipe through the vent. He was reaching out to disconnect the gyro and resume control of the ship when with terrifying swiftness everything turned black!

For a split-second, time itself seemed to stand still. All sounds, all sensations were gone. His brain seemed to slip a cog—then something jerked him out of that strange blankness and he found himself slumped back in his seat, staring up at the sky.

Oddly, the sky appeared darker. He pulled himself up in his seat, fighting a faint dizziness. The Northrop was still cruising on its course, and the double-banked Wasp had not broken its steady drone. He peered over the side to spot Boiling Field, then almost bounced off his seat in amazement.

They were flying over a gray and barren sea!

Hardly believing his senses, he twisted around and stared back. Ten miles astern, a ragged coastline showed in the rays of the setting sun. With complete stupefaction, he realized they were heading out over the Atlantic Ocean!

For an instant he thought he had lost his mind. Then the difference in the sun's position forced itself into his consciousness and he looked at the clock. The hands had stood at 5:29 as he reached out to switch off the gyro.

But now it was exactly six o'clock!

What had seemed only a second of complete blankness had been more than half an hour. During that time, the ship had flown 125 miles, taking them southeast to the Atlantic. Still dazed, he banked through a turn of 180 degrees and headed back toward shore. Doyle sat up groggily as the ship straightened out.

"Say, what th' devil—" his eyes bulged as he saw the ocean below them. "Holy cats! What happened? Where are we?"

Knight pointed down as they raced back to the coast. "There's Fishing Point, and Chincoteague Island beyond. We're about a hundred and twenty miles southeast of Washington."

"Judas Priest!" Doyle said hoarsely. "We can't be—why, I wasn't out more than a couple of seconds."

"That's what I thought," Knight answered grimly. "Take a look at the clock."

"Half an hour!" erupted Doyle. "Good Lord, what happened to us?"

"I'd give a lot to know," said Knight. "Something knocked us out, but how it was done is beyond me."

"I've got it—that pipe!" exclaimed Doyle.

"This is no time for jokes," snapped Knight.

"I'm not kidding," insisted Doyle. "Somebody must've slipped a drug in with your tobacco."

"Not a chance," said Knight. "That pouch has been in my pocket all day, and I've filled my pipe from it twice. Anyway, a drug wouldn't hit like that, and if it were strong enough for the smoke to affect you then I'd have been laid out cold."

"Then what did it?" Doyle demanded.

"You dope it out," said Knight. "Right now, I want to get back on terra firma, before it happens again. We've just about enough fuel to take us to Boiling."

THE NORTHROP hurtled across the narrow peninsula south of Eastern Maryland, roared on above Tangier Sound and the maze of islands at the East of Chesapeake Bay. Doyle spoke abruptly.

"Dick, we're lucky to be alive—plenty lucky!"

"You mean about the gyro?" said Knight.

"You said it. If we hadn't been cruising on the gyro—well, we'd sure have made a loud bang when we hit with that motor wide open."

Knight gazed somberly into space.

"I wonder who else figured that way."

"I can think of a dozen birds we've crossed that'd like to bump us off," growled Doyle. "But what gets me is how anybody could make us pass out like that. When I woke up it was just like comin' out of ether after an operation—I'd have sworn it hadn't been a second. Kinda gives you the creeps, to think of—"

The sharp rasp of the signal buzzer interrupted him. Knight switched on the speaker as the orange light flickered, and instantly Brett's anxious voice sounded:

*"Q! Where are you? Report in if you hear me."*

The message was repeated twice, but Knight did not touch the hand-mike.

"Why don't you answer him?" said Doyle.

"I don't want anybody knowing where we are right now," Knight told him. He moved the dial, picked up the station at Boiling Field. Some one was giving orders, apparently to Air Corps pilots who were looking for the Northrop.

*“ . . . to Captain Deane. Search area between Bowie and Annapolis. Lieutenant Garson, take area from Bowie to Laurel. Remainder of 3rd Flight, continue in assigned areas . . . ”*

The Northrop raced on across Chesapeake Bay, passed above Prince Frederick at six thousand feet. The sun was down, but the first dusk had hardly begun to settle. Knight nosed down slightly and eased back the throttle. It was exactly thirty miles to Boiling Field; at their speed they would reach it in about eight minutes. He watched the clock. Seven minutes, six, five, four . . .

He had left the radio tuned to the Boiling Field station. Suddenly a harsh voice grated something in a foreign-sounding tongue. Knight stared at the speaker-box. Espionage had made him familiar with a number of languages, but this one was totally unfamiliar. The words were interrupted quickly.

“Get off the air, whoever you are! This is an official Army station.”

Another blast in the unknown tongue answered, then the two voices mixed in a violent uproar. The din was deafening, and Knight turned off the receiver. Boiling Field loomed up ahead, spread out along the eastern bank of the Potomac and the Anacostia Branch. He was starting to lower the wheels when Doyle gave a shout of alarm. He whirled in his cockpit.

A Seversky P-35 was plunging down at them with blazing guns!

A BURST of slugs drilled the Northrop’s right wing-tip as Knight whipped aside. Doyle, cursing furiously, was trying to break out the rear-pit .50’s from their concealed recess. The Army fighter screamed around in a lightning turn, and another fierce blast scorched the two-seater’s tail. Knight slammed the Northrop up and around in a whirlwind Immelmann. The maneuver drove him down tight in the seat, but he kept his senses.

The Seversky was following through at terrific speed. Knight kicked into a half-roll, jammed the stick from the corner across to the other side and for an instant caught the Army ship directly in line with the nose. His taut fingers gripped the first two buttons on the stick. Sliding flaps shot open in the wing-roots, and two of his four guns clattered into action.

The rear section of the Seversky pilot’s enclosure crashed into fragments under the pounding guns. Knight saw the man throw himself forward, caught the terror on his blanched face. Then the fighter’s twin-Wasp hurled it out of range. Knight pitched after it in a violent

renversement, but the P-35 darted underneath in another swift turn. By now, Doyle had his guns pulled free. He snapped them down to fire through the tunnel in the floor, and the automatic gear instantly swung open the floor panel. The heavy roar of the .50’s rose above the savage snarl of the traitor’s high-speed .30’s, and the Seversky whirled to one side with a frenzied haste.

Knight thought the pilot would flee, on finding the apparently unarmed Northrop in truth a flying arsenal. But as though in desperation he charged back into the fight. Knight swerved to put Doyle in position, but the ex-Marine gave a frantic yell.

“My gear’s jammed! For Pete’s sake, take him!”

Tracer bullets ripped yellowish streaks over Knight’s cowl. He rolled, felt the vicious thud of cupro-nickel slugs tearing through the wing. A red-and-white rudder flashed before the sights which he had raised up from his cowl. He clenched all four buttons, and both .50’s and .30’s joined in a berserk roar.

The P-35 stood on its tail. Knight backsticked, then whirled the Northrop aside as he saw the fighter twist off in a sudden split. The Seversky pilot was standing on his rudder, trying to blast the Northrop from the sky with one furious raking broadside. Knight jammed his stick forward, dived under the Army ship. Dural fragments flew from the engine cowling as he zoomed up on the other side. The man in the P-35 had with miraculous skill renversed even as the two-seater shot beneath his wings.

The Seversky’s tracers smoked scant inches from the Northrop’s prop as Knight desperately kicked back. For a fraction of a second the two planes hurtled toward each other. Knight cut loose with all four guns. A last heart-pounding instant . . . traitor guns blazing straight toward him . . . then the plummeting fighter went to pieces with a roar and a blast of flame.

## CHAPTER II THE MAN WITH THE BLACK CHUTE

**K**NIGHT KICKED AWAY from the blazing wreck and looked hurriedly around the sky. There were no other ships in sight. He stared back at

Doyle.

“What do you make of it?”

“Don’t ask me,” yelled Doyle. “I think everybody’s gone nuts—including us.”

The warning light connected with the fuel tanks began to flicker, and Knight quickly swung back toward Boiling Field. The engine cut out at a thousand feet, and he lowered the wheels for a hasty landing. There was a small crowd along the line, and he knew the fight had been seen. Flaps down, he landed midway between the Navy hangars and the Army station, letting the two-seater roll. They stopped near a huge twin-motored bombardment plane on which was painted the name Dragon II. He recognized it as one of the new long-range ships designed by North American Aviation for the Air Corps—a veritable flying fortress, with a control cabin seating four, and space aft for a crew of six, the entire ship being equipped for sealing at high altitudes.

There were four P-35 Severskys beyond it, identical with the one which had attacked them. A War Department car had stopped not far away, and Knight saw General Brett and Benita Navarre hurrying from the machine toward a little group of officers.

An armed squad with a lieutenant in charge dashed to the side of the Northrop as it ceased rolling. He bawled an angry command for Knight and Doyle to climb out, but a chunky little major came running out with Brett at his heels, and the scowling lieutenant ordered his men to one side.

“Dick, what in Heaven’s name happened?” Brett asked in a low tone as Knight jumped to the ground. “The pilot of the P-35 attacked us,” Knight said grimly. “It was us or him.”

Benita anxiously pushed by the staring lieutenant. “Deek, are you hurt?” she exclaimed.

Knight smiled at her briefly. “No, I’m all right, *querida*.”

“But there is blood on your face!” Knight rubbed it with his hand, looked at the Northrop. There was a jagged hole in one side of the forward cockpit enclosure. Benita’s pretty dark eyes widened as she saw his expression.

“Then you not know you are so close to being keeled! Oh, Deek, what if it had—”

“But it didn’t,” he grinned. Then his eyes sobered and he turned back to the gray-haired Intelligence chief.

“We’d better go inside, General. This isn’t the only strange thing that’s happened to Doyle and me.”

Brett looked from him to Doyle, who had also climbed out and was sourly inspecting the Northrop.

“Major Cates,” he said to the chunky C.O., who was hostilely standing his ground, “place a guard around this plane and then join us in your office.”

Cates gave the command and followed them inside at once.

“I can’t believe that Lieutenant Garson would attack anybody,” he began with a savage look at Knight. “He was one of my best pilots—”

“And these two men are the most trusted agents in our service,” Brett cut in sharply. “You will keep that information in strictest confidence, Major Cates.”

Cates’ jaw dropped. He gaped from Knight to Doyle.

“But I thought—the papers have always described them as—”

“I know,” Brett said impatiently. “Knight is purposely playing the role of an idler, a wealthy sportsman pilot. Doyle is supposed to be his buddy. But they’re both on our secret roster, and if they say they were attacked that’s all there is to it.”

He turned back to Knight. “Any idea why Garson jumped you?”

Knight shook his head, then hesitated. “Just before it happened, I heard some one cut in on the Boiling Field wavelength, speaking in a foreign language. It’s possible he was ordering Garson to wipe us out.” “You didn’t recognize the language?” said Brett. “No,” said Knight, “I didn’t then, and I’m not sure now. But I think it must have been Esperanto—the universal language.” Cates started.

“Esperanto? Then—maybe you’re right about Garson. He used to study Esperanto—said it was just a hobby when the station officers kidded him.”

