

## THE BLEEDING SUN

### Chapter 1 Ship Death!

Anyone who saw Curly Wolfe that dawn at the Port of Boston would have agreed that the man would look out of place anywhere. No one would point to him and say, "There's a tourist," or "That's a businessman," or "There's a wharf rat." More likely, someone would catch sight of Curly and scratch his head in puzzlement.

The puzzlement would arise thanks to Curly's attire. He wore a black tuxedo, boots, a hat and goggles.

His hat was a dusty, creased and much-abused Stetson, styled for cowboy wear - that is, for a real, working cowboy, not one of those singing Hollywood fellows whose gear gleamed with polish and whose clothing stayed starched, ironed and speck-free through an entire 90-minute film, no matter how many bar fights, gun battles and cattle stampedes he survived.

Likewise, his boots were of the pointy-toed cowboy variety, scuffed and caked with dirt.

His suit, on the other hand, appeared flashy and new. However, it had the look of having been slept in recently.

Curly Wolfe was neither hirsute nor lupine. In fact, except for the hanging shrub he generously named a mustache, Curly hadn't a single hair on his head - his dome was shiny slick under that ten-gallon hat. And not even brows or lashes protected his eyes, which perhaps explained the World War I-era aviator goggles that Curly wore.

Wolfish? No. No lean, gaunt stalker was Curly Wolfe. Instead, he was a sturdy, roughworn character with large fists and red, rawbone knuckles. He looked ready to leap into any fight at the drop of a hat - his or anyone else's - instead of biding his time to attack on the sly.

As the sun came up, Curly stood on a wharf of the inner harbor peering through the morning fog toward the Charlestown Navy Yards. For more than 100 years the yards had served as one of the country's leading ship-building and repair facilities. With the war on, the yards were the site of furious activity around the clock. Already at this hour the sounds of heavy machinery and the clanging of metal rolled across the water from the docks located there.

As Curly watched, a tanker left the immediate area of the Charlestown Yards with a handful of tugboats. The long ship was doubtless filled with gasoline and oil to be used for the continuing war effort. Once it reached the bay, the tugs would drop away and the tanker would pick up a Navy gunboat escort for its cruise along the coast.

The fuel carrier and the tugs nursing it along were at first visible in the fog only as dark silhouettes - their course out of the inner harbor took them through a particularly thick curtain of clouds. But as the haze lifted with the slowly rising sun, details about the vessels grew clearer from where Curly stood.

Curly Wolfe craned his neck left and right, as though searching for another craft on the water. Sighting none, he whipped around as if to ask anyone within reach whether he or she had spotted other boats in the area, but no one else was within shouting distance.

Curly turned his attention back to the tanker.

The waves from the ship's wake were slamming against the wharf. The sun, still low in the sky, hovered behind the tanker's superstructure. The light passing through the still-rising and slowly dissipating fog spread a reddish tint through the air.

Members of the tanker's crew were visible from shore as small figures moving about the deck, busying themselves with their normal duties. A keen observer might have noticed each of those figures suddenly stopping whatever he was doing to run across the deck and converge with his fellows. There, the men gesticulated wildly, turned their heads this way and that as if trying to spot something that wasn't apparent from shore.

A slight mist began to rise from the water immediately surrounding the tanker, as in a pot of water that has just begun to boil. Then, under the reddened sky, the ship began to melt!

Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, beads of metal started to form on every surface of the ship like condensation. As the beads appeared, they rolled down from the upper edge of each part of the vessel - the hull, spars, the radar mast, the superstructure. Yelling and then screaming from the crew was audible for a moment, but soon was drowned out by the greater racket of the ship's destruction.

It was an uncanny sight: solid metal softening and turning liquid without the tremendous heat of a smelter. As streamers of fluid metal began to rain down, the nearby tugs drew away from the large ship. Great plates of metal began to crumple and fold upon themselves like sheets of tin foil. Rivets melted or, weakened by material loss, were sheared through by the weight of shifting loads.

Before the deck collapsed, the huddle of screaming crewmembers appeared to melt as well!

Sheets of fluid steel rained into the water. With a tremendous, rending roar, the tanker's superstructure tumbled onto what remained of the deck. Then, a massive explosion slammed the Port of Boston as the ship destructed in a brilliant flash of light.

Wreckage flew like shrapnel. Nearby buildings sustained great damage as walls collapsed. A number of unprotected bystanders were badly injured, some killed outright.

After the immediate roar, the noise of crashing glass falling from windows continued for a number of minutes within several surrounding miles.

The sounds of shipwork had ceased from the Charlestown Navy Yards. Black clouds rose from the crackling flames that danced across oil floating in the port waters.

One of the tugs that had accompanied the tanker now swayed on the choppy waters. Another listed low in the water, and a third had apparently disappeared in the blast.

There was no sign of Curly Wolfe.

## Chapter 2

### Invitation to Mystery

In Virginia, not far from the Norfolk Naval Shipyards, Renny Renwick joined Doc Savage at breakfast in the coffee shop of a modest hotel.

Renny was a seeming giant - four inches over six feet tall, fully two hundred fifty pounds. His severe, disapproving expression was marked by thin lips set in a grim line. As Renny pushed open the door with his massive hands and entered the diner, he found Doc untying a man from the chair in which he was seated. Apparently this man was the last of a group, for three others stood nearby, stretching and rubbing their limbs as if they had been bound for some time. Ropes and belts were tangled on the floor around the chair legs.

"Holy cow, Doc," rumbled the engineer's deep voice. "What's been going on here?"

"A symptom of any wartime boomtown, Renny," the bronze man answered, turning from the seated man he'd just unwrapped. "The demand for beds is greater than the supply hereabouts. So the shop manager rented each of these fellows a chair to sleep in last night. I was simply helping them out of bed, so to speak."

"Did you sleep here in a chair, too?"

"No, I was more fortunate." Doc smiled. "I managed to finagle a bench at the YMCA, so at least I could lie down while I slept. And a few stretching exercises this morning worked out any kinks."

Doc Savage was broad shouldered and trim and moved with a fluid, masculine grace. He was not so large as Renny, but anyone seeing him would say he was a powerful fellow who seemingly radiated great energy. Even the diner's sole waitress - jaded by years of seeing all sorts of people and shenanigans in a town noted for its craziness during the war - had a hard time keeping her eyes off Doc.

"You should've called me when you got into town," Renny complained. "I've been bunking with the Navy while working on my project at the yards. I could've gotten you quartered there, too."

"I got in late last night," Doc explained, as he gestured toward a table. "It wasn't worth raising a ruckus at the gate to rouse you from sleep just so I could get a bed."

"Huh, something else is raising some kind of ruckus back at the yards this morning," Renny responded as he waved to the waitress for service. "Lots of the uniforms seemed to be in a tizzy as I left this morning. Course, they don't confide too much to a civilian like me."

Doc pushed a folded newspaper across the checkerboard-patterned oilcloth covering the tabletop. "The tizzy probably regards the top story."

"Holy cow!" Renny's eyes widened as he read the 72-point headline and the story running underneath it:

While Renny devoured the news, Doc ordered breakfast for them. The waitress had a hard time figuring which fellow to stare at: the puritan-faced giant with the big hands holding the newspaper like a piece of scrap, or the handsome and polite bronze man placing the order. By the time the engineer folded and dropped the paper into an empty chair, the waitress was placing food on the table, keeping her gaze on the coffeepot so she wouldn't spill the plates. "That's incredible, Doc! What's it all mean?"

Small winds appeared to stir the pools of flake gold that were the bronze man's eyes. "I know just as much as you, Renny, and it all came from that newspaper. Clearly the destruction of the tanker was too big an event in too public an area for the War Department to keep it under wraps. And if their investigators have any answers, the news hounds haven't learned about them yet."

A coffee mug seemed to disappear inside the engineer's massive hands. His dour expression grew even more glum - a sure sign that Renny was excited by the prospect of working on a mystery. "If this wasn't just some fluke - if it really is some kind of enemy weapon - how can the Navy protect its ships against it?"

"You're an engineer, Renny. Does steel simply melt in the normal ambient temperatures we experience outdoors at this time of year?"

Renny snorted. "Of course not!"

"So, does that sound like some kind of fluke?"

"Nope, Doc, not at all."

Doc Savage nodded. "Then I suspect the Navy will be asking you the same question you asked me: How can the Navy protect its ships against something that can melt a vessel the size of a fuel tanker?"

"You got me there, Doc."

"I suspect that question will be coming very soon, Renny," Doc said. The big engineer turned to peer out the window that the bronze man faced. A Navy lieutenant, wearing a no-funny-business expression, approached the coffee shop at a rapid clip.

Entering the diner, the lieutenant stopped at the table occupied by Doc and Renny.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," he started, very politely, bowing slightly. "I'm seeking Colonel John Renwick and Dr. Clark Savage, Jr."

"You found 'em," the grim-faced engineer rumbled. Renny's military rank had been honorarily reinstated by the War Department during the course of the war while he worked on projects for the armed services.

The lieutenant introduced himself. "Lt. Stephen Sherman, sirs. Admiral Ryan requests the presence of Col. Renwick and Dr. Savage. I'm to conduct the colonel and the doctor to Admiral Ryan's office immediately."

The lieutenant stepped back as Doc and Renny stood from their breakfast. His attention focused mainly on Doc. Renny had been visible at the shipyard for the past few weeks, but this was the first time Lt. Sherman had laid eyes on the bronze man, whose presence was still startling even beside the giant engineer. In Doc Savage, thought Lt. Sherman, reside the qualities of a born leader.

As Doc paid the breakfast bill, he spoke to Renny: "You still have a little time to ponder that question we were just discussing. Have an answer yet?"

Renny just shook his head.

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Shortly after leaving the coffee shop, Lt. Sherman drove Doc and Renny through the old stone gate of the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. A few minutes later, he introduced them to Admiral Ryan, who gestured Doc and Renny to seats before his desk as the lieutenant withdrew.

The admiral sternly eyed Doc and Renny for a moment or two before explaining his summons. He had a strong jaw and a no-nonsense expression. His graying hair was trimmed short in a military cut, but his dark, bushy eyebrows appeared untamable.

"Colonel, Doctor," Admiral Ryan nodded to each in turn. "You gentlemen are not fools. You're aware of the apparent attack upon the fuel tanker yesterday in Boston. You obviously know that my calling you has some link to that event. Indeed, you may have some insight on the destruction of that ship. But before we get to that, I want to make something clear."

During the pause, his gaze bored into each of his visitors. Then: "Our country is involved in a great war. It is the job of the military to fight this war in a professional, responsible manner. The role of civilians is to support that war effort and leave the fighting, the conduct of military action, to the men entrusted with that responsibility, the men in uniform."

Admiral Ryan paused again. Renny resisted an urge to squirm. He felt like a school kid summoned to the principal's office. Doc, though clearly paying close attention to their host's words, seemed otherwise unfazed.

"Still," the admiral continued, "you men and your associates have performed many great services to our nation and for the military, particularly since the time war was declared by our government. Dr. Savage, you and your men are clearly extraordinary individuals. While I rarely care for civilian intervention in military affairs - Navy business in particular - you have aided the U.S. Navy in a number of ways.

"One specific instance I recall dealt with a friend of mine - Captain Blackstone Toy."

Renny held his breath. Before the beginning of the war, Doc had exposed a ring of extortionists working against the federal government by destroying Navy vessels. The ringleader was a Navy man, Blackstone Toy, whose efforts included the murder of his own brother.

Was Ryan a co-conspirator with Toy, remaining undiscovered all this time? Renny prepared to leap from his chair.

"I say friend," Admiral Ryan said, "but Toy was a traitor to the Navy, to every man in uniform. He betrayed this country. Money meant more to him than his sworn duty as a military man. I'm not proud to admit it, but he fooled me and many others. Thanks to you men and your associates, his duplicity was found out, his destructive and traitorous activities ended."

Renny started breathing again. He glanced over at Doc. The bronze man shifted his feet slightly, sat back in his chair. So, until hearing some reassuring words from the admiral, Doc had been ready to leap into action as well!

"Now," the admiral plunged into a new topic, "I called you here because one of the men reported that he'd heard Col. Renwick mention you were arriving for a visit, Doctor. What do you two know about this tanker explosion in Boston?"

"Only the details that appeared in this story," Doc answered, gesturing with the folded newspaper he had shown Renny earlier.

"Actually, that's about all I know as well," Admiral Ryan said. "I'd hoped that your arrival

meant you knew something about this event. And, truth to tell, I was a bit anxious that your arrival meant the base or shipyard here was in trouble."

Doc shook his head. "As I said, Renny and I are in the dark."

The admiral waved his hand at the newspaper. "Clearly this is an act of sabotage."

"It's very likely," Doc agreed. "The witnesses' descriptions of the tanker before the explosion certainly seem to bear that out. But there isn't enough hard evidence in this article to clarify anything yet."

Admiral Ryan pushed a pair of reading glasses onto his face while retrieving something from a desk drawer. His eyebrows bristled over the frames like an untrimmed hedge looming over a fence. "Here," he said, and pushed a flimsy across the desk. "I let Washington know I was sending for you. They directed me to show you this. The War Department received a telegram of this message a week ago."

Renny and Doc read the note:

WARNING!

REMOVE ALL NAVY PERSONNEL FROM YOUR SHIPS BEFORE THEY DIE. HORRIBLE WEAPON WILL DESTROY FLEET AND ALL CREWS. THIS MAY BE YOUR ONLY WARNING BEFORE CATASTROPHE.

"It's signed 'Black Cat Jackson,'" Renny pointed out. "Who's that?"

"We don't know yet," Admiral Ryan replied. "The Navy thought it was a hoax, until the explosion in Boston. Now, it's clearly an extortion attempt! Just as things are winding down in the European Theater - as we're focusing our efforts on the war in the Pacific - someone comes along with a weapon that can melt our ships like hot butter!"

A scowl twisted the admiral's face. He turned away, composed himself, then removed his glasses and spoke again. "Dr. Savage, the War Department wants you to look into this matter, using the methods you see fit. Will you accept?"

"Certainly, Admiral," Doc said.

To get things rolling, Doc requested that a call be put through to another of his associates, Theodore Marley Brooks. A Harvard-trained lawyer, Brooks was addressed by his friends with the more informal sobriquet "Ham."

Getting no answer from Ham's apartment, Doc had the call directed to his headquarters, located in a Manhattan skyscraper. After a couple of rings, the phone was answered by a squeaky voice that sounded like a tricycle whose three wheels needed greasing.

"Monk," Doc replied, "have you seen Ham?"

"Doc! Where you been?" responded the squeaking voice. "I thought you'd be back a few days ago."

"There was some trouble on Parade Island, but that's another story. I came directly to Norfolk to see Renny. Again, have you seen Ham?"

"Norfolk, eh? Oh yeah, Ham's right here. But there's someone else showed up this morning to see you. Ever heard of Black Cat Jackson?"

Before Doc could answer, Monk's shout erupted from the receiver: "Hey!"

Doc heard a loud clatter - as though the receiver had been dropped at Monk's end of the line - another shout, then the line went dead.

### Chapter 3

#### Bad Luck Beauty

Theodore Marley Brooks, better known as Ham Brooks, stepped into Doc Savage's penthouse headquarters, located on the eighty-sixth floor of a Manhattan skyscraper. These days, Doc and his aides were frequently out of town, working on far-flung projects related to the war effort. Ham typically was close to home more often than the other members of Doc's crew of scrappy adventurers

were, so he made a point of stopping by to check the penthouse and go through the mail.

Ham was a slender, quick-moving fellow who, year after year, set the benchmark for dressing well. As he entered the headquarters' large study, he set aside his hat and the shiny black swordcane he carried on all occasions.

Hearing a sound behind him, he turned at a snap. "Oh no!" he cried. "One of Doc's experiments has escaped its cage!"

Coming through the door from the laboratory strode a creature right out of a Hollywood fright picture. Only slightly taller than five feet, with a vast chest and long, gorilla arms, the thing surely weighed in at two hundred sixty pounds. On spotting Ham, it twisted its simian face in a grimace and its bristly reddish hair seemed to stand on end.

It opened its wide mouth to speak. Instead of a roar, it uttered a squeak. Actually, several squeaks: "Ah, shaddap, shyster. Are the ambulance drivers on strike or something?"

"Shut your cake hole, you mammalian mistake," Ham fired back. "How many babies and grown men did your ugly mug scare on the way over here?"

Despite appearances, the two were close friends and would pitch in at a moment's notice to help one another out of a jam. But both cherished a good, old-fashioned squabble.

The simian-faced fellow was Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, otherwise known - appropriately enough - as Monk. Although he looked more animal than human, Monk was a genius in a chemistry lab, and dozens of patents at the U.S. Patent Office had his name attached.

Monk and Ham were gearing up for a full-blown mud-slinging session when an interruption came from the front door.

"You two gents sound well-practiced at impressing one another."

Both associates turned toward the speaker: A woman dressed in dark gray, reaching nearly six feet in heels, with a mass of black hair tumbling below her shoulders. Those shoulders would have been considered broad on most women, but on this one they seemed just right. She didn't appear masculine at all, for she was curved in all the ways that the leading journals of fashion and pulchritude said a beautiful woman should be curved. She had the look of an athlete, ready to tackle anything, and the twinkle in her dark eyes suggested she'd have fun tackling it.

Both Ham and Monk gaped. These days, it was rare that such a vision crossed the penthouse threshold.

Ham recovered first. "Pay no attention to the homunculus," he said, jerking his head at Monk. "He's trained to talk, but it usually comes out as nonsense."

"Just what you'd expect to hear from a man with sixteen children and three wives in three boroughs," Monk spat.

"Whoa, boys," the woman gestured for peace. "I just need a little information."

Ham bowed. "Ham Brooks, attorney at law, at your service. The troll is Monk Mayfair, whose chemical experiments, I fear, have done his mental capacities grievous harm."

The woman shook hands with both men, introducing herself: "I'm Catherine Jackson, known to friends and non-friends as Black Cat Jackson."

"It's a pleasure to meet such a vision of loveliness," crooned Monk. "Black Cat, huh? You must wear black all the time, is that it? Are you a widow?"

Ham rolled his eyes at Monk's graceless probing, but Black Cat Jackson merely chuckled.

"It's an odd nickname, I know," she said. "But it comes from my luck - sometimes it's bad for people I meet."

"I can only say that meeting a rare, dark flower such as yourself can only mean that my luck is good today," Monk said, and his wide mouth spread in a grin that surely displayed every tooth in his

head.

"Where does he get these lines?" Ham muttered.

"You boys are charming," Cat said, "but I'm looking for Clark Savage."

"On that count you're outta luck," Monk said.

Ham spoke up. "My hirsute companion is correct, Miss Jackson. Is there some way that we may assist you?"

"I'm not sure - I'm not even sure whether Mister - whether Clark can help," she said. "I came here because - well, he may not even remember me."

Monk figured the only people who wouldn't remember Black Cat Jackson were dead and buried.

"He told me that he gets involved with things," Cat Jackson continued. "And I'd heard people mention that he sometimes helps the government. Not knowing where else to seek help after I heard nothing from the Navy -"

"The Navy?" interrupted Monk.

"Is this about the Boston explosion?" Ham asked.

"Yes - or at least I think so."

"The papers say that tanker melted in the sunlight," Monk said. "I just couldn't believe it!"

"It's true!" Black Cat Jackson stamped her foot. Monk was distracted - what a lovely foot, he thought - but only for a moment. "If other people are in danger from the same horrible thing, I thought Clark might already be looking into the situation."

"Nope, not that we know of," Monk answered.

"Oh," the dark woman said. Ham couldn't quite say what her expression meant. Disappointment? Surprise? Before the attorney could open his mouth, Black Cat Jackson was halfway out the door.

"Wait, please, Miss Jackson," he said, and the woman stopped in the doorway and turned.

"Monk spoke out of turn," Ham said.

"Yeah, that's what I did," Monk said, not caring that he was actually agreeing with Ham, but suddenly desperate to keep Cat Jackson from leaving.

"Doc sometimes undertakes investigations that we simply don't know about," Ham explained, trying to draw this lovely woman back into the room. "He may, indeed, already be studying the Boston explosion. If you know something about that event and the possibility of further disasters, you can tell us. We will certainly make sure Doc gets the information. In fact, he may want to see you himself. So if you'll step back inside and have a seat -"

The phone rang, and Monk leaped to the large desk across the room and snatched up the receiver.

"Yeah, hello?"

Hearing the response, Monk waved for Cat Jackson. "It's Doc!" He spoke into the phone. "Doc! Where you been? I thought you'd be back a few days ago."

After a pause, the hairy chemist said, "Norfolk, eh? Oh yeah, Ham's right here. But there's someone else showed up this morning to see you. Ever heard of Black Cat Jackson?"

That's when bedlam erupted. Before Monk heard a reply, a gang of men rushed through the half-opened door. The leader grabbed Cat Jackson by the arm while another smacked Ham in the head with a weighted sap.

"Hey!" squawked Monk. He dropped the phone receiver and jumped toward the group of strangers.

Cat Jackson still had one arm free. She made a fist and slammed it into the jaw of the fellow

trying to restrain her. He yelled and staggered, and the woman began beating him with both fists. Two other men jumped her, holding her arms and tripping her legs from under her.

Monk howled as his fists swung among the harsh-looking characters attacking him. As he whirled and danced among his assailants, his feet tangled in the phone cord, pulling the telephone to the floor and toppling the hairy chemist. A crew jumped and stamped on Monk until he groaned and twitched. The thug who had laid out Ham advanced and swatted Monk with the sap, and everything went dark for the squeaky-voiced scrapper.

Chapter 4  
Initial Investigations  
More Questions

Ham heard bells. Then the bells went away. He opened his eyes to the blurred image of a face with dark hair and dark eyes leaning over him.

"Ohh, my dark amazon," Ham whispered.

Someone smacked his face. The lawyer shook his head, and his vision cleared. Instead of Black Cat Jackson, a police officer kneeled over him and peered into his face.

"What's this stuff about the amazin' dark, buddy?" the cop asked.

"Nothing, nothing, officer," Ham said. The lawyer delicately touched a goose egg on his head as he sat up. "Just kinda fuzzy as I came to." He saw Monk stretched out on the floor by the desk, another policeman standing beside him.

"Monk!" Ham scrambled over to the chemist. He was concerned about his friend, but he was pleased that his simian pal wasn't awake to hear Ham mistake the cop for Cat Jackson.

Monk groaned and slowly sat up. He leaned against the desk. "Where's Cat? Where are those thugs?" He finally noticed the two cops. "And who are you guys?"

The cop who had smacked Ham spoke up. "You musta got popped pretty good if you can't recognize a couple of New York's Finest. I'm Officer Welch. My partner there is Officer Cranford."

"Okay, okay, I know cops when I see 'em," Monk said.

"I think Monk means to ask how you knew to come here," Ham explained.

"Headquarters sent us," Officer Cranford answered. "Our chiefs got buzzed from some Navy bigwig in Washington. We got the call to check up here at Doc Savage's headquarters - apparently your boss found out you guys had been in a dust up."

"That's what happened, officer," said a voice from the door. Just entering the penthouse office was a walking cadaver carrying a metal box. Actually, this man was Thomas J. Roberts, another Doc Savage associate, dubbed Long Tom by his friends. He appeared to be a physical weakling - thin, not very tall, and with a pale, unhealthy complexion. But despite his appearance, Long Tom could be a wildcat in a fight. He had put down for the count many a foe who had been surprised by the vitality of this seeming weakling.

"When Doc heard the tussle you boys got into, he had the Norfolk admiral put in a call for someone to check on you guys," Long Tom explained. "He knew I was in town for a brief stay, so he followed up with a call to me. I got here just as these stalwarts from the NYPD showed up."

Long Tom looked from Monk to Ham. "So what happened to you two?"

Ham quickly related the story of meeting Black Cat Jackson and the violent arrival of the gang of strangers.

Officers Welch and Cranford nodded to one another. "Sounds like an ugly crowd of desperadoes, all right," the latter noted.

Monk, still rubbing his aches and pains, asked, "Now what?"

"Now we take a look at this gang who visited," Long Tom answered.



Officer Welch piped up. "How's that?"

"Doc set up a gadget in the elevator. If more than four people at a time travel down from our floor without disabling the device, it kicks on some motion picture cameras aimed at the building exits. The cameras capture anybody leaving within the next fifteen minutes." Long Tom lifted the metal box he still carried. "I have the film here."

The puny-looking fellow was a wizard with electricity and electrical gadgets. He had installed the elevator device at Doc's direction. During most of the war, Long Tom had worked on a variety of military projects to develop secret weapons for use against the Axis powers.

Followed by Monk, Ham and the two policemen, Long Tom entered the laboratory, where he ran the special film through a quick developing and printing process. Next, he loaded the print into a viewer that projected the activity at each exit simultaneously onto a single screen, each scene stacked over another. The action zipped along at an accelerated pace, until Monk spotted Black Cat Jackson and yelled, "That's her!"

Long Tom punched a button and all the scenes stopped, with each person frozen onscreen in a moment of recorded time.

"Wow," breathed Officer Welch.

"She's a looker, all right," said Officer Cranford.

"I think we can rely on you men to provide an accurate description for the rest of the city's police force," Long Tom said. His wry tone drew no remark; nor, perhaps, notice. "I'm sure we'll hear a report if someone spots this young lady."

"Oh, absolutely," Officer Cranford said.

"Let's take a look at the goons who stole her away," Monk prodded.

Long Tom flicked a switch, then began advancing the film more slowly by manually turning a crank.

"Looks like ten or eleven of them," Ham remarked.

The group on the screen spewed out from the doorway onto the sidewalk and surrounded Cat Jackson, who was almost entirely obscured by the men. Four men and the woman piled into an older model sedan parked at the curb. The rest hailed two cabs and rode off screen.

Long Tom played the scene backward and forward a few more times, but the assembled viewers learned nothing new.

Ham posed a question. "Was Miss Jackson going willingly, do you think, or was she coerced?"

Monk snorted. "Why, it's clear as the nose on your face! Didn't you see that gang surround Cat? She was forced to go with 'em."

"Surround her?" Ham's brow wrinkled with thought. "That may merely be an appearance, thanks to the camera angle."

"Aw, that's shyster talk!" Monk thumped the table with his fist. "You got bopped on the noggin as soon as those guys busted in here. You didn't see her fighting off those rats. Man, whatta right cross she's got, too!"

Ham glared at Monk. "The protestations of a simple mind, easily swayed by great beauty."

"Hah!" yelled Monk, and even the tough New York cops winced. "You're just jealous 'cause she obviously favored me over your bumbling attempts at suavity-ness. I'm right, and you know it."

The attorney advanced toward the hairy chemist. "Listen, you anthropomorphic excuse for a sentient being -"

"Stop!" shouted Long Tom, halting both in their tracks.

He drew a long breath in the welcome silence. "You both may be right. It'll take more than this film to determine."

The electrical wizard glanced at the policemen. "Meanwhile, you two have enough info to put out a bulletin about this Catherine Jackson. If she knows something about the tanker explosion in Boston, we need to find her."

The cops agreed. Apparently the perils of policing the city were preferable to witnessing an argument between Monk and Ham, for they left in a hurry.

Long Tom turned back to Monk and Ham. "You two seem none the worse for wear after your scrap in the study with the lovely Miss Jackson and the Forty Thieves."

Ham sniffed. Monk gingerly investigated a bump on his head.

"Let's call Doc and report," Long Tom continued. "Then my nursemaid duties are done. I'm scheduled to fly back out . . . to my work."

"Whatcha workin' on, Long Tom?" Monk asked.

The electrical genius led the way into the study to the phone on the large desk. "I'm working on a project for Uncle Sam, and Uncle is very particular about his secrets."

When calling Long Tom, Doc had given him the number for the direct line to Admiral Ryan's office in Norfolk.

There, Doc listened to each of the three associates give his report. Ham was the last on the phone.

"Do you know this Catherine Jackson, Doc?" he asked.

"No, we've never met," Doc answered, looking at the flimsy of the telegram the admiral had given him.

"She claims you two know each other - so she is a phony!"

"Perhaps," Doc admitted. "She may have claimed an acquaintance in the hopes that doing so would improve her chances of meeting me. As for the purpose of that . . . there could be any number of reasons."

Doc then explained what he and Renny had learned from Admiral Ryan. He described the telegram supposedly signed by Black Cat Jackson.

"I don't need lawyer's instincts to say that something's fishy somewhere with that young lady," Ham stated.

Doc quickly instructed Ham to undertake an investigation: "Check out the shipping company and owners of the tanker that blew in Boston - Whithers and McCarthy Shipping Company. Perhaps some of their dealings made them a target of this attack."

To Monk, Doc directed a different task: "View the exit film again. See if you can spot a hack number on the cabs the gang used. You can probably learn from the cab company where the drivers delivered their fares."

"Will do, Doc," squeaked the hairy chemist.

After ringing off, Long Tom prepared to depart. "You know, Ham," he said at the door, "after hearing some of those insults you sent Monk's way, I'd say you've picked up a few bad habits from Johnny."

Johnny was William Harper Littlejohn, another associate in Doc's group of scrappy adventurers. Johnny, a specialist in archeology and geology, was noted for his enthusiastic and eloquent volubility with polysyllabic utterances. His present whereabouts were unknown to the trio in Doc's penthouse headquarters, but given the group's various involvements with the war effort, each associate assumed Johnny was working somewhere for the U.S. government.

All Ham could mutter was, "Good grief."

\*

While Monk and Ham began their assignments in New York, Doc and Renny studied charts in an office provided by Admiral Ryan.

The charts displayed details of the Port of Boston and the Charlestown Navy Yards.

"It's pretty much as I remembered," Renny's voiced rumbled within the office. "The depth there isn't great enough for a submarine to sneak into the harbor. And check the layout of the place - a sub wouldn't have a straight shot from outside the port to the tanker's location, so a torpedo is out of the question."

"So whatever destroyed the tanker was in the immediate vicinity," Doc noted.

"Unless the sun melted the ship, like Monk said," Renny pointed out.

Doc Savage made no response.

There was a knock at the door, and Lt. Sherman entered. "At Admiral Ryan's orders, a plane is scheduled to leave with Dr. Savage for New York in the morning. Take off will be at 0500 hours."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Doc replied before returning his attention to the charts.

"Holy cow, Doc! What if somebody's figured out how to focus the rays of the sun on a specific target - like cooking bugs with a magnifying glass." Renny's grim expression turned even gloomier. "How do we fight the sun?"

Chapter 5

Murder Behind the Scenes

Monk was hanging up the phone as Ham returned to Doc's eighty-sixth floor headquarters.

"I got the address where those cabs delivered the goons who jumped us," the chemist squeaked. "What about you?"

The attorney dropped into a chair facing the large desk. "My initial inquiries and investigations into the business dealings of the Whithers and McCarthy Shipping Company turn up no obvious funny business - nothing that would lead to their being a target, anyway. So perhaps the attack on their tanker in Boston was just a fluke."

"You think so?"

"Perhaps, but I'm not entirely convinced," Ham said. He rested his chin on the silver knob of his sword cane. "Especially after speaking with Irving McCarthy, the company's vice president."

"You got to meet him?"

"Not yet. The company president, Franklin Whithers, is in Europe, checking on the status of the company's holdings there in the wake of the war. But I got hold of McCarthy on the phone. He didn't want to meet at the company's Fifth Avenue offices." The lawyer frowned. "Instead, I'm supposed to meet him at their wharfside warehouse office - where we can talk 'more privately,' as he put it." Ham rattled off the warehouse address.

"Hey, that's close to where I'm going," Monk said. "When are you supposed to meet this McCarthy character?"

Ham checked his watch. "In less than an hour."

"C'mon," Monk picked up a small suitcase and twitched his bullet head toward the door. "I'll drive."

Taking one of Doc's cars from the skyscraper's underground garage, Monk and Ham soon pulled up before a warehouse displaying a large sign proclaiming it the property of Whithers and McCarthy

Shipping Company. A tall fence surrounded the structure, but the gate was open and unattended.

