

PART ONE
The Blood War

I

Look what I, Xié, son of Kan, who was the greatest of the children of Illa, have been reduced to...recording the events of my life in order that, if I perish before the natural term of my existence—and that is long, for I am healthy—the truth about my actions will be known, and it will also be known that my death can only be attributable to the knavery of the infamous Rair.

I know that if this manuscript were to be found now, I will inevitably perish—but that hardly matters any more.

Illa is powerful. It is the Queen of the World, and the ignoble Rair is its ruler.

I, Xié, have vanquished its enemies. But for me, Illa would be nothing but ashes. It is my valor that saved everything...

Yes, I know! Rair will say that it was his machines that secured the victory—but what use are his machines when valiant hearts cannot be found to guide and direct them? I, Xié, am the true savior of Illa—and with what disdain I have been treated! I spit on that wretch Rair, whom I could knock down with a slap.

Who will read these memoirs?

No one, undoubtedly.

I shall bury them deeply, far out of reach, and the earth will need to open up for them to see the light of day again. If anyone does read them, however, Rair's infamy and my glory will be known.

Illa, which is racing toward its doom, will no longer exist...

Illa! The jewel of the world. Those who have not known it are ignorant of life's sweetness.

I am writing these lines in geometrical symbols. They constitute the universal language. For as long as earthly human beings reason, they will know that two right angles are equal and that two parallel lines will never meet. If this manuscript is ever found, someone will succeed in deciphering my memoirs, for human ingenuity is unlimited.

Illa is only a city. It consists of a mound affecting the form of a perfect circle. Imagine a cylinder 17 kilometers in diameter and 700 meters high. Such is Illa.

The cylinder is hollow; it encloses the Illans' dwellings and monuments. Each dwelling is connected to the exterior by means of a vertical shaft. Above these shafts, parabolic mirrors are installed, which change position automatically by means of the power supplied by selenium, in such a fashion as to follow the apparent movement of the sun across the sky, directing its calorific and luminous radiation inside the dwellings.

The top of the city forms an immense terrace at the center of which stands the pyramid of hard-stone¹ in which the Supreme Council sits. At the base of the pyramid are the bunkers enclosing the blood-machines, the abattoirs and the ape-men's stables. Lower down are the openings of the ultimate-metal mines, around which the waters of the Appa flow—and, not far from the mines, the dungeons whose inmates die slowly of starvation...

Until the last few years, Illa, the Mistress of the World, seemed invulnerable. The magnetic currents emitted by the pylons hidden in the hard-stone pyramid were sufficient to protect the city by driving anyone who came within a certain radius of it mad—but the Nourans have succeeded in neutralizing the magnetic vibrations, and it has been necessary to find an alternative.

Life in Illa is happy, but monotonous.

Personally, I only like war and battles.

In Illa, all is calm. The Illans do not need to make any effort. The mixture of glass and metal of which the floor of the houses are made produce magnetic emanations whose force is calculated to counterbalance 97% of the effect of gravity, so a man with a mass of 100 kilos only weighs three. He

¹ Either Dr. Akinson or his notional publisher inserts a footnote: "Xié does not explain what he means by 'hard-stone'—he could not foresee that the Illans' discoveries would be annihilated."

is thus able to move with minimal effort and to be supported by the air like a swimmer in water. His footsteps skim the ground.

The light-accumulators cause a constant clarity to reign within the 101 stories of which the houses of Illa consist. At irregular intervals, the blood-machines radiate osmotic currents that provide the nourishment necessary to maintain and multiply the Illans' cells without them paying any heed to the process.

Cemeteries were abolished 200 years ago. Electric currents disintegrate and dissociate corpses, and that disintegration of human matter release a formidable amount of energy, which serves to produce the magnetic currents that protect Illa.

And Rair reigns. Rair: a brain, a calculating machine, with neither a heart nor nerves.

He was the one who invented the blood-machines—the masterpiece of creation, he assures us. He lives alone in the machine hall, in the crypt situated beneath the summit of the pyramid, and the Supreme Council obeys him.