“That message must have been caught by several stations,” Brett said crisply. “Call Communications and have them check up and see if anyone took a bearing on the transmitter.”

THE C.O. hurried out. Knight waited until the door was closed, then looked from Benita to General Brett. Both stared at him questioningly.

“Something a lot more peculiar than the attack happened to us. You’re probably wondering why we were an hour late.”

“*Si*, we were so much worried,” Benita said quickly. “When Uncle John had them call, you do not answer. We are so afraid that you have the crash.”

“You’ll never know the half of it,” said Doyle. “If we hadn’t been on the gyro, it’d have been curtains.”

“Curtains?” said Benita, wrinkling her pretty brow.

Knight explained, adding the details of their strange experience. Brett looked startled when he first mentioned going blank, and he broke in before Knight had finished.



"When this happened—just before then—did you see any other plane?"

"No, the sky was empty. Ceiling was unlimited, and I remember looking around just a minute or so before that."

"That fits into the other report," Brett muttered.

"Then this isn't the first time?" Knight demanded.

"No, it's happened at least half a dozen times, though we only first heard of it last night, when eight Grumman F2F-l's disappeared from the Naval Air Station at Seattle. The thing is inexplicable. There were seventeen men on the station. That was about 10:45 last night. At ten minutes to twelve they flashed in an alarm to the Navy Department that the eight Grummans had vanished. They swore they hadn't heard a sound, and that no one else had been on the station. Naval Intelligence found out, early this morning, that there was a period of about an hour when the men couldn't remember anything. The whole period was just a blank."

Knight nodded slowly.

"Each one probably thought he'd fallen asleep, and didn't want to admit it at first. But these other instances?"

"They came to light after the Seattle case," said Brett. "State Department called us as soon as they heard of it, and said they'd been confidentially asked by the British Embassy to report anything we might hear about two missing Empire flying-boats—the kind they're planning to use on the trans-Atlantic route. It developed that they'd disappeared the same way—they were in the water near the Short plant at Rochester one night, and when the watchmen and guards were changed at midnight the ships were gone. The Limeys found there'd been the same kind of 'blank' period from eleven to twelve—they thought at first all the men had been drugged. The matter has been kept quiet for fear the public would think the planes crashed on trial runs and this was just some wild story to cover up the truth. But the British haven't found a trace of those ships anywhere."

"Have all the cases involved the disappearance of planes?" Knight asked thoughtfully.

"No, only the ones I've mentioned. One of the instances occurred in Indo-China. A native temple was completely emptied of all its valuables—there were a number of gold idols and jewels running into a million pounds, according to our report from the British. The Annamite natives believed it was some kind of devil that had put the priests and temple guards to sleep,

and nobody gave much credence to the story until the British began investigating this business of passing out. Since then there have been three other cases of temple looting in Asia, with the same details of everybody going blank while it was done."

"England—Asia—the United States," Knight said, half to himself.

Brett's scholarly face clouded. "It's a tough nut to crack, Dick. How many other cases there may be, we don't know. But I haven't told you the most incredible part,"

"What's that?" asked Knight.

"In four instances—even in two of the Asiatic cases—it's developed that airplanes have been heard just before the 'blanking out' periods. Yet no ships were seen."

Knight eyed him shrewdly.

"You're not hinting that somebody's discovered a means of making planes invisible?"

For answer, Brett took out his wallet, extracted a folded clipping. Knight unfolded it, frowned at what met his gaze.

#### AIR MYSTERY STILL UNSOLVED

##### Droning of Apparently Lost Plane a Riddle

Ironwood, Mich. Feb. 10—Ironwood residents remained mystified today concerning the droning of a plane over the city for several hours Saturday night as the pilot apparently sought a safe landing place. No trace of the plane was reported by authorities throughout the State.

Airport officials focussed searchlights into the air, lighted the airport, built bonfires in the rural sections and had street lights flashed on and off in hopes of guiding the pilot to a landing. But the plane was never seen, and investigation has failed to disclose any large airliner cruising in this area. The droning of the motors ceased abruptly at 11 o'clock, but no plane landed within a radius of 50 miles of Ironwood.

Police and others expressed the belief that some machine in the vicinity had made a sound like the rumble of a plane's motors.

DOYLE had read the clipping over Knight's shoulder. "Sounds like some ham reporter hard up for a story," he grunted.

"That's what I thought, Doyle," Brett answered, "but there's a weird sequel. Notice that the sound of the mysterious plane ceased abruptly at 11 o'clock. It was discovered, the next morning, that nineteen

people had died at that same minute, in a tiny village called Larton Corners, about 28 miles from Ironwood. In fact, the nineteen people were the total population of the community, and they all died apparently at the identical moment when the invisible plane ceased to be heard over Ironwood."

"How do you know the time they died?" said Knight,

"One man was found lying half-way out the door of his house, as though he'd heard something and had got up to see what it was. He'd fallen on his right arm and smashed his wristwatch. The hands stopped at eleven. Also, the coroner reports estimated that as the approximate time."

"Not conclusive," muttered Knight, "but you're probably right. What did the coroner say was the cause of death?"

"Evidently he was stumped. He thought it was some kind of obscure poison in their drinking water, but couldn't find any traces. The U.S. Public Health Service sent a representative up there, and a man from the Smithsonian Institution went along with him—the reason I recall it is because they asked us for a plane to ferry them out there in a hurry."

"Why the Smithsonian man?" interrupted Knight.

"I don't know. There was something odd about that. But the strangest part is this: Both of those men disappeared within six hours of the time they reached Larton Corners. They've never been seen since then."

Knight absently took out his pipe and began to fill it.

"How many people 'blanked out' at Ironwood itself that Saturday night?"

"Not a one. But half-way between Ironwood and Larton Corners, three automobiles went off the road just about eleven, and all three drivers later swore they didn't remember anything until they woke up in hospitals. Two of them had been drinking, so the third man's story didn't carry much weight—until all these things were tied together. The point where the cars went into the ditch was just about on a straight line between Larton Corners and Ironwood."

"Is that why you sent for us—to work on this thing?" Knight asked.

"Navy asked me to contact you after the Seattle affair," replied the Intelligence general. "I wired you in Benita's name—thinking you might move a little faster," he added with a twinkle in his eyes.

"And then he come along an hour late," said Benita. She laughed, but Knight caught the undercurrent of tension in her voice.

"Young lady," he said with mock severity, "I thought I told you to stop getting mixed up in these affairs."

Benita's dark eyes sparkled.

"And since when, *Senor* Knight, are you the big buss?"

"You mean 'boss,' my child," said Brett, gallantly hiding a smile. He looked at Knight, spread his hands. "It's no use, Dick; she's worn me down to a shadow. She's got some wild idea she could work with you and Doyle on some of your cases."

"No," said Knight flatly. He affected not to see the hurt look in Benita's eyes. "By the way, General, I'd like to ask Major Cates a few questions about Garson before we leave."

"We'll find him on the way out." Brett picked up his hat and led the way from the C.O.'s inner office. "Doyle, you'd better speak to the Officer-of-the-Day and tell him what repairs are needed on the Northrop. Tell him I said to have the work rushed."

Doyle went in search of the O.D., and Knight followed Benita and the general. They encountered Major Cates near the entrance to the administration building.

"No luck yet on that call," the major reported. "I told them to keep—"

He stopped, as the rumble of motors suddenly rattled the nearest windows.

"Blast those Navy pilots!" he snapped out. "I warned them to stop flying those big boats over here!"

Knight stepped quickly to the door. There was no sign of any Navy planes. With a significant look at Brett, he went outside, and the others followed. He gazed swiftly around the graying sky.

There was not a ship to be seen.

CATES stared amazedly around the heavens, as the droning roar continued. Benita turned excitedly to Brett.

"The invisible people! What we do now?"

Her words jerked Knight into action. "You're getting out of here!" he said tensely. He whirled to shout at the chauffeur of Brett's car, but as suddenly as it had begun the queer droning ended. The general motioned to Cates.

"Order all searchlights manned! Get word to the O.D. at the Navy side and ask him to do the same."

In less than a minute the first searchlight speared the heavens, and in two minutes there were almost a dozen great white beams probing through the dusk. Doyle came dashing up to Knight and the others.

"What's going on?"

A brief renewal of the mysterious rumbling answered him. Five or six searchlights instantly swung toward the apparent source of the sound. Knight stiffened. Where two beams crossed there seemed a momentary fluttering, as though something had passed through the light. Then, two hundred feet below, he saw a figure swinging in curious gyrations.

"It's a man under a black 'chute!" exclaimed Cates. He shouted at a junior officer, and two of the searchlight crews kept the descending figure in their beams. Knight stared into the sky above the black parachute as ten searchlights whipped back and forth, but there was no trace of a plane, and now the rumble had completely died out.

"He's going to alight somewhere up on the hill, beyond St. Elizabeth's," Brett said crisply. "Come on, we may be able to get the secret from him."

Major Cates followed the rest into the Intelligence general's limousine, and in another second they were speeding along the road at the base of the hill. The car swerved around the pumping station and raced to the main street of Anacostia, which led up the slope toward St. Elizabeth's Hospital. The searchlights were still following the man in the black parachute as the wind carried him eastward. Brett's driver skidded into a side street, turned again, and by a miracle of twists and turns kept the descending man in sight.

The swaying figure was for a moment lost in gloom as the hill cut off the searchlights, but Knight saw it strike heavily in a field near an old barn. The parachute collapsed against the side of the barn. Brett's chauffeur stopped with his lights trained on the spot where the unknown man had struck, and Knight and the others jumped out.

"Must've been knocked cold," said Doyle, as the prostrate figure did not move. "Or else—holy smoke!"

Knight stopped short, a coldness tugging at his heart. For that gray-faced man with the glassy, staring eyes was like a corpse dropped from the sky.

The others had halted, too, and then General Brett gave an exclamation of astonishment.

"Good Lord, it's Doctor Ayers—the Public Health Service man who disappeared at Larton's Corners!"

Benita gave a sudden, sharp cry, and pointed to the man's face.

"His eyes! See—they move! He is alive!"

Knight dropped hastily on one knee beside the corpse-like figure. The glassy eyes moved a fraction of an inch, and he shivered as he saw the agony in their

depths. He reached out to touch the man's ashen brow, then recoiled.

It was as cold and stiff as though he had been turned into stone!

### CHAPTER III

### "P-O-L..."

**T**RYING TO HIDE his horror, Knight got to his feet and beckoned to the Army chauffeur. "Drive back to St. Elizabeth's as fast as you can. Bring a doctor—tell them to send an ambulance, too."

"What is it, Dick?" Brett said in an undertone.

"I don't know—must be some kind of disease. You'd better keep Benita back."

Knight again bent over the rigid figure. Ayers' eyes seemed to be trying to tell him something. He bent lower to see if he could hear any slightest sound from the man's lips, but there was none. He touched them, found them stiff and icy cold.

"Judas!" he heard Doyle say in an awed tone. "Look at his left arm!"