Monk pulled up by a door Ham indicated on the side of the building. Two other cars were already parked there. "McCarthy said to use this entrance. Let's go."

The two entered. The cavernous enclosure was only dimly lit, and there was no activity occurring inside. However, the warehouse was filled with crates, boxes and metal drums stacked and bound onto large pallets.

"Kinda quiet for a shipping outfit," Monk noted. "Hello!" his squeaky voice bellowed out and echoed.

Ham gestured toward a staircase nearby that led to a row of offices lining one wall and overlooking the floor of the warehouse. The two men clattered up the steps to the gallery that fronted the offices. The first two office doors were fitted with windows made of pebbled glass. The interiors were dark. The third door was solid wood. Painted in black on its upper panel was the word MANAGEMENT.

"This is it," Ham said. He rapped the door panel using the knob of his sword cane.

"Come in," responded a voice from within.

Monk led the way into the office, swinging the door inward. As he stepped inside, a gun butt slammed down on his head, swung by someone standing behind the door. The door crashed shut, and before Ham could draw his sword, a gun barrel was pressed against his throat.

Monk, groggy, squirmed on the floor. Ham twisted his eyes around. The gun barrel led to a big western-style six shooter held by a weird-looking character: a man wearing a tuxedo, boots, a scruffy cowboy hat and goggles.

"Who are you?" the stranger demanded.

Ham cleared his throat. "We have an appointment with Irving McCarthy."

Curly Wolfe pressed the gun more tightly against the attorney's throat. "What about?"

"We had questions about the tanker that blew up in Boston," Ham answered.

Monk crawled to a nearby corner, where he curled up and groaned.

"Yore pardner is shore one ugly monkey," the gunman said.

"This isn't one of his better days," Ham noted.

"Well, I reckon you're gonna be disappointed in meeting Mr. McCarthy," Curly Wolfe declared. "I just got here a few bits before you boys showed up, and I was likewise disappointed."

Ham realized the smell of gunpowder hung in the room. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I already asked you that," the tuxedoed cowboy snarled, "and you ain't really answered to my satisfaction yet." He ground the end of the gun barrel into Ham's Adam's apple.

The lawyer hacked against the discomfort. Ham quickly considered the danger of revealing his and Monk's association with Doc Savage. Here stood a man wearing a tuxedo with goggles - just how stable could he be? "I'm an attorney," Ham answered, "Theodore Marley Brooks. I've been checking into this tanker explosion."

"Hah!" spat the gunman. One hairless brow rose, and the worn Stetson tilted back from the man's face. "Well good luck, Mr. Lawyer Man. Take some advice from Curly Wolfe - you'll be a whole lot healthier checking into something less explosive, pardner."

He stepped back and gestured with his six-gun for Ham to move away from the office door. When the attorney complied, Curly Wolfe said, "I'm a-leaving right now. And if you don't want to get done for," and he shook his pistol meaningfully at Ham's face, "you and your varmint pal won't be coming out this here door for a good ten minutes."

"Don't worry about that," Ham replied.

"Oh, I ain't worried a bit," Curly Wolfe laughed and left the office, slamming the door behind him. The lawyer heard the cowboy's boot heels clattering down the stairs that led to the warehouse floor, then the slam of the farther door.

Ham crouched beside the moaning Monk and helped him sit upright. "Your noggin will soon be a phrenologist's dream," he said.

"After today's fun and games, I feel kinda like Humpty Dumpty," the chemist groaned. He looked around. "Did you let that creep get away? You didn't even try to stop him," Monk complained.

"Not only does he wear a perfectly good tuxedo badly," Ham answered, "but it's hard to argue with an uncivilized man carrying a gun that big."

"Why didn't you use your normal shyster methods and talk him into a coma?"

"We're lucky," Ham retorted, as he eyed Monk's garb: a striped jacket worn over a polka dot shirt and checked trousers. "He could have shot us both when he caught sight of your outfit."

Monk uttered some words that would set fire to most grades of paper.

The attorney ignored the invective. "I wonder what's become of Irving McCarthy," Ham mused, "and if Mr. Curly Wolfe knows anything about it?"

"No use wondering about McCarthy," Monk squeaked. From his seat in the corner, he could see past the edge of the large desk located opposite the office door. "I think he's been here the whole time."

Ham turned. Hidden behind the desk sprawled a body, a bullet hole in its chest.

"That's McCarthy, all right," Ham sighed. "I've seen his photo." He went over to study the corpse.

Monk slowly stood, a bit unsteadily, and leaned against the desk for support. "Think this Wolfe fella did the dirty deed?"

Ham unbuttoned McCarthy's shirt and peered at the wound. "From what the cowboy said - if you can trust that - it sounded like he got here after the murder. And if he killed McCarthy, why didn't he shoot us as well?"

"That's a thought," agreed Monk. "But killers are weird folks - who can explain what they're likely to do?"

"True," the attorney said. He stood up from the body. "But from my only slightly practiced eye, I'd say that hole was made by a smaller-caliber gun than that .44 Wolfe was waving my way."

Ham began shuffling through the papers spread on the desk and in its drawers. He found shipping invoices and a few memos, both recent and old, including some papers tucked into a pulp-paper magazine - nothing that immediately threw any light on the mystery of the exploding tanker or McCarthy's murder.

After using the office phone to report the murder to the police, Ham and Monk departed. Only one car remained parked at the warehouse - the car, apparently, of Irving McCarthy, who certainly wouldn't be requiring its use again.

## Chapter 6 The Black Ship

Not long after leaving Irving McCarthy's murdered corpse in his warehouse office, Monk and Ham stood beside their car in a filth-strewn alley that darted off a narrow, inhospitable-looking street. The day's light was falling and darkness was starting to close in on the street, which offered only a single dim lamp that remained unbroken and in working order. Hardly anyone moved along the sidewalks that fronted the decrepit buildings - some of which appeared long past deserving condemnation orders - and those few people seemed to scurry, looking over their shoulders as if afraid of being accosted.

"Nice address our friendly gang of goons landed on," noted Ham. "You suppose anyone on this street DOESN'T have at least one conviction?"

"Not everywhere in town is as glamorous as your Park Avenue digs," Monk said and jogged his elbow into Ham's ribs. The chemist peered around the alley corner and down the street. The actual address provided by the cab company was half a block away. The two associates had passed the location and parked here - both they and their car would have been far too conspicuous parked in front of the Black Ship.

For years the place had been notorious among certain circles as a hangout for underworld types. Some of the worst gangland elements gathered there - some in search of connections to ways of making money, others looking for crew members to help carry out a job, and still others simply hanging out between capers.

"You're too respectable looking to get close to the place," Monk said. "I'll have to check it out."

"If any of those guys who jumped us are still there, they'll definitely recognize your mug," Ham scoffed. "You're not exactly Mr. Incognito - especially in that distinctive style of apparel you inflict on the world."

"No problem." Monk waved away any difficulties. From the back seat of the car he pulled the suitcase that he'd brought from Doc's headquarters. Inside the case were some dark-colored clothes in a shabby state of repair, including a wide-brimmed hat, a pair of shoes and a small makeup kit. "When I found out where the cabs dropped off the gang, I pulled together a little bag of tricks from Doc's stock of goodies."

In a few minutes Monk showed off his handiwork. Darkness was increasing, so Ham removed a flashlight from the car's glove box. He twisted the end to power the bulb and flicked a switch to throw light on Monk.

"You look disreputable, but that's no change," Ham smirked. "You may look different enough to pull it off if the only time they saw you was in Doc's office."

Monk's arms were a little long for the sleeves of the coat, but he pulled the hat brim down low over his eyes to disguise his features as much as possible. He had also donned a fake mustache. "This crumb catcher tickles," he complained.

"It'll hide your face long enough to check out the place," Ham encouraged. "Maybe it'll be dark inside. That way no one will report you as an escapee from the Central Park Zoo."

The chemist snorted. "And to think you could have had an honest career on the radio with Charley McCarthy."

Monk left the lawyer with the car and slunk along the street to another narrow alleyway, which marked the entrance to the Black Ship. He entered the dive and glanced around. The lighting was nearly as dim as out on the street, but Monk thought he saw two familiar faces sitting at a small table near the door. The disguised chemist bought a drink at the bar and took a seat at a table close to the two men he recognized. He sat with his back to the duo to forestall their possibly recognizing him.

Monk tried to eavesdrop. One of the two thugs sounded like his craw was full of gravel. "Has anyone heard from the Blind Man?"

"Naw," his companion answered. "But Barlowe hinted some of the boys may be moving out soon."

"Action somewhere else?"

The other grunted.

"Sometimes the Blind Man gets in an all-fired hurry," said the fellow with the very rough voice, "then we sit around and wait for his signal."

"I think he's waiting on something," the other said. "Or maybe someone else."

"Y'think he's scared?"

"Of what?"

"I dunno," Gravel Voice said. "Maybe this Savage character."

Monk perked up his ears a bit more.

"You trust that dame?"

Gravel Voice growled. "Huh. The Blind Man says she's on the level. And he don't trust nobody too much."

Monk's hackles rose. Were the two talking about Black Cat Jackson? And who was this Blind Man?

"It was her idea to check on Savage, see if he was sniffin' around," Gravel Voice added.

Monk decided that Cat Jackson must be the person they were discussing. And from the sounds of their talk, the gang must be in cahoots with her. Which meant, unfortunately, that Ham was probably correct concerning her intentions.

About that time the two thugs were joined by a third man who had just entered the Black Ship. "Let's go, you guys," said the latest arrival. "We gotta run-dezz-view."

The three scraped their chairs across the rough floor and clattered out the door. A few moments later Monk followed the crew out into the alley. He paused at the point where the alley met the dark street. He watched the three men climb into a sedan, the same one that had appeared on Long Tom's film.

Monk leaned against the wall. His fist moved from his jacket pocket and twitched against the rough bricks behind him. He returned his hand to his pocket as the car barreled away down the street.

Monk ran to meet Ham at the car. The chemist jumped in and directed Ham to follow the thugs' sedan. While the lawyer drove, Monk described what he had overheard.

"The Blind Man, Black Cat Jackson, McCarthy, Curly Wolfe, this gang of no-goods . . . How do they all fit together?" Ham wondered aloud. "And do they really all have something to do with that Boston tanker blowing up?"

Ham stayed well back from the car he was tailing. He slowed considerably as the sedan pulled over and its passengers spilled out and filed into a small house set back from the street. Ham and Monk passed the parked vehicle and parked just around the corner at the end of the block. Ham reached into the glove box and pulled out the flashlight again.

This residential neighborhood had seen better days. A number of houses lined the street, and most appeared inhabited, but many required quite a bit of repair.

"A lot of soldier boys are gonna have a lot of nailing and painting to do when they get home," Monk noted.

He and Ham stayed close to the shadows as they crept toward the house their quarry had entered. At the corner of the lot, Monk paused while Ham chanced a quick look inside the parked sedan. He returned to the chemist's side. "No clues there," the lawyer whispered.

The duo carefully made their way along a hedge in need of pruning to reach the side of the house. They stopped on each side of a window through which light shone. Ham slowly peered over the windowsill.

A lamp and the table on which it stood obscured part of the lawyer's view into the house. Still, he could clearly see that the room held no upholstered furniture. Instead, it offered a rough table, a scattering of worn wooden chairs and a scratched and marred wardrobe. A calendar decorated with a farm scene hung crookedly on the wall behind the table.

Ham nodded to Monk, who also turned to peer into the room. There was no sign of Black Cat Jackson, but three men sat in chairs and a fourth stood by the table.

"The three guys sittin' down were in the Black Ship," came Monk's squeaky whisper. "I think the other one was part of the crew that showed up at Doc's place."

"Can you make out what they're saying?"

Both listened for a few moments.

"I heard one of 'em say Black Cat's name," the chemist responded. "But the rest of it - I'm not sure about."

"I think another one said something about the Blind Man," Ham said.

A fifth man appeared in the room's doorway. He said something too low for the two associates to hear, and the man Monk recognized as Gravel Voice stood and followed the newcomer from the room.

"Where do you reckon the rest of that gang is?" Monk wondered.

"Maybe with Black Cat," Ham offered, "and maybe she's with the Blind Man."

"Those guys in the Black Ship said something about some guys heading out to action somewhere else," Monk said.

Ham started to step away from the window. "I'll check the other side of the house," he whispered. But he didn't have a chance to move that way.

For the night suddenly came to life. Monk shouted as someone dropped a bag over his head and he was pulled back over some obstacle that tripped him to the ground. The same happened to Ham. Pinned to the ground, both men fought back as they were pummeled by unseen fists. Already worn by the abuse their bodies had experienced during the day, Ham and Monk's efforts didn't last long. Their struggles ceased as they were overpowered and bound hand and foot.

"You guys ain't so smart," Gravel Voice said. "You didn't see our lookouts as you slipped in."

The chemist and the lawyer were roughly dragged across the ground and into the house, then tossed down some steps to the basement. Monk's head spun crazily, but he heard one last thing before the door slammed shut at the top of the stairs: "Do we kill 'em now or later?"

\*

Bright sunlight flashed on the dancing waves of the Atlantic as a Curtiss Helldiver roared through the air on its way from the base at Norfolk. Following fashion the crew had decorated the plane. To the fuselage had been painted a snarling red dog. The craft's Navy pilot, Captain Mann, "Red Dog" to his friends, had taken off early this morning at the order of Admiral Ryan to deliver his passenger to New York City.

His passenger, Doc Savage, had complimented the pilot on his handling of the dive bomber. Captain Mann took the compliment to heart - he'd heard stories about how his passenger had helped to develop some aircraft used by the military.

The two men had chatted off and on during the flight, but most of the trip was made in relative silence enforced by the roar of the 10,000-plus horsepower of the Helldiver's air-cooled engine.

Renny had complained about being left out of the action, but he recognized his obligation to finish up his work for the Navy. The big engineer had seen Doc off this morning and wished the bronze man luck.

The flight had been uneventful. Doc had used the time to mentally tote up what he knew about the affair so far. The sum was disappointing.

Captain Mann broke into his thoughts with an exclamation: "There's a dandy sight!" He pointed to the ocean below. "Our boys are coming home!"

Doc turned to see a small convoy and its gunship escort: Cruising the sun-speckled ocean were three troopships loaded with soldiers on their way home from the war in Europe. They were still a few hours from New York Harbor, but the troops were close enough to feel the excitement of getting



to walk on home soil again.

"There'll be some happy people in the streets of the city tonight!" laughed Captain Mann. Doc agreed, and a small smile touched the bronze man's lips.

Captain Mann directed the Helldiver downward toward the ships to wave its wings in greeting to the returning troops. As he pulled the plane up from its shallow dive, Captain Mann pulled Doc's attention away from the ships.

"Hey, lookit that," Mann said. "The sun - all of a sudden, it's red."

Doc twisted around to look. Indeed, the orb of the sun, which mere minutes ago had been glaringly white, was now a scarlet disk. A trilling sounded through the Helldiver's cabin.

"What the hell's that?" Mann jerked around, checking his instruments and the seals on the plane's canopy. But the trilling was merely a sound uttered by Doc Savage, usually unconsciously, when something unusual popped up. The weird trill seemed to emanate around the man of bronze and trailed off, like some will o' the wisp borne by the air.

"The soldier boys are waving back. Wait a minute - they're not waving. Holy Moley!" shouted the pilot. "The ships - what's happening?"

Doc quickly turned away from the sun. The men on the decks of the ships just below the plane were clearly in the midst of some uproar.

He reached in a pouch tucked below his seat and whipped out binoculars. Training the lenses on the carriers below, the disturbance came clear - the ships were melting!

## Chapter 7

### Terror and Death

Captain Mann attempted to contact any of the ships below by radio.

"No luck." The pilot sounded disgusted. "Either the radios aren't working, or everyone's abandoned the radio rooms."

He circled outwards from the melting ships, but there were no other craft in sight.

"I don't spot any enemy vessels," Mann said. "Course, our under-wing bombs were removed to install extra fuel tanks, so I don't have any big artillery to use against anybody anyway."

"Buzz lower," Doc Savage directed, "so we can get a better look."

"Are you crazy!" Mann blustered. "One, this is government property you're riding in, and I'm responsible for it - I'm not letting it melt like those tin cans. Two, I'm no coward, but I don't have any intention of committing suicide!"

"Look," Doc said calmly, "the sun is still red, but nothing's happening to this plane. Only the ships are melting. We should be safe. Drop down a bit. At the first sign of trouble, pull up."

Doc knew how to use his voice like a master debater, and he could be highly persuasive. The pilot grunted, then turned the diver bomber's nose downward. The Helldiver descended in a slow, controlled spiral with the cluster of doomed ships at its center.

"We're okay so far," Mann said, relief evident in his voice.

The man of bronze kept the binoculars glued to his eyes. Suddenly, an explosion bloomed on the deck of one of the troop ships.

"What was that?" Mann asked.

"A deck gun exploded," Doc explained. "Someone tried to shoot at us."

"What! Are they crazy? We're not the enemy!"

"It's likely the melting has deteriorated the gun to such a point that it exploded when someone

tried to fire it," the bronze man surmised. "Perhaps they would shoot at any stranger because the horror of the situation has driven them mad."

Indeed, the sight Doc surveyed was pure horror. Men writhing and screaming in agony. Some rolled on the deck in obvious pain or slapped at their bodies. Others leaped overboard, only to flounder in the water briefly before sinking from sight.

For the people on board were clearly suffering the effects of whatever terror was melting the ships. Just as particles of the metal comprising the craft were dissolving and melting to roll toward the surging waters below, the human beings trapped by this bizarre attack were flaking to pieces, crumpling to the rapidly deteriorating deck and quickly crumbling to puddles of ash.

Doc could not hear their screams, but he could clearly see their stretched and twisted expressions.

"My God!" Captain Mann cried. "This is . . . too much . . . too hellish . . ."

"Keep an eye on the plane," Doc warned, trying to distract the pilot from the terrors below. "Make sure we don't start melting as well."

"Yes," Mann choked out. "Yes, you're right."

The Helldiver continued to circle, leaving Doc and the pilot helpless witnesses to the terrible deaths of the troops who had survived the war only to be utterly destroyed so close to home. There were few remains left afloat when Captain Mann turned the plane away, its decreasing fuel supply requiring them to head toward their original destination.

On the way, they passed three ships speeding to the disaster area in response to a brief Mayday that one of the radiomen had gotten off before succumbing to the melting horror.

After landing, there was some commotion with the ground crew as Doc and Captain Mann clambered down from the cockpit, but the two flyers were quickly whisked away to the officer in charge. Doc and Captain Mann made their reports to the officer, who assured both men that he would send the file to the heads of the War Department immediately. He then summoned a driver, who delivered Doc Savage to his headquarters.

In his penthouse high atop one of Manhattan's tallest buildings, the man of bronze moved quickly and determinedly about his business. He rapidly reviewed the films Long Tom had retrieved from the cameras trained on the building's exits. He studied the faces of the gang members - including that of Black Cat Jackson - just long enough to memorize the features of each.

Next he checked the recording gadget that captured any messages called into the office phone by his associates or any other callers. Nothing there.

He made calls to the residences of Monk and Ham but received no answers.

Then he flashed a dull colored light upon one of the office windows. A fluorescent writing sprang into visibility where only clear glass had been apparent just a moment before. Doc recognized Monk's scrawl. The chemist had used a stick devised by Doc to write a message on the window. The writing turned visible only under the rays of ultraviolet light, which were emitted by the small torch the bronze man had shone onto the glass.

Monk's message gave the address he had gotten from the cab company.

Doc next checked a small cabinet hanging on a wall. Inside were several keys, each set suspended by a numbered peg. The bronze man noted which set was missing, then plucked a set from another peg and dropped it into a coat pocket.

He brought a small case from another room before dashing out the door of the penthouse headquarters.

\*

While Doc and Captain Mann had been winging their way from the site of the melting Navy ships, Monk and Ham, still trapped in the gang's basement, had been squirming against their bonds. To no avail.

Both ceased their efforts upon hearing a different set of steps ringing on the floorboards overhead. Dim morning light filtered in through the grimy windows, and the two adventurers turned their gazes toward one another, each offering a question in his expression. When they heard the new voice from upstairs - muffled by the woodwork, but still recognizable as a woman's voice - those questions dissolved into knowing looks.

More steps above, then the door at the top of the basement stairs opened. "Here's what I called you about," Gravel Voice said.

Black Cat Jackson appeared beside him in the doorway. She followed him down the steps and stared down at the two prisoners.

"I knew you boys were trouble the first time I saw you," she said. She was more casually dressed than yesterday - a sweater and slacks over low-heeled shoes - but she was still gorgeous. Ham, trained in the courtroom to read voices and expressions, detected no surprise or anxiety from this woman. In fact, she eyed Monk and Ham much as someone might eye a piece of furniture - which chair looked more comfortable to sit in?

"She's a cool one," Ham thought.

"We caught 'em last night snooping outside," Gravel Voice explained. "Smalley wanted to kill 'em right off, but I figured we better clue you in first. Especially since you've had more contact with the Blind Man lately."

"Shut up!" For a moment Ham thought Black Cat would strike Gravel Voice, and clearly the thug thought the same, for he quickly stepped back.

"Did you talk this way in front of them all night?" Black Cat demanded.

"No," Gravel Voice answered, recovering from his brief shake up. "No, they been down here all night. No one's said anything to 'em. We waited for you. After all, you brought 'em into this."

"Only after consulting . . . the boss," she replied. "We needed to know if Doc Savage was already involved."

"Looks like he ain't - he wouldn't be sending out these two stumble bums if he were around."

"And steps are being taken to keep him away," Black Cat said. "We know he's in Norfolk. He'll stay there."

"So the bronze guy is out of it," Gravel Voice noted. "We can go ahead and silence these two." Ham got a cold feeling in his gut as the thug turned an evil leer in the direction of the smartly dressed lawyer and the hairy chemist.

"Are you crazy?" Black Cat asked. "Doc Savage is bad enough on a normal day. But if his two boys show up dead, you might as well put a gun to your own head. Nothing would stop him from getting to us then. And if the . . . the boss found that out, he might kill you before Doc Savage did."

"So what the hell do we do with 'em?"

"Keep them handy," the woman replied. "If for some reason Doc Savage returns to the city, we'll use them to keep him at bay. They'll be hostages."

Gravel Voice gave Black Cat a puzzled look, then turned his sour puss toward the prisoners. He looked doubtful.

"Who did the boss put in charge?" Black Cat asked.

Gravel Voice was slow to answer. "You."

"All right, then."

She turned, and Gravel Voice led the way back up the stairs. At the top, Black Cat paused to look down at Monk and Ham, bound hand and foot, before turning away and slamming the door.

\*

Doc Savage, like Monk, had recognized the address belonging to the Black Ship. He knew the dive's reputation as a hangout for low lifes. He had prepared appropriately.

He had selected an older model car from his underground garage. It was dented and dirty, but looks were deceiving. The metal beast could burn down the highway better than some police patrol cars.

The small case he brought along contained a makeup kit and a change of clothes, similar to what Monk had prepared the previous day. When Doc drove his seeming jalopy along the street leading to the Black Ship, no one glancing inside the car would have recognized the man of bronze at the wheel.

Actually, there were few people on the street to even notice the car and its driver. This neighborhood witnessed more nocturnal activity than daylight action.

The disguised bronze man pulled to the curb close to the alley mouth that led to the Black Ship's entrance. Dropping to the pavement, Doc had assumed a posture and a shuffling gait that - along with his shabby clothes and made up features - transformed him completely beyond recognition.

He rounded the nose of the car and approached the doorway to the tavern, one hand tucked into a coat pocket. He began to sway from side to side and muttered to himself. He stumbled into the establishment.

Although daylight blazed outdoors, it was dim within. The Black Ship was well named - as if the quality of light inside its walls remained constant, no matter what occurred outside its world. The place was nearly deserted - only half a dozen men sat at tables or stood by the bar, tended by a surly-looking fellow who apparently needed a new blade in his safety razor.

The bronze man continued his swaying shuffle while he kept up his low-toned muttering, moving from table to table. He wavered over each tabletop, seeming on the verge of taking seat, before trundling to the next table. When he approached a place where someone sat and started his odd behavior, he was roughly shooed away and loudly abused.

Having stumbled past all the tables, the mutter man of bronze slid along the bar. Finally, the bartender slapped his rag into the dented metal sink and shouted, "Buy a drink and siddown and shut up or get the hell oudda here ya damn tumblebug!"

Doc Savage shuffled a weaving track toward the door and made his way outside, one hand remaining in his pocket all the while. He swayed from one side of the alley to the other, then stopped near the mouth of the alley.

A glowing patch appeared on the wall of chipped brick. Doc's hand moved within the coat pocket, and the glow resolved into the familiar fluorescent scrawl of Monk Mayfair. The chemist had scribbled a message on the wall while he stood watching the thugs he had followed last night. The writing was revealed by the flashlight-sized ultraviolet projector Doc carried in his coat pocket, which offered a hole through which he beamed the light. Doc's wanderings through the Black Ship had merely been his effort to find such a note or other clue left inside the tavern.

Monk's note read like this:

M & H FOLLOW 3 FROM GANG.

He had also noted the time.

This message let Doc know that nothing had befallen his associates up to this point of their investigation. Tracking them down from here on might be problematic, since the bronze man didn't know to what location Monk and Ham had followed the gang members.

Doc returned to his car, where he turned over the engine and then switched on a dial on the dash. Harsh static erupted from a small speaker. Doc adjusted a second dial, tuning into a specific frequency. In a moment, a crisp, bell-like tone rang from the set. It was followed by another and repeated at regular intervals. The man of bronze dropped the car into gear and whirled away down the block.

The bell tone was carried by a certain frequency emanating from a transmitter hooked to the car

used by Monk and Ham. When Ham took the flash light from the glove box of their car, he had flipped a switch that activated the transmitting set. Because each of Doc's vehicles was tuned to a separate frequency, Doc knew which frequency to search for by checking which keys were missing from the cabinet at his headquarters.

Triangulating against echoing broadcasts from fixed receivers and transmitters maintained by certain agents Doc kept on his payroll, the bronze man steadily bore down on the source of the bell tones - the car taken from the garage by Monk and Ham.

He soon cruised down the residential street along which the chemist and the lawyer had scurried last night. Doc recognized a parked sedan as one of the cars from the films Long Tom had developed. He assumed the house before which it was parked was a location used by at least one of the gang members.

Doc continued to the end of the block, where he spotted the car abandoned by Monk and Ham, still parked where they had left it. The bronze man drove on. His two associates might be fine, simply keeping a lookout on the gang's activities, but maybe not - and their lack of reporting in suggested to Doc that the two were in trouble. And if they were in trouble, someone would likely have found their car and kept a watch on it.

A few blocks away, Doc pulled into an alley providing access to garages at the back of a group of residential lots. He parked close against a row of tall shrubs and stepped from the car. He picked up a nearly empty wine bottle from the gutter and began performing his drunk act again. He muttered and shuffled along, slowly heading back toward the corner at which Monk and Ham had left their vehicle.

\*

While Doc Savage was leaving his vehicle in an alley, Black Cat Jackson parked in front of the house inhabited by Gravel Voice and the rest of the gang. She crossed the porch and entered, then stepped into the room that Monk and Ham had spied upon the previous evening.

Four men sat at the table drinking coffee from chipped mugs. One read a newspaper, one dealt a deck of cards in a game of solitaire, another flipped through the pages of a pulp paper magazine, and the fourth simply stared into his coffee as if waiting for something to surface there. Gravel Voice came in from the other room.

He moved his palms along the sides of his head to press his hair into place, then dry-washed his hands. "What's up?" he asked.

Black Cat jerked her head. "Bring your two guests upstairs."

All the men at the table looked up. Gravel Voice squinted. "Whuffo?" he questioned.

A light blazed in the woman's eyes. After a moment, she answered, "I've contacted the Blind Man. We're moving these two."

Gravel Voice made a chewing motion, then gestured with his thumb. Three of the men stood from the table, leaving the magazine reader. A few minutes later, they dragged Monk and Ham, still bound and gagged, into the room. The hairy chemist and the slim attorney turned acid-laced looks toward the beautiful dark woman standing before them.

Just as Black Cat opened her mouth to speak, an explosion roared outside. The house shuddered and the windows rattled in their frames. Both Monk and Ham nearly fell, their many hours of bondage sapping their ability to weather a sudden lurch.

Great surprise appeared on Black Cat's face. "What the hell was that?"

Gravel Voice clapped his hands sharply. "Haw! You said Doc Savage was such a bloodhound, and there was a chance he might track down these two bozos. So Smalley found their car and rigged a bomb to it in case their boss checked it out. You just heard that bomb going off!

"Doc Savage is dead!"

Hearing Gravel Voice proclaim the death of Doc Savage, Ham and Monk, though tightly bound, turned toward one another with stricken looks.

For a moment, utter shock gripped Black Cat Jackson. Then the woman leaped across the room and socked Gravel Voice on the nose with her balled fist. Even Monk winced at the great crack the blow made, and Gravel Voice dropped to the floor.

He swore and held both hands to his bleeding nose.

"Shut up!" screamed Black Cat, and she kicked Gravel Voice sharply on a shin. He yawped and grabbed his leg with one bloody hand.

"You men are complete idiots!" the woman shouted. "That blast will bring the law here willy-nilly. None of us can stay here now."

She leveled her gaze at the one named Smalley, who still sat holding a magazine at the table. "And YOU - you and your blasted bomb - ANYBODY could have set that off, not just Savage! What if it was some kid playing? Or a cop checking out an abandoned car? Do you know what happens to people who kill a cop in this town?" The woman uttered an exasperated growl - just the sound of it made Ham's throat hurt.

"It's no wonder the Blind Man sent me with you. You're all idiots!" Black Cat cried.

Smalley made a face like Cupid, if Cupid were a social degenerate. "Smalley's no idiot," he claimed. "Smalley's just evil!" He laughed raucously and slapped the tabletop.

Ham rolled his eyes and thought, At least Monk doesn't refer to himself in the third person.

Black Cat looked like she could fight a farm full of gators and still have enough of a mad on to whip every man in the room. Red streaks colored her cheeks and her knuckles turned bone white with the pressure in her knotted fists. Monk noticed the woman trembling a bit - not with fright, but as she restrained herself from tearing into the fools surrounding her.

Black Cat moved quickly. She bent over Gravel Voice, dipped her hand into his jacket pocket and plucked out a revolver, which she brandished liberally about the room.

"Cattle are smarter than you morons," she said, finally. "If anyone else makes any smart remarks, just make sure you want 'em to be the last words you ever say," she warned, then she pulled back the hammer on the gun, "because I guarantee you won't ever say anything else."

The place got very quiet. No one moved. Even Gravel Voice hushed his pained breathing.

The revolver was small, just a .22 caliber, but it was clear Black Cat Jackson knew how to handle a sidearm. And a pistol in the control of a knowledgeable handler - no matter how small the gun - was a deadly matter.

"All right," the woman said. She carefully let the hammer back down with her thumb. "Gather your belongings, pack up any food. We're going to Barlowe's place."

Gravel Voice jerked up his head. "Barlowe's place?" He got a sneaking look on his face. "You know where it is?"

"Sure," Black Cat said with a smirk. "Don't you?"

Gravel Voice didn't answer, but commenced to gingerly touching his nose.

Black Cat looked around at the others. "Hurry up," she ordered. "You're burning daylight."

"What about these two mugs?" Smalley asked, pointing to Monk and Ham.

"Bring 'em," the woman answered. Then: "Here's your pea shooter."

She tossed the revolver back to Gravel Voice. Monk and Ham could hardly believe their eyes, and expected the gangster to spare no time in getting even with Black Cat now that he was armed. Surprisingly, he simply tucked the gun back into his pocket. And the tall, deadly beauty turned her

back on Gravel Voice and peered out the front door as if she had given a weapon to her best friend instead of to a person she'd just smacked and then threatened with that same pistol.

The hairy chemist turned to his partner. His expression clearly asked, What the hell is going on here?