His grandson, Toupahou, the fiancé of my daughter Silmée, is a worthy fellow, who likes battles and conflicts, as I do, and scorns equation-mongers. His grandfather knows that, and does not like him. Rair is capable of anything, and his right-hand man, Limm, is even worse.

Poor Silmée! But try to make young people see reason! After all, I've had my moments!

This morning, there was a meeting of the Supreme Council in the Bronze Hall at the top of the pyramid. I was summoned to it.

When I arrived, Rair was already there, in the company of Ilg, the electrician, Hielug, the chemist, Grosé, the chief of the militia, and Fangar, the airman—and, of course, the infamous Limm.

Limm: a tall dark fellow; brave, admittedly, but also idle; ready for anything, provided that there's profit in it. Rair's right arm. He looked at me—laughing, I think. Doubtless he understood that Rair was watching him, though, and that I wouldn't tolerate any insult. He bowed to me ceremoniously, and, in his amiable and unctuous voice, invited me to sit down in the guest chair.

For I, Xié, leader of Illa's army, was only admitted to the Supreme Council when I was invited. Those scientists held me in scorn. I'm paying them back in full!

Rair, as usual, was deep in reflection. He scarcely indicated to me, by raising his eyebrows slightly, that he had noticed my arrival.

Hielug, Ilg and Grosé were talking in low voices. Formularistic technologists, connected by meager ambitions, those three! Hielug, a big bald man, who still swallows filthy foodstuffs...it's said that he goes down into the mines where the ape-men work in order to be able to consume meat and vegetables in their company, like an animal. Rair despises him, but makes use of him.

Ilg, the electrician, is thin and bony. He's sly and insinuating. A skillful technician, though. I admit that his radiant bombs, which obliterate all life within radius of more than 100 meters, rendered great service during the last war...but that doesn't prevent Ilg being a coward and a liar.

Grosé's a better man than him. We're almost friends, but he's ambitious. I wonder if he's trustworthy. He's succeeded in having himself admitted to the Council, although I'm not admitted to it myself. Another tactic of Rair's, to divide us.

Rair doesn't suspect that I see through him. Fangar, the chief airman, is an old friend. We understand one another, and it's him I'd want for a son-in-law of Similée hadn't made her choice...when I think that my grandson will also be Rair's, and might perhaps become one of those dried-up scientists!

I was lost in reflections of that sort when the bronze door opened and let in the old men of the Supreme Council. Ancient debris, reaching the end of their lives. One of them, Gadohr, is 217 years old!

Naturally, they're still acting and thinking. They reason, by sheer force of habit—but Rair guides them and suggests the decisions he expects of them. I've noticed that more than once.

They arrived in silence. Thanks to the effluvia that neutralize the effects of gravity, they move forward effortlessly—but their wrinkled faces, extinct eyes and sagging features advertise their decrepitude adequately.

"Here's the reason for this session," Rair began, without any preamble. "War is inevitable. Yes. The Nourans aren't threatening us, but we need them, and they won't ever render the service we expect of them—an indispensable service.

“The blood-machines, which produce the psychophysiological effluvia permitting our people to nourish themselves and attain an average age of 167 years—a statistic applicable to the last 21 years—are no longer satisfactory.

“I’ve reflected, calculated and meditated. The result of my calculations is that our organs could last twice as long—except that they need to make less effort. In absorbing the effluvia of the blood-machines, our bodies are submitted to intensive work—a natural consequence of the fact that the effluvia in question are derived from the blood of pigs and apes.”

“To reduce that effort, bringing the process to near-perfection, it’s necessary to employ blood similar to that which flows in our own veins—human blood. The rest will follow. I’ve established by calculation the precise change necessitated by my new formulae. The mechanical vibrations need to be reduced. I know the exact quantity of the reduction.

“Seven thousand apes and 4000 pigs are necessary annually. Now, to replace them, we would need 8400 adult humans.

“We cannot demand them from our own people. There remain the Nourans. They need to give us a similar number of well-constituted people, chosen by our physiologists, whose strength will be measured as well as the exact quantity of their blood corpuscles. By that means, the duration of life in Illa will be increased to an average of 350 years.