Then Knight saw for the first time that Ayers' arm was twisted in a grotesque fashion. He knew at once it was broken. He unfastened the parachute harness, unbuttoned the man's coat and tried to slip it off. It was impossible; Ayer's limbs were set as in *rigor mortis*. He took out his knife and slit the left coat-sleeve and shirt-sleeve. They dropped away, revealing the sickening kink in the man's broken forearm. Knight's eyes suddenly dilated, but not at sight of the injury.

Tattooed high on that rigid, ashen forearm were four tiny faces, identical even to their expression of brooding menace. Underneath, a cross had been burned into the flesh.

"*Madre de Dios!*" whispered Benita. Her eyes, wide and frightened, clung to the sinister faces. She caught at Knight's arm as he stood up. "Deek! I am afraid! I have try to forget those terrible men—"

"Don't worry, there's no danger," he said gently, but his lean face was taut as he turned to General Brett.

"We'll have to be on guard every second if we're fighting *them*."

"I know," Brett muttered, but Major Cates looked uncomprehendingly from one to the other.

"I don't understand," he said. "What do those symbols mean?"



Knight answered him. "The cross is something new, but the tattooed part indicates he was either a member or a victim of the Four Faces, the deadliest secret society on earth. It's a gigantic criminal organization headed by four men whose identity we've never been able to learn. They have members in every part of the globe. It's fairly clear now that Lieutenant Garson belonged to the Four Faces."

"Garson a criminal! I don't believe it."

"He was criminal enough to try to shoot us down," Knight said drily. "I think he was probably an unwilling member. The Four Faces have a way of finding secrets in a man's—or a woman's—past, and blackmailing a victim into doing what they order. I saw proof, when I first tangled with them, that some of the highest officials and members of society in Europe were enforced agents of the Four Faces."

Benita shivered.

"I have hope so much they are keeled—after that so awful night on the island."

"We ran them down at a base on the equator," Knight explained to Cates. "They had an elaborate headquarters they called 'The Center.' A Russian named Nikolai Borzec, formerly with the OGPU, was in charge of all their flying operations. He and the four men who guide the organization escaped in a stolen Clipper. We've never heard a thing of the Four Faces since then. They dumped chemicals into their file and information rooms and destroyed all clues to their various sub-headquarters, but I know that they have contacts all over the world, and agents in every phase of life."

"Look!" Doyle said huskily. "Ayers is trying to tell us something."

THE stricken man's right index finger was quivering convulsively. Knight produced a pencil and borrowed Doyle's red notebook. Two more cars from Boiling Field had arrived on the scene, and their lights brilliantly illuminated the little group in the field. Cates ordered the men from the first car to keep everyone else back, as the inevitable crowd began to gather. Knight tried to close Ayer's hand around the pencil, but the stiff fingers could not hold it. He placed the pencil alongside the man's trembling index finger and kept it there with his own hand so that the point rested on the notebook. Ayers' eyes slowly, painfully turned toward the opened book, then back to Knight.

"You'll have to ask him questions, Dick," said General Brett. "Probably all he can do is make a mark for yes or no."

"Is the Four Faces main headquarters near here?" Knight asked the stricken doctor.

With a laborious effort, Ayers began to move the pencil. It was a jerky, almost illegible scrawl, but Knight saw the answer was, "No."

"Do you know where it is? No, wait—I'll ask you different countries—"

But the pencil was scrawling again, as beads of perspiration stood out on Ayers' gray forehead. Suddenly the pencil slipped, and his trembling hand ceased to quiver. Knight looked hastily toward the man's face. Ayers' eyes were open, but it was evident that he had put his last bit of energy into forcing his hand to move. A chalky pallor was spreading under the queer grayness of his skin. Knight glanced down at the notebook.

"P—o—l . . ." he held the book up closer to his eyes. "Pola—then the headquarters is in Poland!"

"Poland?" exclaimed Brett. "Good Heaven, then they're operating clear across the Atlantic."

"Say, that's why they grabbed off those Empire boats!" said Doyle.

"There's something funny about this," Knight said, frowning. "Poland is overrun with spies of a dozen nations; a secret like that—"

"Here's the St. Elizabeth's doctor," cut in Major Cates. "It's Merriam, one of the Navy staff."

The medico, an elderly man, lost his professional calm at sight of the Public Health Service official.

"It's Doctor Ayers!" he gasped. "How did he get here?"

General Brett explained, while Merriam opened Ayers' shirt and undershirt. Knight saw that the man's chest was the same ashen gray as his face. But for his eyes and his hair, he would have seemed a stone statue lying there on the ground. Merriam tapped Ayers' rigid chest, applied a stethoscope to his heart and slowly stood up.

"We'll get him into the hospital as soon as the ambulance comes," he said in a lowered voice, "but there's nothing anyone can do."

"What is it?" Brett asked in a whisper.

"Calcinosis. Ayers was working on it—it's not supposed to be contagious, but we don't know much about it yet. It's a hardening of the muscles by deposits of calcium diverted from the bloodstream. There have been several cases where the limbs and shoulders have been ossified, and one case reported where a man's face was literally turned into stone."

Knight turned to the general.

"Those deaths at Larton's Corners must have been caused by calcinosis. That would explain why Ayers went up there."

"I didn't know about that," interjected Merriam.

"We can check on it with Public Health Service," said Brett. "But here's the ambulance."

A tall man in the white uniform of an interne pushed through the small crowd of motorists who were being held back by the soldiers from Boiling. Two attendants with a blanket-covered stretcher trotted after him. The interne wore dark glasses, but there was something about the sardonic curve of his lips which struck a spark in Knight's memory. He stepped back, thrusting his hand inside his coat. Like a flash, the white-coated man whipped an automatic into sight.

"Raise your hands, Knight!" he rasped.

The two attendants dropped the stretcher, flung back the blanket and snatched up two sub-machine guns. Back in the crowd, a woman screamed, and Knight saw a dozen men with Tommy-guns and pistols pouring from three cars which had followed the ambulance.

"Keep those fools quiet!" the false interne snarled over his shoulder at the gunmen. Then, deliberately, he removed his dark glasses and took a step closer to Knight.

"Nikolai Borzec!" Benita moaned.

THE Russian's strange golden eyes swerved toward her for an instant. "It is a pleasure to see you again, *senorita*," he said ironically. "I have looked forward to this renewal of our acquaintance."

"You'll never get away with this, Borzec," General Brett said sternly.

The Russian's black eyebrows arched mockingly. "But I am getting away with it, my dear General. And please remember, bullets are no respecters of rank."

His sardonic smile abruptly vanished.

"Vetri!" he snapped.

A grim, dark-faced man came out of the crowd.

"How much did they learn?" Borzec demanded, in Russian.

"Nothing," Knight heard Vetri answer. "Ayers couldn't talk. He tried to write something in that notebook but—"

Borzec rammed his pistol into Knight's chest and jerked the notebook from his hand. The pupils of his weird, eyes dwindled to black pin-points as he saw the scrawls. Vetri stepped to the Russian's side, whispered something Knight did not catch. The sardonic grin came back to Borzec's lips.

"Take the girl to the first car," he ordered the other man.

Knight lunged forward, but Borzec drove him back with a vicious shove of his automatic. Benita fought like a Fury as Vetri took hold of her, and he had to call another gunman to help him. Kicking and struggling, Benita was dragged away. Murderous rage seethed in Knight's veins, but he fought it back, trying to keep a cool head. To make a break now would only be suicide; it would not help Benita.

From somewhere down in Anacostia came the shrill wail of a police siren. One of the gunmen jerked around, and Borzec's eyes flicked sidewise for a second. Knight charged him, head down, one hand snatching for the Russian's gun. Borzec tripped, and they went down together. The gun blazed close to Knight's ear, almost deafening him. He struck savagely at the snarling face before him, felt a satisfying crunch as his fist hit Borzec's jaw.

Doyle had leaped at the gunman who had turned his head. Knight saw Doyle wrench the Tommy-gun loose from the man's grasp. The second gunner wildly whirled his weapon, and a clattering roar filled the air. Merriam and Cates fell, riddled, and Ayers' prostrate body jumped under a hail of lead as the gunman spun around. Doyle clamped the trigger of the second gun, and flame shot from the muzzle. A scream of agony burst from the killer's throat as he fell, cut nearly in two. He toppled down almost on top of Knight, and the stock of his gun hit the secret agent's head.

It was only a glancing blow, but it dazed Knight for a second. Borzec seized his advantage and rolled free, tumbling Knight to one side. He raised his pistol, but Brett kicked it out of his hand before he could fire. Borzec leaped up with amazing swiftness and dashed toward the crowd. Doyle spun around with Tommy-gun lifted, then swore as he saw the terrified men and women who served as the Russian's shield.

One of the men guarding the crowd swung his gun toward Knight and the others. A husky Air Corps sergeant knocked the gun aside, and another non-com jumped the man from behind. The crowd suddenly broke, with panic-stricken men and women dashing in all directions. Brett's chauffeur leaped into his car and sent it roaring down the road. In the resulting gloom, as the headlights ceased to spot him, Knight seized the machine-gun the second killer had dropped and ran toward Borzec's car.

He heard the auto start, then the machine behind it thundered after it. The rest of Borzec's gunmen, after a

few shots at the nearest soldiers, sprang into the third car and followed their leader. Knight poured a burst into the machine, and it careened sharply, ending upside-down in a hollow. Brett was shouting at the driver of one of the Boiling Field cars. The man backed hurriedly, waited till the general and Knight and Doyle were aboard, and then raced after the fleeing Russian.

"Switch off your lights!" Knight said harshly. "Close up on that second car—step on it!"

The machine plunged around a turn, tore on down the hill at a reckless pace. Knight leaned around the windshield, aimed the sub-machine gun. From the car ahead, guns blazed as the Army car passed under a street-light. Knight pulled the trigger, and the other machine went into a shrieking skid. There was a crash as it piled headfirst into a telephone pole. The Army driver grazed the wreck as it slued around, then tramped on the throttle again.

Frightened citizens were herding into shops and alleys as they roared down into Anacostia. Knight saw a police scout car up on the curb, a blue-coated figure dangling limply through an open door. The second policeman was slumped over the wheel. Ahead, Borzec's car whirled left.

"They're making for Boiling or Naval Air!" shouted Doyle.

"Then they're trapped, the devils!" grated General Brett.

Knight did not answer, but an evil premonition came over him. Borzec was no fool . . . he would not run into a trap . . .

The Army machine screeched around the pumping-station turn, slowed with a jerk.

"Which way, General?" cried the driver. "Everything's dark!"

ALL the searchlights had been switched off, and so had the lights of the fleeing car. Knight leaped out, ran to the sentry-box at the beginning of the Boiling Field road. He almost fell over the sentry's body. He bent hastily, raced back to the car.

"The sentry's unconscious. General, I'm afraid the same thing that hit Doyle and me has struck everyone on the station!"

A roar of motors drowned Brett's reply. For a second, Knight thought it came from the mystery ship they had heard before. Then a floodlight went on, at the Army side of the field, and he saw the new long-range bomber slowly taxiing out.

"The Dragon ship!" Brett cried. "They're stealing it!"