Gravel Voice made his prisoners sit, their backs against the wall. He stood over them, one hand in the pocket that swaddled his gun. The gang clattered around, packing up their few necessities. Gravel Voice called out an occasional command, telling Smalley or another of the men to retrieve some portion of his belongings.

Still at the door, Black Cat asked Gravel Voice, "Was Dimples on lookout?"

"Yeah."

"Here he comes."

Then entered a sixth member of the gang that Black Cat Jackson apparently led. He was short and wiry, but his face seemed to swell like a balloon because of his round cheeks, which were marked by deep dimples. Hence his moniker.

Dimples puffed with excitement. "Si-reens are coming," he announced.

Black Cat grabbed his near elbow. "Did you see the car blow?"

"Naw. Heard it though. Damn loud, Smalley, you tryin' to kill ever'body in the damn borough?"

Smalley cackled from the other room.

Black Cat jerked his attention back to her. "What made the bomb go off?"

"Didn't see that either," Dimples replied. "Only folks I saw in the street was a mangy dog, a skinny cat, and a raggedy old drunk."

The woman stared fiercely at the lookout a moment. "Any sign of the drunk?"

Dimples shook his head. "Mighta been him blew up the car. Mighta been looking for a place to sleep."

Black Cat opened the front door onto the porch. The faintest whine of the siren was apparent.

"Let's go," she ordered. She gestured at Monk and Ham. "Those two in my car with Dimples."

"I'll go too," Gravel Voiced volunteered.

"Fine," she replied. "The rest of you in the other car. Follow me to Barlowe's place."

The crew hustled into the cars. Gravel Voice and Smalley prodded the two prisoners from behind with sharp jabbing motions of their handguns.

The engines turned over and the cars took off. They passed the blackened and smoking wreckage of the car Monk and Ham's car. Both prisoners craned as well they could against their bindings to view the mess.

Monk made noises. Even though the chemist's words were muffled by a gag, Ham could tell that his swearing was particularly caustic.

Monk, he thought, was always good with acid.

\*

Renny Renwick, winding up his late lunch, finished off a cup of black coffee and winced. An entire pot's worth of bitterness seemed concentrated in the mug's last drop. Ah, well, he'd rarely considered himself a fine cook. Camp coffee was about the pinnacle of his culinary skills. At least with this just-finished cup of joe he didn't have to filter the grounds from the liquid with his teeth.

The big-fisted engineer looked down at the crumb-scattered blueprints spread across his desk, then stood and stretched his large frame, trying to wring out the twist of anxiety that had kept him on edge all day. He wanted to be with Doc, tracking down the ship-melting mystery. Renny had risen early in the hope of catching the bronze man still half-asleep and easily convinced of allowing the engineer to go along to New York. But he had found Doc already awake and alert and working through his daily exercise regimen. Doc said, "No."

Renny left his office and made his way over to the dry dock where his current project was in progress. He was overseeing construction of a ship that could best be described as a floating dry dock. When completed, this craft and others like it would strip valuable travel time from ships heading into port for repairs. The floating dry dock would be stationed at various Naval bases near or within a theatre of war or areas where maneuvers were being conducted. The floating dry dock would meet a craft at sea and its crew would go to work repairing the battle-damaged ship.

The project was massive, and various sections were being constructed separately in separate dry docks to be assembled later. Renny felt some pride for his part in the project. Looking at the work crews clambering over the unfinished monster now, he shook his head in wonder at the enormity of the deal.

Still, his desire to be involved with some adventure and working side-by-side with Doc tickled at his consciousness.

The big engineer calmly survey his immediate world. The day was bright, the air filled with the roar and buzz of the continually passing planes and the clash and yelling of the constant yelling. This was a place for hard, sweaty work. No exotic adventure would come calling here.

"Colonel Renwick! Colonel Renwick!" Renny turned to see Lt. Stephen Sherman calling his name and rushing toward him.

The young officer scooted to a stop beside the engineer.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Admiral Ryan sent me to find you, sir," Lt. Sherman said. "The ship-melting thing - it's come to Norfolk!"

## Chapter 9 Deadly Flight

"Holy cow!" Renny exclaimed.

With Lt. Sherman's help, and armed with authority granted by Admiral Ryan, the dour engineer soon was airborne aboard a small seaplane fitted with floats.

Even though Renny could easily have handled the craft, he left those duties to the pilot, Captain Pucula, and surveyed the world outside the windscreen.

Lt. Sherman had explained that a small flotilla of ships lying off the coast had sent a desperate radio message that the sun had turned to blood and the sky red and their ships were starting to melt around them.

Turned to blood? Renny twisted his neck and surveyed the sky. Bright. Squint-making bright, horizon to horizon.

"There!" the captain called out, and jutted his chin forward. "There they are!"

The giant engineer turned his head and leaned forward. And suddenly the glare of the sky was gone, replaced by a crimson wash. The sun, like the source of this scarlet staining the sky, was a round bloody blister hanging over the scene.

And the scene: Six ships. Rather, what had been six ships. There wasn't enough left of any one of them to suggest what sort of craft it might have started out the day as. Only the ruins of the lowest decks were left -- listing badly, taking on water, and still steadily melting away under the horrid red glare of the sun.



Capt. Pucula sat quietly observing the destruction. His lips were a thin white line, and his chin trembled.

For maybe the first time in his life, Renny breathed what could actually be described a whisper: "Holy cow..."

The pilot directed the plane in a circle around the swiftly disappearing ships below. There wasn't a sign of a single survivor.

The pilot finally broke the silence within the aircraft's cabin: "You know how many troops and crew were aboard those tin cans?"

"I know," the engineer answered.

"You know how many people in how many families . . ."

"I know," Renny repeated. "That's enough."

Renny stirred his gaze from the ocean below, quickly examined the craft carrying him through the air. "Any trouble with the controls?"

The captain answered with a negative. "We seem unaffected by the sun -- or whatever this melting thing is." He took a quick but thorough survey of the instruments. "Gauges all check out."

Renny was silent a moment, during which he peered upward at the sun again, then asked, "How's your fuel?"

Capt. Pucula remained silent a moment as well, checked the appropriate gauge, then nodded. "Enough. You're thinking of setting her down there, aren't you?"

"Yep."

The pilot jerked his head. "All right."

"Let's wait a bit," Renny cautioned. "See what happens with the sun."

What happened with the sun was that slowly its vermilion glare evaporated and it regained the same bright hue it earlier displayed. By that time, the last remnants of the Navy ships below had disappeared into the sea.

The giant engineer gestured to the flashing waters. "Let's go."

Capt. Pucula took her down. "If anything feels weird, if I notice the slightest -- "

"Back upstairs," Renny agreed, "quicker than soonest."

The pilot brought the plane down on its floats nicely. He kept the engines going, ready for any sign of the melting terror to strike his craft. After a few minutes in which both men kept a hard eye out for the merest suggestion of trouble, Capt. Pucula said, "I think we're clear."

Renny opened the cabin door, clutching a canteen that he'd brought along.

"I wouldn't jump in for a swim," the pilot noted.

"Not my plan, either," the engineer said.

He stood on the nearest pontoon and clutched the doorframe, balancing against the plane's bucking on the waves. Renny squatted and held the open canteen in the ocean water to fill the container. In a minute, he was back in his seat.

"Anything more?" the pilot asked. He thought he'd never seen a man's face look so morose as Renny's at that moment. He had no notion that the more depressed Renny looked, the more intensely he was focused on the adventure at hand.

Renny looked across the waves, empty of any clue that not long ago a number of ships carrying a great human cargo were surging through these heavy waters.

"Nothing more," he said.

Capt. Pucula soon had the plane airborne and headed back to base.

\*

Dimples was explaining to his captive audience -- Monk and Ham -- that he'd earned his moniker after a stray bullet passed through both his cheeks during a robbery. "When them holes healed up, I had dimples. And a new name to boot!"

"We're here," Black Cat announced.

Thank goodness, Ham thought. He didn't want to hear any more personal anecdotes from Dimples.

Black Cat had driven along a narrow alley and pulled up to the back door of an apartment building. The sedan carrying the rest of the gang had parked out on the street, and the crew piled down the alley to pull the two prisoners from the car and hustle them into the building.

Black Cat directed them up the back stairs to the third floor. Gravel Voice knocked at a door indicated by the dark beauty, and a surprised face greeted them when the door opened. The whole gang pushed into the room.

The man who had opened the door had been alone until Black Cat and her crew arrived. His right eye blinked uncontrollably for seconds at a time. "What's going on?" he asked.

"It's okay, Twitch," Gravel Voice answered. "We hadda leave the house."

"Any problems around here?" Black Cat asked.

Twitch replied in the negative. "Hardly anybody in this place besides us and the super. A couple or three folks on the fifth floor, I think. At least one of 'em works at night."

Black Cat followed up with another question. "Where's Barlowe?"

Twitch shook his head. "Ain't seen him or the other boys in a couple of days. I think the Blind Man sent 'em out."

"Know where?"

Twitch had no answer. Gravel Voice gave Black Cat a hard glare. "Don't you know?" he asked.

Black Cat replied with a frown. "I have an idea, but I'm not sure. The Blind Man is cautious, you know. He doesn't tell everybody everything."

"Yeah," Gravel Voice said with a smirk. "I know that."

Ham and Monk, still bound and gagged, were seated on the floor in opposite corners of the room. Both listened intently to each word their captors uttered in the hope of gleaning clues to the mystery that had swept them up. Even with Doc possibly dead, the two aides were dedicated to fighting their way through to answers to their questions.

It was at this point that Gravel Voice gestured toward the two prisoners. "Whatta we do with these two?"

"We'll hang onto them for now," Black Cat said. "We're not sure about that bomb -- it could very well have been someone besides Doc Savage who was blown to kingdom come by Smalley's bomb." She shook her head in frustration. "Or the damn thing may have just gone off by itself. Last we knew, Savage was still in Norfolk."

But Doc had returned to New York earlier that day. And as a matter of fact, he clung to the brick wall just outside the window of the apartment within which Black Cat and Gravel Voice argued at the moment.

Earlier, Doc had used his disguise as a wandering drunk to approach the car Ham and Monk had left

parked at the corner close to the house the Gravel Voice gang had used. Even convincingly disguised, Doc remained alert and observant. He'd picked out the gang's lookout easily. But the bronze man had not been able to determine the whereabouts of his two missing aides without scouring the neighborhood -- an activity that likely would have made even Dimples suspicious.

So Doc had paused in his meandering to seemingly swig drinks from the bottle he had picked up. Meanwhile, he unobtrusively examined the parked car for any clues. In doing so, he noticed two wires leading from the hinge of the driver's side door -- evidence of Smalley's clumsily devised booby trap. Further scrutiny uncovered the bomb itself clinging to the undercarriage.

Doc decided the best way to draw out anyone connected with this trap was to set off the explosive.

Doc crossed the street and found some cover behind an outbuilding set back from a small house. When Dimples had focused his attention in another direction, Doc launched his bottle at the car, unerringly striking the wires at the door hinge, and the car went up in flame and thunder.

Doc saw Dimples quickly scramble to a specific house. A few minutes later, he watched the gang members prod Ham and Monk out to a car, then saw the two loaded cars take off.

Doc hurried to his own vehicle and shadowed the gang to this apartment building. Carefully making his way along the alley, he scaled the side of the building, checking windows as he scurried upward until he located the gang.

The bronze man silently debated his next move when he heard Gravel Voice assign Twitch and Dimples to lookout duty for the building's front and back doors, respectively.

Doc scrambled back down to the ground. He was retracing his path back along the alley when he was stopped beside Black Cat's car.

A gun barrel tapped his ribs.

"That's far enough, big man," said a voice behind him.

#### Chapter 10 Three Blind Mice

Doc heard the snap of a pistol hammer being cocked.

"Who are you?" asked the gunman.

That question suggested to the bronze man that the speaker wasn't one of the gang members. And he managed to spot a distorted image of the gunman reflected on the chrome trim of Black Cat Jackson's car, and the face he saw didn't look like any of the gang members Doc had seen on the headquarters film or running from the hideout earlier.

The bronze giant answered, "That gang is holding friends of mine prisoner."

"That right?"

Doc continued, "And they're sending lookouts to each door. We'd better get a move on if we don't want to be spotted."

The gunman was silent a moment, then nudged Doc with the gun barrel. "Let's go, back up this alley."

The two scurried from the car, the gunman careful to keep out of Doc's direct sight. He used the pistol to prod the bronze man into a small pocket of space between two buildings.

The two men stood among a cluster of trash cans. The gunman asked again, "Who are you?"

Doc considered, then told the man his name.

"I've heard of you," the man said. "You're some kinda big-time powerful hombre in the papers and on the radio."

Doc remained silent.

"There's always trouble around you," the man continued. "Either it finds you or you find it, I don't much care at this particular moment. But you're liable to start some kind of dust up I ain't innerested in seeing happen right now." The gunman asked another question. "How'd you climb up that wall? Looked like a bug running up and down them bricks."

"Bad mortar job," Doc answered. "There were enough cracks and spaces between the bricks for my fingers and toes. Not an easy climb, but I've managed harder."

"You must be part billy goat," the hidden man said.

The bronze man responded by asking a question. "Now I'd like to know who you are."

"I can't rightly tell you that," the man said. "I don't wanna hurt you none -- but you can cause me problems and I might just have to shoot you anyways to keep you out of my way. Not enough to kill you, but I'll shoot you for sure if you start acting up."

"You'd shoot me here?" Doc questioned.

"Calm as you please, ain't you? No, I'd have you mosey a ways from around here first. But I can't let you go busting in on those hardcases, neither."

"Why do you think I'd do that?" Doc asked.

"Like I said, I've heard about you. You can be a terror. I don't know how many fellers are in there, but I bet you'd tangle with 'em to help your friends."

Doc made no reply.

"But you leave those fellers alone for now," the gunman continued, "and I'll tell you that your pals won't be harmed. I won't say that they won't get hurt, 'cause I'm pretty sure they ain't real comfortable, but they won't be hurt in no serious fashion. How's that sound?"

"And what do you propose I do?" Doc prompted.

"Skeedaddle for now," came the answer. "Leave things be for about 24 hours or so."

Doc remained quiet. The fellow stood close enough behind the bronze man that Doc could have spun around to knock aside the gun and grapple with his unseen interrogator. But the man seemed to have some inside information about the gang, and Doc figured that information might prove valuable. After a few moments' pause, Doc said, "I'll leave."

"Now, I'm slipping out of here," the gunman said. "You just keep looking the other way for about ten minutes while I make my way, then you can leave, too."

"Why do you suppose I'll follow those directions?" Doc asked.

"You just will, 'cause that's the kind of feller you are."

The bronze man had no answer for that, so he waited, and a few minutes later he heard a car start up near the end of the alley and leave. When the allotted time passed, Doc slipped back to his own car without being spotted by the sentries for Gravel Voice. He turned over the engine and drove off.

Sitting within his own vehicle, Curly Wolfe watched from a block distant as Doc left the scene. Curly had been the gunman behind Doc in the alley. He had left the bronze man, climbed into his auto and driven away only to circle the block so he could make sure the big fellow actually left.

Curly followed Doc Savage for several miles until he was convinced the bronze man was not going to return to the gang's new hideout. Then Curly turned his auto in another direction. After awhile he parked in front of a Brooklyn pharmacy. Inside, he entered a phone booth at the rear of the store. After completing a call, Curly took a seat at the soda fountain counter and ordered a cup of coffee. The woman wearing the starched white apron stood at the far end of the counter after serving Curly and kept an eye on him while drying plates -- after all, it wasn't every day that someone walked in wearing a tuxedo, cowboy hat and boots plus goggles. He looked like trouble. Besides, he didn't even take off his hat.

Twenty minutes later, a more normal-looking fellow joined Curly at the counter. At least, thought the waitress as she placed a slice of pie and cup of coffee before the new arrival, this one knows to take his hat off indoors. She resumed her vigilant post at the end of the counter.

The man who had joined Curly didn't give his companion a second look, so he must have met him earlier and already gotten accustomed to his odd wardrobe. This new fellow was portly -- he kept his coat buttoned while he sat, and the material strained across his shoulders and paunch -- and very pale. His pale blond hair was shaved down nearly to his skull, and droplets of perspiration gathered at his hairline to roll downward to hang suspended from his brows over very deep green eyes.

Curly watched his sweating companion quickly spoon two heaping bites of cherry pie into his gaping mouth before asking, "Harry, what have you found?"

Harry wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and slurped coffee before answering.

"I checked around the spots you suggested, I asked around, I snooped around piers and boatyards -- that's kinda tough, y'know, 'cause there's a war on -- and I still came up with nothing."

Curly started growling about the value of Harry's information. Harry took the opportunity to stuff more pie into his face, then made quieting motions with his hands.

"I did some other snooping," he said as he chewed. "There are plenty of warehouses that have gone empty these last few years as so much production was turned over to the war effort. So owners are willing to rent space on the cheap."

"And?" prompted Curly as Harry finished off the crust.

"I checked around water, like you said, the warehouses that had been empty. I found one that seems promising." Harry picked crumbs from his plate and poked them into his mouth. "Just rented out last month. A bit of activity going on around there. Lots of coming and going."

"Where 'bouts is this likely location?"

Harry named a spot in the warehouse district along the Hudson River.

"Let's look 'er over," Curly said, and he urged Harry away from ordering a second slice of pie while placing money on the counter and growling about the ungodly price of city vittles.

Harry watched Curly fold his cash back into a colorful bandana and tuck the packet into his trouser pocket. "Didn't like your coffee?" the fat man asked.

"Weak and thin," Curly complained as they walked out the door. "Weren't even any grinds in it."

The two climbed into Curly's car and Harry directed him this way and that until they reached one warehouse standing among many that all had an abandoned look. The row of massive buildings sat on a pier that extended into the water.

Out of the car, Harry led Curly around to the side of the warehouse he had singled out. From a heap of tumbled rubbish, the two pulled crates and drums that they stacked stairstep-fashion up to a large window whose bottom half was partly swung open. Peering in, Harry announced, "Dark inside. Nobody home. Let's go in."

And more quickly than Curly would have imagined, Harry forced the window open wider and slithered into the building. Curly followed him up and in.

Curly was surprised to find that Harry had pulled a small flash from a pocket and turned the light upon their surroundings. Harry's coat had looked too tight to hide anything so large as a battery-powered light.

The place was mostly empty. Debris from various past tenants littered the edges of the cavernous space along the walls, as well as a number of unmarked crates stacked at intervals and shrouded under large tarpaulins. But in the middle of the warehouse floor stood an arrangement of large workbenches and oddly shaped pieces of equipment. Curly recognized a lathe, but the rest of the machinery remained a mystery to him.

"Somebody's been making something," Harry pointed out.

"You're sharp as a whip, all right," Curly muttered.

The two ranged over the space, finding more setups for metalwork and other sorts of assembling. Their search turned up no plans or other documents that revealed the nature of the work that had been done or might be ongoing here.

At the rear of the warehouse Curly and Harry encountered a floor-to-ceiling wall interrupted by a large overhead door and, beside it, a smaller man-sized door. This second proved unlocked, and the two men passed through.

The enclosure beyond the wall featured more puzzling machinery, a great array of tools, and a large motorized winch for suspending objects from the ceiling. The clearance was considerable, and clearly items of great size could be raised and lowered.

A portion of the floor sloped downward to the back of the building, forming a type of declining ramp within which water lapped from the river that lay just outside the wall. Parallel rails of metal ran from the level part of the floor, down the ramp and into the water. Another massive overhead door stood in the back wall over the ramp, while a slotted gate continued the barrier below the waterline. A lengthy loop of chain hung down from each door's rails high overhead and were snugged to cleats on the wall.

"Hey," noted Harry, "you could put a boat out from here right into the river."

"Yes sir," Curly snorted, "you're a quick study."

Another voice, quiet, calm and carrying a tone of authority, spoke from behind the two men. "Trouble's on the way, gentlemen."

Curly and Harry whirled around. Curly's eyes widened behind the lenses of his goggles. Harry shouted, "Doc Savage!"

Indeed, the man of bronze stood just within the door that the pair had used to enter this section of the warehouse, still attired in the guise of a downtrodden grape worshipper. Harry's cry echoed within the walls and reverberated in the greater section of the structure.

Then another yell followed from the larger area of the building behind the bronze man: "Doc Savage!"

Next came blasts of gunfire and the blaze of powder flash lighting the darkness as bullets slammed into the small room holding Doc, Curly and Harry. One of the shots smacked Harry's flash from his hand, leaving the group in darkness fitfully lit by the flares of powder burn.

Harry uttered a brief shriek and said, "We're trapped like three blind mice!"

## Chapter 11

### Thunder and Fire

Doc Savage slapped the door so that it slammed shut. Several more bullets struck the solid wooden door, then the firing stopped. There followed a few moments of quiet while Doc listened with his ear to the door, then he whipped to the chains linked to the overhead doors over the ramp to the river.

"We must leave here immediately," he said, and he began to pull the chain that lifted the underwater slotted gate. "Can you swim?"

"I can outswim a muskrat," Curly answered.

"Absolutely," Harry said.

"Let's go," Doc said. "Out into the river." He urged both men down the ramp and into the water.

Soon the three were treading water between the massive piers that stretched into the Hudson River and supported the rows of huge warehouses so similar to the one they had just escaped. Doc directed his two companions back toward the dock from which the pier extended. There, the three located a ladder that put them on dry land again.

The daylight was starting to recede, and the dampness weighting the air combined with the growing darkness and the sounds of the river water sloshing against the pier pilings to create an oppressive air.

Harry panted as he stepped from the ladder. He began wringing water from his coattails. "We're safe now," he said.

"Not yet. Follow me," the bronze man said. "Hurry."

They ran half a block until they reached Doc's car, which was parked out of the direct line of sight from the warehouse they had just left. When Doc motioned for Curly and Harry to climb aboard, Curly balked.

"What about my car?" he asked.

"That crew shooting at us knew someone was snooping inside when they spotted your car on their approach," Doc replied. "And your car won't exist much longer."

"What are you--"

That's when the air rocked with a chain of explosions. The force threw Curly into the car. Doc immediately put the auto into gear and raced away. Harry peered out the back window and saw a massive fireball and a cloud of debris shooting skyward from the point the warehouse had been standing. But that warehouse no longer existed, and the section of the pier upon which it had rested was now crumpling into the river.

"Oh my lord," Harry croaked.

Chunks of wood, stone and metal began falling to the ground where Doc's automobile had just been parked. A fierce black cloud rolled through the air, and the river's surface was repeatedly shattered by falling wreckage.

"Those crates under the tarps," Doc explained as he manouvered the car, "were filled with explosives and linked by a daisy-chained electric fuse."

"Why?" Harry asked.

"So they could easily destroy any evidence of their work."

"How'd you know?" Curly inquired, having finally caught his breath.

"I suspected you would follow me to make sure I left that gang's hideout, and I saw you tailing my car," Doc answered. "When you left off shadowing me, I started following you. I watched your meeting with Harry Portman, here, and read your lips to determine where you were heading."

"You're full of tricks, ain't you?" Curly said. "I knew you were trouble."

"But he just saved our lives," Harry said.

"Shut up, you!"

"I parked out of sight," Doc continued, "followed you into the place, and stayed out of sight while you scouted around. That's when I found the explosives. While you were in the other room, I heard that other crew arrive and then I warned you."

By this time Doc had pulled up to another warehouse. It, too, looked abandoned, and a sign on its facade read

HIDALGO TRADING CO.

"We'll get dry clothing here," the bronze man said as he opened a door into the structure for the two men.

As soon as everyone was inside, Curly knocked Harry to the floor with a blow to the chin. "You and your loud mouth! Now they know Savage is in town, you loco, pie-eating numbskull!"

Harry rubbed his jaw and looked up with surprise furrowing his still-damp brow. Doc handed out shirts and trousers from a set of lockers arranged along the wall near the door. "Put these on," the bronze man directed. "I'll have your wet things cleaned and returned to you. I'll have to retrieve some shoes from another room."

"My boots are fine just as they are," Curly proclaimed. "They been through worse."

"As far as Harry's smarts," Doc said, "I must say I was surprised that he recognized me while I was disguised."

Harry scrambled to his feet, enthusiasm evident on his face. "I study your work all the time. You used that same get-up two years ago when you broke up that Nazi spy ring."

\*

\*An unrecorded adventure that remains classified and whose files are stored in a sub-basement vault at Doc Savage's skyscraper headquarters.

Doc raised an eyebrow and gave Harry a look of re-appraisal. The portly fellow's attention was then pulled to the wonders housed in the building they now occupied. "Holy socks," he breathed.

The warehouse, owned by Doc, held any number of automobiles -- some quite experimental-looking -- as well as an anachronistic-looking autogyro, a dirigible and a submarine. Harry also spotted a workbench on which was arrayed the sections of something he thought looked similar to Buck Rogers' jet pack, just like in the funny papers.

Harry turned and the warehouse contents were forgotten. Instead, he was mesmerised by the bronze man's remarkable physique as Doc removed his soggy disguise and changed into dry clothes. Curly Wolfe also was struck speechless by the sight. Doc was a muscular marvel whose physical training had been ongoing since his youth, and his muscles rippled with corded sinew as he moved. He was a like a perfectly realized specimen that had just stepped from the pages of a physical culture magazine.

The other two men began changing into dry garb, and Curly was amazed at what Harry pulled from his pockets. The fat man had only just unbuttoned his jacket -- he had even swam in the river with it fastened -- and now Harry pulled out a sap of braided leather, a Case knife, two pairs of brass knuckles, a set of chamois-wrapped lock-picking tools, and three handguns, all of a small caliber. Curly shook his head -- where did Harry hide that stuff?

As the three finished up their change, Doc started toward an office in a corner of the warehouse. "I'll get shoes for Harry and me -- how about you?"

"Nope," Curly answered.

"I'm afraid I don't have a stand-in for that bush you're wearing."

Curly reached up to his nose and realized that the sopping and bedraggled shrub he called a mustache was dangling from one corner of his lip. He made a disgusted noise and pulled off the fake hair and dropped it to the floor.

Doc smiled and entered the office. He rummaged in a locker for shoes that looked to fit Harry, then went back out.

The two men -- wet clothes, fake mustache and all -- were gone. Only Harry's soaked and worn-at-the-heels shoes remained.

Doc checked outside. His car was gone as well.

If Doc Savage were a swearing man, he would have sworn now.

He had played a hunch, and it had flopped. He had been more loquacious than usual in explaining how he arrived at the warehouse with Harry and -- and he still didn't know Mr. Goggles' name! -- and the other character in the hope that they would share some useful information. But Doc still knew very little.



It was time to try something different.

\*

Gravel Voice swung around in surprise as the apartment door slammed open. "Barlowe!" he cried.

Barlowe was a very big man. More than six feet tall and barrel-chested, and his profile pointed forward like a sharp knife. His long jaw jutted out in a way that showed he tolerated no foolishness and no defiance. Three more hard-looking men followed him into the room. He took in the scene as Black Cat Jackson joined them from an adjoining room.

"I was surprised to find you here," Barlowe stated.

Gravel Voice seemed delighted by the big man's arrival. "We had to leave the other place," he explained.

Barlowe cut him off. "Dimples told me at the door. Stupid Smalley."

A voice called from the other room, "Smalley's not stupid! Smalley --"

"Shut it!" Barlowe bellowed, and Smalley went silent.

The big man looked from Monk to Ham, still bound in their respective corners. He looked a question at Gravel Voice.

"Two of Doc Savage's crew," Gravel Voice said. "We're holding them here in case the car bomb didn't get him."

"That bomb didn't get him," Barlowe replied.

Monk and Ham exchanged guardedly celebratory looks.

"And he ain't in Norfolk no more," Barlowe continued. He didn't explain that this knowledge came only from an unknown person shouting Doc's name in a darkened warehouse. "But he ain't here no more, neither. We blew him up with the Hudson River place." He stared at Black Cat. "Didn't know about that location, did you?"

"Was I supposed to know about it?" Black Cat asked, a sarcastic smile appearing on her face. "The Blind Man is very fond of secrets. Or didn't you know that?"

Barlowe's jaw tightened, and a darkness spread from the bridge of his nose across his cheeks and up his forehead to his hairline. His fists trembled as he stared at the dark beauty standing before him, then he suddenly swung around to strike one of his three henchmen a tremendous haymaker. The other two thugs jumped back as the third smashed against the wall, then crumpled to the floor, out cold.

The big man had already turned back to Black Cat and faced her as though nothing so violent had just transpired. No one moved to help the downed man.

Barlowe jerked his head. "We don't need them anymore," he said, meaning Monk and Ham.

"You sure?" challenged Black Cat. Gravel Voice darted worried looks from the woman to Barlowe and made sure he wasn't standing within reach of the big man's fists.

Barlowe responded with a tone of finality: "Savage is dead. And from what I hear, you brought him into this thing by going to visit his office."

Black Cat rolled her eyes as though she were dealing with a simpleton. Gravel Voice could tell this reaction infuriated Barlowe. The dark-haired woman spoke as though she hadn't noticed.

"You know the Blind Man was very worried about Savage. So I went to his office to find out if he had already gotten involved. Apparently he hadn't, until this crew of morons showed up and made such a fuss that it raised a few antennas with Savage's crowd."

Gravel Voice sputtered. "I had Dimples follow you to -- well, I thought we'd learn how to meet

the Blind Man. I didn't like being left out of things."

"Who cares about what you didn't like?" Barlowe roared. "You're not paid to like or not like!"

Gravel Voice frowned, then continued. "Dimples called and said she went into Savage's building. We thought she was turning snitch on us, so we raided the joint to get her out of there." He shook a finger at Black Cat. "And you tried to fight us off, too!"

"You're darn tootin' I smacked you boys around! I was mad! It was just another example of how your stupidity tangled up things -- I could have walked out with these two oafs no more wiser. But you brought in an entire army to stir up a hornets nest and Doc Savage's curiosity!" Black Cat shook a fist at Gravel Voice, who seemed to shrink a bit.

"That's enough," Barlowe ordered. He turned to Gravel Voice. "Get your crew together. We're leaving town."

"Why?"

"With the warehouse gone, our operations here are over. We're going back to Norfolk." He pointed at the two prisoners. "We don't need these chuckleheads. Get rid of 'em."

Men began carrying boxes out of the apartment to the cars the gang had parked nearby.

Barlowe made a gesture to someone in the other room, and Black Cat suddenly found her arms held by Smalley and another gang member. Someone dropped an empty cloth flour sack over the woman's head.

"We don't need this troublemaker any more, either, no matter what the Blind Man thinks. Take care of her, too!" Barlowe ordered.

Black Cat fought fiercely. She shook free briefly, and one of her fists popped Smalley on the jaw, while the nails of her other hand raked the face of her second captor. When she reached up to remove the bag, Barlowe stepped forward and landed an uppercut to the feisty beauty's chin. Black Cat stretched out like a lodge pole, then dropped to the floor groaning.

Ham cringed at the way Barlowe's men handled the woman. But he saw red when the big man lashed out at her so savagely while she was unable to see. Monk, a sucker for any pretty woman, howled against his gag and raged against his bonds.

That's when a strange, guttural gobbling sounded through the room. Monk and Ham stiffened against the tugging of the gang members who were working to get them on their feet. Barlowe whipped around, turning his head this way and that. "What was that?" he demanded. No one had an answer.

One of the gang manhandling Monk asked, "Won't a gun be kinda noisy for finishing off these birds?"

"Gun, hell!" Barlowe blustered. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a large knife that he quickly folded open. The blade looked sharp and fit for bear skinning. "We'll just use this."

As he stepped toward Black Cat Jackson and raised the knife to her throat, one of the crew who had been loading the cars ran back into the room. "Barlowe!" he yelled. "Something's wrong -- Twitch is out cold at his post!"

At that point, a voice outside the window yelled, "Now!" The cry was accompanied by the tinkle of breaking glass. In the act of turning toward the window, Barlowe spun on his heel and toppled to the floor like a felled tree. He was quickly joined by everyone else in the room -- except Monk and Ham.