“Given that, nothing can prevent us from acting, in the interests of civilization itself. To send an ultimatum to Nour would be stupid. They would demand explanations, and, after making sufficient preparations, would go to war. It’s necessary to take them by surprise, and take as many prisoners as possible. We’ll find employment for them.

“Has the Council any observations to make regarding this decision?”

A general shaking of heads was the only reply to this question. The Council approved. It always approved.

Rair darted a sharp glance at me.

“You’ve understood, Xié!” he said, in his dry voice. “Explanations would be futile. We are henceforth in a state of war with Nour. All possible means must be employed to secure victory. You have full authority—and remember that the most ferocious war is the mildest, because it’s the shortest!”

All gazes turned toward me.

“I’m at the disposal of my fatherland,” I replied, shuddering internally with horror. But I dared not look at Rair, for fear that he would divine my true sentiments.

“Our victory is certain,” Rair went on, in his jerky voice. “Our soldiers and airmen employ the zero-stone, which, exposed to a certain temperature, releases the energy contained in matter and provokes explosions that annihilate all life within a given radius. We haven’t yet made use of that invention of mine, for sentimental reasons that are now obsolete. When the people of Nour have seen a few thousand of their own thus reduced to dust, they’ll listen to the voice of reason. They’ll remember that they’re all mortal, and that, by surrendering a certain number of their people to us, they’ll only be bringing the deaths of the latter forward and prolonging the lives of the rest of their population. That’s the way it is—but that reasoning, clear and simple as it is, will only be understood by them after the preliminary extermination of one of their armies. We can’t do anything about that.

“Let’s pass on to the second decision to be taken. The deliberations of the Supreme Council are causing me to waste time. My time is precious. Everyone here knows that. Let’s avoid that waste. I’ve decided, to that end, that in future I’ll make my decisions known to the Council when I make them. Everyone will gain from that. I…”

Rair did not get any further. One of the old men, Foug, had stood up. “That’s dictatorship!” he shouted. “We can’t accept that.”

“It’s the rule of reason, and woe betide anyone who doesn’t understand it!” Rair replied, staring at the interrupter.

“I don’t understand it!” declared Foug, curtly. “Reason tells us that the human brain is subject to error, and that one single individual can’t have any pretention to infallibility! Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of your immense science, Rair, have been transmitted to you. It’s the science accumulated by our ancestors. You’re not its unique depository. If you’ve added something to it—which is true, and which we don’t contest—you’ve only followed the example of countless forebears. Our duty is to help you and monitor you, as you monitor us. That’s the law of Illa!”

Murmurs of approval greeted these sensible, but imprudent, words. The infamous Limm darted a sinister glance at the protestors—of whom I was one.

Rair remained impassive, but I thought I saw the corners of his thin mouth rise up in a gesture of scorn. I recognized that imperceptible rictus. Rair had already shown it to me on the day when he crushed the delegates of the people who wanted to interrupt the motion of the solar mirrors in order to enjoy a little darkness.

A sudden fury gripped me. “Foug is right!” I shouted.

My voice resonated loudly in the silence that had fallen.

Rair’s rictus was accentuated. “Military men are made for fighting, not for reasoning, Xié,” he hissed. “And anyway, no one asked for your opinion. The second resolution is not adopted. It will be re-presented. A state of war exists between Illa and Nour. The session is ended.”

With these words, Rair got up and disappeared through the little door connecting the Council Hall with his laboratory. Limm followed him.

Hielug and Ilg went out first, together. Then the old men of the Council left the room. I was able to observe that Foug remained slightly apart—that his colleagues, fearing the hatred of Rair, disapproved of him. The cowards! The miserable debris! Oh, Rair knew them well! He had not deigned to insist.

I heard one of them murmur: “If it’s true that the new blood-machines can extend our lives by a century, Rair can only be approved. We’re still young and we can...”

Those old ruins, young! What nonsense!

I went out myself, behind Grosé and Fangar. Grosé, I could see, did not share my opinion. Fangar, less of a coward, came over to me and told me that he was at my disposal for the operations of war.

“I’ll see you in an hour,” I replied, as I left him.

I was in a hurry to get home, in fact. One might have thought that I had a presentiment of the misfortunes awaiting me!