Knight jumped to the running-board, and the car lurched ahead. As they neared the hangars, the glare from the floodlight showed a number of men stretched on the ground. They did not appear to be wounded, and Knight knew they must have been "blanked out" just as Doyle and he had been. In the half-shadow beyond, several men were working frantically on the P-35's. One ship's engine was idling. He saw two men loading the guns on another of the other fighters.

Borzec's car had swerved out onto the field, was speeding after the

. The huge plane stopped, and its cabin door swung open. Knight groaned as he saw Benita pushed into the ship. The Army car plunged out toward the big bomber, but the Russian and his men leaped aboard and slammed the door. Knight jumped to the ground and fired desperately at the nearest propeller, but the plane thundered away unharmed.

"Come on!" Doyle howled behind him. "We'll follow it with a couple of P-35's!"

A blast of shots greeted them as their car raced back toward the line. Bullets tore through the top and shattered the windshield, and the driver caught at his arm, stifling a groan. Doyle crashed a fusillade into a little knot of men near the floodlight, and Knight raked three more who were running toward the fighters. Two other cars came roaring along the road, and as they halted at the line Knight recognized some of the Air Corps men who had been at the fight up on the hill. There were only five gunmen left, and all but one of them fled, with the Air Corps men in pursuit, as they saw themselves hopelessly outnumbered. The lone exception was already half-way into the idling P-35. Knight fired, but there was only one shot in the Tommy-gun, and he missed. The next instant the plane was streaking down the field.

It seemed an eternity, but it was less than a minute when he gunned one of the other Severskys away from the line. Doyle had started the next one in line, and was recklessly racing the engine in a hasty warming-up.

Knight jerked the triangular cockpit cover closed, and bent grimly over the stick. The twin-Wasp unleashed its 1,000 horse-power in a bellow as he hit the throttle. His slitted eyes flicked to the instrument board. The manifold pressure was far past the red mark, but he kept the throttle wide open. Under that furious surge of power, the Seversky hurled itself into the air as though from a catapult. He pulled the stick back, and the trim metal ship screamed up into the night.



In scant seconds he had the wheels retracted. He saw Doyle's ship flit through the floodlight below, then two searchlights poked up from in front of the Operations office. Brett was giving them every aid in spotting the stolen ship.

The two beams swayed madly about the sky, and then leaped simultaneously to fasten on a fast-moving shape. Knight's pulses hammered as he saw the gleaming wings and massive hull of the *Dragon II*. He had already made up his mind. If the big ship escaped, Benita was as good as dead. The Four Faces would let her live only so long as they thought she had information to assist them. If they did not get it voluntarily they would use torture—one or another of the thousand fiendish means by which they kept their power over their members and victims. After that, death, for he knew Benita would never agree to become one of their spies.

There was only one way he could save her now. If he could cripple the huge bomber by hitting its props or engines, the pilot would be forced to land at one of the airports around Washington, in order to avoid a crash.

HIS hands shook as he pulled the charging-levers of the special highspeed Vickers in the wings. If his aim were wrong, he might kill Benita—but he had to take that chance. The huge ship was twisting wildly to escape the betraying searchlights as he charged in. An enormous expanse of wing flashed through the glow, reflected brightly toward him. He caught a glimpse of the blur from the right-hand prop, and instantly clamped the taped trigger-release on the stick.

His tracers gouged the leading-edge of the wing, barely a yard from the prop. With his heart pounding in his throat, he pressed the left rudder pedal. The tracers moved sidewise—and into empty space. In a furious zoom, the *Dragon II* was above him, and guns were blasting from three points on the flying fortress.

Knight dived headlong, came up beneath the bomber. A trap shot open, and a stream of fire crackled down at him. He saw two of the twin-Wasp's cooling flaps vanish under that lash of lead. Another gunner caught him from the top turret as he rolled to the side. In despair, Knight renversed and pulled out of the weaving searchlights. There was not a blind spot on that ship. Only a miracle could give him time to wreck a prop or an engine.

He was leveling out for another attempt when two red streaks appeared beside his enclosure. He jerked

the stick, kicked around just as the stolen Seversky dropped from the blackness. He crashed a burst through the other ship's tail, but the pilot flung clear with a dizzy climb. Knight stabbed two quick blasts after him, lost the ship in the dark. He was racing back toward the bomber when again he saw the darting wings of a Seversky. He tripped his guns, then let go the clamp as he saw Doyle's face in the brief glare of a searchlight. Another P-35 was zooming up beside Doyle, and Knight recognized the husky Air Corps sergeant who had knocked the Tommy-gun aside, back at the first battle.

By now, there were four searchlights, and one of them suddenly crossed Knight's ship. He shielded his eyes, ruddered away from the other two fighters. A faint rattle of shots sounded above the radial's thunder. He saw one of the two Severskys caught in a crossfire from the *Dragon* and the stolen P-35. With a muttered oath, he whirled toward the diving fighter. His guns were snarling in an instant, but it was too late.

Yellow fire gushed from under the sergeant's cowl, and in a second the metal ship was lost in gas-fed flames. The cockpit enclosure burst open, and Knight helplessly watched the doomed pilot dive into space. There had been no time to fasten parachute harness.

The fierce glow of the flamer lit up the sky for more than a mile. The *Dragon II* was in a tight bank, heading eastward. Knight saw Doyle race after it. The stolen P-35 had recovered from its dive and with a swift chandelle the pilot went after Doyle. Knight shoved his stick forward, murder in his heart.

A short burst flamed from the other man's guns. Knight turned cold as he saw Doyle's ship pitch into the start of a spin. The thought that Doyle was finished gave him a berserk fury, and he struck like a madman. One terrific fusillade crashed through the stolen fighter's tail. The pilot jerked around, and by the now waning light of the flamer Knight saw the horror on his face.

"Take it, damn you!" he snarled. His fingers clamped the trip, and the lurid lightning of his guns jumped the gap. A battered thing that had been a man tumbled out of sight, and the stolen P-35 screamed down to a splintering end.

Knight drew a thankful breath as he saw Doyle come out of the spin, a thousand feet below. Doyle began a wobbly glide back to the Army field. Knight turned to follow the trail of the *Dragon II*, then stared about him in dismay.

All the searchlights were concentrated at one

place in the sky, but there was not a sign of the stolen bomber!

A queer flickering at the center of that mass of brilliance caught his eye. He shaded his eyes, stared toward the spot where the beams met and crossed. The light appeared to be trembling just as it had done before they had seen the unfortunate Doctor Ayers falling under the black parachute. But he could see nothing to cause that odd flickering.

He closed the throttle, slid open the cockpit enclosure, and held the Seversky in the slowest possible glide. Above the moan of the ship he heard the reverberating drone of engines. It seemed to come from the space where the beams were centered.

Then, swiftly, that mysterious droning died away. One by one, the searchlights separated and swung feverishly about the heavens. Knight listened intently, but there was no sound but the moaning of his own ship.

The *Dragon II* was gone.

## CHAPTER IV STRIFE IN THE STRATOSPHERE

**A** THIN GROUND FOG had settled over Los Angeles and the surrounding area. Eight miles north, and slightly to the west, the mist combined with the darkness to shroud Griffith Park Airport, the National Guard field of the 40th Division. A beacon rotated slowly, sending its flashing rays out into the murk, but this was the only light visible on the field.

To all appearances, the place was deserted save for the skeleton force which usually guarded the field. But inside the hangar five mechanics clustered around a blue Northrop two-seater, and within a curtained office not far away three men sat about a flat-topped desk, talking in unconsciously lowered voices.

Dick Knight turned a haggard face toward General Brett, who had arrived only a few minutes before. "You're sure you weren't followed?" he said.

Brett nodded wearily. "I had two Intelligence agents waiting to nab anybody who trailed me, and I doubled back twice. And now, would you mind telling me what all this is about?"

Knight started to answer, but the clicking of a teletypewriter interrupted, and he swung quickly to look at the words on the tape. Brett glanced at Doyle,

whose four-day stubble of beard and ragged clothes gave him the appearance of a genuine bum. Doyle squashed out a cigarette, exhaled a crooked stream of smoke through his broken nose.

"Don't ask me, General," he rumbled. "I'm only the errand boy around here. Hanged if I know what he's up to."

Knight turned around from the tape.

"I didn't tell you everything, because I thought you'd be able to play your part better, out at Santa Monica."

"I don't understand this, Dick," Brett said in a tired voice. "All the events of the last four days have occurred on the East Coast, in the Atlantic or in Europe. Why did you come out here?"

"Because I think these devils—these falcons from nowhere—are going to strike here in the next forty-eight hours. It's plain that the Four Faces are building up a powerful air fleet. If that big French ship—the *Lacotiere*—hadn't caught on fire last night, they'd have made off with it. The British have blocked any more attempts on the Empire boats by temporarily dismantling the controls, and Pan American has ordered the same thing for its Clippers. But there's one big ship which could be stolen without much trouble—the Douglas DF flying-boat that the Soviet has taken an option on."

Brett looked startled.

"You don't think the Soviet is working with the Four Faces?"

"No, they hate them, and especially Borzec for double-crossing them. But the U.S.S.R. is anxious for that plane, and it's supposed to be test-flown day after tomorrow. Of course, there are special guards around the ship, but they wouldn't do any more good than the sentries at Boiling did."

"But what can you do?" objected Brett.

Knight pointed to a small telephone switchboard near the teletypewriter. Three bulbs were lit above plugged connections.

"At three points near that ship, tiny microphones are hidden. Doyle planted them with the help of a Douglas representative two nights ago. They're hooked up by hidden wires to three separate phone circuits that end here. The guards don't know they're there, but I can hear anything that happens—you'll hear them talking or walking around, if you listen to that amplifier in the corner."

A few moments later the thud of feet sounded from the horn, then a mumbling voice spoke:

*"Hey, Shorty, gotta match?"*

"Yeh," said another voice. There was an interval, then: *"Jim, do you believe all this stuff in th' papers about them Limey crates and that Army bus bein' swiped?"*

*"Must be something to it,"* said the first man, *"or they wouldn't have stuck us out here with these gats."*

KNIGHT turned the volume down until the voices were barely audible, then came back to his seat. General Brett eyed him, puzzled.

"Santa Monica is fifteen miles or more from here. If you're trying to trap these raiders, why are you so far away?"

"I'm not trying to trap them," Knight said bluntly. "My idea is to let them get away with the ship—it's fixed so they'll be forced down before they get far. But meantime I think I'll get a lead on the direction to their base. The Northrop has been repaired, and an extra tank placed back of my seat, and a streamlined belly tank like the ones they had on those Grummans at Seattle. There'll be enough fuel to cross the Pacific, at the height I expect to be flying."

"Even if you found one of their bases," said Brett listlessly, "it might not be the one where they took Benita. And you'd be shot down or captured before you could do anything."

Knight's jaw hardened.

"I've worked out a plan, General. And I don't think there's more than one base."

"But there'd have to be! They've struck at half a dozen widely separated points throughout the world."

"And they're using long-range ships," Knight replied, "probably with extra tanks. While we were their prisoners at Ariki Island, I heard Borzec and one of the Four Faces mention an alternate base they were preparing. I'll stake everything on that. Somewhere—and I believe it's on this continent—they've built another hide-out. It's most likely close to some isolated lake where they can land those flying-boats."