Thirty seconds later, Doc Savage entered the room through the same window that he had tossed the small glass globes containing knockout gas that had stunned the gang of crooks. Doc had warned his two assistants of the gas by speaking in the ancient Mayan language, which had been the gobbling noises Barlowe had notice earlier.

During an earlier phase of his career the bronze man had regularly relied on a wide array of devices such as the glass knockout grenades, carrying them in the pockets of a specially tailored vest that he habitually wore. In recent years he rarely depended on these gadgets. But for this occasion, Doc had gathered a small supply of the tiny glass globes from a locker at the Hidalgo Trading Company warehouse.

Doc quickly freed Monk and Ham. The three were made safe from the effects of the gas simply by holding their breath until it dissipated, which usually occurred within sixty seconds.

The hairy chemist and the disheveled lawyer sat and massaged their limbs. Their ordeal as captives had taken its toll on their bodies.

"I knew you'd show up, Doc!" Monk crowed. "When these low-down gutter birds wake up, I'm gonna --"

"What have you learned?" Doc interrupted.

"Unfortunately, not a great deal," Ham answered. "This is a particularly bloodthirsty crowd. There seemed to be some conflicting levels of information-sharing going on with this group."

"Stop that!" Doc interrupted.

His command was directed at Monk, who was preparing to give the unconscious Smalley a kick in the ribs. The chemist briefly scowled in frustration before assuming an expression of innocence. "I thought I saw a poisonous-looking spider crawling on him," he explained.

Ham scoffed. Then, before the lawyer could continue his report to Doc, a shout floated up from downstairs: "Fire! Fire!"

Sure enough, black smoke was rising in the alley outside the window, and smoke was starting to drift into the apartment from the hallway.

"Think this is a trick?" Monk asked.

"Perhaps," Doc agreed. "There are still gang members loose about the place. Still, we have to get these people to safety in case there actually is a fire. Can you two manage to carry this Jackson woman downstairs?"

"Sure!"

A brief argument ensued between the two aides on how best to carry the unconscious beauty until Doc cut it short. The trio went down the main staircase, the two aides going slowly in the thickening smoke.

Meanwhile, Doc located a water closet and, tearing a sleeve from his shirt, soaked the fabric in water from the sink faucet. He wrapped the sleeve around his head to cover his nose and mouth, providing some minimal relief from the rapidly thickening smoke.

Next, he lifted two of the unconscious gang members -- Barlowe and another, one upon each of his broad shoulders -- and stepped into the hallway. Barlowe was a solidly built fellow, Doc noted, and in a fair fight might physically be evenly matched with the bronze man.

The acrid smoke was quickly filling the building and obscuring the bronze man's vision. The back stairwell was closer to the apartment door, so he headed that way.

The big man of bronze was briskly descending the steps when he suddenly hurtled forward and slammed into a wall, tumbling to the nearest landing in a tangle with the limp forms of Barlowe and his lackey.

Doc had a vague sense of having stumbled over a tripwire strung across the stairs, when a swarm of men -- those members of Gravel Voice and Barlowe's gang who had escaped Doc's gas bomb by having been loading their vehicles -- attacked the dazed bronze man and relieved him of his two prisoners. Some of the group struck the downed bronze giant repeatedly with fists and heels while others of their number retrieved their unconscious comrades from the apartment. After a few minutes, the group had scurried away, leaving Doc to groggily and slowly crawl down the stairs.

Meanwhile, Monk and Ham had made it to the building lobby with Black Cat Jackson between them. The smoke was a roiling darkness that stung the eyes and nose. As Monk and Ham made their way to the door, which they could just discern as a slightly brighter spot within the smoke-filled room, three figures leapt out of the darkness upon the two. A blow to the skull put both assistants down, and the three ambushers relieved them of Black Cat Jackson's limp form.

At the rear of the building, Doc reached the alley at the bottom of the stairs. The gang had already vamoosed.

Leaning against a wall, he made his way to the front of the building in time to see four men -- one of whom he recognized, because of the clothing Doc had supplied and his battered cowboy hat, as pie-eating Harry Portman's erstwhile companion -- carrying Black Cat Jackson and loading her into a car that they swiftly drove away.

Doc entered the building lobby and pulled his two assistants into the fresh air. While inside, he had spotted several piles of oil-soaked rags, which -- when set fire -- had provided the choking pall that decoyed him and his friends into two separate ambushes.

The bronze man rubbed his aching head. He sat on the sidewalk between the prone forms of Monk and Ham, both of whom groaned.

"Brothers," Doc announced, "we've been stymied!"

## Chapter 12 The Melting Mystery

Doc Savage finished relating his side of the caper as he completed working on Monk's injuries. The bronze man, trained in the medical arts, had already seen to Ham's wounds while the two aides briefed him on their part in the case. After hearing their story, Doc had called a contact at the local police precinct and requested information about the investigation of McCarthy's murder.

Earlier, the trio had left the thugs' apartment house just as a fire truck was arriving. Doc explained to the firefighters the cause of their being summoned so the truck crew would know what sort of situation they were dealing with.

Next, Doc dashed with Monk and Ham to the nearest phone they could locate -- this one happened to be installed at a neighborhood service station. There, Doc called Renny. The big engineer was still in Norfolk.

"Doc!" the dour-faced giant exclaimed when the bronze man announced himself. "The melting sun thing -- it's struck here!"

Doc asked questions, and Renny quickly filled him in on what he had witnessed. "I also got a sample of sea water from the site," he added. "Admiral Ryan had it sent to a lab in Maryland for analysis. No word back yet on that, though."

"Good thinking," Doc commended Renny. "Tell the admiral he can expect more attacks of the melting thing."

"What!"

"Yes. The crew behind it -- at least, one of them -- is heading back to Norfolk. They may have left some members there already, so whoever caused the earlier attack may still be around and getting ready for more destruction."

"Doc -- this bleeding sun thing -- it's horrible. Admiral Ryan will be rock-chomping mad when I tell him more of his ships and men are going down."

"He can reduce the risk, I think, if he follows these precautions," Doc replied. "Every ship that's seaworthy and can possibly leave the base should do so. They shouldn't be clustered together. Have them get as much distance from one another as possible."

"Okay."

"And have everyone keep a sharp eye out for any unauthorized aircraft."

"Civilian planes?" Renny queried.

"Any craft, including military," Doc warned. "We're not sure how big this thing is or just who's behind it. The admiral's recollection of his erstwhile friend, Captain Blackstone Toy, should lead

us to include the likelihood of traitors among our suspicions."

"Holy cow!"

After Renny acknowledged that he would immediately inform Admiral Ryan of Doc's suggestions and signed off, Doc and his two aides returned to their Manhattan skyscraper headquarters.

Now, as Doc finished tending to his own injuries, a call came in on the line from the private detective agency situated on the building's fourth floor. Monk took the call.

"Doc," he relayed, "some starched-whites from the Navy dropped off a package for you."

"Have it sent up," the bronze man directed. "And I have two other tasks for the operatives: First, did Black Cat Jackson stop there for screening before she came up to the eighty-sixth floor? If not, how did she and that gang of thugs circumvent the agency?"

"Second, the operatives should initiate a search for Harry Portman."

"Portman?" Monk scoffed. "That low-rent P.I. who's always begging you for work?"

"The same," Doc answered. "Mr. Curly Wolfe had apparently engaged his services to find something or someone. That's how we all ended up at Barlowe's warehouse. And I didn't spot Harry with the crowd that spirited Black Cat Jackson from the smoke-filled apartment house. Harry may have some answers that we need."

While Monk passed along directions to the operative on the phone, Ham asked, "So who is Mr. Tuxedo-and-Goggles, anyway? Any clues?" The lawyer spun a new sword cane through his fingers. His spirits had lifted from the funk brought on by his physical and psychic assaults after he had donned a fresh suit of clothes.

"Well, the tuxedo is no longer part of the picture. I saw its remains in one of the smudge fires at the apartment building," Doc said.

"So he started the fires," Ham noted.

"Apparently," Doc agreed. "As for the goggles -- I think he wears those to protect his eyes from dust. He has no eyelashes, nor any hair at all, for that matter. He may have a condition called alopecia universalis, a loss of all body hair." The bronze man paused. "From your and my encounters with this oddly garbed fellow, he's clearly involved with this mess. HOW he's involved remains unclear. Further, his presence at McCarthy's office seems to implicate McCarthy or his company in the plot."

"Did Wolfe kill McCarthy, do you think?" Ham asked.

"Possibly, but there's no way to know at this time," Doc replied. "And if Curly Wolfe is innocent of that attack, McCarthy's murder may be a coincidence, improbable as that may be."

"So many questions," Ham stated. "For instance, who is this Blind Man we kept hearing about?"

At that moment, an operative from the fourth-floor detective agency arrived carrying the package that the Navy had delivered earlier. Monk accepted the square wooden crate, and Doc directed him to the large laboratory, to which he and Ham followed.

The lab, which for its size was one of the best equipped in the city, sat directly off from the expansive reception area and study. Monk was a remarkably skilled industrial chemist but he rarely accepted work in the field these days -- his love of adventure lured him away from stable jobs so often that the considerable fortune he once owned had dwindled greatly. He would still take a special short-term assignment on occasion, requesting -- and usually receiving -- a large fee. These jobs he accepted solely for the purpose of paying whatever debts he accumulated while indulging showgirls in fast times and furious fun, plus giving in to whatever other whims his capricious lifestyle seemed to demand.

Monk opened the box and looked inside. He faced the bronze marvel standing before him. He frowned, and his fabulously homely features knotted into a tangle of wrinkles.

"This is just a box of rags!" he declared.

"Yes," agreed Doc. "Analyze them carefully. I directed the ground crew to wipe down the plane I arrived in from Norfolk. They used these rags, which may carry residue from whatever is causing these bleeding sun attacks."

A buzzer signaled an arrival at the front door. Ham left the lab while Monk busied himself with preparations. A moment later the lawyer ducked his head back in the lab door.

"It's the police," he informed Doc, who returned to the reception area. There, he found two officers, whom Ham introduced as Officer Cranford and Officer Welch. The two uniformed policemen had pushed two dollies stacked with boxes into the penthouse headquarters.

"Evidence you requested from the McCarthy murder investigation," Officer Cranford explained.

While Doc helped the officers unload the boxes, Officer Welch said to Ham, "Counselor, I thought we told you fellows to take it easy after we helped you out here earlier." He admired a shiner Ham had picked up during his recent travails. "Did you get too close to that firecracker dame you was telling us about?"

Officer Cranford piped up. "Did you find that woman yet? We've been keeping an eye open for her."

Ham stuck his chin out and sniffed. "War Department business," he said.

After the lawyer escorted the two policemen from the headquarters, he and Doc began studying the contents of the boxes. Doc began with an assortment of material taken from the warehouse office in which Monk and Ham had discovered McCarthy's corpse. There were the usual sorts of business papers -- memos, invoices, meeting notes, an informal daily ledger, a phone log. The bronze man quickly scanned each of these, his remarkable photographic memory locking in each detail.

At one point, Ham reached into a box and pulled out the same pulp paper magazine he had previously spotted at the murdered shipping magnate's office. "Dime magazines full of blood and thunder nonsense," scoffed the lawyer. "You'd suppose a fellow of McCarthy's business standing could make better use of his recreational time."

Before Doc could reply, they both heard Monk exclaim from the lab.

"Blazes!"

The bronze giant whipped to the adjoining room, Ham close behind.

The lab was brightly lit for Monk to keenly observe the results of his tests. "These rags in the box -- they're disappearing before my very eyes!" the hairy chemist shouted in his squeaky voice.

Doc and Ham peered into the box, the bronze man cautioning his aides to be wary of getting too close. Just as Monk had described, the shop rags were crumbling away into apparent nothingness.

Doc's trilling filled the room. It seemed to originate in no particular spot, but to emanate from the very air.

Doc snatched up the container and placed it in a large glass-walled cabinet that he quickly sealed, then he reached over and flicked a switch on the wall. An electric pumping sound followed as the air within the cabinet was sucked out, forming a vacuum inside.

Monk looked in. "Too late -- they're all gone."

"That frightful ape face of yours scared them out of existence," Ham suggested.

Before Monk could retort, Doc questioned, "Have you handled these rags?"

"Only with these tongs," Monk replied, "and they don't seem worse for it."

"What have your tests revealed?"

"Not a lot yet -- not before I saw most of the rags boiling away into nothin'." The simian-faced chemist moved over to a small, shallow tray covered by a metal lid, which he lifted. "Hey, this hunk that I was getting ready to soak is still in one piece." He picked up the fabric clipping -- about

four inches square -- and showed Doc before dropping it back into the tray.

"These rags had definitely soaked up something from that plane," Monk said. "I don't quite have it broken down. Looks vaguely familiar, though." He pointed Doc to a microscope under which he had mounted a slide bearing a trace of the stuff on a piece of rag.

The bronze man switched on the scope light and peered intently, unmoving for several minutes. After awhile his weird trilling filled the laboratory, then drifted away into silence. When Doc finally lifted his head, he stated simply, "It's gone."

"Gone!" Monk barked.

"I observed the fabric under the lens," Doc explained. "It appeared whole when I first turned on the light. However, the longer I looked, the fabric slowly seemed to dissolve."

"Into smaller pieces?" Ham asked.

"Into -- nothing, apparently," Doc answered, and a rare look of consternation crossed his features. "There was no observable residue."

"Hey!" Monk cried. He looked down at the tray in which he had left the small square of rag uncovered. "This one's gone, too!"

Doc flashed to the vacuum box in which he had left the Navy's rag box. "Look!" he directed.

The sides of the wooden box that faced the outside glass walls of the vacuum box were partly eaten away as if by powerful acid. However, there was no smoke, no sawdust or ashes. Only the nails remained, dropping to the floor of the vacuum box as the supporting wood boards evaporated.

Doc flicked out a long arm and shut off the laboratory lights except for a small safety light that shone dimly in a corner of the room.

In the near darkness, he pulled a flashlight from a drawer within a metal cabinet. He switched this on and twisted the cowling around the lens to concentrate the beam into a narrow and fiercely bright rod of white light. He approached the darkened vacuum box and focused the light as a small, intense circle on the surface of one side of the wooden container.

As Monk and Ham watched, Doc held the beam of light perfectly still. The circle of wood within the light seemed to melt away! First a depression formed in the surface, then it deepened until a hole appeared all the way through the plank wall.

"Blazes!"

Monk's exclamation seemed a signal, for Doc switched off the light. From another cabinet he removed a large tarp, which he draped over the vacuum box before switching the room light on again.

"Clearly, the residue from the rags soaked into the wood, and light causes some violent reaction when it reaches the chemical that Monk has been researching," Doc said. He phoned the air base that he had flown into that morning and checked on the condition of the Helldiver in which he had arrived.

"Everything checks out fine?" Doc said into the receiver. "Keep the craft inside a dimly lit hangar and wash it down thoroughly. Don't send it upstairs for anything, and check its structural integrity twice a day."

He rang off. Monk scratched his head. "I don't get it, Doc," the chemist said. "Whatever this stuff is, it melts huge battleships just like butter -- same with this wood box and those rags. But the nails, my tongs, and that plane are just fine."

The bronze man pointed to the tarp-covered vacuum box. "Clearly these porous materials are easily susceptible to this melting substance. But denser materials -- the nails, tongs, and Navy plane -- must require another catalyst. Something that was added to the large ships that caused them to melt but wasn't present on the Helldiver."

"What could that be?" Ham asked.

"That remains a mystery for now," Doc answered, just as Monk noticed the magazine that Ham still absent-mindedly clutched.

"Hey, I thought you stopped reading Spicy Socialite Stories."

"I never did such a thing!" scoffed the lawyer.

"I know," Monk prodded. "I see you got a copy right there."

Ham frowned and looked at the periodical that he now realized he still held. He sputtered and shook the magazine at Monk. "I've never read such trash! This is evidence!"

Monk's eyes widened. "That's what that maniac Smalley was reading!"

"But this came from the McCarthy evidence box."

Doc asked for the magazine, and as Ham handed it over, a small booklet fell from its pages. As the lawyer retrieved the fallen object, Doc read aloud the name of the dime magazine: "Spicy Sea Stories."

Monk asked, "Does that issue have a Deep-Six Davis story in it?"

Doc glanced at the chemist, then checked the table of contents. "No."

The bronze man flipped through all the pages, committing each to memory. Near the back cover, between two pages that each devoted one column to advertisements, Doc found inserted two slips of paper.

"This seems to be a type of diary or log," Ham said as he browsed the small leather-bound booklet. "McCarthy noted meetings and dealings with various individuals, apparently. There are no names, only initials."

"Are there dates?" Doc asked.

"Yes. Notes seem to have been entered with a span of many months -- and in some cases, years -- between them."

The bronze man continued to examine the slips of paper he'd found in the magazine. Whirlpools of gold seemed to spin within his eyes. "Check the notations for 1934," he directed Ham.

"Here's something. Looks like sometime in late July: 'Mtg HMC.' Then, a couple of weeks later, 'HMC psg LNDN.'" Ham frowned as he scrutinized the pages open before him. "The next entry skips to October."

"And?" prompted Doc.

"It says, '50T JS.' Sounds like a formula or something." Ham looked a question at Monk.

The hairy chemist shook his head. "Nothing I know."

"That's really not surprising, monkey brain," Ham sniffed.

Doc forestalled another outburst between the two aides by asking Ham for further notations from the booklet.

"This one's from December," Ham said. "It repeats the earlier formula: '50T JS.' And for January, February, and March 1935, there are similar notes. '20T HMC,' '40T HMC,' and '50T HMC.'"

"If HMC are a person's initials in the earlier notes, then JS must be a person, too," Monk said.

He looked at Ham just as the lawyer looked up at Monk. Both said the name at the same time: "John Sunlight?"

Doc frowned. John Sunlight had proven to be one of the most difficult characters that the bronze man had tangled with during his career of devil fighting. Sunlight had a face like a mystic and the demeanor of a world-beating dictator with a messiah complex.



"Consider the date, brothers," Doc said. "1934, 1935. We didn't encounter Sunlight until a few years later."

"But he could have been operating beneath our notice long before then," Ham countered.

"Possibly," Doc acceded. "But it seems unlikely he would have had contact with McCarthy in any sort of capacity."

Ham looked puzzled. "You seem very willing to dismiss Sunlight's involvement, Doc."

"It's easy enough to check out," the bronze man said, and he lifted the two pieces of paper he'd found in the pulp magazine. "Deposit slips. These will give us a paper trail to follow." He handed them to Ham.

The lawyer examined the slips. "Deposits to the account of Irving McCarthy -- both for fifty thousand dollars!"

"That matches the notes in the little book," Monk pointed out.

"Ham, follow that trail," Doc directed. "And have an operative from the fourth floor agency contact the publisher of Spicy Sea Stories. Find out who placed this ad." The bronze man showed Ham an ad on the magazine page marked by the two deposit slips:

LOOKING FOR SEA ADVENTURE?  
JOIN OUR CREW!  
EXPERIENCED SEA DOGS ONLY!

The advertisement went on with its recruiting spiel and directed inquiries to a post office box in Manhattan. "I'll get on it now," Ham said.

"Whadda I do?" Monk asked.

"Monk, contact the Navy. Find out what sort of lab results they've come up with," Doc instructed. "Then, I need you to whip up a new concoction for me."

A smile spread across the chemist's simian features. "Hot dog! I love new concoctions!"

Chapter 13  
Death Ship--Ghost Ship!

It was two hours later when Doc left his Manhattan headquarters, hailed a cab, and directed the driver to LaGuardia Field.

As the taxi drove into the airfield's gate, Doc instructed him to head toward a particular hangar on the far edge of the field. The sedan hurried onward, and the passing lights briefly illumined the interior of the car, flashing metallicly on Doc's face. Gazing out the window, the bronze man reflected on a city commission's recent request for his input on expanding and updating LaGuardia. Doc had turned in some suggestions, including his recommendation that the city not focus its attention on centralizing all air traffic at a single airport. Doc strongly believed that the air freight and air passenger businesses would experience a meteoric rise in the years following the war's end. So he recommended a series of smaller airfields arranged in a semicircle around the perimeter of the metropolitan area. This setup would keep the burgeoning air industry from overburdening a single airfield by spreading the traffic across a series of fields, each in close proximity to a certain region of the city and its environs.

However, the city fathers responded to Doc's recommendations with a resounding lack of enthusiasm. The costs, they said, were too great. Still, there was no doubt that the city would expand LaGuardia soon. Probably as soon as the war wound down.

Doc climbed out as the taxi pulled up. He paid his fare, and the cab rushed away. Light already poured out the windows of the hangar, for Doc had called a ground chief before leaving his skyscraper headquarters. The chief had gathered his crew, and the men were at work inside. Doc entered the barn-like structure through an entrance at its side, and bright light briefly flared out from the door as he passed through.

Thirty minutes later, a panel truck drew up beside the hangar. The driver offloaded half a dozen large parcels--some crated and quite heavy--that he delivered to the crew inside, then drove off.

It was still dark two hours later when the wide hangar doors opened and the craft within was wheeled out.

Despite the bright lights shining from the open hangar, the surface of the plane offered little reflection. It seemed to be covered with a dull black paint. It was still possible for an observer to make out that the craft had a delta shape instead of the normal cigar-type fuselage. Indeed, the four-motored plane was a large experimental flying wing, loaned to Doc Savage by the Army for testing purposes.

The bronze man climbed aboard and sat behind the controls. He soon had the futuristic-looking bird airborne.

He circled the field several times to get reacquainted with the feel of the craft. Doc had designed and directed the installation of baffles in the fuel cells to prevent the unhampered sloshing that had unbalanced the plane on earlier flights. Satisfied with the results, Doc nosed the wing south.

Back at the airfield, quite some distance from the recently emptied hangar, a man leaned against the hood of a sedan and peered after the departing wing through binoculars. With the craft beyond sight in the darkness, the watcher stowed the binoculars in the car, then made his way to the hangar on foot. After the last of the crew left the structure, the observer stealthily broke into the darkened hangar. Using a flashlight, he went through a desk until he found a copy of the flight plan that Doc had filed with the LaGuardia administration office. Pocketing the papers, the man left.

\*

At sea, Commander Gould stood on the bridge and looked out over his ship. The USS Dynamo had lingered in this patch of water for several hours now, since receiving the radio message from Norfolk not to come into the base. Something about the bleeding sun and melting ships. Gould had heard something about this terror, but he dismissed this rumor as some sort of hysteria -- people just couldn't believe the European war was truly over, so they dreamed up some devilish imagined threat to justify their disbelief in the face of obvious relief.

Gould was the hard-bitten veteran of many battles and executive officer of the Dynamo. His ship and her men had suffered through plenty of hell during the war. They had all represented their country with great patriotism, courage and fortitude. They deserved any relief they could find.

Besides, the Pacific Theater of Operations remained a hotbed. Plenty of hell left to endure there. The returning fleet didn't need more Atlantic problems to distract from the Asian cauldron.

The commander turned his gaze out into the distance, still shrouded in darkness. But a barely perceptible line of growing light began to mark the horizon. He had heard a number of planes during the night. Sent out from Norfolk, no doubt, to check on any tin cans scattered around the water. No rough seas last night. None expected today, so he foresaw a calm sail into port. Another ship, the Caisson, was just visible off to the south.

The light increased. Activity was increasing aboard ship. Someone handed Gould a mug of coffee, scalding hot and bitter.

The brightness swelled and the fiery globe in the east lifted clear of the sea.

The X-O of the Dynamo frowned. There was a curious pink tint to the air -- a pink that darkened to crimson as the sun climbed.

The sun. The sun was an angry scarlet boil.

Gould's eyes widened. His coffee spilled, the mug clattered to the deck.

He heard a petty officer scream.

The Dynamo began to melt.

\*

Doc landed outside Norfolk at a small airfield that had been used since the United States' entry into the war primarily by the military for craft not intended for battle. Civilian staff and crews manned the field, with security provided by a smattering of military police, who frequently had their hands full when called into Norfolk to break up fights or investigate disturbances caused by off-duty personnel.

The bronze man left the flying wing in the hands of a hangar crew before climbing into a sedan sent for him by Admiral Ryan. He carried three bulky cases, each made of metal with a dull sheen, each about the size of a large suitcase.

Doc arrived in time to enter Ryan's office with Lt. Sherman. The lieutenant greeted the bronze man and handed a note to the admiral, who had been awaiting Doc Savage's arrival with Renny. The engineer had a dour look on his face -- a sure sign that he was happy to be involved with this adventure.

Admiral Ryan frowned at the note and growled. "I sent a patrol boat out to check on ships I kept at sea last night. We've apparently lost two more to that bleeding sun thing -- the Dynamo and the Caisson. There's no sign of them. And the patrol found a ghost boat, a PT with no one aboard."

"Keep any crews off that ghost boat," Doc interrupted. "Have it towed in, but don't let a crew bring it in alone. It might still be in danger of melting."

Ryan glared at Doc, and his shaggy brows seemed to bristle. He barked at Sherman, "You heard him. Make it so!" The lieutenant hustled out.

Doc explained about the Helldiver that had flown him to New York and the residue that had destroyed the shop rags in his laboratory. "I think we'll find more of that residue on the ghost PT."

"What about the crew?" Renny asked.

"Unfortunately, human flesh is not so strong as steel," the bronze man answered. "Like the fabric rags and the porous wooden box in my Manhattan lab, a man will melt under light alone when exposed to whatever this chemical concoction may be."

"But the Dynamo and Caisson," Admiral Ryan sputtered.

"Clearly some catalyst is required to so dramatically affect the ships that have melted," Doc answered. "That catalyst must have been present with the Dynamo and Caisson, but not the PT boat. There, only the crew melted."

Renny thought his ears were scorching as Ryan swore vigorously for several moments. "Those are--were damn fine American fighting men, Navy men! And they're gone thanks to some secret weapon? Something that makes the sun melt them into nothing?"

Doc was grimly silent.

"Is this stuff like that red snow we encountered in Florida, Doc?" the big engineer questioned.\*

"There are, I think, similarities" Doc replied, "but there seem to be differences as well. For instance, the red snow needed no catalyst to do its dirty work. Likewise, the metal-destroying power used by the so-called Metal Master was sonics-based.\*\* The bleeding sun menace we're dealing with now is apparently chemically based."

Doc directed his attention to the admiral. "I'd like to take a look at that ghost boat. Can you assign a seaplane for our use?"

Admiral Ryan nodded. Twenty minutes later, Doc and Renny were in the air over the Atlantic waters. The big engineer sat at the controls of the ship that had taken him out the previous day. The plane's yoke seemed to disappear within his massive hands.

Renny sat the craft down on the choppy seas with relative ease and taxied the pontoon plane to

within a score of feet of the seemingly abandoned PT boat. Alongside the ghost boat was a streamlined Navy runabout, the three-man crew of which had notified Norfolk about finding the crewless PT. They were awaiting the arrival of a tug to tow the PT into Norfolk.

Doc hailed the runabout, then launched an inflatable rubber dinghy, in which he and Renny rowed to the PT, carrying aboard one of the metal cases that the bronze man had brought from New York.

On reaching the deck, Doc opened the case and directed Renny to follow his example. The bronze man rubbed a square of fabric over a surface of the boat or a piece of its equipment. Then he would seal the rag within a lead-lined pouch--the lead was thin enough to be flexible--and write a note on a tag that he would attach to the pouch. Each note described the location on the craft that Doc or Renny had scrubbed with the enclosed rag.

Doc and Renny secured samples from below deck as well as above. While the bronze man was investigating below deck, Renny paused to note another plane approaching. He returned to his waterless scrubbing--"I never did care for swabbing the decks," he thought, "but if Doc says 'Do it,' I'll do it"--and did not even look up as he heard the roar of the plane pass overhead and recede into the distance.

Renny was still intent on gathering samples of residue when he heard the first shouts from the runabout crew. He glanced over to the smaller boat. The men were wild-eyed and pointing skyward.

The big engineer turned his gaze. He released his pent-up breath as he saw that the sky was clear blue. Clear blue, that is, just above the horizon. For when he lifted his eyes, he felt an icy grip around his chest--the blue around the already scarlet sun was rapidly changing to a spreading expanse of crimson that would soon fill the sky!

#### Chapter 14

Threats Under Water,  
Threats Under Ground

Doc dashed through the hatch from below. He was on the deck less than half a second before scanning the rapidly reddening sky and ordering, "Over the side!"

He didn't pause to see his order carried out. Instead he vaulted into the water. There was little splash as his powerful strokes knifed his body through the chop. He reached the seaplane more quickly than if he had rowed in the dinghy.

Clambering aboard and flashing into the cabin, Doc immediately reappeared at the open hatch. "Renny!" he shouted.

The engineer, head bobbing alongside those of the runabout's crew, turned to see Doc launch another of the metal cases in his direction. Renny swam to meet the case as it splashed down. He had no worry of the case sinking; it was designed to be bouyant.

By the time Renny had the case open, Doc was beside him helping pass the contents out to the Navy personnel -- compact scuba devices. Each man swiftly donned a device and checked its operation.

"Stay beneath the surface at all times," Doc directed, then the entire group ducked below the water line.

Moments later, against the surging sounds of the water, the group all heard a pop -- Doc turned to see the rapidly-dwindling-from-existence remains of the dinghy float from sight.

As each of the swimmers fought the bouyancy of the sea water, they craned their necks to peer toward the surface. Renny gulped as he watched the shards of light shatter, form anew, and shatter again where the water met the air. The sky's reddish hue was clearly visible through the shifting presence of the surrounding water.

When the engineer glanced at Doc, he saw the bronze man signalling him with sign language. Renny responded in kind: "After we arrived in the seaplane yesterday, we waited about 20 minutes for the bleeding sun effect to disperse."

Again using his fingers, Doc asked, "And the melting was already far along?"

Renny nodded yes, then added, "The ship was nearly gone when we got there."

Doc replied, "We may have to wait about an hour before returning to the surface."

Renny asked, "Will the breathing gear last that long?"

Doc could probably last twice as long as that period, thanks to his extensive training. But the others? Doc answered: "Almost. But no."

The bronze man directed the assemblage to remove belts, shoestrings, clothing, and anything else they could use to tie together and form a patchwork line. With the articles tied together, Doc then signed to the men to show them how to conserve their air supply by regulating their air flow and breathing. Next, he had each man lash his grip to the crudely fashioned line.

The bronze man slipped his head and one shoulder through a loop at one end of the line. He gestured to Renny and the sailors, then started swimming at an even pace, tugging the others away from the tainted water.

Doc was the best choice for this chore. Trained from birth until as an adult he was a remarkable physical specimen -- indeed, was likely one of the finest athletes on the planet -- he could labor at great exertions seemingly tirelessly. Further, he was able to work with greater economy of motion and expenditure of energy than most normal people. Even Doc had his limits, of course. But everyone in the group had stripped down to his shorts, essentially streamlining their passage through the water.

The boundary of the bleeding sun effect was unknown. It might be a score of yards, it might be miles. But Doc swam on, headed toward the general direction of Norfolk, hoping to reach the extent of the deadly peril, staying beneath the surface of the water, before he and his fellows ran out of air.

The sailors marveled as the shifting light that passed down through the choppy ocean waves drifted over the amazing musculature of the bronze marvel who swam in the lead of their group. Corded tendons popped into sight and subsided, muscles rippled like running water, flowed like fluid bronze. And steadily, unswervingly, Doc pulled the group onward.

Never had the sailors seen the like. Even Renny, who had seen Doc perform incredible feats, was impressed.

After thirty minutes of unwavering exertion, Doc paused, treading water while he rested. Ten minutes later he resumed his efforts. The sailors in tow shook their heads in amazement.