Brett shook his head. "I'm afraid you're shooting in the dark this time. And if those devils have really found a means of making ships invisible, we're licked."

"We let ourselves be tricked that night. Whatever made that sound was intended to draw the searchlights to one spot while the bomber got away. By the way, do you have the information I wired about?"

"Yes," said the general. "The Public Health people admitted the deaths at Larton's Corners were caused by extreme attacks of calcinosis. The bodies were like

Ayers', or even more rigid—but they weren't icy cold as his was. As for Garson, we couldn't find anything in his effects, but we uncovered a scandal he'd had part in. It would have forced his dismissal if the War Department had heard of it, so evidently that's how the Four Faces blackmailed him. And finally, Poland has reported a nationwide search for a secret base—with no success."

"Any more messages in Esperanto?"

"Not since that afternoon. If it's the official language for the Four Faces, they're keeping quiet."

"Or using ultra high-frequencies our receivers won't catch," said Knight.

"Whatever the answer, they're too clever for us," muttered Brett. "And now they've got the French standing on their heads. This afternoon, a French liner was looted of a cargo of five million in gold bullion which was being brought over to New York. That same devilish 'blank' period hit everyone on the ship for two hours or more, and according to a subsequent code report several people later died of 'heart failure.'"

"So that's their game," growled Doyle. "They're turning those crates into pirate ships."

"It's even more serious than that," said the general. "If they're not stopped soon—" he shrugged, looked at Knight. "If you'd only been able to find out who the four leaders are, we'd have something."

"They were behind bullet-proof glass, and they wore masks exactly like those four faces tattooed on Ayers' arm," Knight answered. He paused to listen to the mumble of voices from the amplifier, then went on thoughtfully. "Maybe I'm clear off, but did you ever happen to think of the peculiar death of that Belgian millionaire—Lowenstein? He was supposed to have fallen into the English Channel from his private cabin plane. A body was found, but there was never positive identification. In fact, it was rumored that he staged the thing to cover up his disappearance."

"But he had everything in the world," said Brett. "Why should he want to disappear?"

"The men behind those four masks are drunk with power," Knight said grimly. "They've built up a huge secret army—a diabolic international empire. There have been other wealthy men whose deaths have never been fully substantiated. If four such men got together—combined their money and their brains—"

"Holy smoke!" said Doyle. "They could damn near run the world!"

"It would take time," said Knight, "but I believe that's their goal. They're absolutely devoid of mercy—



human life means nothing if—" he winced suddenly and his words trailed off into silence.

"And to think that Benita is in their hands," Brett said huskily. No one spoke and after a while he took a long telegram from his pocket. "I almost forgot this," he said heavily. "My office relayed a briefed report on that Smithsonian man. He was at work on some kind of astronomy—I didn't finish reading it before I came here."

Knight was starting to read the telegram when a stifled cry came from the amplifier. He jammed the message into his coat pocket, leaped to the device, and whirled the volume control. There was a loud thud as of some one falling, then a gasping voice:

*"Shorty! Everything's .... black. I can't—"*

THE word ended in a groan, then there was dead silence. Knight turned the volume full on, but not another sound came from the amplifier. He wheeled to Doyle.

"It's happened! Tell the mechs to start the engine—but no lights!"

Doyle dashed out. Knight jerked open a desk drawer, thrust an envelope into Brett's hands.

"There's my plan, General! Don't let anyone change it—everything may depend on it. Tell every operator you can reach to keep tuned in on that wavelength."

"Wait!" cried Brett, as Knight snatched up a flying-suit and helmet. He followed the secret agent out onto the dark field. "You're up to some suicide scheme—or you'd have told me the details before."

The sputter of the Northrop's engine saved Knight from reply. He found Doyle in the rear cockpit handling the dual throttle with one hand, securing a helmet with the other.

"Pile out of there, you crazy Mick!" he shouted. "This is a solo hop!"

"Try to put me out!" yelled Doyle. "Think I'm going to miss a good scrap?"

Knight swore, but climbed into the front cockpit. "We'll never get off with this load!" he flung over his shoulder.

"Then dump some gas," howled Doyle as he slid the enclosure shut.

Knight groaned, signaled for the mechanics to jerk the chocks. The twin-Wasp had been run briefly at intervals to keep it warm, and he taxied quickly onto the oiled runway which ran north and south. The engine boomed, and the heavily loaded ship began to roll into the gloom. Knight peered ahead tautly as it

thundered into the darkness. He had ordered even the obstruction lights turned off, so that no one would suspect a ship might leave the field that night. If the Northrop did not lift soon . . .

The runway was two thousand feet long. The Northrop bounced three times, finally lifted at the very end of the run. Knight held his breath. There were trees and pole-lines ahead. The next two seconds might decide their fate.

It seemed two minutes before he saw the altimeter hand begin to show a safe margin. He kept climbing straight ahead until they were at three thousand feet. The lights of an airliner landing at Burbank appeared on his left. He banked into a wide upward spiral, leaving his own lights off.

"Why aren't we heading for Santa Monica?" Doyle shouted. "They'll get away with that ship if you don't shake a leg."

"I'm not after the DE," returned Knight. "We're going after bigger game."

He reached out to a small black box which had been secured on the right of his instrument board. As he pressed a switch-button, a miniature hooded light faintly shone on a peculiar device under the glass face of the box. It consisted of a large, hermetically-sealed test tube with a smaller tube inside. Steel dust was suspended in mercury at the bottom of the large tube, and a magnet and a long needle were delicately balanced on a pivot, so that the needle could turn or dip in any direction.

"What's that gadget?" demanded Doyle, looking over from the rear cockpit.

"It's an experimental collision-warning system," said Knight. "I worked it out with a copy of that ground-level altimeter that Ralph Lucas recently offered to Russia. Watch the needle."

The needle was swinging slowly, its point dipping as it followed the airliner descending at Burbank.

"You mean that thing will point to the nearest ship?" exclaimed Doyle.

"Unless you're close to the ground," said Knight. "Above three thousand, the gravitational pull of the earth isn't enough to keep that steel dust down in the tube. It starts to travel toward the magnet, on an air cushion. When you go down, the magnetic force isn't strong enough to support the column of dust fluid, and it falls. That's what makes it a ground-level altimeter instead of sea-level. But I hooked up a coil in that box so that it will pick up by induction any electric disturbance like a radio wave or spark-coil

wave on an engine. It's shielded against our own engine. That's why it points to that United ship."

"It's not pointing to that ship now!" erupted Doyle. "Look, it's jerked over toward the coast!"

Knight quickly took a bearing across the maze of lights below.

"Santa Monica! They've got the DF into the air! We'll have to work fast."

HE SET the propeller for maximum climb, with the engine almost full out. They were at eight thousand feet when five or six searchlights poked up from along the coast. Knight shot an eager glance at the collision-warning device. The needle was steady, and almost straight West. Suddenly, it trembled violently, then began to whirl on its pivot.

"Hell—we're surrounded!" yelled Doyle.

"What are the searchlights doing?" rapped Knight, his eyes fixed on the needle.

"Huh? They're—wait a second—they're all switching toward one spot, just like they did at Boiling that night."

"Tell me when they break apart," said Knight.

Almost two minutes passed, and then the needle ceased to whirl.

"They're comin' apart now," said Doyle. "Why, what's the big idea?"

"My guess was right!" Knight said tensely. "Now, if we can only get up out of range of the DF!"

He shoved the throttle farther open, and the manifold-pressure rose past the danger-mark, with an air-speed close to 350. The Northrop climbed at a dizzy angle, and a raw cold poured in through the opened vents. He switched on the electric cockpit heater temporarily, looked back at Doyle.

"Be ready to seal up tight at 10,000. Make sure she's locked off; we're going up where a leak won't be healthy."

"Not the stratosphere again?" howled the ex-Marine.

"Eight—and maybe higher than the last time."

"Oh, Lord! If I'd known that, I'd never have hopped into this bus."

"Want to bail out?" said Knight, knowing that nothing would have budged the other man.

"Go jump on a prop," growled Doyle. "It's too cold—and anyway, I'd maybe land in the ocean."

A moment later the altimeter showed ten thousand feet, and Knight locked the forward section of the cockpit enclosure. Three months before, the Northrop had been re-built so that the fuselage was air-tight and

could be sealed for high-altitude flying. Since then, a third stage had been added to the super-chargers and special radiators to cool the heated air which compressors supplied to the cockpit.

Doyle sealed the rear pit, and Knight inspected the temperature and pressure gauges as the ship maintained its swift climb. The collision-warning needle had ceased to point to the West; it dipped now and then as airliners on the Los Angeles-San Francisco route passed, several thousand feet below. Knight kept the ship climbing in a fast spiral.

The Northrop was at 26,000 feet when the needle quivered and then tilted slightly upward and northwest. Knight banked hastily, staring up through the transparent enclosure. He could see nothing but stars twinkling against the black dome of the sky.

"What're you looking for?" said Doyle.

"Another ship," Knight answered. "It's probably high up, but keep your eyes open."

"How do you know there's a ship up here?"

"There has to be. It's the only answer to that 'invisible' business. We're going on up until we find it."

Doyle looked down lugubriously toward the earth, where a few faint lights showed.

"Goodbye, old world. I'm caught up here with a lunatic who's trying to fly to the moon."

TWENTY minutes passed, then Knight spoke abruptly.

"Better have your guns ready."

Doyle hurriedly pulled the lever which swung the rear .50's up in their airtight mount.

"See something?" he barked.

Knight was staring at the needle in the black box. It was slowly moving around in a circle, its point tilted high in the air.

"Straight above us," he muttered. "But no way of knowing how high."

After that, the minutes seemed endless. The Northrop went up and up, through the frozen night, and still no trace of anything in that desolate sky. Half an hour dragged by, while Knight kept his haggard eyes on the needle.

"Holy cats!" Doyle's voice broke the long silence. "We're up to sixty thousand feet!"

"I know," Knight said grimly. "And speed is more than doubled at this height."

"Now I know you're nuts!" moaned Doyle. "We're makin' over 700—and not even tryin' to dope out where we're headin'!"

"I think we're circling almost above Los Angeles," said Knight. "They must be waiting for the DF, but it's been forced down by now—all the tanks but one reserve were filled with water."

"Well, then—Judas! Look at the needle!"

It had swung sharply through an arc of ninety degrees, was pointing behind and upward. Knight spun around at the stick.

A giant flying-boat was riding the Northrop's tail!

## CHAPTER V SECRET OF THE STARS

**T**HE HUGE SHIP was only a dark blur as it plunged down; but as he turned, a retractable landing light flashed from the great rounded bow. Knight booted the left rudder pedal, and the Northrop leaped three hundred feet sidewise through the thin air. And in that second, guns hurled bright purple tracers through the space where the ship had been.

The Northrop's wild skid almost threw it out of control. The ship fell off, dropped a full thousand feet in the rarefied air. Knight caught it, twisted hurriedly aside as the weird purple tracers blazed after them. Doyle was bringing his .50's to bear.

"Hold on!" shouted Knight, but Doyle cut loose even as he spoke. The tracers from the heavy guns made only pale lines, so faint they could hardly be seen. But they were enough to betray where the Northrop flew in the dark. The flying-boat hurtled back, and suddenly a dazzling glare lit those desolate heights. A flare had been released, a flare that burned brilliantly in spite of the lack of oxygen. Knight swerved violently, for the Northrop was almost under the light.

The ship's terrific speed took him clear in split-seconds. He pulled up in a steep but careful climbing turn, trying to keep from losing altitude in the bank. The needle in the black box was pointing almost straight ahead. He veered slightly, saw the mystery-ship leap out of the gloom.

It was below, and circling over the flare. By the reflected glow he could see the monster clearly. Its wing and hull had been painted a dull black, but he knew it at once for one of the stolen Empire boats. There was no mistaking the giant ship with its two-deck cabin and four big Pegasus engines. Guns bristled

from air-tight ports on both decks, and he saw that the two large, torpedo-shaped searchlights had been secured on the hull aft of the wing, apparently controllable from within. These two units gave out no light, but as the Northrop roared closer he saw a queer heat mirage projected high in the air above the nearest apparatus.

With a quick jerk, the unit flicked around toward the thundering two-seater. A cold horror shot through Knight as he realized that this must be the thing which had stricken the unfortunate Ayers and the villagers at Larton Corners.

In a frenzy, he hurled the Northrop straight up in a wild zoom. His foot was jamming the rudder in the first twist of a split when he felt his senses reel. For an instant, utter despair took hold of him. In another second Doyle and he would black out, and the plunging ship would carry them down to disintegration.

One second . . .

Then the Northrop was spinning madly, furiously, down into the black void—but he had kept his senses!

That deadly beam had reached out for them—but the mad speeds of the stratosphere had defeated the fiends behind it. The Northrop had barely skirted the edge of doom in its whirlwind passing.

He heard Doyle shouting hoarsely from the rear cockpit. With an effort, he pulled himself up and centered the controls. He had automatically closed the throttle, but the ship was screaming down at a tremendous speed. He brought it out gingerly, stared at the altimeter. The hand stood at 52,500. They had lost more than seven thousand feet!

"Holy smoke!" Doyle gasped. "And I asked myself into this!"

Knight shook his head groggily, looked upward through the enclosure. Only the frigid stars were visible. Either the speeds of the two ships had separated them so widely that the Empire boat was out of sight, or the bow-light had been switched off. He glanced down at the ebony box. The balanced needle was pointing almost due North.

"You're not going after those birds again?" howled Doyle.

"I'm sorry, old man," Knight said grimly, "but I've got to locate their base."

"I was only kidding," growled the other man. "Pour the soup to her and let's go!"

"No, this time we'll use our heads," said Knight. "They probably think they finished us. We'll follow at



a safe distance—I'm now able to tell, by the way the needle jerks, if we are beginning to get too close."

HE CLIMBED again, and the altimeter hand rose steadily until it showed 65,000 feet.

"The collision-box needle's still tilted up a trifle," he said to Doyle, "but maybe we'd better level off here."

"They must've rebuilt those Empire boats," muttered Doyle. "They weren't supercharged for stuff like this, or for sealing off."

"The two they stole were," returned Knight. "The British were experimenting with high-altitude Atlantic flying. That's obviously why the Four Faces stole those particular boats. Their pirate operations are based on long-range ships."

"And those damned ray-projectors—or whatever they are!" grated Doyle. "I'd like to get my mitts on the bird behind that thing."

"I wonder if that Smithsonian man knew anything," Knight began thoughtfully. Then he recalled the telegram Brett had given him. He set the gyropilot to keep the ship on its course, took the message from his pocket. Bending over the hooded light of the black box, he scanned the words. After a minute he gave a low whistle.

"Listen to this:

*"Report on John Ellis Deane, scientist attached to Smithsonian Institution. Has been making study of certain stars from Mount Wilson Observatory in California. Shortly before trip to Larton's Corners, made public these findings: 'Practically all the blue-colored stars in the universe are continually sending out vast showers of "death beams" and giving very few of the beneficial ultra-violet rays. Thus, death rays which would end all animal and plant life are being projected toward the earth by huge stars in the universe, but a protective layer in the earth's atmosphere prevents the death-dealing beams from harming anything.'*

*"These "stars of death" are three times as hot as the sun. The major part of the rays would kill organisms instead of supporting life. They would not produce*

*the sensation of light on an organism on which they fell. Just what sensation they would produce is hard to say, but experiments are being made to determine this, using special instruments and lower organisms in the research."*

"Phew!" exclaimed Doyle. "And we're up here where that 'protective layer' is mighty thin!"

Knight gazed somberly into the frozen sky.

"It must be the answer," he said. "Deane undoubtedly learned that those 'death beams' from the blue stars would produce calcinosis and even death, if they got through the protective layer. That would explain his going to Larton's Corners, to investigate. The Four Faces have evidently found some way to bring those blue star rays through and reach the earth. They must be able to control the effects, ranging from death to the 'blanking out' we experienced."

"Thank Heaven they didn't give us the works," Doyle said emphatically. "Say, they must've been experimenting at Ironwood—just trying it out, and it didn't work till they passed that village. And then they had to kidnap this Deane bird for fear he might dope out what happened."

Knight nodded. A few minutes passed, then Doyle looked at the rear-pit compass.

"Still headin' North," he grunted. "You got any idea where we are?"

"We must be close to the Canadian border, at this speed," said Knight.

"Yeah, and if we keep on much longer we'll hit the North Pole," growled Doyle.

Knight jumped as though he had sat on a hot stove.

"Doyle, you've hit it! What a blind idiot I've been!"

"What do you mean?" said Doyle, startled.

"The North Pole! That's what poor old Ayers was trying to write!"

"You're crazy!" snorted Doyle. "How could they ever have a base up there?"

"It may not be exactly at the Pole—probably some distance from it—but Ayers knew it would give us a lead, or maybe that's as close as he could guess. It answers everything—explains the whole business. I've been trying to figure how they could strike so far apart, even with these terrific stratosphere speeds. This explains it all."

"I don't get it," cut in Doyle.

"They can drop down in any direction from the top of the world," said Knight. "It's approximately the same distance from the North Pole down to Rochester, England, as to Seattle. Or they can fly down other meridians to China or to Washington, D.C. Flying in the stratosphere, they can make the round-trip and have plenty of fuel to spare. It's a wonder nobody thought of it before."

"Holy smoke!" Doyle burst out. "If they're holed up some place in the Arctic nobody'll be able to get 'em out."

"Yes, there's one way," said Knight, grimly. "A mass air attack—maybe three or four countries combining forces.

Our job now is to find that base."

"They'll wipe us out before we can take a second look," predicted Doyle.

"Our radio is still working. We'll have time to flash word when we spot the location. By now, Brett will have a hundred Army, Navy, Marine and Coast Guard operators listening in on our 'D' wavelength. I told him we wouldn't use our transmitter until we found the base."

"Well, that's that," said Doyle, mournfully. "I wonder what kind of funerals they have up there around the North Pole?"

Knight looked around and smiled crookedly.

"We're not finished yet, Lothario. Maybe you'll still see that grass widow back in Washington."

"I'd sell my chances for a Confederate dollar," growled Doyle.

KNIGHT turned back to the controls. The Northrop raced on through the icy darkness and at intervals he estimated their position by dead reckoning.

"Where do you think we are now?" Doyle rumbled after more than an hour had passed.

"Somewhere near the Gulf of Alaska," said Knight. "The needle swung northwest a while ago; for some reason they seem to be heading—"

"There's a light down there!" exclaimed Doyle.

Knight stared down. It was faint at that height, but he knew it must be of great intensity at its source. He took a compact field-glass from a clip at one side, focussed it on the light while Doyle flew the ship.

"Think it's their base?" Doyle said tersely.

"No, it must be from a Navy carrier. Part of the Fleet is up in these waters, getting ready for the maneuvers on April 16th. It's probably the *Ranger* trying its pilots on some night landings on the way to the Aleutians."

Knight watched the needle in the black box as he spoke, but it did not swerve from its northwesterly course. In a few minutes the glow from the Navy carrier faded out and the Northrop flew again in a seemingly endless void.

Fifty minutes later, Knight dropped the empty bellying-tank, then checked their remaining fuel. The extra tank behind his seat was untouched, and with the main tank and the reserve he estimated they had enough gas for at least three hours' flight. He was

calculating their range, at stratosphere speeds, when Doyle let out a yell and thumped him on the back.

"Hey, Dick! Look up ahead!"

Bands and waves of brilliant light were flashing in the sky. There were vivid reds and blues and greens, with rings of yellow pulsating through the others and blending into almost every shade of the rainbow.

"Aurora borealis—Northern Lights," said Knight. "We're getting close to the Arctic Ocean."

"Any land up where we're headin'?"

"I don't know. That region north of the Beaufort Sea is mostly unexplored."

Knight tried to keep his tone calm, but in spite of himself he felt a surge of primitive fear at hurtling into those strange and unexplored skies. Even without the Four Faces to consider, there was only a fifty-fifty chance of their coming back. Then he thought of Benita, and determination stiffened his jaw.

The clock hands on the panel read forty minutes past midnight when the black-box needle suddenly began to dip. Knight eased back his throttle, but the needle did not turn to right or left.

"They're going down!" he said tautly to Doyle. "Be ready to drop a flare if we have to."

"If those lights get much brighter we won't have to," retorted the other man.

The aurora had gained in intensity, but Knight still could not see the ship ahead. From the action of the needle, it was going down in a fast power glide, on a course almost North. The altimeter hand fell swiftly to 50,000, moved on to 45,000, down to 40,000.

SOME twenty minutes later when the hand read 17,000, a bluish-white beam appeared about twenty miles beyond. It flashed five or six times, evidently in a signal, for a neon-red rectangle was at once outlined far below.

"For the luvva Pete!" ejaculated Doyle. "Top that—clear up here in the Arctic!"

Knight did not answer. He was using the field-glass to see what lay within that red rectangle. At first he thought only a vast ice-pack lay beneath, then he made out the darker outlines of an island about two miles long, and shaped roughly like a pear. At the eastern side lay the neon rectangle, and as they went lower he saw a black expanse which seemed to be water. There was, he knew, a constant northeasterly drift from these seas toward the Pole; this might account for the lack of an ice pack in the lee of the island, but it was more likely that the Four Faces' chemists had found some

solution which melted the ice and kept that stretch of water open.

Another rectangle, but unlighted, adjoined the framed area of water. It was a different color from the ice pack, but not so dark as the island, so that it stood out in the glow from the black raider's landing lights. Apparently it had been cleared for land-planes, but he could see no ships.

The terrific speed of the Northrop had diminished, but they were rapidly passing above the base. Knight looked at the clock and the compass, to make a final calculation before radioing their discovery. He jerked around as Doyle gave a cry of alarm.