Fifteen minutes later, the bronze man paused again. A few moments later, against the noise of the surging ocean, the steady sound of a churning prop came to the ears of the group. Doc, still cautious regarding the bleeding sun menace, stripped a shirt from the makeshift rope, wrapped his hand and arm to the shoulder, then removed his scuba device. He kicked toward the surface, then lifted the device into the air and waved it around while keeping his head and the rest of his body beneath the water. The shine of sunlight reflected from the scuba's metallic parts and caught the attention of the crew on the approaching craft.

Doc brought his arm back under the water and inspected the shirt. There was no evidence that it was evaporating into nothingness, so the bronze man signaled to his companions that it was all right to surface.

When all five heads broke the water to breathe in open air, the first thing each man saw was the Navy tug on its way to the ghost PT. The captain had altered her course to pick up the men after spotting Doc's signal. The craft was ungainly, homely, and her paint job could not hide the scars that years of hard usage had provided, but to the crowd in the water, the tug was the most beautiful sight they had seen in a long time.

After everyone was aboard and Doc had explained the situation to the tug's skipper, the captain notified Norfolk by radio. Then the tug continued on its way to the unmanned PT.

"This is the first chance we've had to talk, Doc," Renny said. "What do you think was behind that attack?"

"I'm afraid that my presence endangered you all, Renny," Doc said. "I think the attack was an

attempt to get me out of the picture. According to the woman known as Black Cat Jackson, the mystery man behind this plot -- the so-called Blind Man -- is very concerned about my involvement."

"Sounds like he's scared of you, Doc. Or maybe he hates you."

The bronze man had no response.

"So, the bleeding sun attack on us," Renny continued. "Do you think a spy back at the base reported our whereabouts?"

"It's possible," Doc said. "But it's also possible that someone not associated with the Navy was spying on our movements from long-distance with binoculars or a telescope. What sort of plane passed over the PT?"

"I didn't see it," Renny admitted, "but I bet those sailors did."

Indeed, all three sailors saw the aircraft whose passage preceded the spread of the bleeding sun effect.

"It was painted to be hard to spot against the sky," one of the runabout crewmen said. "But it was clearly a German plane."

His fellows agreed. One added, "From my sighting, I'd say it was a Focke-Wulf Condor."

"Didn't the Germans use those as recon ships?" Renny asked.

Doc nodded. "Usually for long-range missions and night-time transport, as well as bombing runs."

"Holy cow!" Renny cried. "Doc -- is there a group of renegade Nazis running loose, refusing to surrender?"

"They might be helpin' the Japs," one sailor suggested.

Doc offered no response, but had this newest information radioed to Norfolk.

The tug continued to the PT. Being careful not to touch any surfaces that might have been exposed to the melting chemical, Doc made a cursory examination: hemp lines, exposed rubber gaskets or other parts not made of metal had thoroughly disappeared. After all, this was the PT's second exposure to the bleeding sun. Indeed, even the metal plates of the deck and hull exhibited pitted marks. Glass, a non-porous material, seemed unaffected except for some marring also caused by the second exposure.

The sailors' runabout, a craft made primarily of wood, was no longer shipshape at all. Only a portion of its hull wallowed in the chop.

Admiral Ryan had sent out a fighter to patrol the area and escort the tug back to Norfolk while underway with the PT. Another seaplane arrived from the base. Doc sent Renny aboard it. "I'll return to land in the plane we came in," the bronze man said. "The crate should be sound. If trouble occurs, I'll land or bail, and the plane you're in can pick me up," he explained to the giant engineer.

Doc was fairly confident. After all, the crate's two wing-mounted engines were completely shrouded, protecting any parts that would have been vulnerable to the bleeding sun menace. And the propellers were alloy instead of wood and showed no scars from the melting chemical.

As things turned out, everyone made it back to Norfolk without incident.

Doc and Renny got outfitted in fresh clothing from Renny's quarters -- the spare clothes aboard the tug didn't quite fit the two adventurers. As they came out into the daylight they were met by Lt. Sherman.

"We've got some information on that German plane," he reported. "Spotted heading inland. Here are the approximate coordinates." He handed Doc a sheet of paper. "Apparently it's been through that area several times, but locals thought it was simply a captured plane used by the Navy for some invasion mission, so no one reported it."

"I'll need a map of the surrounding territory," the bronze man said. "Renny and I will head out

to investigate."

"I'll tell the admiral so he can order a squad to accompany you."

"No," instructed Doc, "Renny and I'll go alone. We'll be better able to slip around than if we take a large group."

Lt. Sherman frowned. "The admiral won't like that. But I'll tell him"

Soon the two were in a nondescript sedan barreling along a narrow country lane. Renny drove, directed by Doc, who occasionally consulted the map appropriated by Lt. Sherman. Trees stood up in the fence rows lining the road, a sign that any farms in this area had had little tending in the recent past. Soon the fences disappeared, and scrub-choked and unmown fields alternated with thick stands of timber and marshy swamp land drained by numerous streams, which the duo crossed on rickety wooden bridges that had seen their most recent maintenance sometime early in the century. The road was little more than a gathering of ruts resembling a cow path. But no grass grew in the wheel tracks, suggesting that the way experienced enough traffic to keep down any plant growth.

"This country looks pretty empty, Doc," the engineer said, jerking the wheel to dodge a sudden hole.

Doc pointed to a break in the shrubby growth surrounding them. "Stop there."

With the car hidden by the undergrowth and the engine switched off, the two men clambered out. Both turned, listening carefully. Renny heard only the twittering of birds, the chirping of insects and the whispering of the breeze in the grass that came to his knees. If Doc detected anything more, he said nothing about it.

Doc nodded away from the road. "This way." The two waded through the grass to enter another stand of trees, whose thick foliage filtered out so much sunlight that Renny wished he had brought a flashlight in case he and Doc had to remain here until dusk.

After trudging through the undergrowth, avoiding swampy areas and quicksand, and dodging tree branches and grasping briars, Doc cautioned Renny for quiet. Brighter light ahead suggested a break in the trees. Indeed, as the two adventurers advanced, it was clear the the forest ended here, giving way to a great meadow that had been trimmed low to the ground. Within this cleared area were a number of hangars housing planes. A seventh building was smaller, but still quite large. Its doors were shut, so there was no knowing what it might hold. The buildings were constructed so that from the air the structures would look like barns. To complete the illusion, a tractor and wagon were parked out in the open. Three cows also stood about. Renny noticed that the cattle didn't stir, and he realized that they were fake bovines -- papier mache or something similar. But a flier passing over would have no time to detect their counterfeit nature.

Doc motioned for Renny to remain hidden in the trees. The bronze man slithered forward on his belly in the short grass, exploiting whatever irregularities the land offered as additional cover. He had spotted only three men visible at a time -- each moving from one building to another -- but there was no clear way yet to determine the full count of men present.

The clearing was long enough for taking off and landing the planes, which Doc could now tell were all of a German design, like the craft that had strafed the group at the ghost PT with the bleeding sun chemical.

Doc squirmed up to a corner of one hangar. Three men tinkered with the engine of one plane. The plinking sound of cooling metal suggested that the second plane inside had recently returned from a flight.

Carefully, quickly but methodically, Doc checked each of the hangars. Two and three planes were housed in each, along with a number of stacked canisters that the bronze man figured contained the melting chemical.

One of the hangars was empty of mechanics. Doc swept about the place, eyes taking in every detail. He clambered aboard one of the three planes and found the device used for dispersing the bleeding sun chemical. After a few minutes, he left that plane and entered first one and then the other of the remaining craft in the hangar.

In the shadow of the trees, Renny watched Doc scurry from building to building. The giant

engineer was constantly amazed at how his bronze leader could seemingly flow and glide like a molten metal ghost without being detected.

Renny jerked his head to the side on hearing a twig snap. There had been plenty of rustlings in the undergrowth and leaves. But this noise didn't sound like that caused by rabbits, birds or squirrels. And that soft background noise had gone quiet, Renny noticed.

The engineer flattened to the ground as the chattering of a sub-machinegun erupted nearby. The tree trunk above him shattered into splinters.

Renny crab-crawled deeper into the forest. He pulled out the automatic pistol he'd brought along and snapped off a couple of shots. Fire thundered back in return.

The engineer scuttled into a depression protected on one side by a deadfall. It served him as a natural foxhole. Gunfire racketed around him. His assailants hadn't spotted his hiding place yet, so he held his fire.

Outside the barnlike hangar, Doc peered from one corner to the remaining structure on the property. The men from the hangars all came and went through the man-sized door beside the larger tractor-sized door arranged on the front of this building.

As Doc considered ways of entering the shed undetected, suddenly the sound of gunfire broke out. The bronze man recognized the sound of a .45 automatic -- likely a Navy sidearm brought along by Renny. The other guns were most certainly sub-machineguns.

Sentries had stumbled across Renny, Doc decided.

Three armed men erupted from the front of the barn. One stopped halfway across the clearing, the next halted a third of the way farther, and the third continued toward the disturbance in the trees. A human line of communication for reporting to the people in the barn, Doc noted.

While attention was directed toward the firefight in the forest, Doc rapidly approached the barn from the opposite side. Staying low, he whirled around the corner and, counting on luck and surprise, whipped into the smaller door.

No one was present within the structure, which consisted of a single large room. The floor was paved with flag stones. A black sedan faced the shed door. More than a dozen windproof lanterns were stacked in a corner. A complex radio setup was arranged against a wall. Any figures and words marked on it were written in gothic German script. Doc saw that it was cleverly wired so that the barn's roof served as the antenna.

There was room enough to park a second vehicle beside the first. Doc compared the tire treads to the tracks in the empty space. They didn't match.

At the back of the room, two metal plates were set into the floor, one larger than the other. Doc lifted the pull ring on the larger to reveal a lift such as one might see built into a Manhattan sidewalk to move freight from the street to the basement of a business.

Lifting the second hatch revealed a ladder set into the wall of a vertical tunnel. Doc paused to listen. Sporadic shots let him know that Renny still eluded the guards. The bronze man entered the tunnel and descended.

The basement just below the level of the barn was studded with metal beams to support the floor above. The lift was constructed to continue downward below this basement level. Several feet away, Doc located a fireman's pole and a metal spiral staircase that led to a lower level. Peering through the hole through which the brass shaft plunged, the bronze man made sure the coast was clear. Then he went down the spiral steps.

The walls were not covered but were raw earth and stone, left just as the diggers had cut through the ground. Thick beams shored up the roof and walls at regular intervals. Small lights were attached to the walls every fifty feet or so, connected by a metal conduit. Other shafts broke off at right angles. Clearly whoever was behind this scheme had been working on this plan for quite a while -- perhaps years. For it would take much time and effort to create what appeared at first glance to be an extensive network of tunnels.

The floor was hard-packed earth. Still, it showed multiple wheel tracks as though heavy loads had



been carted to or from the lift that connected the tunnels to the barn above.

Doc advanced rapidly along the main tunnel. He investigated a few of the offshoot tunnels, entering about fifty or sixty feet into each. These secondary tunnels were narrower than the primary artery, and the wall lamps were set farther apart. Other than that, Doc spotted no details that explained their purposes or destinations.

The sound of tromping feet suddenly broke into the quiet of the tunnels. A group was running toward Doc. Before they came into sight, the bronze man dodged into one of the side tunnels. He stepped far enough away from the main tunnel to be hidden when five men, armed with German-made machine pistols fitted with 35-round magazines, dashed past. Small arms such as these were what Doc had heard used against Renny.

After Doc heard the group using the lift to ascend to the barn, he continued along the main tunnel, briefly investigating the secondary tunnels. All but one of these latter proved mysterious, boring on into the distance. That exception turned out to be a short passage to a wooden door.

Doc quickly used his picking tools to open the padlock that secured the door. On the other side was a store room. The bronze man used a pen-sized flash to illuminate the area. He twisted the barrel of the pen to charge the light.

Cannisters and barrels of liquids and powders filled the room, floor to ceiling. Each container was marked in German, Japanese or Italian. Doc judged these to be the raw materials used in fabricating the melting chemical.

Doc didn't linger. He knew his time here was limited. He shut and relocked the door. He was back in the main tunnel when he heard the elevator descending again.

He bolted for one of the side tunnels. The sound of approaching men grew closer. Then they turned into the very tunnel in which Doc hid!

## Chapter 15

### Hell in a Small House

As the group approached, Doc hurtled deeper along the secondary tunnel, staying out of sight of the men. Just past a set of beams supporting the roof, the bronze man stretched horizontally across the tunnel, and with his feet and hands pressed against opposite walls, he scuttled upward until his back met the earth ceiling. He was further obscured by the fact that his position was equidistant between two of the widely spaced wall lamps.

A group of five men passed under Doc. Carried among them was the giant, Renny. He was unconscious, he was dirty, and his clothing was torn as though he'd been in a terrific fight, but he seemed to have suffered no life-threatening wounds.

Men in the group complained. "This lug is heavy!" "He must eat concrete blocks for breakfast." "He's a scrapper, too. I see why Barlowe said to be careful sneakin' up on him." "Lucky for us he ran outta bullets." "Lenny and Max will be patched up and fine in no time."

After the huffing and puffing crew passed and were far enough ahead, Doc dropped back to the floor. He carefully trailed them.

Doc judged that the tunnel ran about five miles -- a longish way to travel on foot underground. Furthermore, the passage gradually sloped upward, so the crew was ascending closer to the surface. The men reached a low steel door. It was unlocked. They passed through with the still-unconscious Renny.

Doc put his ear to the shut door. He heard the hum of machinery, against which he could detect the curses of the men carrying Renny. Then there was the sound of a door slamming, leaving only the continual hum of machinery.

Cautiously, Doc opened the steel door and ducked through. He had entered what looked like the cellar of a house. The boards above his head creaked as people moved about upstairs.

The hum came from a chugging generator. A metal conduit ran from the generator to the tunnel just left by the bronze man. He decided that the generator must power the tunnel lights.

Mounds of earth filled two corners of the cellar. The mounds had settled and were well-packed, indicating that they had been there a long time. Doc decided that the piles were formed while the tunnel had been dug.

He climbed a stairway to a door. The stairs were made of unpainted lumber and dirty with tracked mud.

Doc put an ear to the door. He could hear angry shouting. He could distinguish the exclamations of the fellow he'd come to recognize as Gravel Voice.

"That's one damn big galoot, but that ain't Doc Savage!"

"How were we supposed to know that? Barlow said bring him here, so we did!"

Other noises followed -- Doc determined that Gravel Voice consulted with someone over the phone or a radio set.

While that occurred, Doc slowly opened the door and slipped through to find himself in a sort of mud room -- a type of backdoor entryway that served as a doorless closet, with hooks for hanging coats and hats, space for dirty boots and mops and brooms. He advanced into the kitchen quiet as a bronze shadow.

In the next room, a dining room without a dining table but offering a radio on a worn desk, Renny lay trussed up on the floor, still unconscious. Three of the armed men who had brought the engineer through the tunnel stood over him. They were an ugly, scar-faced lot whose looks would make a jackass scamper. Two of the men each had a finger missing. Not, Doc noted grimly, their trigger fingers.

Gravel Voice sat before the radio.

He spun around and pulled headphones from his ears to address the three guards. "Barlowe says get rid of 'im."

"Won't that big bronze guy get even more het up for killin' his helper?"

"Barlowe don't care," Gravel Voice sniffed. "He don't care if Doc Savage has to lick his own armpit. So go do it quiet-like, out in the garage. Then bury him good and deep behind the garage so he don't go to drawing buzzards."

Doc prepared to spring into the room and raise havoc, counting on surprise to enable him to bring low the armed thugs and to free Renny.

But the bronze man was the one who was surprised.

Just before he leapt among the deadly crew, Doc felt a poke in his back. He spun around to find another armed man with an evil leer cracking his face. He pointed one of those German-made machine pistols at Doc's midsection.

The fellow followed Doc into the dining room, where they were met with exclamations of surprise.

Gravel Voice squawked, "That's Doc Savage!"

Renny was stirring by this time, and his eyes widened at the sight of Doc taken flatfooted.

The man who held his gun on Doc said, "He was so intent on you guys in front, he didn't know I was dragging behind him later. I guess the generator was so loud downstairs he didn't hear me, either." He laughed a brittle bark.

"All of you -- keep those guns trained on him," Gravel Voice ordered. "He's a devil. I'm callin' Barlowe again."

Then Gravel Voice donned the headphones and radioed his leader. After explaining the situation, he listened quietly before signing off and turning back to the assemblage.

"Kill him, too," was all he said.

There was a quiet moment, then one of the thugs gestured for Doc to head through the kitchen to the back door. "Go ahead, Mr. Big Shot."

Two of the men drew Renny to his feet to follow Doc.

One of the armed men led the group toward the back door, followed by Doc, then Renny, then the other armed thugs.

From the dining room, Gravel Voice howled a curse, and a burst of gunfire followed.

Doc took immediate advantage of this unexpected distraction by leaping into action.

He pivoted, grabbed Renny by the arm and swung the giant engineer around to smash into the leading gunman, who crashed into the mudroom wall. Continuing his spin, the bronze man whipped open the basement door, offering a moment's protection against the kitchen gunmen.

One of the kitchen guns chattered, splintering the door. Doc snapped up the gun of the stunned thug in the mudroom, whom Renny was slugging into senselessness with his bucket-sized fists. Doc poked the snout of the machine pistol through the space between the door and wall and ran off about a dozen rounds. There came a shout and a clattering thud.

Doc put an eye to the door crack. One gunman lay wounded on the kitchen floor. The other men were back in the dining room firing out the windows.

The bronze man quickly freed Renny of his bonds and handed him the gun. In the kitchen, he checked the fallen man: wounded in arm and leg, shock, unconsciousness. Doc gestured for Renny to deliver first aid, then moved toward the dining room.

The front rooms of the house presented hell's version of Bedlam. Gravel Voice and the others had pushed furniture against the dining room and parlor walls for some protection from the shots entering the house. The din from the guns was deafening. Chunks of plaster and lath rained from the ceiling and walls. Light fixtures jumped and crashed to the floor. Splinters flew from the window and door frames and furniture.

The racket from the interior and exterior gunfire covered Doc's movements as he slipped behind one then another of the gunmen and seemingly pinched their necks. In reality, Doc's pinch attacked a cluster of nerves that rendered the men unable to move and barely conscious.

Gravel Voice happened to turn and see what was going on behind him. He shouted, and the sole remaining gunman spun to turn his gun on Doc. The bronze man snatched up two chairs and threw them, smashing the spinning man and Gravel Voice into senselessness.

Clouds of plaster dust and gunsmoke choked the air. Occasional shots still peppered the room from outdoors. Doc announced loudly to the shooters, "This is Doc Savage. The gunmen in the house are now under my control. Cease firing!"

Next came a curse in the voice Doc recognized as belonging to Curly Wolfe: "That big bronze galoot is everywhere! Clear out!"

Doc chanced a look through one of the bullet-shattered windows. The house sat in a wide grass-covered clearing surrounded by shrubbery and trees. It was this growth that offered Curly Wolfe and his crew cover for their assault on the house. A rutted driveway ran through a break in the shrubs and apparently joined a country road out of sight beyond the wall of foliage.

Doc rushed to the back door, passing Renny and his charges, and exited. He whipped around the corner of the house, alert to any marksman Curly Wolfe may have left hanging behind. As he plunged into the foliage, Doc heard the clash of gears and roar of a car motor that rapidly receded. With a grunt of disgust, the bronze man turned and rejoined Renny.

"They conked me on the head from behind," the giant engineer explained how the gang captured him in the woods. "Next thing I knew, they'd brought me here."

Doc examined the gunman he had wounded. The fellow's life was in no danger, and he would be fine until he received more thorough medical attention. The bronze man then succinctly described what he had discovered in the barnlike hangars and in the tunnels. "I suspect other secondary tunnels lead

to other safe houses like this one."

He pulled out the map Lt. Sherman had given them. He glanced through a window at the position of the sun and checked the time on his watch, then pointed out to Renny a spot on the map. "We're located somewhere close to here. I want you to haul this crew to Admiral Ryan. Have him assign squads to enter the tunnels from this house to flush out other gang members in houses at the ends of these other tunnels."

"What about radioing the base?"

"Curly Wolfe's crew shot the radio to bits during their attack," Doc replied, "and there seems to be no telephone."

"What are you gonna do?" Renny questioned.

"While you're gone, I'll explore the tunnels, mark the ones for the Navy squads to follow."

While Renny finished binding the rest of the gang downed by Doc, the bronze man checked the garage. Parked inside he found a sedan with plenty of room for Renny to carry the subdued gang to the authorities. The two men loaded Gravel Voice and his ugly crew into the automobile. Renny climbed in. He drove off with a wave.

Doc re-entered the house and went into the tunnel. He hurried back toward the point where this secondary passage branched off from the main trunk.

The road Renny drove over had been covered with creek gravel once, years ago. Now it was deeply rutted and very rough, and trees and underbrush crowded from both sides. The sedan bounced heavily over the sudden dips and humps, and branches scraped its sides.

The car rounded a sharp turn, then the giant engineer stomped the brake. A large log lay across the narrow road and blocked the sedan's path. A cloud of road dust enveloped the auto, then passed on. When it did so, the sedan was surrounded by gunmen pointing their guns toward the vehicle. Renny turned toward his open window to meet a large-bore pistol staring right into one of his eyes.

## Chapter 16 Deadly Encounter

Renny Renwick stared into the black eye of the gun barrel. Then he focused on the face behind the revolver. A disreputable-looking hat, an apparently hairless face, a terribly fake and bedraggled mustache, and goggles. He matched perfectly Doc's description of Curly Wolf.

"Another big galoot," Curly said. "That Savage character runs with quite a crowd of specimens. I wouldn't move too much there, fella." Curly called out to someone on the other side of the car: "Well?"

"He's not here!" A woman's voice. Renny turned. The woman was a dark-haired beauty whose looks took his breath momentarily. This must be the Black Cat Jackson Doc told him about.

Curly swore. "What now?"

"I don't know where any of the other places are," she said. While it was clear from the quality of her voice that this was a strong and determined woman, Renny detected the slightest note of despair when she spoke.

Curly swore again. Renny thought the leaves on the surrounding trees might dry up and fall to the ground. He also feared momentarily that Curly might accidentally twitch his trigger finger enough to send a bullet roaring into the engineer's brain.

"How 'bout one of them uglies?" Curly finally asked.

"Here. Maltone might know." Renny saw the woman indicate the hardcase that Doc called Gravel Voice.

Curly poked his gun at the giant engineer. "You. Out of the car."

Two of Curly's silent helpers tied Renny to a nearby tree. The knots weren't tight, but it would take a bit of effort for him to get loose.

The two helpers and Curly then pulled Gravel Voice, still unconscious, from the car. The group carried him out of sight, then the sounds of car doors slamming, then an engine starting and driving away let Renny know he was alone with a carload of sleeping thugs.

Renny started working at his bonds.

\*

Doc Savage darted through the tunnels like a born-and-bred cave creature, quick but wary. He avoided contact with the few groups of armed men he encountered by employing the same trick he'd used earlier -- suspending himself near the roof of the tunnel, hidden in the darkness by a supporting beam.

He followed the main trunk to its end, where his way was barred by a heavy steel door. But a small square window set at eye level let him peer into a laboratory where three lab-coated men operated the machinery that apparently mixed the bleeding sun chemicals and stored the mixture in large metal tanks that the airplanes used for spraying the Navy's ships. An armed guard also stood in the lab.

Doc withdrew upon hearing the approach of heavy feet. The bronze man hid while a group of five men passed, each carrying a machine pistol, then he backtracked to begin checking out other side tunnels.

A few of the tunnels dead-ended as if work had been suspended before the project had reached completion.

Others led to hideouts like the one Doc and Renny had taken over. These tunnels ended at doors opening into cellars or basements. Doc did not enter further into these places, leaving that duty to the well-armed squads that Renny would summon. Those military squads would then have numbers and surprise on their side.

Doc wondered that the squads hadn't begun their arrival already. He didn't know that Renny had run into trouble with Curly Wolf's gang.

Doc flashed like a bronze ghost through the pools of dim illumination spaced along each passage. As soon as one of his tunnel searches was successful he rushed back to the point that the secondary tunnel branched from the main tunnel and made a mark with a piece of chalk. This was the special chalk Doc and his crew used that fluoresced under ultraviolet light. The bronze man had instructed Renny to direct the Navy squads to come prepared with small black light projectors.

Doc paused when the overhead lights began to flash on and off. There was no siren or other alarm. Then the lights returned to their usual uninterrupted glow.

Within moments, the bronze man scrambled into hiding within the darkness of the recesses of the tunnel roof when he heard the rapid thudding of feet approaching. Ten armed men passed beneath him in the secondary tunnel, hurrying toward the main trunk.

After the gunmen passed, Doc dropped to the floor and cautiously advanced. Men were crowding from the side tunnels, some heading to the laboratory end of the main passage, others darting into the tunnel that led to the farmhouse Doc and Renny had emptied, and most heading toward the tunnel entrance below the barn where Doc started his exploration of the underground network.

After a few minutes, the scrambling settled down. The main passage appeared empty except for a couple of guards patrolling separately.

Doc moved quiet as a bronze shadow, gliding through the main tunnel with lightning speed. He avoided the passing sentries by ducking into a side tunnel as necessary.

He made his way undetected to the beginning of the tunnel. Warily, this ghostlike apparition of bronze made his way back to the barn through which he had originally entered the tunnels. The doors gaped open. The big sedan was gone. The radio glowed with life but uttered no sound except for a monotonous low hum.

Doc stood in the middle of the floor, scanning the view beyond the open doors. The coughing and

gargling roar of starting and warming aircraft engines came to his ears. But no one was in sight.

He stepped forward to study the radio. Before the bronze man reached it, a voice commanded from above: "Stop right there!"

Doc whipped around. The barrels of half a dozen machine pistols were tilted toward him from the barn loft. More than a dozen men swiftly piled into the barn through the open doors and surrounded Doc. All carried guns pointed at the bronze man. The menacing looks that each man directed his way were unmistakable.

Two more figures stepped through the barn doors and made their way to the fore of crowd. One was the obviously insane Smalley, who casually tossed a grenade into the air, catching it and tossing it again and again.

The other was the towering Barlowe. His sharp, ugly face glared at the bronze man with undiluted hatred. He sneered and flexed his muscles, took a step closer to Doc.

"So you're the high-and-mighty thorn in my side," Barlowe said.

Doc stood silently, seemingly at ease and undisturbed by the turn of events.

"You've been in my tunnels," Barlowe continued. "You've been pretty blasted busy, I suspect."

Smalley giggled while still tossing the grenade. Still no response came from Doc.

"Well, mister bronze boy," Barlowe said, "today it's time for you to die."

## Chapter 17

### Battle

Barlowe eyed Doc Savage expectantly after making his declaration of the bronze man's impending death. But if he thought the metallic-hued giant would quail, he was disappointed.

"When I couldn't raise Maltone on the radio I knew something was up," Barlowe said. "And I figured you were the reason behind it."

Doc didn't explain that Curly Wolfe's gang had initiated the difficulties experienced by Barlowe's crew.

Barlowe addressed the surrounding gunmen. "Getting rid of this guy will solve most of our problems, boys."

Doc showed no change in expression. His apparent equanimity -- even disinterest -- might have been the same were he to discuss the weather with a stranger.

His golden eyes surveyed the gathered gunmen. Their faces displayed a mixture of bravado and hate masking an underlying quality of fear. Their ranks had bedeviled the Navy and brought death and destruction to the shores of the United States at a time when the nation was wearily -- and warily -- celebrating victory in Europe. But these men -- hardcases all, by the looks of them -- had heard tales of Doc Savage's amazing exploits. They knew that he had already escaped at least one death trap at the Hudson River warehouse in New York. They were leery of the supposed secret gadgets he could snatch from thin air to humble his enemies. And they had shared rumors of his uncanny ability to pull triumph from seemingly sure defeat.

And the bronze man's unflappable silence in the face of sure death shook their confidence tremendously.

Barlowe grunted. "I hear from my crew that you used some of your hoodoo to conk me out back in the City. But my boys got me out." The wicked man squinted devilishly at Doc. "Seems like I owe you something in return," he snarled.

No response from Doc other than the slight raising of a bronze eyebrow.

Barlowe cracked his knuckles. "You're supposed to be some kinda tough guy. Let's see just how tough you really are. I bet it all's just hooey. You and me -- we'll fight it out and see who's

really so tough."

Doc eyed the big criminal. Barlowe clearly was quite confident of his abilities. "Why should I?" Doc asked.

Barlowe pulled a slightly benevolent expression -- which really didn't look at home on his face. "Let's say you whip me. I'll be generous. I won't kill you."

Doc knew that Barlowe was lying. But engaging the man in a fight would afford him some time to find an opportunity to escape or to possibly round up this entire crew.

"All right," Doc agreed.

"Search him," Barlowe ordered, and he fanned a hand at a couple of men standing near. "I don't want him pulling any gizmos in the middle of our fight. Unfairly, you know." Barlowe's slash of a mouth crooked in an ugly sneer.

The bronze man stood impassively while the men patted him down and checked his pockets. The only thing that drew their curiosity was the snub of fluorescent chalk.

"Toss it," Barlowe gruffed.

Satisfied that the bronze man had been disarmed of any and all gadgets and gizmos, the searchers stepped back. Barlowe advanced after handing over his gun to Smalley, rolled up his sleeves, and challenged, "Put 'em up, big man."

Barlowe's fists, while not so massive as Renny Renwick's freakishly large hands, were still big knobby clubs that could surely do some serious damage if wielded well. Doc adjusted his stance, raised his bronze-knuckled fists, and the two battlers warily circled one another.

Barlowe was an intimidatingly large figure. Doc Savage was a big man and a physical marvel. Among his accomplishments was expert training in the Sweet Science. No doubt Barlowe was an experienced brawler from 'way back, but as his moves across the barn floor suggested, he clearly knew a few things about pugilistic strategy.

Barlowe's thugs shouted and urged him on, and the knife-faced crook lashed out with blinding speed. Doc dodged the blow, a bronze blur, blocked the followup right cross, feinted, then launched a lightning-fast flurry of body blows to Barlowe's midsection, hammering his ribs.

Barlowe staggered, stepped back. He raised his eyebrows, but didn't fall. He grunted and grinned evilly. Here was a very tough opponent for Doc.

Barlowe stepped in swinging viciously. Doc dodged and blocked some of his hits, then got in some body-shaking jabs of his own. Barlowe roared and howled and was echoed by the assembled gunmen. Doc remained silent within the blurring flow of arms and bare fists as the two men danced within the ring formed by Barlowe's lackeys.

Doc's knuckles smashed into Barlowe's jaw twice, seemingly bone-cracking blasts that would have felled a draught horse. Barlowe just shook his head and barreled back in with strikes at the bronze man that were equivalent to kicks from a Missouri mule.

Barlowe could take a punch.

Rarely had Doc met someone who might prove his physical match. Barlowe might prove one of those few. And the gang boss clearly revelled in going toe-to-toe with the bronze man.

Perhaps the two were evenly matched this day: Doc was operating on little sleep; he'd flown a long flight early that morning; brought a Navy crew to safety -- swimming underwater; invaded the tunnel network and stormed the farmhouse hideaway of Gravel Voice; and now he fought a grueling bare knuckles battle with a vicious and cunning murderer. Even a remarkable physical marvel like the man of bronze had his limits.

This was not the easiest day of Doc's career.

Barlowe was preparing to deliver a devastating haymaker when Doc detected over the hubbub a squawking from the radio. Before anyone could determine what was being said, Doc doubled over and

charged his opponent, catching Barlowe in the solar plexus. He drove the big man through the ring of gunmen and slammed him into the radio. The transceiver burst into splinters, its message undelivered.

Barlowe leaped to his feet with a roar and a terrible oath. He dove onto the bronze man, and the two giant figures rolled over the floor like snarling jungle predators struggling for their lives.

Several times Doc reached for Barlowe's neck to deliver his disabling nerve pinch, but each time the gang boss slipped around to escape the attempt and delivered a crushing blow to the brone man's head or body. The dust thrown up by their battle rolled through the air and out the barn door in clouds, obscuring everyone's view. But the sounds of the fight were unmistakable and apparently unending.