Two Grumman F2F-1's were rocketing out of the sky, silhouetted against the Northern Lights. "Without a second's hesitation, the leading Grumman opened fire, and two streaks of purple tracers shot past the Northrop's tail. Knight whipped into a tight climbing turn as Doyle opened up with the rear guns. The diving Grumman rolled hastily, and Knight heard the bellow of its 14-cylinder engine as it plunged away. The second fighter was charging in on the right, and to Knight's dismay still a third Grumman appeared. He snapped the two-seater around in a screeching turn, cut loose his .30's. He saw his tracers stab through the thick belly of the second Grumman, but the pilot dived under them, unharmed. Doyle was pounding away at the third ship. Knight swung back to rake the first F2F-1 as it returned to the battle. Then with a shout to Doyle he whirled in a furious renversement.

The black raider was zooming up into the fight, its two deadly projectors swinging toward the Northrop!

With a wild turn, Knight pitched between two Grummans and cut in his twin .50's. Forward in the huge ship, a machine-gunner was huddled under a small, transparent trap. Knight hurled a burst toward him, as the man swung his guns toward the Northrop. The nearest Grumman pilot whirled frantically to drive them off. Knight shifted his rudder.

A hail of 50-caliber slugs pounded into the pivoting fighter. The Grumman staggered, and its right wing crumpled. The Northrop's rasping guns crashed another blast over the fighter's cowl. The cockpit enclosure shattered to fragments, and the pilot was slammed halfway out of his pit by the force of the heavy guns.

Knight rolled back toward the banking raider. Doyle was fiercely hammering the second Grumman, while bullets from a machine-gun near the tail of the Empire boat smoked about his head. Two more guns

were blazing at the two-seater, and as Knight nosed down, one scorching fusillade tore half the enclosure away. The icy air hit him like a blow.

He gasped in a breath, kicked around to center his aim on the raider. Both of the projectors were swinging toward him. He booted the rudder, saw the third Grumman pilot zooming madly to get out of range of the fateful beams.

Heat-waves shot up into the frigid sky, whipped sideways toward the Northrop. Knight clamped the master button on his stick, and all four wing-root guns crashed out a thunderous roar.

Through slitted eyes, Knight saw his tracers cut through the top of the hull, near the forward machine-gunner. He rammed the stick forward, and the smoking torrent raked aft, over the thick glass ports through which the projectors were sighted. The starboard projector went to pieces under that lash of lead, and the other flipped through an arc to dangle toward the ground.

With shaking hands, Knight snapped his transmitter switch, saw the circuit light go on. He snatched the hand-mike, shouted through half-frozen lips:

"Brett! Nine hundred miles north of Point—"

*Crash!* A burst from one of the Grummans drilled the cowl in front of Knight. The hand-mike came away, its cord severed by a bullet. There was another hammering blast—and the engine abruptly went dead!

## CHAPTER VI POLAR DOOM

**T**HE NORTHROP SLID OFF crookedly. Knight nosed down, frenziedly whipped the switch back and forth, but to no avail. He kicked away from a stream of tracers, trying to dive away from the light suddenly focussed on them from the raider. Doyle's guns roared again, and the probing tracers ended. Knight pointed the ship toward the other side of the island, where a derelict schooner became visible forced by pack ice against the shore. There was a chance in a million that he might set the Northrop down safely . . .

Then with a groan of despair he swung back. For a light had poked out from the schooner, now evidently held by an outpost of the Four Faces, and by its rays he saw that to land on that jagged ice would mean death.



Dully, he headed down toward the space he had seen beside the open water. They were licked—after victory had seemed theirs. He saw colored signal lights flicker on the ground, then the guns of the two Grummans and the Empire boat ceased to blaze at them. Five hundred feet from the ground, he reached for a dump-valve. They were coming in too fast, with that heavy load. He hesitated, then dumped the reserve tank and let down the wheels. Men in fur parkas scattered from underneath as the gasoline streamed down.

A floodlight at the side of the clearing had been turned on, illuminating both the landing-space and the water. Though he had lost almost all hope, Knight mechanically noted the details of the strange Arctic base.

What he had at first thought were hills a few hundred yards from the water proved to be a long, low structure like a gigantic dirigible hangar two-thirds underground. It was painted so that the roof resembled the ground when seen from above. The sides sloped down to the ground, and there was only one opening visible, a huge ramp which led gradually down into the unfrozen water, and onto which planes could taxi from the cleared space. A battery of floods and signal lights was placed near this entry, and he could see men with machine-guns.

The Northrop settled heavily on scraped ground, rolled to a stop. It was instantly covered from three directions. Half numb from the freezing cold, Knight and Doyle were dragged from the ship by half a dozen men in parkas who carried automatics or sub-machine guns. Their captors were now dragging them, with kicks and blows, toward the entrance to the base when the black Empire boat landed and hastily taxied in to the ramp.

Borzec appeared, swiftly fastening a parka, from the hatch near the tail. He jumped onto a gangway ladder which was hurriedly pushed alongside, and ran down to where the prisoners had been halted. Just before he reached them he snarled something in Esperanto to the men at the lights, and the base at once was darkened, save for the weird beauty of the Aurora Borealis. The Russian lunged toward Knight in the gloom, struck him fiercely in the face. Knight reeled, his strength sapped by the cold, and fell half-conscious on the frozen ground. Dimly, he heard some one run to Borzec from within the base, then he felt himself roughly hauled inside.

Through glazed eyes he saw the missing *Dragon II*, the second Empire boat, painted black like the first, and a number of other ships, of various types

and sizes. A big stoop-shouldered man with a bloody bandage above a pale, hopeless face was being hustled from the Dragon by two armed guards. Borzec spoke to them sharply in Esperanto, and one of the men rattled off a reply. Borzec scowled at the prisoner, ordered him brought along, and the group entered a small passage at the left of the hangar space.

A PLEASANT warmth revived Knight as he was on the point of fainting. He saw Doyle being shoved along, his head lolling, a nasty cut along his jaw. They turned into another hall, paused before a massive door where two men stood guard. As they saw the Russian, they stood aside.

Borzec disappeared inside, came back almost at once, and the prisoners were marched into a dimly-lighted room devoid of windows. One wall was composed of black glass, and for an instant Knight thought he vaguely glimpsed four figures seated around a table behind it. Then a light flashed on in the room, shining down on the group, and set at such an angle that the black glass at once became a polished mirror reflecting the faces and figures of the prisoners and their guards.

"Finish your report," ordered a grim voice in Russian. It seemed to come from behind the glass, but Knight saw no opening. He felt a shudder which was not from his chilled limbs, as he recognized the voice of the spokesman who had once called himself the First Face.

Borzec looked at the glass, his strange golden eyes set in a fixed stare.

"We carried out the schedule exactly. The DF boat took off within thirty seconds of the time planned, but for some reason it was forced down soon afterward. While we were waiting, these two prisoners appeared in a special Northrop—the high-altitude ship I previously mentioned. I ordered the ultra-blue ray projectors turned on them, and I saw their plane fall into a spin. I thought they were finished, until they appeared here. How they followed us, I don't know."

"That is not important now," the First Face said with a harshness Knight had not heard in his voice before. "Our secret is imperiled. Just before they landed, they sent a message indicating a search to be made 'nine hundred miles North of a certain "Point"'. The calculation was only approximate, but Point Barrow was evidently meant, and a search by air using those directions would ruin us."

"But there are a dozen 'points' in the North

country,” protested Borzec. “And the message may not have been caught.”

“We shall take no chance on that. We have already ordered the second Empire plane and the *Dragon* bomber taken out and started. The U.S.S. *Ranger* and several other American vessels are cruising toward the Aleutians. The carrier will be raided tonight, and sunk immediately afterward.”

“I thought we were to wait until the entire Fleet was together, so we could raid all the carriers at once,” said Borzec hurriedly.

“That can be done later, if they still hold their maneuvers. But the presence of that carrier is now a menace. If they caught the message, they can send long range flying-boats to this area. While we could probably destroy them, there is a chance that one might slip through and bomb our headquarters.”

“Very well,” muttered Borzec, “I will take charge and lead the expedition. But before I go, we can force these two dogs to tell us the truth as to whether they were alone—and also how they managed to follow us.”

“A good idea,” came the cold voice from behind the black glass. “Mr. Knight, we have no time to waste. If necessary we shall inflict torture to force you to speak. You will be wise to give us the information at once.”

Knight grimly kept silent. Borzec wheeled, raised his automatic to whip the barrel against the secret agent’s head. But a voice from behind the glass, a voice other than that of the First Face, restrained him.

“He is not the type to break that easily. Wait a moment.”

Evidently a command was given to some one not in the room, for in a minute the door opened and two guards entered. Knight’s heart leaped as he saw Benita. Until that second, he did not realize how much he had been fighting the fear that she was dead.

The girl’s look of despair changed to amazement as she saw him and Doyle.

“*Ricardo!*” she cried. She tried to break away from her guards and reach him, but they hauled her back.

“Mr. Knight,” the voice of the First Face came with an unconcealed menace, “we are aware of your interest in *Senorita* Navarre. If you desire to have her remain alive, you will speak!”

“And what proof,” Knight said savagely, “do I have that you won’t kill her anyway?”

“None,” snapped the unseen man. “But it is our purpose to hold her prisoner until she agrees to become an agent of the Four Faces. However, if you refuse to give us the facts now, she will be taken

outside, with you and your companion, and all three of you will be chained together to freeze to death.”

Something clicked at the base of Knight’s tortured brain. He slowly shook his head.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

Borzec snarled out an oath, but the voice from back of the glass restrained him.

“He is bluffing. Leave the prisoners here, and see that the planes are made ready as quickly as possible.”

BORZEC looked uncertainly at the black glass. “Are the orders the same as before?” he queried.

“No,” came the curt response, “this time you will leave no possible clues. The rule is still good that dead men tell no tales. If practical, strike while the carrier is separated from the other vessels. If not, destroy the crews on the others at the same time. Then land the *Dragon* on board the carrier. One of your crew can be dropped on board by parachute, as was done with the French liner, to keep the *Ranger* headed into the wind for you to land. The Empire boat will be filled with reserve pilots to fly back as many planes as possible. After that, you will blow up the vessel.”

The Russian turned his strange eyes on a stoop-shouldered prisoner nearby.

“Well, Deane,” he grated, “is the installation on the finished?”

Knight saw a brief flash of hatred in Deane’s bloodshot eyes, then the man dispiritedly nodded.

“Yes, it’s ready,” he mumbled.

“I’ll take no chance on trickery,” snapped Borzec. “This time, you’ll go with me—handcuffed to the ship. If it should fail—” his sardonic lips curled with an ugly threat. He was turning to go when a parka-clad figure, evidently a man of importance, burst into the room.

“Pardon, your Excellencies,” he said hurriedly toward the black glass, “but I have found something of vital importance. We were checking over the Northrop—I found a clipped distributor wire forced them down—and I learned how they managed to follow the Empire boat.”

He described hastily the black box and its contents. Borzec swore furiously.

“With that device, all our plans are smashed. We can be followed anywhere, no matter even if we are too high to be seen or heard.”

“It looks like something quickly put together, a makeshift,” said the engineer. “Perhaps it is the only one in existence—these men may not have left instructions for building others.”

"It would be a simple matter," fumed Borzec. "The thing is nothing but an application of the Lucas ground-level altimeter. But perhaps you are right—Knight may have rigged it for this flight without explaining to anyone else."

"We shall speedily learn that," came the voice of the First Face. "Proceed with your orders."

With a murderous glare at Knight and Benita, Borzec departed, taking with him the engineer and Deane. As the door closed, there was a whispered conference behind the black glass, and Knight waited, praying that it would take long enough to achieve his purpose. But it was ended in a few seconds.

"Mr. Knight," said the hidden spokesman, "we have made a slight change in our plans. In the event of your continued refusal, the *senorita* and your companion will be taken out, without protection against the temperature. I may inform you that it is 56 below zero. You will be dressed in a parka and will be kept warm enough so that you will witness the deaths of these two. What is your answer?"

Knight's eyes passed over Benita's face, to Doyle, who was sagging in the brutal grasp of two guards. He could barely force himself to say the words.

"I've nothing to tell you," he mumbled. In the black glass he saw Benita's eyes close.

There was a low but furious oath from back of the barrier.

"Take them out and carry out the orders! He'll change his mind when he sees them freezing to death!"

Doyle's guards almost had to carry him back through the passage. Knight watched through narrowed lids. Had that blow really stunned the hard-boiled ex-Marine, or was he pretending? If he were . . .

"Put this on!" one of his captors commanded gruffly.

He was forced to don a heavy parka, while the two men kept him covered. They had stopped near the point where the hall opened into the hangar space, and he could hear the thunder of motors being warmed up. Evidently the hangar was heated, the warmth being retained except during moments when the huge cantilever door was open, for the engines were running easily. He saw Benita look at him as they went on into the hangar. There was an anguished look in her eyes which was like a knife in his heart.

IT WAS dark and bitter cold when they came near the opened door of the huge hangar. Knight shot a look ahead. Only the intermittent flash of the

Northern Lights broke the darkness, but he could see the second Empire boat going down the ramp, with most of the ground men assisting in the launching. The *Dragon II* was at the edge of the ramp leading to the scraped ground, and a man up in the cockpit was revving up the motors.

Borzec and a crowd of pilots and mechanics were near the inclined ramp to the water, and Knight guessed that the Russian was giving last-minute instructions. The field lights were still turned off, and all but two of the men at the control point had gone to assist in launching the Empire boat. Knight's pulses quickened. A sub-machine gun hung on a rack behind one of the two men, but neither had seen the guards and their prisoners; they were watching the stolen British ship slide into the water. He had already taken the measure of their guards. They were stolid Norwegians. He spoke swiftly to Doyle, in English, at the same time surreptitiously slipping off his right glove.

"Tommy, right—get it?"

One of his guards cursed him, but he saw Doyle's head twist sidewise, heard his brief grunt. Benita gasped as the cold wind struck her. He rattled a sentence in hasty Spanish.

"*Querida!* Pretend to faint—drop suddenly!"

The girl gave a cry, stumbled and went to her knees. Both her guards bent to jerk her to her feet. At that moment, Knight jumped back, tore free from the man on his right. His clenched fist thudded into the guard's stomach and his right hand wrenched the man's gun away as he doubled over in agony. The second guard had his gun half-raised to club Knight over the head. Knight fired, whirled and pumped two shots as fast as he could pull the trigger. Benita's guards slumped to the ground. Doyle's guards, their attention taken by Benita's fall, and handicapped by their prisoner, desperately tried to wheel and fire at Knight. Doyle lunged against one man and dragged the other off balance. Knight grimly shot down both of them, spun toward the two at the light-control station.

Doyle was within six feet of the Tommy-gun when the first man sprang toward it. Knight drilled him through the head, snatched up another pistol from one of the fallen guards. Borzec and the crowd about him were running toward them, yelling wildly. Doyle cut loose with the Tommy-gun and five of them toppled to the icy earth. Borzec and the others broke and ran frantically for shelter. Knight leaped toward Doyle, thrust the pistol into his hand.



"Give me the Tommy! I'll cover you—get Benita into the *Dragon* and take off! Make for the *Ranger*!"

"No, no!" cried the girl. "I will not go without you?"

A shot splintered the edge of the floodlight switchboard back of Knight. He fired at the shadows where a pistol had blasted, then gave Doyle a fierce shove.

"Get going! I'll take the Northrop! For Heaven's sake, move!"

Clutching the pistol in one big paw, Doyle scooped Benita into his arms and dashed toward the *Dragon II*. A gun clattered from the starboard side of the second Empire boat. Knight silenced it with a split-second burst, ran toward the *Dragon*. The man at the controls was jumping down from his seat to run aft through the cabin. Knight saw Doyle hastily put Benita down, then he saw the flash of a gun in the gloom.

He had no time to watch further. For with an angry snarl, a machine gun cut loose back at the entrance to the base, and frozen dirt kicked up a stream almost at his feet. He jumped aside, raised the Tommy-gun. It was almost empty, but with a fervent prayer he pulled the trigger. Flame shot from the muzzle. He thought he heard a scream above the roar of motors, then the other gun ceased to spurt.

He threw down the Tommy-gun, gripped the pistol and sprinted toward the Northrop, which had been rolled to one side of the cleared space. The *Dragon II* was thundering down the field, and he knew that Doyle must have killed or crippled the man who had been at the controls.

Lights flashed on as he vaulted into the two-seater. The beam flashed past him, focussed on the fleeing bomber. Knight groaned as machine guns on the Empire boat cut loose along the beam. But with a sudden twist, Doyle banked out of the glare and swept up into the night.

## CHAPTER VII CORPSE OF STONE

**R**ELIEF AT THE ESCAPE of Doyle and Benita loosed a new energy within Knight. For the instant, the guns were not trained on him. Every effort seemed concentrated on bringing down the *Dragon*. He switched on the inertia starter, cut in the ignition as the starter whined to full speed. There was one heart-

freezing second when the half-chilled motor turned over without a sound, then a roar burst from its iron lungs and its unblocked wheels let the ship dart ahead.

Purple streaks lanced toward him as he kicked into the wind. He ducked low, shoved open the throttle. The Northrop leaped like a whipped horse, plunged across the hard-packed ground. Icy air almost took his breath as it screamed around his head. The wind tore fragments of the shattered enclosure loose, sent them slamming back against the tail. Then the Northrop was in the air, lifting steeply. He crouched out of the raw gale, leaning to the left side, where part of the enclosure still remained.

The Empire boat was taking off in a bright flood of light. He nosed down, ready to blast it down the moment it left the water. But instantly the floodlights went off and the huge ship was lost in the ensuing blackness. He climbed, trying to see the *Dragon II*. A vague blur whirled above and to the south, made faintly visible by flickering glow of the Northern Lights. The next instant he swore through gritted teeth, for other eyes had seen that blur.

A searchlight shot, like a great shining sword, up at the fleeing plane. And then Knight saw that it was not fleeing. Doyle was circling, waiting to be sure that the Northrop had taken off safely.

The beam caught the *Dragon* squarely, held it despite Doyle's abrupt turn. Knight backsticked, battling to reach the other ship's level. His heart skipped a beat. The Empire boat was climbing madly, less than half a mile away, and one of its blue-ray projectors was tilting toward the *Dragon*!

Knight kicked around toward the Four Faces ship and squeezed his stick buttons. Nothing happened. He threw a frantic look at the ammo gauge. His guns were empty!

As though the pilot of the other ship knew his helplessness, the Empire boat hurtled almost in front of him toward the *Dragon*. As its black shape flashed through a searchlight, Knight saw Borzec bent savagely over the controls on the starboard side. His sardonic face was a mask of fury, and in that instant it seemed the Devil himself flew there, borne on a hideous mission of murder.

It was only a matter of seconds until the projector would be in line with the *Dragon*. Knight made his decision in a grim instant, plunged the Northrop after the roaring raider. His throttle went forward, wide open, under his stiffened fingers, and the two-seater screeched in at the tail of the monster.

He had no guns—but there was one way left to save Doyle and Benita. When that whirling prop struck the raider's tail . . . .

*T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t!* Machine-gun fire blasted back at him, over the flippers of the Empire boat. He shoved the stick down a fraction, rode into the blind spot. Under the parka's hood his face was marble white, but there was a queer, twisted smile on his lips.

Then suddenly that smile changed to a look of amazement. The Empire boat was zooming wildly. The guns had ceased to blaze at him, and then, staring across icy sky, he saw a projector on the *Dragon II* whip straight toward the fleeing Russian.

With a swift jerk, Knight threw the Northrop out of range. Something danced in the waving searchlights from the base. Heat waves . . . invisible death leaping across the sky!

The huge black ship swung into a turn. Knight ruddered out of its path, as it roared back almost parallel to his plane. Then for one horrible second, as the lights fell across the bow of the monster, he saw into the cockpit.

Stiff as a statue, Borzec sat at the controls, his Satanic face a frozen mask of agony! Caught at short range, in the full force of the deadly blue-star rays, he had been literally turned into stone!

As the plane roared by, Knight thought he saw other faces, gray and terrible as the Russian's had been, behind the guns of the raider. Then the black Empire boat slowly nosed down in a gradually tightening turn. He watched it as it struck, with a tremendous spout of flame, in the midst of the vast icepack.

By the glare, he saw three Grummans taking off in a belated effort to catch the escaped ships. He pulled up steeply to where the *Dragon II* circled. Through the glass port back of the projector he saw the face of Deane, the expert who had been kidnaped. The glare of the burning plane showed Benita up in the cockpit

beside Doyle. Knight waved back in response to their anxious signals, and then together the two planes roared off to the South.

IT WAS five days later, as the *Ranger* approached Seattle, and a pleasant breeze blew across the broad flight deck. General Brett, having been flown out from Seattle, had just heard the final details of the Arctic adventure.

"Yes, I understand about the 'invisible' planes now," he said to Deane. "The blue-star rays, once that infra-red beam helped them to penetrate the atmosphere, also carried sound vibrations from the Pegasus motors on those Empire boats."

"That's right, General," said the Smithsonian man, quietly. "But I don't think you need worry any more. One of the men Knight shot was the only other person up there who understood the apparatus."

"And those birds are finished, anyway," grunted Doyle. "That bombing raid wiped 'em out, and no mistake."

Knight hesitated, looking at Benita.

"I know," she said, "You think those four terrible men escape, maybe, before the bombs come, no?"

Knight smiled.

"What chance do I have against a mind-reader? Maybe they did get away, but Borzec was killed, and the Four Faces will have a tough time working up a new air outfit."

Relief brought a new light into the girl's dark eyes.

"I am so ver' glad—I always see those awful faces in my dreams. Now maybe we have a little happy time, when we come to thees city?"

"Say," said Doyle, "that reminds me. I used to know a couple of gals in Seattle. I'd better be checkin' up on—" his jaw sagged, and he cast an outraged look at Knight. "Well, if that ain't a helluva note! I never did get back that little red book of mine!"