The shrill squealing of brakes interrupted the mob scene when the sedan that had earlier been parked in the barn fishtailed to a stop before the open doors, adding its own trailing cloud to the dust stirred up by the fight. A scowling man jumped from the car yelling at the top of his lungs:

"Dammit there's a flock of birds on the way here! What happened to your radio?"

The crowd quieted a bit, and Barlowe wrenched himself loose from Doc's hold. As he staggered to his feet, the gang boss shouted out orders:

"Get in the air! Man the guns!"

Some of the assembled thugs scattered out the door in response.

Barlowe's chest heaved as he caught his breath. blood seeped from cuts on his face and arms. One eye was swelled nearly to complete closure. He grinned his wicked grin and his slash mouth was more crooked than earlier.

The rumble of the planes changed pitch as the engines revved and the craft took flight. The thundrclap of big guns broke upon the soundscape -- apparently Barlowe had some small anti-aircraft artillery hidden in the woods around the clearing.

"There's enough light yet to do some damage to any Navy birds that make it in here," Barlowe said.

Doc started to get to his feet, but the remaining thugs around Barlowe stormed forward and booted his already-battered body back to the floor.

"Don't use the metal-melting mixture in those planes," Doc warned.

"Hah!" spat Barlowe.

Doc surveyed the deadly faces arrayed before him. The flake gold of his eyes whirled in the light slanting through the door, dimmed still by the yet-settling dust.

Traitors. Sabateurs. Spies. Murderers.

"Somehow you've called down hell on us here," complained Barlowe. "We'll have to clear out of this place. But we're not licked yet. The Fatherland has been defeated. That is the fault of the weak fools leading our glorious march the past several months. But what remains of the Axis powers will yet prevail. And from their victory shall rise anew the dream of the Reich."

Doc marveled at the zealous propoganda drooling from Barlowe's mouth. His very manner of speech had changed. Perhaps the result of some sort of brainwashing technique?

Perhaps not. Doc saw the fervor in the man's face. "How long have you been planted in this country?"

"Long enough. And I'll be here to see this country collapse." He reached, and Smalley returned Barlowe's machine pistol to his hands. "But you, trouble maker, will not."

Barlowe brought the gun up, aimed at Doc. His finger tightened on the trigger as his smile widened.



"Stop there!" The shout from the back of the still-clouded barn halted Barlowe for the briefest of seconds, and Doc -- who had slowly carefully positioned himself during Barlowe's speech -- launched himself at the legs of the gang boss. Barlowe's gun chattered in a blast of bullets that cut an arc of holes across the barn wall and roof. Pandemonium erupted as a squad of Navy commandoes burst from the trapdoor leading to the tunnels.

Barlowe's men fired and the Navy squad returned fire. In the close quarters of the barn, the racket was deafening.

One of Barlowe's booted feet connected with Doc's face, momentarily stunning the bronze man. He saw the wild-eyed Smalley pull the pin from his grenade and fling it toward the rear of the barn.

As Barlowe and Smalley scrambled away, Doc yelled in his most commanding tone of voice, "Live grenade!" Men dashed and dove for cover. Doc rolled just past the barn door before the explosive blasted the back wall of the barn to shards and splinters.

Doc stood, ears ringing. Barlowe and Smalley had rushed in the sedan to one of the hangars. They had already clambered aboard a plane and had it roaring across the field. In moments it was aloft, joining the airborne fray.

A group of four Navy planes twisted in air, dodging the bursting shells from the small ground artillery Barlowe's gang had arrayed around the area. They strafed these gun emplacements, knocking out two of the five immediately.

Lt. Sherman approached Doc Savage. He saw what was going on, then ordered his squad to help take out the other three artillery set ups.

"Are you all right, Dr. Savage?" the lieutenant asked.

Doc nodded, then said, "You still have men in the tunnels?"

"Yes, they're mopping up the remaining --"

"Radio them," Doc interrupted. "Get them out. I'm sure this place is like this gang's other hideouts -- boobytrapped to explode and hide any evidence of their work."

Lt. Sherman hopped to follow Doc's directions. The bronze man watched the aircraft battling in the sky. Barlowe's planes released their drifting clouds of chemicals directly in the paths of the Navy planes. The Navy pilots, roaring through the air at high speed, couldn't avoid the clouds, which were more concentrated and denser than the layers sifted onto the previously disabled Navy ships. Three of the Navy planes immediately began to suffer. Engines spluttered and riveted seams began to weaken. The planes grew unstable.

The fourth Navy pilot turned his craft to give chase to the flock of fleeing enemy planes. But his efforts ended when one of Barlowe's planes dove and slammed into the Navy plane, taking both craft to the ground in a flaming tangle.

Lt. Sherman had witnessed this last occurrence. He gasped and said, "They're kamikaze pilots!"

"No, it was merely coincidence," Doc said, watching the enemy planes flee into the gathering dusk. "I disabled the dispersal units of three planes. When their crews tried to use them, they simply poured the mixture into their own cabins. See?"

Two more of Barlowe's planes toppled from the sky simultaneously, as if awaiting Doc's description. They crashed about two miles away.

As Doc and the Navy troops evacuated the area surrounding the barn and hangars, Doc commented grimly, "Those flyers simply caused their own deaths. They surely melted away within seconds of releasing the gas."

The group met the men coming back from taking the artillery placements. "No prisoners," the troops reported. Lt. Sherman ordered men to head out to the crash sites of the Navy and enemy planes, then directed the rest of his men to secure the perimeter of the area.

The lieutenant was radioing back to the base when the ground bucked and shuddered like a massive rodeo bronco. All but Doc Savage either fell on their faces or to their knees. The bronze man kept

his feet, staggering as the earth moved beneath him.

Groans and explosions of noise rose from the round. A great geyser of broken earth rocketed into the sky, scattering debris and dust for miles. The barn and hangars took flight as flocks of splinters then slowly spiraled to earth.

The trembles and rumbles subsided. A great silence descended, seemingly brought down by the sifting dust from the sky.

Lt. Sherman looked up from the ground toward Doc. "You were right," he said, "about those bombs."

Doc looked over the demolished area. A grim light stirred the golden pools in his eyes. "That's that," he stated flatly.

## Chapter 18 Deadly Shipyard

When a person stands surrounded by the concrete and steel and glass mountains rearing skyward among the streets of Manhattan, he has a hard time imagining that there is a world of trees and grasses and wild animals where a building of any type is a rarity.

Yet cross the Hudson River from the City and head southwest to Newark, New Jersey, and continue on a ways, and you'll enter the brush-covered hill country. There's a feeling of solitude there, and the inhabitants -- the human inhabitants -- are few and far between.

In a cabin situated within heavy woods, while Doc Savage began his initial exploration of the tunnels underneath the barn standing in an out-of-the-way meadow outside Norfolk, Harry Portman sat at a rough table cleaning his plate with a slice of folded white bread.

Curly Wolfe, Harry's most recent client, had brought Harry here after spiriting the unconscious Black Cat Jackson from the clutches of Doc Savage's men, Monk and Ham. Harry had been held under guard at a Brooklyn hotel room while that occurred. With the beautiful Jackson woman secured, two of Curly's men escorted Harry to this out-of-the-way lodging, first stopping off at a country store to purchase enough food and supplies to last the private eye a few weeks.

The cabin was used throughout the year by hunters. Or had been before the war. The place looked long-untenanted and uncared-for when Harry set foot inside. The big detective gathered that Curly Wolfe had previously rented the cabin from Mr. Burl "Bug" Masters, owner, manager, and operator of Bug's Store, the source of the groceries that Harry had just consumed.

His plate successfully sopped, Harry popped the piece of bread into his mouth, then slurped coffee and smacked his lips with relish.

Relish, he thought. Mmmm. Too bad his supplies included none of that.

Harry had expressed his misgivings about hiding out this way.

Curly Wolfe's rebuff had been to the point. "Who's paying you?"

"You are," Harry answered.

"Then you're still workin' for me," Curly Wolfe proclaimed. "And what I say goes. You're stayin' hid out till I say so. You ain't hurtin' nobody by doin' that."

"But I didn't know this job was hooked up with any ship-melting thing!" Harry protested. "I may have information that can help the authorities."

One of Curly's eyes widened behind the lens of his goggles, and one eye squinched up tight. "I say again, who's payin' you?"

"You are."

"All right then."

And Harry had quickly found himself bundled into a sedan headed for the wilds of New Jersey.

Harry scooted his chair back from the table and retrieved the rolled-up copy of *Spicy Sea Stories* from his coat pocket. He was debating whether to read the serial or a Deep Six Davis short story when a knock sounded from the cabin door.

Harry nearly jumped out of his socks. "Who's there?"

"Mr. Portman? It's me, Bug Masters." This was the voice of the store owner who had sold Curly Wolfe's men Harry's provisions. "You left behind a box of food your friends paid for."

Ah, thought Harry, more food! Maybe there's relish in this batch. "Sure, just a minute."

Harry had just started to open the door when it burst in upon him, and the heavy detective tumbled to the floor. Two suited fellows quickly swarmed over Harry, pinning his arms to his sides and then hand-cuffing his wrists together. The two were followed in by Bug Masters. The store owner, manager and operator had a look of meek contrition wiggling about his big-eyed face.

"Oh, Mr. Portman, I'm sorry to cause you such troubles," Masters blurted out. "But when I heard that the authorities from the city were looking for you, I knew I just had to call them in."

"You didn't cause Harry's troubles, Mr. Masters," one of the suited men said as the pair hauled their prisoner to his feet. "Harry brought about his own troubles."

Harry finally got his breath back. He blustered a bit. "Who are you characters?" he asked.

"We work for Doc Savage," one of the men answered, and Bug Masters' big eyes seemed to grow even larger. "And you've got information that Doc wants."

Relish was now the farthest thing from Harry's mind.

\*

Ham Brooks, the legal whiz of Doc Savage's crew, had been following a paper trail as directed by his bronze leader, trying to determine just what the references meant in that small notebook he had found among the effects of Irving McCarthy -- the "McCarthy" of the Whithers and McCarthy Shipping Company. Ham and Monk had found the slain vice president in one of his company's wharf warehouses.

Ham had gone through company papers and bank records, leaving whirlwinds of paper and marveling file clerks in his wake.

The shipping company's president, Franklin Whithers, was in Europe, checking on the status of his business holdings there in the wake of the war.

The normal channels of communications in Europe were currently in rough shape, but things were swiftly improving. Ham had relied upon the Navy and U.S. military to make contact with Whithers.

The shipping boss had been shocked and angered to learn of the destruction of one of his tankers and to find out about his partner's murder. As a result, he had been very helpful in supplying information for Ham's investigation.

The facts Ham pulled together from his sources made for the framework of a story that might prove to be very interesting. He just lacked some important details.

Before stepping up to a leading role at Whithers and McCarthy, the slain executive had worked in purchasing and budgeting for a shipyard on the waterfront outside Manhattan: The Winthrop Shipyard. The name rang a bell in Ham's memory.

McCarthy had left Winthrop to join Whithers Shipping in a similar capacity. He had been there for nearly two years when he began making large bank deposits. During 1934 and 1935, McCarthy deposited approximately \$500 thousand to various accounts, as jotted in the small notebook Ham had found in the evidence delivered to Doc's headquarters.

In 1936, McCarthy invested a much-needed pile of cash in Whithers Shipping, essentially purchasing an executive-level position in the company, as reflected in the business' altered name.

"The economy was still blasted," Whithers had told Ham over a static-attacked phone-radio hookup, "and business was very bad. Basically, Irving saved me and the company. He was smart, too. He kept

us afloat."

The following year, Whithers and McCarthy's business was apparently much improved -- the shipping company purchased a ship building company: McCarthy's former employer, the Winthrop Shipyard.

"As I understand it, not much was going on there at the time," Whithers explained. "Irving said it was a good investment, that the price was right."

"What did you do with the yard?" Ham asked, shouting to be heard over the buzzing crackle of the connection.

"Irving watched over it, mostly. I think we were building Liberty ships there," Whithers said. "I only visited once, before any construction had started."

Ham's research left some questions unanswered and raised others. For instance, Whithers and McCarthy bought the Winthrop Shipyard in 1937, but President Roosevelt didn't announce the Liberty project until '41. What had been going on at the yard during those intervening years? Whithers didn't know.

Ham decided to pay a visit to this shipyard that had so interested the late Irving McCarthy.

\*

Monk Mayfair dry-washed his hairy hand over his remarkable face, rubbed his eyes, then sighed. Monk was tired. But his fatigue was of the sort that provided satisfaction.

Doc had directed the chemistry whiz to whip up a concoction. With eagerness, Monk had set about concocting at the top of his form. For hours without rest or food, the simian-faced chemist had tinkered in the eighty-sixth floor laboratory to create the thing his bronze leader had requested, making it match the description that Doc had laid out.

He and the bronze man -- an accomplished scientist on his own -- had crafted a prototype in the wee hours of the morning before Doc had left the skyscraper headquarters. In the time since the bronze man's departure, Monk had worked to test and perfect the formula.

He had just gotten off the phone with Navy officials, sharing his findings with them. At this point, the work on the project was in military hands.

Monk gobbled a hastily made sandwich and washed it down with a glass of milk. One of the phones rang, and when he answered he heard the voice of one of the fourth-floor operatives who worked for Doc.

"Bob Jenson here, Mr. Mayfair. We've tracked down some information on that 'Looking For Sea Adventure' ad in the issue of Spicy Sea Stories you called about."

"Great!" barked Monk -- if his squeaky voice could be said to bark. "What did you learn?"

"The publisher's records show that the ad was placed via telegram, which was sent from an office in Colorado," Jenson replied. "We have contacted associates in that state who are trying to learn more from that end."

"The ad was paid for by Whithers and McCarthy Shipping -- "

"What?!" yawned Monk. "McCarthy is the guy me and Ham found dead!"

"The check was drawn against their account for a shipbuilding yard they own. The account holder is specified as Whithers and McCarthy W Yard."

"What about that place?"

"I've been unable to raise anyone on the phone over there," Jenson said. "And everyone in the accounting office at Whithers and McCarthy seems to be in the dark about that account and about any business at that yard. Apparently the late Mr. McCarthy took a very personal watch over everything at this W Yard."

"Get hold of somebody at Whithers and McCarthy who can get us into this shipyard," the chemist ordered. "I'll meet you in the basement garage in fifteen minutes."

\*

A cab pulled up before an imposing steel gate made of riveted steel plates. There were touches of rust trailing from the plate seams and shadowing each of the rivet heads, suggesting a bit of neglect. Set in this rather forbidding-looking entrance was a smaller, human-sized door, into which was built a square aperture through which a sentry could peer.

Above the gate was a sign:

Whithers and McCarthy Shipping  
W Yard

Just over this sign was affixed a light that projected a cone of illumination into the area immediately around the gate. The cab disgorged two well-dressed men who stepped out of the darkness into the lone circle of light. One of the men was Ham Brooks.

His companion advanced and put an eye to the square hole in the gate. Inside the gate, nearby, stood a guard house lit by a single bulb, which revealed a watchman sitting at a desk reading a magazine.

The man at the gate called over to this fellow. "Say there, I'm William Barnes from the main office at Whithers and McCarthy."

The guard approached and smiled, unlocked the door, and Barnes and Ham entered.

"This is Mr. Brooks, an associate of Doc Savage," Barnes explained. "Which way to the office?"

"Head right over thataway," the guard said as he pointed toward a light over a door set into an otherwise blank warehouse wall about fifty yards distant. "Is your taxi going to wait?"

"Yes," Barnes said as he and Ham started toward the door.

"I'll let him pull inside so he's not sitting out in the dark," the guard said, and he began opening the larger gate doors.

The shipyard appeared eerie in the nighttime fog that had advanced from the waterfront. There was no work underway, and the place was shrouded in darkness but for the guard shack and the lit doorway to which Ham and Barnes advanced. Cranes, moving booms, and meagre material piles created forbidding shapes in the night.

Ham gave a moment's thought to the damage the damp air and filthy surroundings might be doing to his attire, then continued to focus his attention on the shipyard as he made his way to the office door. He could not determine through the bad light whether work had been done here recently. The attorney had a growing sense of apprehension, and he gripped his sword cane tightly. He wished that he had contacted Monk to accompany him on this trip.

Ham was on the point of addressing a question to Barnes, when he heard a sudden, gusting grunt from his companion. He whipped about, but briefly saw stars that quickly disappeared in an all-enveloping blackness.

The guard and another figure stood over the fallen Ham and Barnes, who were stretched out unconscious upon the ground.

"The Blind Man was smart to stake out this place," the false guard gloated. "That one is one of Savage's crew!"

"Gather him up," his companion snarled.

As the guard complied with this order, the sound of an approaching car engine broke through the fog. The sound ceased at the shipyard gate, followed by the noise of two car doors unlatching and thumping shut.

"More company!" hissed the guard. "Hit the switch!"

"Scram!" whispered his companion.

\*

As Monk and operative Jenson rolled through the manufacturing district along the waterfront, the hair chemist asked, "So, on that other little investigation over at the publishers of Spicy Sea Stories . . . "

"Uh, no, Mr. Mayfair," Jenson answered, "they wouldn't release the information you wanted. If you want to contact the writer of the Deep Sea Davis stories, you'll just have to write a letter in care of the magazine."

"Darn!"

Monk pulled up to the address given him by Jenson and parked beside the gate whose sign was illuminated by a single light:

Whithers and McCarthy Shipping  
W Yard

The two men stepped from the car. The massive steel gates were open, but no one was in sight.

"That's odd," Jenson remarked.

"Something is screwy here," Monk said. "Hey, there's a cab parked over there."

The pair ran over to the taxi. Just as Monk got his hand on the door latch, the only three lights that had been burning in the shipyard -- over the gate, in the guard shack, and over a warehouse door -- were extinguished, plunging the entire place into darkness.

Monk yowled a complaint. He opened the car door, fumbled in the taxi's glove box, then pulled out a flashlight that he immediately switched on.

The simian chemist instantly screeched again. "He's dead!"

The flashlight beam revealed the body of the cab driver, propped in the corner of the back seat. Jenson swiftly moved to check the man.

"He's dead, all right," the operative confirmed. "Not long, either, I'd say."

That's when a car motor erupted into life. Tires screeched and gravel flew. Monk swung the light beam and watched a sedan roar from across the yard and out the gate. He made out at least two figures inside the car.

"After 'em!" he squeaked.

Before he and Jenson had taken two strides toward their vehicle, Monk slid to a halt. "Listen!" he said.

After a moment, a groan reached their ears. Using the meagre light beam, the two men followed the sounds and soon reached the stirring form of William Barnes.

The man slowly came around. Crimson leaked from a small gash across his forehead. "Who are you, mister?" Monk demanded.

"Mr. Brooks . . ." wheezed Barnes.

"Ham!" shouted Monk. "Was that shyster with you?"

Barnes nodded feebly. Frantic, the hairy chemist cast the light beam about the area until he spotted the discarded sword cane of his friend. "Ham! They got Ham! He'd never leave his toothpick behind!"

Monk left the light with Jenson and Barnes while he scrambled for the car. He bumped his shins and tumbled a couple of times in the dark, but finally reached his vehicle. Using the car's wireless radio, he raised the fourth-floor agency that worked for Doc and told them what he knew, which wasn't much at the moment. The color and make of the sedan he'd seen rush off -- that was it.

Jenson hollered out, "Turn on the lights!" and Monk switched on the high beams of the car's

headlights. A few moments later Jenson approached alone.

"Where's Barnes?" Monk asked.

"He was feeling better," the operative replied. "He took the flashlight to check out the office. He seemed rather offended by his welcome here and the fact that no business is going on."

"From this dust," Monk said, making a swipe at a smudge and a tear in the knee of his trousers, "I'd say nothing's been happening for a while. Where's that office?"

Jenson pointed toward the warehouse to which Barnes and Ham were originally headed. "He wanted to check the files."

"Let's check with him," grunted Monk. He turned a glance briefly behind him. "I hope Ham is okay."

The chemist and Jenson had taken only a couple of steps toward the warehouse when the lights -- over the gate, in the guard shack, and over the warehouse door -- suddenly came back to life. Then the entire world seemed to turn to light as the warehouse disappeared into a roaring column of fire!

## Chapter 19

### Dealing With the Devil

Sneaky Pete Bronson shook his head. He was miserable. How long had he been here? Sitting in this chair, his leg manacled to the floor of a windowless room painted an achingly bright white? No other furniture, and only an armed guard for company. A soldier or a sailor, Pete didn't know, but the guy maybe was dressed in Navy garb. And Pete really didn't care whether the fellow was a sailor or a Boy Scout -- the rifle and side arm he carried looked rather threatening to this prisoner!

Pete had asked the guard questions -- "Where am I?" "How long have I been here?" -- but the man didn't stir, didn't speak. He just flicked his eyes at Pete every now and then.

Pete had awakened in this chair. The last thing he remembered was a hell of a fight in Maltone's farmhouse. Then, nothing till waking up in this bright room that made Pete's eyes water.

The door slammed open, admitted another person, slammed shut. This arrival was dressed in a Naval officer's uniform and had bushy eyebrows topping an ugly scowl.

"Who are you?" barked the officer.

Pete finally had someone to talk to, but his contrary nature made him scowl back at his interrogator, as if his barking offended Pete.

"That's all right, I already got your name from the others," the officer said. "The wounded one, Andy, was eager to tell me things when I -- asked -- the right way."

The officer released an evil smile that chilled Pete's bones for a moment.

"You're Sneaky Pete Bronson," the officer said, surprising Pete that he hadn't actually been bluffing about his name. "I'm Admiral Ryan, and you, Sneaky Pete, are a saboteur, a spy, a traitor working for an enemy power, a murderer committing treason during wartime! And I expect to have you shot at dawn!"

Pete's eyes were bugging. His mouth was now so dry he could not protest, and his Adam's apple hopped in his throat as he tried to choke out words, any words, but his efforts were in vain.

A pained expression crossed Ryan's face. "However," he said, "there's a man here who wants to keep you alive -- against my wishes. You may have heard of him. Doc Savage."

Pete was still. Savage had been their prisoner in the farmhouse. Then there had been the attack from outside, and after that...something had happened that turned the tables.

"Savage wants to keep you from the firing squad," Ryan explained, "if you answer his questions. Hell, I don't care about that -- he's a civilian, and this is wartime! I'll see you shot at dawn! Count on it!"

And Admiral Ryan stalked out without another word, leaving Sneaky Pete to sweat in this blindingly white room with the silent guard.

\*

Admiral Ryan entered his office rubbing his fists together and wearing a look of great satisfaction. Sitting awaiting him were Doc Savage and Renny Renwick.

"That was a fine piece of work," Ryan said. "Letting Bronson sweat awhile, stirring him up with a real fear, then letting him sweat some more -- he'll be plenty ready to blab all he knows to you, Savage."

"It's too bad the rest of those thugs from the farmhouse didn't know anything useful," Renny said.

"Even my threats got us nowhere," frowned Ryan, "and I meant every damned word. They're the enemy and should be shot down like mad dogs."

"Holy cow, Doc," opined Renny, "this Sneaky Pete is our last hope for learning the Barlowe gang's hideout!"

Ryan glanced over at Doc Savage. The bronze man sat calmly quiet. His face gave some evidence of the terrible beating he'd endured at the hands of Barlowe, but otherwise he didn't look like a man who had toiled almost continuously for three days with little rest. Ryan silently noted that with a dozen men like Doc Savage leading the war effort, perhaps all the country's enemies would have been defeated by now.

"I've gotten word that you've taken delivery of a shipment from the Department of War's laboratories," Doc said. "This should be the results of the experiments Monk Mayfair undertook in New York."

Ryan nodded crisply. "You're right. I've ordered Lt. Sherman to organize details regarding those materials. No one sleeps tonight." The base commander checked a wall clock. "Dawn is five hours away. We should be in fine form by then."

Doc stood. "It's time for me to go to work."

\*

Sneaky Pete Bronson was about to bust. Since Admiral Ryan had made his proclamations and left, time had crawled. He had gotten no more of a stir out of the guard than before. How long had it been? Was dawn already creeping upon the skies? Was Pete's doom only minutes away?

The door opened and Pete nearly shouted, so twisted tight with anxiety was he at that moment. But the figure who entered was not Ryan. Instead, it was Doc Savage!

Pete almost fainted with relief. But the bronze man was so imposing -- his figure seemed so much larger, stronger and impressive standing over Pete than he had appeared in the farmhouse, when Pete and his cronies had been armed and in control -- or so they thought -- that the manacled thug quailed a bit. Would Doc Savage really bring salvation to one of the villains who had attempted to destroy him?

The silent guard left and closed the door. Doc Savage looked down upon Pete, who licked his dry lips.

No one moved. The silence drew out.

Then the bronze man spoke: "You heard Admiral Ryan's plans for you?" The flake gold in his eyes was seemingly stirred by a sudden breeze.

"Y-yes," Pete answered, and the word came out nearly like the croak of a thirsty frog.

"Tell me what I want to know," Doc said.

"Yes!" Pete replied eagerly, his mind and emotions burdened by the silence and the thoughts he had suffered through in this featureless prison.



"What is the base of operations Barlowe is using here?" Doc asked. "Where will I find him and the rest of his gang?"

"Will -- will you help me?" Pete begged. His hands gripped the chair arms like claws.

"Answer me," Doc said, "and you'll live beyond the dawn."

So deadly was the thought of dawn in the thug's mind, Pete nearly wept at the bronze man's words. He had no thought for any retribution that may come his way later -- just surviving the coming dawn was all his strained nerves focused on.

Five minutes later, Doc Savage strode back into Ryan's office.

"I have our information," he said. His tone was grim. He nodded to the giant engineer standing by the officer's desk. "Let's get ready for action."

\*

Outside of Norfolk, far away from the Naval base, the Virginia countryside rolled with old farms and small rural communities whose inhabitants could tick off the events in their histories back to the American War for Independence and beyond, through the colonial period to the earliest settlement efforts in the area.

Scattered throughout this part of the state were pockets of settlement -- not shared by villages of neighbors, but scratched out of the one-time wilderness by single families, clannish in their habits, rarely seeking the company of others outside their bloodline except when absolutely necessary.

One such homestead sat in a ragged-edged clearing amid a wild tangle of thick woods. A two-story farmhouse and four outbuildings sat in the clearing, along with a scattering of cars and two tractors hooked up to large, long, enclosed trailers. Those who lived in the region barely knew the names or faces of those who lived and struggled to survive on this patch of land, but everyone knew of their independent and cantankerous ways. And anyone who knew that about the family living there thus made strong efforts to steer clear from those folks' paths.

The family name associated with this farm was Scott. But in reality, no one of that name resided there now. The destiny of those one-time landowners was unknown to any except, perhaps, to one or two people now within the low farmhouse at the edge of the clearing. One of those men was likely the ugly and evil man named Barlowe.

Barlowe stalked within the farmhouse now. He downed black coffee from a cracked mug while he moved from room to room. The few men awake stayed out of his way, for the vicious expression he carried -- marred beyond its usual ugliness by the marks left from the battle with Doc Savage -- showed clear that a volcano of anger -- though silent and contained now -- lay ready to erupt at the slightest provocation.

More than one of the gang members thought their boss was jumpier than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rockers, and for that reason, each man kept his mouth shut.

The sounds of sleeping men drifted down the stairs from what was little more than a loft in the house. Snores, snorts, and sleepy mutters. Anyone who knew the voice of the man known as Smalley recognized the giggling sighs drifting from the loft as his sleeping sounds. Rest had become a precious commodity among these men.

But surely even those resting gang members were roused from sleep when Barlowe stomped the kitchen floor and angrily shouted, "Where are those damn Killer Kalbs?!"

One man dared to answer: "They're making a practice run on Number Two to check out those repairs, boss."

Barlowe swung around swiftly and viciously swatted the man a backhanded blow that smacked him to the floor. "I know that, fool!" The rest of the crew cringed.

Just then the kitchen door banged opened and in strode two men dressed in rubber raincoats and galoshes -- even though the sky showed not the slightest hint of rain. "Finally!" shouted Barlowe.

He poured coffee for both from an enamel pot simmering on the wood-burning stove arranged in a

corner of the room by a woodbox. "Here you go, Big Boy, Skeeter."

Big Boy Kalb was just that -- tall and broad. There was a bearish look to his form, and his raincoat seemed a tad tight about the shoulders.

Skeeter Kalb was slim like a reed. His coat swallowed him like a tent that had lost its pegs and poles.

But their sprightly monikers had little to do with the Kalbs' expressions or demeanors. Both appeared to wear a perpetual snarl, and their eyes caught the light in angry yellow glints.

The scowling pair slurped their coffee eagerly, and Barlowe gave each refills, which they attacked with alacrity. Impatient for this spate of gluttony to end, Barlowe prompted, "Well?"

"Everything's set from our end," Big Boy answered. "We've been working all night --"

"Till this prop problem popped up," Skeeter continued for his brother. "Even with the time out for repairs --"

"We'll be done by dawn," Big Boy said.

Barlowe opened his mouth, but before he could speak, all in the house heard a fusillade of shots erupt from a distance -- the volume suggested that the noise came from the edge of the property.

"The sentries!" Barlowe said.

A scattering of gun noises replied to the initial burst. Everyone in the house listened intently to the sporadic continuation of the firefight as to a radio drama. Finally, silence.

A few minutes later, the kitchen door popped open. In walked two of Barlowe's men with guns trained on Curly Wolfe and Black Cat Jackson.

One of the newly entered crew spoke up: "These two were leading a group trying to sneak onto the grounds. We blasted the rest of their gang. Thought you'd wanna talk to these two," he said, and gestured with his gun at Black Cat Jackson, "particularly this one."

Barlowe's knife-slash of a mouth twisted in a grimace. He glared at the dark beauty standing disarmed but unbowed before him. Clearly he remained unfazed by her looks.

"You're a damned nuisance," he said. "I didn't like it when the Blind Man brought you in on things, but he had his reasons, I guess. Now you're still a thorn in my side. If that blasted bronze man hadn't interfered, you'd be dead by now and I'd be shed of you."

He turned to Curly Wolfe. "And who the hell are you?"

Curly's goggles hung from one ear, the strap broken close to the eyepiece on one side. Still, he didn't appear a ridiculous figure -- he bristled with indignation and pure cussedness.

"What's it to you?" he spat.

Any person in the house could almost feel the air pressure change as every member of the gang suddenly held his breath. Barlowe's eyes twitched. His gaze became a fiery beam that burned its way toward Curly's eyes, but the crusty fellow glared right back, unshaken.

Barlowe's voice revealed barely restrained fury. "I'm the devil who's got a houseload of guns ready to wipe you off the earth. There won't even be a greasy spot left to bury when I'm through with you."

Curly Wolfe actually smiled. There was almost a twinkle accompanying the determination in his eyes. "Good. You can be the devil, I don't give a damn so long as you know it. I'm looking for someone, and I bet you're just the devil to tell me where to find him."

Clearly, Barlowe was surprised. His eyebrows popped up and his mouth dropped open.

"We've been working against one another, but it doesn't have to be that way," Curly continued.

"Why, the way I see it, you've got the Navy hoodwinked -- all from right here inside the very U. S.

of A. You keep that up, you must have some powerful backing. Things might change in the way things are run in this country. And then you might need somebody like me."

Barlowe turned a doubly hard scowl at the man. "Just who are you?"

"Folks call me Curly, Curly Wolfe. I'm a wildcatter, filled my bank by hitting it big in oil country. Drilling, fuel and energy, I know 'em backwards and forwards."

"How are you tied in with Jackson, here?" Barlowe asked.

"She's my daughter."

"What?!" Barlowe looked ready to explode again. "I should kill you just for that!"

Barlowe raged further, but Curly remained unperturbed. When the gang boss settled down a bit, Curly continued.

"Catherine is my daughter, as I said. Married this young feller, an inventor type. He came to me with this idea for an easy mining technique, reducing time and costs. I laughed him off, shooed him away. Sounded like Flash Gordon stuff to me. Besides, I was an oil man. Drilling was all the world I figured to know.

"So the boy goes off in a huff, claims he's gonna prove his ideas to me by finding somebody who's got more brains than me to put his ideas to work. Guess I don't blame him. Figure we're probably both kinda hard headed.'"

Curly craned his neck around the kitchen. "Say, you got any more of that coffee I smell?"

"Finish your tale!" Barlowe roared.

"So the boy disappears. Hiram, his name is. Ran off without Cat, here, which pleased me none at all and blame near made my daughter riled up enough to start taking pot shots at the hired hands. But then Hiram wrote and said he'd got hooked up with some feller who was going to put his ideas to work.

"Cat got a few more letters, then nothing. I figured Hiram was deep into cogitatin' and working on his invention. But Cat took off after him. Somehow she ciphered out where Hiram'd gone. And she hooked up with this feller she calls the Blind Man, the guy Hiram was working for."

Black Cat Jackson had stood by silent and impassive during this entire oration. Her eyes flashed occasionally as her gaze roved the room and spotted men who had previously taken orders from her.

"The Blind Man always told her that Hiram was squirreled away working on his idea. I guess she convinced this blind feller to let her help out more, so he gave her some authority and sent her east with some of his crew. She let me know that Hiram's idea was fixing to be put to work, but in a different way than he'd proposed to me. So I came east to see for myself."

"And?" prompted Barlowe.

"Dang if it ain't some kinda impressive Flash Gordon action after all," Curly replied. "I've seen what it'll do to them big ships. I reckon it would be just the thang for mining minerals, just like Hiram said."

"I thought you were strictly an oil man?"

"I've seen the future -- Hiram's idea would work like a charm. So I'm expanding my area of interests. And after you've conquered the country, you'll be needing a savvy guy like me to get those metals out of the ground to get the manufacturing industries back on the git-go."

Barlowe jerked his thumb at Black Cat and growled. "She's caused me a lot of trouble."

"She's an ornery child, I agree, and her stubborn streak is mainly my fault, her raisin' being mainly my responsibility since her ma died early. I guess I just didn't instill a lot of feminine shy-and-retiring qualities in her. Cat's a spunky gal, and her frettin' over Hiram got her ire up with everyone, including me. If the Blind Man had just let her get together with Hiram months ago, I'm sure none of these problems with you boys woulda ever come about."

"She brought Doc Savage into this!" Barlowe screamed full into Curly's face. But the oil man merely shrugged.

"Way I heard it, Cat wanted to distract that big bronze galoot onto some wild goose chase. She was just checking to see if he was sniffin' around Hiram's idea and was going to divert him when your jumpy boys bungled everything by bustin' in on her play at Savage's headquarters."

Barlowe got twitchy. "How did you find this place?"

"Maltone," Black Cat said, speaking up for the first time. "I knew where he was stationed, but Doc Savage broke up that place. We hijacked his man Renny and stole Maltone away. I knew he'd know where to find you."

"Where's Maltone now?" Barlowe asked.

"Tied up in one of our cars, parked on that cow path they call a lane to this place," the dark-haired woman answered.

Barlowe jerked his head to two of his gang. They left to retrieve the gravel-voiced thug named Maltone.

Barlowe turned back to the father and daughter. "So you found me. What do you want?"

"I want Hiram!" Black Cat answered.

"I want to make a deal," Curly said.

"Hiram ain't here," Barlowe said. "The Blind Man must know where he is, but I sure don't. And what kind of deal?"

"Like I said, I wanta use Hiram's idea for mining for the Blind Man when all this stuff winds down," Curly said.

"But I killed all your gang," Barlowe retorted. "Ain'tcha mad at me?"

"I'm a businessman," Curly said. "I didn't wildcat oil to make friends. I worked to make money. A deal with this Blind Man will make me more money. Those fellers your gang shot down -- well they were just hired hands I picked up in New York City. Losers, mainly, who'd do anything fer cash. They don't mean nothin' to me."

Barlowe squinted at Curly. "And what if Doc Savage shows up?"

"Just gimme my gun back," Curly exclaimed, "and I'll plug him square!"

"That's just fine," Barlowe said. He turned and addressed the Kalb brothers. "Get back to work."

The two rain-coated men left. Curly asked, "What's going on?"

Barlowe grinned satanically. "Thanks to those two gents, every Navy ship in Norfolk will be wiped out at dawn!"

## Chapter 20 Deadly Skies

Monk was frantic. There had been no word, sight or sign of Ham.

The frightfully simian-faced chemist and operative Jenson had been detained awhile answering police questions. A quick call to war department authorities cut through most of the red tape the men would have normally had to tangle with.

The blasted and burned wreckage at the shipyard revealed the remains of only one body, apparently that of Barnes. Monk shuddered, then breathed a sigh of relief: At least Ham hadn't been inside when the warehouse was destroyed.

"They musta booby-trapped the place to blow when the lights were switched on," Monk surmised.

"Then Barnes wasn't part of their devilishness," Jenson said.

"They're bad eggs," Monk said. "And they must have Ham!"

Back at Doc's eighty-sixth floor headquarters, Monk paced in circles like a worried ape at the zoo. The police and Doc's operatives were searching for the hairy chemist's combative friend. Trains, bus terminals and airports had been checked and were being watched. Crews patrolled the docks. But no sign of the lawyer had appeared.

It had been a long night for Monk, and it was not yet dawn. Dark circles ringed his eyes. He was jumpy with worry. So when the ringing phone suddenly broke the silence, Monk nearly hopped out of his shoes.

"Is this that ape, Mayfair?" a gruff voice asked after the chemist answered. "We got your buddy Brooks. Tell Savage to call off his work for the Navy or your clothes-horse pal gets the deep six!"

"Doc can't stop -- he's workin' for the War Department!" squeaked Monk. "Besides, when he gets hold of you, your goose is cooked if you harm Ham!"

"Hah!" retorted the gruff voice. "He'll never get hold of us. We're taking your pal Brooks to Japan!"

"What?!" Monk sputtered.

"Tell Savage what I said!" And he broke the connection.

\*

Four outbuildings were arranged in no discernable order around the clearing surrounding Barlowe's farmhouse. One was low and long. Two others were tall and slender, and both stood with a precarious-seeming slant. The fourth was a garage housing a broken-down buckboard wagon.

Dismissed by the vicious gang chief, the Killer Kalbs stepped from the porch fronting the house and advanced toward the low and long building. Suddenly Big Boy whirled back and said, "I heard somebody --"

"And he's there!" finished Skeeter.

Both whipped pistols from the pockets of their raincoats and fired a hail of bullets at the shadowed corner of the house. Then they turned and rushed to the outbuilding that was their original goal.

The Kalbs were right. The figure haunting the shadows was Doc Savage.

Doc stepped behind the house corner for protection from the shots. As soon as the raincoated assailants ceased their gunplay, the bronze man started after them. But immediately scores of guns opened fire on the farmhouse from the woods surrounding the clearing. Doc flattened on the ground. Suddenly return fire erupted from the windows of the house.

Caught in a crossfire, Doc rolled under the porch.

Doc had arrived at the clearing in advance of Renny and the Navy squads to reconnoiter. He had slipped past Barlowe's sentries that patrolled the borders of the property. He had tried getting inside the two tall outbuildings, but to no avail. When the Kalbs exited the low building to enter the farmhouse, the bronze man investigated that structure. What he found did not surprise him.

A few minutes later he had heard the firefight that resulted in the capture of Curly Wolfe and Black Cat Jackson. Doc had glided to a window and overheard Barlowe's interrogation of his two prisoners.

Now he was pinned down under the porch -- the Navy probably started its attack upon hearing the gunshots loosed by the Kalbs.

As with many structures of this type, the farmhouse rested on low columns of stacked stone that resulted in a relatively open crawlspace beneath the house. Doc rolled and crawled toward the back

of the building. Occasional ricochets whined past and threw up shards of chipped rock dangerous as shrapnel grenades.

Doc encountered one puzzling obstacle -- a circular pillar of smooth stone or poured concrete, roughly three feet in diameter, rising vertically from the ground to the floor of the house. Moving around this article, the bronze man reached the back of the house.

Lying on his back, protected from flying bullets by a thick support made of cut stone, Doc peered up at a screened-in back porch. The arms and rifle of a gang member extended out the partially open screen door, firing into the darkness.

Doc reached up, grabbed an arm, and yanked the man out and to the ground. The gunman squawked once, but Doc quickly pummeled him into unconsciousness.

Doc slipped up and through the door. He stayed low on the porch floor, for the Navy -- not seeing the bronze man in the darkness -- continued pouring bullets his direction.

A hunched-over figure opened the door to the kitchen and crab-walked out to the porch. "Lefty?" he said.

A powerful uppercut from Doc had the thug momentarily defying gravity before stretching flat on the floor, unconscious.

Doc's talk with Sneaky Pete Bronson had moved him to prepare for his trip to Barlowe's stronghold by provisioning with items he had brought from aboard the flying wing. He wore his rarely used, many-pocketed vest, from which he now pulled three small devices. Each was the size of a matchbox.

He twisted the end of one item, the lobbed it into the kitchen and tightly closed his eyes. The interior of the house was suddenly brightly illuminated by the flash bomb.

Doc dashed inside. Yells of dismay filled the kitchen as gunmen dropped their weapons to claw at their temporarily blinded eyes.

Doc tossed off the remaining two flash bombs into the other rooms of the farmhouse. Then he whirled through the kitchen, swiftly disabling gang members with nerve pinches and terrific blows of his fists.

Black Cat Jackson and Curly Wolfe huddled behind the overturned kitchen table, unarmed but somewhat protected from the Navy gunfire that had abated as return fire from the house ceased. Doc directed, "Wolfe! Jackson! Stay down!"

Barlowe staggered into the kitchen, still toting a machine pistol, and heard the bronze man's instructions. "Savage!" he shouted, then triggered a hail of bullets from his gun that maimed a number of his own crew.

Doc dodged easily. But Barlowe rushed for the wood box by the stove -- although blinded by the flash bombs, the gang chief knew his way around the house by heart.

The box apparently was fitted with hidden casters, for Barlowe easily wheeled it from the corner. An opening to a tunnel was revealed. The evil-faced villain dove down this hole.

Doc's pursuit was halted by the insane giggling of Smalley. The bronze man looked up. Smalley stood on the edge of the loft and armed a large grenade.

Doc snapped up the leg of a broken chair and tossed it as Smalley launched his explosive into the room. "Down!" shouted the bronze man.

The chair leg hit the grenade, knocking it back into the loft. The sharp blast that immediately followed blew Smalley out one of the bullet-shattered windows. The mad bomber's career was ended.

The Navy attack squad was breaking down the remains of the doors as Doc dashed for Barlowe's bolt hole. He knew the blindness would soon wear off, and Doc would quickly lose his advantage over the gang boss.

The tunnel drove down into the ground about ten feet. Doc knew this tunnel's presence explained the smooth pillar he'd encountered under the house.

Doc landed in a horizontal passage. Walls, floor and ceiling formed a rough square, and they were lined with cut stone. There was no light but for a dim glow from ahead.

Doc heard Barlowe's steps clattering on the rock. The bronze man dashed in pursuit.

The sound of rapid steps, carried down the echoing corridor, ceased. A voice rapidly shouting orders came next, followed by a sharp crash.

The bronze man quickly reached a large chamber littered with tools from an overturned workbench. A radio transceiver, its case and innards smashed by a hammer that protruded from its remains, explained the crash Doc heard.

Two other items captured Doc's attention: Two rockets, about twice the size of a man and constructed with short wings at midsection and tail, pointed skyward and attached to two launch rails. These extended beyond the roof of the chamber into tunnel-like projections. Doc briefly oriented himself to the aboveground layout and determined that these launch rails undoubtedly ran up through the two narrow and tall outbuildings near the farmhouse.

Barlowe had already clambered into one of these rockets. As he ignited the jets, fire flew across the floor of the chamber in a deafening roar. Doc backed into the entrance tunnel for protection. Barlowe's jet rocketed up its rails and disappeared.

Doc leaped into the remaining jet. A source inside military intelligence kept him updated with reports about technology developments, so he recognized these one-man jets as innovations developed by the Nazis in recent years to battle the U.S. Army Air Force during the latter's bombing raids into Germany. The jets used a combination of liquid and solid fuel.

Doc strapped himself in. He lay prone, facing the nose of the jet, half of which offered a transparent windscreen for visibility. Doc looked over the controls, compared them to what he had learned from the intelligence reports, then fired the ignition.

The jet roared up the rails, blew the top off the narrow launch building, and leaped into the sky.

Immediately the force of more than two gravities pressed against the bronze man's mighty frame. But Doc's lifetime of intense training allowed him to ignore the discomfort. He focused on controlling the jet's flight direction and locating Barlowe's craft ahead of him.

The launch rockets ceased firing. The six turbojets circling the jet body just back of the midsection took over. Doc flipped a switch, and locks disengaged so that the jet's four solid-fuel booster rockets were jettisoned.

The miniature craft's flight leveled off. Doc spotted the fire from Barlowe's turbothrusters ahead.

The jet was armed with two 30 mm cannons, each mounted on opposite sides of the cockpit. The temptation to shoot Barlowe out of the sky was very real. But Doc hoped that the gang chief would lead him to a last, unsuspected stronghold for the spy ring.

So Doc followed Barlowe through the night sky.

They flew over farmland, so the landscape was dark. But ahead, rapidly approaching, Doc saw a swiftly growing light. The single light soon became discernable as two separate lights. Large lights, perhaps bonfires.

Barlowe was headed in their direction, trailed by Doc. The bronze man noticed that Barlowe's craft was losing altitude. Soon his own jet was doing the same. The limited fuel supply was rapidly being depleted.

The flame from Barlowe's turbos sputtered into darkness. Doc detected a brief flash from the darkened body of the jet. Then against the firelight he saw a parachute. Barlowe had ejected from the falling jet.

Doc's turbos burped and went silent. He pulled at the yoke, trying to glide closer to Barlowe's landing site before having to bail out. But the now-dead jet was swiftly hurtling to earth.

Doc pulled a lever. Explosive bolts blew his cockpit capsule free of the jet body with the same brief flash he had observed of Barlowe's ship. A parachute unfurled from the end of the capsule, and Doc began a swaying descent to earth.

While approaching ground, Doc determined that what he thought were bonfires were actually burning buildings. Hangars, in fact. One housed two planes, another held only one, and all three were being consumed by flames.

A third, smaller building stood untouched by fire. The firelight revealed a figure that moved about a fourth, undamaged plane, preparing it for flight. Undoubtedly Barlowe had radioed from the underground chamber for this plane to be readied and the others destroyed to frustrate attempts to follow him further.

As Doc watched, Barlowe's capsule touched ground, and the gang chief leaped out. On the run toward the warmed-up plane, he pulled a gun and shot down the man who stood alongside the craft. Barlowe boarded the ship.

Doc landed just as Barlowe roared into the air. Like a cat with nine lives, Barlowe was still at large.

The bronze man knelt by the man Barlowe had shot down. Dead.

He glanced at the hangars caught in their infernos. The planes were beyond saving.

He looked up at the sky before dashing over to the undamaged radio shack. Barlowe was heading west.

\*

The radio was in working condition. Doc reached Renny through the radioman assigned to the Navy squad that had raided Barlowe's farmhouse. The bronze man explained that he was now about twenty miles from the house.

He issued some instructions, then broke contact and radioed the airfield where he had left the flying wing he had piloted from New York.

His third call went to the Navy base with information for Admiral Ryan that he had gleaned from eavesdropping on Barlowe's conversation with Curly Wolfe and Black Cat Jackson.

Completing his transmissions, Doc located and set out smudge pots along a landing track. He lit each pot.

Twenty minutes later, a small plane landed and picked him up. The pilot whisked the bronze man to the hangar that housed the flying wing.

While preflight preparations were underway, Renny drove up in an official Navy vehicle.

Within five minutes, Doc and the giant engineer were airborne aboard the flying wing.

\*

A thread-thin line of light -- the barest hint of dawn -- marked the horizon. But the Atlantic waters were still black as pitch beneath the wings of Doc Savage's aircraft.

Renny focused on the dark skies ahead. Bright flashes intermittently spotted the sky.

"Holy cow, Doc, that looks like quite a battle up there."

"I'm sure it is," the bronze man replied. "I let Admiral Ryan know that Barlowe had ordered a major offensive against the fleet."

Renny adjusted his headphones and tuned in the radio frequency used by the Navy craft. "You're right, Doc! The ships are trying to blow those Nazi planes out of the sky -- Barlowe's crews are releasing clouds of that bleeding sun chemical into the air."

Doc didn't answer. He was focusing his attention on the ocean waters below, peering through special goggles of his own devising.



"What are you looking for?" the engineer asked.

"Remember that I said the bleeding sun chemical apparently needed some catalyst to make it utterly effective against the Navy ships? We're searching for the delivery method of that catalyst: submarines."

"Subs? But that tanker that blew up in the Port of Boston -- the depth wasn't great enough for a sub to reach it there."

"Not a full-size submarine," Doc explained, "but a miniature sub, big enough for only one or two people."

"What?"

"I checked out that low outbuilding at Barlowe's farm. It actually held three bays for such compact subs as I described. Two bays were occupied."

"But that farm is landlocked," Renny sputtered.

"The bays seemed quite deep," Doc continued. "Knowing this crew's tunneling tendencies, I'd say they dug underground channels to a nearby river deep enough for the subs to navigate. The channel would give them access to the ocean."

"That would make them nearly impossible to locate by anyone simply searching the coast or any obvious spots like inlets."

"Right. I marked the two subs with a compound from one of my vest pockets. I had the hangar crew attach one of our black light projectors to the underbody of the flying wing. I hope I'll be able to pick up the markings with these goggles through the ocean water."

Renny returned his attention to the radio signals. "Apparently the Navy ships have downed most of Barlowe's planes," he reported. "The last three have high-tailed it outta there!"

"The admiral's men will capture them -- they really have nowhere to hide now, and the rest of their local gang is wiped out."

Before Renny could reply, "There!" Doc said. He'd located the two subs. They were running parallel courses below the surface, speeding away from the fleet. "The hangar crew equipped us with four air-to-sea missiles. They'll act like depth charges to those subs. Send one just off their bows as a warning to stop and surface."

Renny, who had also donned the special goggles, sighted their quarry. He armed and touched off one of the rockets.

A geyser of water climbed the air ahead of the subs.

"I bet that rocked 'em!" A particularly dour expression took over the engineer's face, evidence of his great joy. "Doc, they're separating and speeding up."

The man of bronze was silent a moment. He sighted the fleeing subs in turn and sent the wing's remaining rockets after their targets. The ocean rose in great waves, then subsided. After a few minutes, all signs of the two subs were gone but for spreading slicks of oil and fuel.

Doc headed the flying wing back to land.

Renny looked down, stone faced. He knew the bronze man refrained from taking a life if at all possible. But he and Doc were now working for the Navy against an enemy of the country. And the engineer remembered the sight of those Navy ships, their crews and passengers that were destroyed by the bleeding sun. He had no qualms about the doom they had just visited upon those submarines and their operators.

The day was brightening. A sudden thought came to Renny. "Doc, the planes still released the bleeding sun chemical -- the Navy ships are still in danger, especially if those subs delivered their catalyst!"

The bronze man opened his mouth to reply, but before he could utter a sound one of Barlowe's Nazi planes shot into sight from where it had been trailing the flying wing. It zoomed across Doc's flight path and let loose a rapidly expanding cloud that enveloped the flying wing.

Wide-eyed, Renny turned. The sun was above the horizon. The sky was turning crimson!

"Doc!" cried out the giant engineer. "We're gonna melt!"

Chapter 21  
Tracking the Devil

"We're gonna melt!"

Hot on the heels of Renny's shout, an inexplicable noise filled the plane. A loud sort of burring buzz that originated from the rear of the craft and actually shook its entire structure.

Doc's golden gaze swiftly took in the quaking indicators and disturbed gauges arrayed before him. The yoke actually shivered within the mighty grip of the bronze man's hands. Ordering Renny to take over the controls, Doc whipped to the rear of the plane.

Here was stowed a variety of Doc's equipment cases. The sound was louder here. Rapidly unlashng and shifting aside the boxes, Doc found the noisemaker -- a round-cornered triangular-shaped box encased in brass, about three times the size of a cigar box, held to the flying wing's metal deck by magnetic clamps.

Doc resisted the urge to cover his ears. Pains shot through his feet and up his legs. The unsecured cases skittered across the plane's deck.

The bronze man dared not touch the thing. He opened one of the equipment cases and withdrew a thickly-insulated flask, which he opened. He poured its contents over the shaking devil. The thing rapidly began to melt, for Doc had doused it with a highly concentrated acid.

Doc opened an exhaust vent to flush out the acid's vile fumes when the shaking thing ceased its vibrations. He also dashed a neutralizer over the mess to keep the corrosive from eating through the belly of the plane.

He rejoined Renny in the cockpit. The giant engineer still had a worried expression. "What was that?" he asked.

"That," Doc answered, "was the elusive catalyst. And don't worry about the melting sun problem. We're safe. So are Admiral Ryan's ships."

"Holy cow, Doc! How?"

The bronze man pointed to the windscreen. "Notice that the visibility has gotten a bit murky? You'll even see some crystal formations along the seams. Monk concocted this goo that I spread over all the wing's exposed surfaces. It basically neutralizes the effect of the bleeding sun chemical. With further work, Monk was able to improve it, which is what the Navy ships spent the night slathering on their ships. The murkiness results as the mixture reacts with the melting chemical. Monk also devised an ointment that the sailors could use on their skin and clothing. I call it bleeding sunblock."

"What was that racketing devil back there, the catalyst, you called it?"

"Barlowe's men would attach gadgets like that to ships from the miniature subs. Apparently they were switched on with a radio control, probably by the subs or one of Barlowe's planes. When activated, they set up a tremendous vibration in whatever they're attached to. Perhaps not as noticeable in a large ship, but very obvious in a plane this size."

"But why, Doc?"

"From my limited study of the melting phenomenon, I'd say the chemical mixture released by the planes weakens the electro-chemical forces binding the molecules of whatever it touches."

"What does light have to do with it?"

"Experiments have shown light to act as both wave and particle. But whatever light actually is, the tiny packets of energy that travel along as light actually would knock apart the individual atoms of the chemically weakened molecules -- so the light seemed to actually melt people and ships into nothingness.

"That worked alone for relatively delicate materials like human flesh or cloth. But sturdier materials, like steel, required the intense frequencies released by this shaking devil to act as a catalyst, to assist in the melting process. This device," Doc said while gesturing to the melted puddle in the rear, "was undoubtedly hidden aboard while the wing was grounded in the hangar. I'm sure Barlowe had me shadowed in the City, so someone would have reported my leaving in this wing. It would have been a simple matter to locate it after I arrived here."

\*

Reaching the Navy base again, Doc and Renny were informed by Lt. Sherman that Monk had been repeatedly calling from New York.

"Doc, they're taking Ham to Japan!" Monk screeched as soon as Doc Savage called his headquarters.

The bronze man asked for a full report of what he and the various operatives had learned. When Monk described the activity at the shipbuilding yard where Ham had been captured, Doc asked the name and address of the yard.

After Monk gave his reply, Admiral Ryan's office was filled with the weird trilling noise that Doc uttered at times of surprise. It rarely happened these days, as the bronze man had conditioned himself to avoid this unconscious response, so the look of surprise on the faces of Ryan and Lt. Sherman was matched by that of the giant engineer, Renny.

After a few more remarks, Doc rang off. "Admiral Ryan," Doc said, "with your leave, I'd like Renny to take a trip with me. We may be gone a few days. We have to rescue one of my associates, Ham Brooks."

\*

When Doc entered the room where Curly Wolfe and his daughter were being held, Black Cat Jackson whipped to the bronze man and gave his face a ringing slap.

"Your blasted interference has ruined everything!" she cried.

An expression of great surprise crossed Doc's face. Not often had women confronted him in quite this way.

"I heard the story you handed Barlowe," Doc said. "Some of it was clearly true. But some of it was obviously false."

"Oh, you think you know so much!" the dark-haired beauty shouted.

"My men found and questioned Harry Portman," Doc explained. "I know your father hired him to find your husband, Hiram, though Harry didn't quite have all the story."

Black Cat made fists that trembled with her rage.

"I investigated the tunnels Barlowe's men used for making and storing the melting chemical. What does Hiram look like?"

"He's tall and slim, with dark hair and brown eyes," Curly Wolfe spoke up for the first time. "Gotta small dark spot on his chin like a little bruise. Did you see him?"

"No," the bronze man answered, and the young woman sat down, slumped in her seat. Doc did not add that those men in the underground lab were killed either during the Navy's invasion or the explosion Barlowe triggered after the hideout was compromised. Earlier, Lt. Sherman had related to the bronze man that Navy technicians had located and defused the bombs set around the farmhouse attacked during the dark hours of this morning.

Curly Wolfe shook his head. "I told that monster some terrible lies. I oughta wash my mouth out with lye for some of the things I said to that son of a she-coyote. Those men with me, the ones his gang killed -- they weren't men I'd hired in the city. They were good ol' boys that worked with me

back on the oil fields. Fine boys, been with me fer years. I just told Barlowe that hogwash so's he'd think I was a tough customer. It makes my heart ache, Savage, it surely does."

He paused, then looked up at Doc. "This whole thing is just about Cat's Hiram. Not about mineral extraction or any of that mess I told Barlowe. She went looking for Hiram on the inside of the Blind Man's gang, and when I found out what she was up to, I started looking from the outside. I didn't want Barlowe to find out about me, 'cause he woulda killed my darlin' girl."

"Barlowe escaped," Doc said. "I'm sure he's gone to the Blind Man, who has one of my associates. I'm going after him. Do you want to come along?"

Curly Wolfe and Black Cat Jackson looked at the bronze man. A fierce glow filled their gazes. The cracking of Wolfe's roughened knuckles filled the room.

"Let's go get 'em!" he said.

\*

Ranks of domed white clouds marched over Colorado toward the horizon. Out of the bright morning sky buzzed a silver plane that touched down outside Denver at Buckley Field.

Although any schoolboy will answer that Colorado is a land-locked state, the Navy maintained Buckley for testing ordnance and training fliers and artillerymen how to use that hardware.

Doc Savage was the first of the passengers to step down from the plane. The bronze man usually preferred to pilot any plane he traveled in, but the Navy supplied this craft and its pilot. And the trip allowed Doc time to rest and to think.

Black Cat Jackson, Curly Wolfe -- his goggles repaired and back on his face -- and Renny Renwick followed Doc onto the tarmac. They were met by a jeep, whose driver told Doc, "Your associate, Mr. Mayfair, is waiting at Admiral Murray's office."

In the admiral's office, Monk rushed up to Doc. The chemist still exhibited a frantic expression. "Doc, what are we gonna do about Ham?" The simian-faced chemist caught sight of Black Cat Jackson then, and his ugly features re-arranged into an expression of delight. "Why hello, bee-yoo-tiful." Then he frowned a particularly ugly scowl. "Say, you're part of this mess that got Ham kidnapped. And you!" Monk made a fist and hurled himself at Curly Wolfe, but was held back by Doc. "You whacked my noggin with that blasted antique cannon! Hey!"

"Settle down, Monk," Doc ordered. "Let's be polite for a moment."

The bronze man greeted Admiral Murray, a tall, hawk-eyed man. Renny had the feeling that the officer's steely gaze could burn a hole right through a person, and Murray could know what a man was thinking just by looking at him.

Introductions made, the group sat and Doc explained the presence of Wolfe and his daughter. Monk sulked a little less obviously after hearing the history behind his encounters with this rough-and-tumble father-and-daughter team.

"After you were captured, I did what I could to keep you from being killed," Black Cat explained to the rusty-haired chemist. "And to find out what the bleeding sun targets would be. But Barlowe always had plans of his own. For example, I only found out about the Boston tanker a few hours ahead of time. I couldn't stop it."

"I went there looking for Hiram," Curly Wolfe spoke up, "but he was nowhere to be found."

Murray interrupted. "So why are you here, Dr. Savage?" Eyes turned to the officer. "I got a wire from Admiral Ryan that you'd be coming, that your man Mayfair would meet you from New York City, and a few other details, but nothing really specific. I'm interested in assisting you -- as I've been ordered to do by the War Department -- but I've got a base to run and other responsibilities that will quickly be taking a higher priority. There's a war still on, you know."

"Yeah," squeaked Monk, "how are we gonna get to Japan to rescue Ham?"

Doc answered calmly, "We're not going to Japan."

Renny was thunderstruck into silence, and after a moment of marveling at his leader, Monk complained loudly.

"Consider," Doc cut off Monk's tirade, "that the Blind Man and his crew have used one primary technique: misdirection. Like a stage magician who directs his audience's attention away from the mechanics of his trick, the Blind Man has directed the attention of the military away from what is now its primary target: Japan.

"The melting sun attacks all occurred on the East coast. The gang's plan, I'm sure, was to stir up nationwide dismay to dull the euphoria that rose with the announcement of peace in Europe. Bringing a threat to the eastern shores of America would cause the increasingly tight focus on the Pacific Theatre of War to be split again. The military would devote resources far from Japan to battle the threat to its eastern seaboard. Japan would therefore not immediately have to bear the brunt of a more vigorous and strengthened U.S. attack force."

"But Ham!" sputtered Monk.

"The only reason we know Ham is heading for Japan is because the Blind Man's crew told you so. Again, we can assume they are employing misdirection. With the inroads the military has made on Japan's territory, it would now be nearly impossible for someone to travel from this country undetected to Japan. So the Blind Man -- and Ham -- are undoubtedly closer to home than the Empire of the Rising Sun."

"Why are we in Colorado, Doc?" Renny's voice boomed out.

The buzzing of Admiral Murray's phone brought conversation to a halt. After Murray listened, responded, "Send him in," and hung up, he looked to Doc. "Your local man has arrived."

"Holy cow, is Johnny here?" Renny asked.

The door opened and in walked a vigorous-looking fellow dressed in very dusty khaki clothing and carrying an even dustier Stetson cowboy hat. His sleeves were rolled above his elbows, and his skin was darkly tanned. He grinned widely at the group. "Not Professor Littlejohn, I'm afraid, Mr. Renwick. I'm Howard Hopkins. I've been assisting operative Jenson back in the big city where you fellows hail from."

The bronze man greeted the newcomer and shook hands. "Hiya, Doc!" Hopkins said. "Good to see ya again. By the way, your wheeled package was located and it arrived safely in California."

Doc nodded thanks.

Operative Hopkins turned his attention to Admiral Murray. "Howdy, Will! Y'know, Doc, I've known the admiral here since back in the days when the closest he could get to the Navy was fishing in Jeffy Sines' leaky row boat on old man Farmer's pond."

A smile finally broke through Murray's scowl. "Savage, if you're relying on this prairie dog for help, you're in trouble," he joked.

"To get back to your question, Mr. Renwick, the notes for placing the ads in Spicy Sea Stories were telegraphed from an office in a small town named Stillwell," Hopkins said.

"Barlowe or the Blind Man used these ads to recruit his crew of thugs, including the Killer Kalbs," Doc explained.

"I didn't know the Blind Man operated out of Colorado," Black Cat said. "I originally followed Hiram's trail to New Orleans."

"Apparently the Blind Man had bases scattered across the country," Doc said. "We know he has one here, so we're checking it out. Ham -- and Hiram -- may be there. Maybe not. But we're starting our search here."

"My investigations and snoopings have traced a likely camp at Table Lake," operative Hopkins added. "Whoever placed the ads came from there and returned."

The wiry operative plucked a topological map from his back pocket and unfolded it on Murray's desk. Squiggly lines had been penciled onto the map.

"You can see that Table Lake is a sort of oval-shaped bowl that gets its name because of its elevation -- it stands above its immediate surroundings, although there are mountains all around the area. But Table Lake sort of stands alone -- like a mesa, but filled with water."

Hopkins pointed to the pencil marks. "These are rough roads and trails around the Lake, whose waters are supplied by springs deep at its bottom. The lake feeds creeks, which are marked here. We'll follow this one up to the mountainside today."

"In broad daylight?" Curly Wolfe asked.

"Yup, we'll be outfitted as prospectors to throw off any suspicions," Hopkins said, then cast a look at Black Cat Jackson. "May take a little more outfittin' for the lady to pass as a grizzled old prospectin' coot, though."

The lady of Hopkins' attention proffered no response to his remarks.

"And the goin' is pretty rugged," Hopkins continued. "You gotta set aside your vanity and imagine yourself to be part mountain goat to get along some of these trails."

This time, Black Cat directed a boulder-withering glare at Hopkins, but the unflappable operative simply returned to his presentation.

"I've found signs of recent foot and wheeled traffic along this trail, but then it reaches this point," he said as a finger tapped the map, "and all signs are gone. I figure this Blind Man and his crew are close by."

"Why should it be them?" Renny rumbled.

"Old-fashioned snoopin', Mr. Renwick, thanks to asking questions at the Stillwell telegraph office, banks, stores, and so forth."

"It makes sense that the Blind Man would need an out-of-the-way lake to test out his submarine methods," Doc interjected.

"So close to a military base?" Admiral Murray questioned.

"The Blind Man is a bold villain," Doc answered. "Who would suspect an enemy power to hide under the nose of the U.S. Navy or Army?"

"When do we leave, Doc?" squeaked Monk.

"You'll head out as soon as possible," the bronze man replied. "I have some work to do, then I'll take off later."

"Everything the prospectin' crew needs is outside," Hopkins said. "I brought it with me." Then he grinned, Black Cat thought, like a donkey.

\*

When Monk finally got his feet on the ground again, he nearly bent down to kiss the dirt.

As it was, he spluttered against the swirling clouds of dust that still swam about the car.

"That ain't no car," he groused, "it's an abomination!"

It was a sort of stagecoach, but lacked horses. Instead, it was an old big sedan with a rebuilt body that was half-again as long as it had been when it originally rolled off the Detroit assembly line. Even equipped with heavy-duty tires and springs, the car rode like a bucking bronco over the rutted trail, according to Monk.

"This fine steed put in miles of work in the Texas oilfields," Hopkins said proudly. "She'll get you just about anywhere you need to go."

"So I'm a prospector," the chemist said. "Does that mean I have to feel like a mule kicked me all the way here?"

Roped to the roof and hanging from the sides of the car and lashed to the front and rear bumpers was a variety of provisions and supplies wrapped in canvas.

"All that dust," Curly Wolfe said. He had swapped his goggles for a pair of eyeglasses that hugged his face. "Anyone for miles will know we're here."

"Part of our disguise," Hopkins said. "Anyone trying to sneak in wouldn't make such a spectacle arriving."

A spectacle in disguise accurately described the group's outfits. All wore fake beards. Monk's happened to cover most of his face -- his tiny pig eyes appeared even more sunk within pits of gristle -- and looked like an angry porcupine rested between his shirt collar and his much-beaten Stetson.

Even Black Cat Jackson's considerable charms were difficult to detect. Her hair was tucked into a shapeless hat, and her work-worn shirt and trousers were large enough to conceal her normally unoverlookable curves. The only elements of her usual attire that she wouldn't give up were the pointy-toed cowboy boots she still wore.

Operative Hopkins had gotten quite exasperated with Black Cat about her boots before the group began its trip. "I can't believe it! I finally meet a beautiful woman who actually acts like she doesn't give a hoot about what a mirror says, and now you prove me wrong! I never saw a person so vain for a pair of boots!"

Black Cat had sent the operative's way one of those steel-withering glares that made even Renny flinch, then responded, "It's not a bit of vanity keeping these boots on my feet, but believe what you will. I'm not taking off my footgear to wear those horrible brogans you're shaking under my nose."

Doc's loyal agent had finally given up on this point, but had at least gotten the stubborn beauty to pull the baggy legs of her trousers over the tops of the boots.

"What now?" Renny rumbled. No amount of fake beard could disguise his deep voice.

"This is trail's end for our coach," Hopkins said. "We take the rest of the way by foot."

The crew unloaded provisions from the auto. As Monk swung down a pack of tinned goods, the bundle smacked Curly Wolfe in the head and knocked the oil man to the ground. He rolled around and held his skull, then jumped up with his fists swinging at the hirsute chemist. Monk would have quickly found himself in a rough and tumble scuffle if Renny hadn't snatched Curly by the collar.

"Oops," Monk said.

Curly Wolfe swore a blue streak. "You blasted ape, you did that on purpose!"

"Why would I do that?" Monk asked with the innocence of an angel.

"Fer that knock on your rock-filled noggin I gave you back in the shipping office, you dope!"

"We don't have time for this," Renny said. "I'm staying between you two knot-heads the rest of the way." Operative Hopkins rolled his eyes, his estimations of Doc Savage's infinite patience rising to even greater heights.

The group toted supplies along the narrow trail the operative picked out. "First I felt like I'd been riding a mule," Monk complained. "Now it feels like the mule is riding me! Ham better appreciate all I'm going through for his sake. Dumb shyster with no more sense than to get nabbed."

"I recall some companion of that shyster also getting nabbed on an earlier occasion," Black Cat said.

Renny's chuckle was like distant thunder, and Monk kept his mouth shut the rest of the way.

The group tramped along for more than an hour before stopping to make camp, rest and eat. They huddled over Hopkins' map, then separated to search for signs that might lead them to the Blind Man's hideout.

The sun had just disappeared when Monk returned to camp, the last to straggle in. He plopped before the fire and accepted a cup of coffee, which he sipped carefully to avoid burning his mouth and thoroughly soaking his beard. The ugly face he made was evident even though the false brush obscuring his features.

"You made this coffe, didn't you?" he accused Renny. The giant engineer meekly nodded. "Good. I'd hate to think that more than one mortal on this earth could cook so bad."

"Any luck?" Hopkins asked.

"Not a bit!" Monk sputtered.

"Same for everyone," Curly Wolfe said.

"Twenty yards thataway is the last place I ever found signs of anyone getting in here, then all footprints disappear," Hopkins asserted.

The spot to which he pointed was invisible in the darkness, but during daylight hours the features there were clear. A deep, furiously rushing creek ran down from the lake above, its course nearly perpendicular at the spot mentioned by Hopkins. The flow formed a sort of waterfall there, as its bed apparently flattened out to form a sort of basin pool that caught the tumbling waters before the banks narrowed and sent the creek careening downhill again. By the pool stood a tall outcropping of rock -- wide at its base and rapidly narrowing to a sort of steeple -- by which the winding trail led. It was at this thorn of rock that the operative had noted the termination of the Blind Man's signs.

"Are we safe up here?" Black Cat asked.

"We should be," Hopkins answered. "We're just prospectors, after all."

"Yeah, but we gotta watch out for claim jumpers," Renny rumbled.

"I set up some tripwires and alarms around the perimeter, about thirty yards out," Hopkins said. "And we'll take watch shifts through the night."

"That's fine," Monk said, "but when's Doc getting here? I think I'll take a look around your perimeter anyway."

Monk had just gotten to his feet when a voice rang out from the edge of the firelit darkness, "No need to leave the party, shortstuff!" And the camp was suddenly ringed by the racheting sounds of machine pistols being cocked to fire.

## Chapter 22 Surrender

Ten men, armed with machine pistols, stepped into the light, ringing the disguised group of campers.

"What are you people doing here?" barked one of the newcomers.

"Lookin' for silver, mostly," operative Hopkins answered. "But if we're trespassin' on a claim you gents already filed, we'll gladly move on in the mornin'. Say, how would you like to join us for some grub?"

"Try the coffee," Monk said.

"Shut up!" ordered the first man who spoke. He had an ugly face made uglier by a crooked scar that ran from his forehead, along his nose to the corner of his mouth. He jerked his head, and three of his men moved in to search the party and their gear. The three pulled handguns from each of Hopkins' group and pocketed them.

"Gather your gear! Put out that fire!" ordered Scar Face.

While the group of false prospectors complied, Renny whispered to Hopkins in his quietest voice, "I thought you said prospectors would be ignored."



"I was wrong, I guess," the operative answered meekly. "Did I mention that some campers disappeared up here a few weeks ago?"

Renny scowled and prepared to make a retort when Scar Face again shouted for silence. Monk kicked out the campfire, and the armed group marched the campers away, leading with two handheld lanterns.

To the steeple of rock that Hopkins had mentioned only a short while ago.

"C'mon, hurry up," complained one of the guards. "I hate being out here while all those planes are going over."

"The planes go over all the time," another scoffed. "We're safe here."

"I still don't like it."

Indeed, the sound of aircraft had sounded all day and during the evening. The proximity of Buckley Field meant a close approach by many craft flying to the coast and back.

Monk paid no attention to the planes. He stared goggle-eyed at the creek along which the group stood. In seeming response to Scar Face having picked up a stone and striking the side of the rocky steeple, a bubbling rose from the depths of the basin-like pool formed by the flowing waters. The disturbed waters roiled as though some great beast were rising to the surface. Then something stood up from the water with a splash, close to the creek bank.

Scar Face directed his light toward it. The water rolled off, and a door opened. "Get in."

"An elevator shaft!" gasped Hopkins.

"Holy cow!" said Renny.

The prisoners went down in two groups escorted by armed guards. Scar Face directed two of his men to stay topside and hide the prospectors' car.

The cabin of the elevator went dark but for the carried lantern when the door shut. None of the prisoners could tell how far down they were conveyed. Renny figured that, since there were obviously no cables, the elevator worked on some hydraulic principle.

The group reunited in a large stone chamber, ringed by the armed men. Through a door cut into the stone strode Barlowe, his knife-slash features showing the bruises from his tussle with Doc Savage. "Whaddaya got here?"

"Say they're looking for silver," Scar Face answered.

Barlowe looked them over. Then his face darkened into an ugly scowl. "These ain't prospectors!" He dashed forward and backhanded Black Cat Jackson so that her false beard and hat flew across the room and her long black hair tumbled down. Monk and Renny made moves to run to her aid, but suddenly found themselves facing the barrels of their captors' guns.

"No prospector ever wore boots like that," laughed Barlowe, and operative Hopkins uttered a little growl. Barlowe went to each captive and yanked off his fake beard.

"Doc Savage's crew!" he shouted.

"Indeed." The words came from a dark figure who walked into the chamber at that moment. "If his crew is here, you can expect Savage to be nearby."

"The Blind Man!" gasped Black Cat.

Monk glared at the new arrival, who wore very dark glasses. One side of his face was badly scarred by burns. Monk stared at this face for several moments. "Hey," the simian chemist said.

"Yeah," Renny's voice rumbled with amazement, "I recognize him, too."

"But," Monk sputtered, "but you're dead!"

\*

Doc Savage flew through the cooling night air. His wings snapped in the wind.

"Flew" wasn't entirely accurate, as the bronze man plummeted downward after leaping from the airplane that had transported him from Buckley Field. And his wings were actually fabric extensions that ran from the cuffs of his sleeves to those of his one-piece jumpsuit's pant legs and between his legs as well. He wore no parachute, but controlled his fall by extending and bending his arms to fill and collapse the flaps of his "parasuit." In effect, he was able to turn and glide on the air currents, decreasing to some extent the tug of gravity thanks to the lighter-than-air gas trapped in special pockets lining the jumpsuit.

Doc wore a protective helmet fitted with special goggles that enhanced the available light, brightening the surrounding darkness for night vision, plus acted like a pair of binoculars. With this device he had been able to view the invasion of his associates' camp by Barlowe's armed men.

Marking the location of the camp in his memory, Doc aimed for the lake itself as his landing point. At the last possible instant he collapsed the sails of his suit, stretched his hands before him and entered the water with the grace of a high diver. The armed men and their captives were just then leaving the darkened camp -- two hundred feet lower on the Table Lake plateau -- and did not hear the bronze man's splash over the other night noises or buzzing engines of crossing airplanes.

Making shore, Doc ripped the wings from his jumpsuit and hid them under stones and brush. He swiftly made his way to the empty camp, then trailed the group to the spire or rock, where he witnessed the calling of the underwater elevator and the carrying away of the prisoners.

The two men left on the surface -- charged by Scar Face to hide the suspected prospectors' car -- headed down the trail to do their work. Before they got very far, Doc had subdued them and relieved the two men of their weapons.

The bronze man scrambled to the top of the rocky spire that Scar Face had hammered to summon the elevator. At its peak protected by a projection of stone, Doc found an opening. Using his spring-generated light, he discovered that the opening was part of a circular shaft, four inches in diameter, bored down through the rock and lined with a metal pipe. He heard voices distorted and muffled by the pipe rising from below. Clearly this pipe ran to the underground chamber connected to the elevator.

Doc held a hand over the opening and felt air being drawn downward into the pipe. So this bore served not only as a sort of doorbell for the elevator but also as part of a passive ventilation system.

There had to be more air holes, though, for just this one would be too small to serve an entire installation that surely was large enough to deserve the work required to engineer such an elaborate entrance system.

From his perch, Doc scanned the surroundings through the light-enhancing goggles. He stopped at the two boulders that formed a notch through which was funneled the stream forming the waterfall that dropped six feet to the basin pool.

The bronze man descended the spire. He and Hopkins had discussed fully their plans before the operative led his party to Table Lake. So Doc knew, thanks to memorizing Hopkins' detailed maps, where the agent had planned to lay his tripwires. And where Doc had directed him to cache a duffel filled with supplies that the bronze man had given him

Doc quickly found and retrieved that duffel now. Next, he clambered to reach the fall of water. He ducked through the rush of water to find a small niche in the rock behind the water. He crawled inside to discover a widening in the rear that formed a low tunnel. At its end, on the floor, was cut a rectangular opening topped by a metal grille. From this shaft Doc felt air rising and washing over his face.

After securing a loop of rope from the duffel to a projecting rock, Doc lifted the metal grille from its rectangle and lowered himself through the narrow shaft.

\*

Barlowe's men had escorted their prisoners along a corridor carved from the mountain stone to a

single dark cell. They were herded inside, then the door slammed shut, dropping darkness upon them like a curtain.

Renny pulled a tiny but powerful spring-generated light from a hidden pocket and switched it on. A mournful voice floated from one of the room's black corners:

"Will I never escape that mistake of nature?"

"Ham!" Monk erupted happily and rushed over to bring the attorney into the light. Ham looked none the worse for wear -- a few tears and smudges on his clothes, some scuffs on his shoes, and a black eye -- and Monk's tune changed immediately. "You overdressed moron! You idiot shyster! Causing all this trouble just to save your hide!"

The two renewed their squabbling in earnest until operative Hopkins shouted for peace and quiet. That's when Ham noticed Black Cat Jackson.

"Hey!" Ham rubbed his eyes. He wasn't sure whether to be delighted or very angry. "What're you doing here?"

"Looking for my husband," the dark beauty replied.

"Husband?" Ham had a confused and disappointed look for a moment. Renny and Monk brought the lawyer up to speed about Jackson and her father, Curly Wolfe.

"Have you seen Hiram?" Black Cat asked.

Ham shook his head. "I'm the only prisoner I know of, until you guys arrived. And I haven't seen everyone working for this outfit, but I didn't see anyone resembling the description of Hiram you just offered."

"Maybe there's another cell?" suggested Curly Wolfe.

"Or maybe he's still helpin' these nazis," Monk squeaked.

Before Black Cat could protest, Renny interrupted. "The only way we'll find out is by gettin' out of here," he rumbled.

"Why are they keeping us alive, do you figger?" Hopkins asked.

"We're bait," Ham said. "We're here to lure in Doc. These guys can't wait to kill him."

\*

When Doc dropped to the floor, he found himself at the intersection of four corridors. He quickly explored each. All were either cut directly through rock or their walls, floor and ceiling were covered with mortared stone.

The first passage led to quarters equipped for housing roughly two hundred men. Evidence showed that far fewer were actually living there, which helped explain how the bronze man could slip around so easily without detection.

The second corridor led to the room with the elevator entrance. Ten guards stood there, and the bronze man retreated silently.

The third corridor ran to a vast cavern serving multiple purposes. Part was devoted to work space, with tools and equipment similar to that Doc had located in the Hudson River warehouse that Barlowe had blown up back in New York. Clearly this material was used to repair and modify the mini-subs and to assemble the infernal vibrating boxes that acted as a catalyst for the bleeding sun chemical when attached to a ship.

Another section of the cavern was given over to a cleverly engineered lock for launching a mini-sub into the lake waters through the wall of the lakebed. One of the gang's subs sat now in a launching sled whose rails led toward a sealed hatch -- which enclosed, no doubt, the submersible chamber. Doc suspected this chamber worked similar to the tanks of a full-size Navy submarine that would fill or empty for the sub to sink or rise.

The final section was devoted to stacks of pressurized cylinders holding the bleeding sun mixture. Doc supposed these were carried to the surface at night by the sub, which met a truck or other transport at the lake's edge for carrying the cylinders to the spy ring's hideouts.

Doc swiftly investigated the cavern. He found evidence that it was filled with explosives, just like all of Barlowe's boltholes. But before he could dismantle any devices, he was forced to hide from a group of five armed men who entered. Doc slipped out, quiet as a bronze ghost, during one moment when all five had their backs to him.

Doc took this opportunity to investigate the remaining corridor. This fourth passage branched two ways. One section led to a large storage room. Here Doc found sealed vats containing the bleeding sun mixture.

The second branch widened to a larger cavern before continuing, but Doc went no farther. In the larger area milled about twenty armed men. They stood outside a closed door to a room that -- judging from the racket emanating from the other side -- held at least Monk and Ham, and likely imprisoned the rest of Doc's party as well.

Doc, hidden at a corner, scanned the crowd. So far he had no proof that Barlowe or the Blind Man were present. But the bronze man still had to free his crew and shut down this installation.

Doc Savage crept back the way he came.

\*

Scar Face scowled. He couldn't help it -- his scar made ALL of his expressions a scowl. But this time, he meant it.

He stood among the men in the cavern with the elevator. He'd heard stories about this seemingly amazing bronze man, so he'd warned his crew to be alert for any surprise attacks attempting to free the prisoners.

But Scar Face scowled not out of fear from the bronze man or at any dissatisfaction with his own cold-blooded crew. He was frustrated that Savage hadn't yet tried anything. Scar Face knew that Barlowe and the Blind Man held a deep-seated animosity for Savage, and that the Blind Man had some further feeling about Savage that Scar Face couldn't quite work out. Was it a touch of fear?

Scar Face shrugged. Who cared about any possible failings in the Blind Man? Scar Face took his orders from Barlowe, who was utterly fearless. And Scar Face had no doubts about his abilities or those of his men. They would cut down this bronze man mercilessly. Just let him begin his attack.

The alert sounded from the elevator. Must be the two men Scar Face had left on the surface to disable and hide the vehicle of the fake prospectors. He pressed a button by the door, and the elevator ascended.

A few minutes later Scar Face heard the door open behind him.

"Hello."

Scar Face spun around, machine pistol up, when he heard this voice. Almost as a single body, his men turned and trained their guns at the figure standing before them in the elevator chamber, flanked by the two groggy-looking men Scar Face had left behind. They sat on the floor of the chamber. The standing man had his hands lifted in surrender.

"I'm Doc Savage."

Chapter 23

The Blind Man

After the guards threw Doc into the cell with his party and locked the door, the bronze man's men surrounded him.

"Doc!" Monk squeaked. "They caught ya!"

"No, I gave myself up," Doc answered calmly.

"What?" Renny shook his head.

"They're going to tell Barlowe and the Blind Man now."

"You'll never guess who the Blind Man is!" Monk said.

"I know who the Blind Man is," Doc said.

"You know?" Ham asked.

"He's Hugh McCoy."

"You know!" Renny rumbled.

"It came clear when Monk told me the address for the shipyard where Ham was nabbed -- the Whithers and McCarthy W Yard. This was clearly the old Winthrop Shipyard."

"Yes," added Ham, who hadn't had a chance to fill in Doc about the findings of his investigations into Irving McCarthy. "McCarthy worked for Winthrop before moving to Whithers Shipping, which later bought the yard."

"And the Winthrop yard was used to build the sub used by the Silver Death's Heads, who were organized by Hugh McCoy," Doc continued. "That coincidence between that case\* and the fact that subs are a part of this scheme was too great. McCarthy is dead -- the Blind Man had to be McCoy."

"But we saw him die!" Monk complained.

"No we didn't," Ham rebuffed the chemist. "He was aboard ship when we escaped. When it sank, we found no sign of him. We thought he'd drowned with that boat."

"But he musta had a sub waiting that took him aboard," Renny chimed in.

"There was a sub," Monk said. "And it went down when McCoy's boat blew up!"

Ham, the experienced debater and courtroom lawyer, shook off Monk's complaints. "McCoy had his men running the Winthrop Shipyard. He could have had more than one sub built. That's the obvious explanation. Besides, open your eyes, you simian simpleton: he's alive and you saw him!"

"His initials match those entries in McCarthy's code book," Doc added.

"And those entries must detail the exchange of money for McCarthy's secretly transporting McCoy to Europe using Whithers ships," Ham said.

"But we still don't know who JS is," Monk reminded.

"Maybe we'll find out," Doc said.

"Was there any sign of Hiram?" Black Cat asked.

"No, I'm sorry," Doc answered. "None yet." He paused. "We need to be ready to get out of here. Who has a timepiece?"

Monk, surprised because Doc normally carried a chronometer, indicated that he had a pocket watch. He handed it over when the bronze man asked for it. Doc checked the time before pocketing the piece.

"All your clothes -- the disguises Hopkins gave you -- are impregnated with the bleeding sunblock that Monk developed. But you need to protect your exposed skin if McCoy looses the chemical on us. If that happens, pull your hats low on your heads."

He pointed to his shoes. "The heels of your shoes are removable and filled with the sunblock. Smear it on. It'll dry clear in a couple of minutes."

"Jackson wouldn't wear our special shoes," Hopkins complained. Monk noticed that the young woman had tucked the cuffs of her pants legs into the tops of her boots.

"Everyone should have enough to share with her and Ham," Doc said. "Now check inside the sweat bands of your hats. Those are flexible, transparent strips to wear as eye protectors. And the interior seams of your shirt collars will easily rip loose. You'll find them to be collapsible breathers to fit over your nose and mouth. Don these items immediately if Barlowe or McCoy uses the bleeding sun stuff."

"What about me?" Ham asked.

"The linings of Monk's boots remove to reveal the same two items," Doc explained. "Might as well hand them over now, Monk."

The simian chemist complied delightedly. "You know, old buddy, you won't have to worry about whether that bleeding sun junk smells bad. I think it's been at least a week or so since I last washed my feet."

Ham growled a low reply as he snatched the breather and goggles from Monk.

Doc issued a few more instructions before a clatter at the door alerted them of the guards' return. The door opened, and gunmen directed Doc and his party to file out.

Awaiting them, along with forty or so men armed with machine pistols, were Barlowe and the Blind Man.

"Savage, welcome at last," greeted the latter.

"McCoy," Doc replied. Their captor still had a strapping, athletic-looking build. But he seemed bent, or somehow shrunken inward. His once-dark hair was gray, and a white stripe marked his left temple like a lightning bolt. And as Monk, Renny, and the others had seen earlier, one side of his face showed scars, also.

"I wear these dark glasses because of injuries sustained during the sinking of our ship when last we met," McCoy said. "I'm not truly blind, but bright light is quite painful for me. Thus the less-than-glaring light we use in our snug little hideaway." He gestured to the small bulbs whose fittings were bolted to the ceiling.

"This is quite an extensive installation," Doc commented. "As were all that I've seen."

"Yes, there are a few planners with great foresight serving the Reich," McCoy said. "Long before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, we knew that the United States would eventually enter the war. These installations were planned and secretly built years before Roosevelt declared war. In fact, my own operations with the Silver Death's Heads were an early branch of that plan, as well as a way to raise funds."

"I thought you were just a crook," Monk said, "but you were a traitor even then!"

"Ouch," McCoy smiled. "Names are so hurtful. Really, gentlemen, you are all quite talented in your ways. The Reich could use you. But you're all far too dangerous to live." He turned to Black Cat Jackson. "And you, my lovely young wildcat. I'd so hoped you would embrace our cause and stand proudly by my side. But this blind devotion to your husband --"

"Where is Hiram?" All present could detect the barely restrained fury in Black Cat's voice.

"Ha!" Barlowe boomed. "He was dead a week before you ever showed up. I killed him myself!"

His laugh echoed through the chamber. Doc and his men turned to watch the young woman's reaction, ready to spring forward if she collapsed, ready to restrain her if she pounced on Barlowe. But she stood coldly, an icy statue glaring at Barlowe. Curly Wolfe touched her arm, but she shook her father's hand loose.

"What are you talking about, 'The Reich could use us?'" Renny asked. "The war in Europe is over."

McCoy smiled. "You are children, really. The Reich still lives. Germany's surrender means nothing. Barlowe, here, works for a Nazi group -- Bureau Ehrhardt -- stationed in Shanghai. Our work continues. You suppose the entire war was masterminded by Adolf, Il Duce and Hirohito? Really, those powers they led would never have worked together so well without a greater mind coordinating them."

"Would that be the mysterious JS?" Doc queried.

"Ah, you're a smart one, Savage. That's why I'll feel better when you're dead. But then, you still don't really know who JS is, do you?" McCoy smiled again. "You probably would know, but Barlowe reached good old Irving McCarthy just in time.

"Irving and I went back a number of years, and I'd certainly helped his finances grow. But with the war ending, he was getting nervous. We targeted his tanker as a warning. Obviously that didn't work, for he was going to meet with your men. Too bad for him."

"You say your work continues?" Doc prodded.

"Yes. You certainly made a mess of our east coast efforts. But you won't be around to disrupt our plans on the west coast."

"I won't have to be," Doc replied. "At Barlowe's farmhouse retreat, there were bays for three subs, but only two present. Clearly one had been shipped overland in one of those big trucks. My agents tracked it entering California."

"Oh, that's the 'wheeled package' Hopkins mentioned in Admiral Murray's office," Renny interjected.

"Correct," Doc said. "Before I arrived here tonight, I received word that the Navy had swept in and rounded up your entire west coast ring, McCoy."

The Blind Man's fists clenched. "You're lying."

Doc shook his head. "Their code word was 'Phoenix.'"

McCoy's face grew dark and his scars looked white against his reddening flesh.

"By the way," Doc continued, "You have two minutes in which to surrender to me."

McCoy sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

Doc lifted Monk's watch from his pocket. "Less time now. I set an explosive device in the storeroom with your bleeding sun mixture. It'll ignite in ninety seconds."

The armed men looked at one another. They had no fear of Doc and his men, but a healthy respect for the melting chemical. All had seen it in action.

"You're lying!" Barlowe yelled.

"Believe me, I don't lie about explosives."

"Barlowe!" McCoy screeched. "Kill him! Kill them all!"

Barlowe snatched a machine pistol from the man beside him. But before he could cock the firing mechanism, a hollow BOOM sounded down the corridor from the direction of the storage room for the vats.

Moments later the clatter of boot heels sounded, and the five men Doc had spotted in the submarine chamber ran into the room. They chattered breathlessly, "Red clouds!" and "The melter!" and continued running toward the elevator cavern.

Scar Face and his men exchanged looks, then charged after their fellows.

McCoy screeched again. Barlowe screamed and charged at Doc, the gun still in his hands.

But before Barlowe reached the bronze man, Black Cat Jackson leaped forward. She ducked and snatched an object from her boot as Barlowe swung the gun at her, then stood and plunged the object toward the killer's throat. Barlowe toppled back and thrashed on the floor, then was still.

Operative Hopkins, stunned, saw a slim flexible blade -- much like a metal ruler -- protruding from Barlowe's bloody neck. He realized that Black Cat had hidden this knife in the lining of her

boot. She stood over the dead man, in a sort of quiet shock in the aftermath of her action.

He looked around. He heard gunfire rattling from the direction of the elevator cavern -- Barlowe's men were fighting one another to escape. Curly Wolfe, Doc and his men were battling hand-to-hand those of McCoy's men who had remained behind. One of those men turned toward Black Cat Jackson. Before his gun was raised, Hopkins jumped the man and the two started trading blows.

Doc downed his opponent with a mighty blow to the jaw. He checked the progress of his gang, then whirled away down the corridor he had spotted McCoy scurrying toward.

This passage led to the submarine chamber. Doc suspected the Blind Man would try to use that for his escape.

Doc hadn't released the bleeding sun chemical into the installation. He had crafted a very small charge -- just big enough to make a big boom when the sound echoed through these chambers -- from material he snatched from the sub chamber's workroom. The red cloud was a dye that rapidly expanded on contact with air. He had carried that in the duffel bag Hopkins had cached. The detonator was timed with his chronometer.

The result had turned out much as he had hoped.

He whipped into the sub chamber. McCoy was just climbing up to the submarine hatch. The Blind Man screamed an oath, then aimed and fired a machine pistol.

Doc dodged back out of the room. Slugs slammed the walls, ricocheted and danced around the chamber with zings and sparks. Doc called out to McCoy, then one of Barlowe's hidden charges exploded. A great flash of light -- the blast wave punched Doc like a giant fist and tumbled him farther down the corridor. The bronze man's ears rang, but still he heard McCoy's scream as the first red-hued clouds appeared in the chamber door.

Doc scrambled to his feet and rushed back to his companions, who met him halfway.

"McCoy ruptured the pressurized cylinders of the melting stuff," Doc said. "We're in real danger now."

A rumbling began to fill the underground chambers.

"Barlowe's men ran away," Renny said. "When we checked the elevator, a few were still shooting it out."

"This way," Doc said, and directed them to the corridor intersection where he had entered the installation. With some help, everyone managed to enter the duct and clamber up to the cave behind the waterfall.

After everyone reached the shore, the group started down the trail to the motorized stagecoach that Hopkins had driven to Table Lake. The ground shivered beneath their feet, then they heard a loud THUMP. The earth gave a great shake that nearly toppled them all. A vast eruption of muddy water shot from the waterfall cave the group had just exited.

"The bleeding sun mixture and the explosives compromised the integrity of the walls," Doc explained. "I bet Table Lake's level just dropped ten feet as the whole installation was flooded."

He noticed that Hopkins was comforting Black Cat Jackson. "I'm sorry about your husband," the bronze man said. The woman nodded, then turned with the operative down the trail. Curly Wolfe followed several steps behind.

"Doc," Monk complained, "we still don't know nothing about that JS guy."

"We don't even know if McCoy just made that stuff up," Renny rumbled.

"No," Doc agreed, "but someone with that sort of influence -- if McCoy was telling the truth -- won't stay hidden for long."

Precognition was never attributed to Doc Savage, whose amazing abilities often seemed greater than those of normal mortals. But Doc would soon learn more about this mysterious JS, this man behind the scenes of the world's greatest conflict. Little did the bronze man realize that he would



soon be called to the Philippines, where he would quickly be enmeshed by the deadly mystery of THE SCREAMING MAN, which would answer many of his questions.

But those dangers were yet to come. At this moment, Doc prepared to continue down the rugged trail with his fellow adventurers. But he was halted by a call from the underbrush.

"Doc!" The bronze man turned at hearing Ham, who was hidden by thick foliage. "Some of that melting sun stuff got me. My clothes are gone!"

Monk had overheard. "Haw! Serves you right, you shyster. Get yourself in trouble and look what happens -- the plug gets pulled out of the lake bottom! You caused a natural disaster!"

"Shut up, you ape!"

"Hey, I'm not the one playing jungle boy in the raw!"

Renny sighed and left the racket behind.

Monk continued his harangue: "And if you're uncomfortable now, just wait till you ride in that butt-buster that Hopkins calls a car!"

As dawn arrived in Colorado, the day had set on the deadly bleeding sun conspiracy. Doc shook his head as the bickering escalated between Monk and Ham. No matter what the future might bring, the world was back to normal for now.

- Fin -