

# **The Path Beyond The Stars**

by

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Scanned by BW-SciFi  
Version 1.0

Published by  
Dell Publishing Co., Inc.  
750 Third Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017

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Dell ® TM 681510, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.  
Manufactured in The United States of America  
First printing—March 1969

Prologue

Part One: "Like molten metal..."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11

Part Two: "A Circle of Stones"

12 13 14

Part Three: "The Pentacle and the Cross"

15 16 17 18

Part Four: "In Crystal-Templ'd Barrecrith"

19

Part Five: Trog

20 21

# THE PATH BEYOND THE STARS

## PROLOGUE

The baby woke up, wailed, kicked out. His father continued briskly to strap him down in the blanketed cocoon of the spacer lifecraft—the one-man type. Behind the grim, busy father the baby's mother stood sobbing. When the lean, set-faced father had finished his task, and after a final check of the hammock clamps, the autocontrols, the feeder, he backed out of the miniboat into the larger ship's airlock. The mother sprang forward toward her baby; the bearded father blocked her way, pulling her gently back with him into the ship's cabin. Then he went back and closed the miniboat hatch, firming it airtight.

"My baby! My little Jon!"

The father pushed the crying woman back into the cabin so that he could lock the ship's hatch; he gave a casual glance in the forevid at the enormous, angry red sun boiling down on them. Only after the miniboat was well on its way did the father permit himself a shivered sigh of relief and an outward sign of human compassion for his frantic wife.

When he touched her, she pulled away, choking.

"You're cold as ice! You don't *care*, Johann!"

"Care?" He smiled obliquely and took hold of her shaking shoulders. "I care, Rosemary. There just hasn't been time for dramatics. We had to get our boy away before that"—he gestured behind them at the forevid—"pulls us into it. We're goners. We'll never see Barrecrith again. But it must not happen to Jon! Jon *can't* die! He's too important!"

"I don't understand."

He gripped her hands. "I know. You've tried hard, but it's not in you to understand. But you gave all of us Jon. Think how wonderful that is! Jon is *the one*—and Jon is *ours!*" He kissed her forehead, then impulsively pulled her to him. She collapsed onto his tunic, bewildered, lost in the meshes of an intolerable grief.

After a moment, Johann flicked off the forevid so that they need not see their nemesis. He drew the weeping woman to the rearvid where they could just see the miniboat become another blink of light in the black ocean—then vanish.

"He's so small! In all that blackness!"

"Jon will be fine. He will be picked up. His ship's Mayday call will send out signals for help automatically every half hour as long as necessary. The fuel, the air are adequate for him. The nipples feeders will move down automatically every four hours. In a matter of days he'll be in the middle of a major star lane. Someone is sure to pick him up, fetch him back to Earth."

"*Earth.*" She spoke the word unfamiliarly, as if it represented something lost and strange to her.

Together they strained their eyes into the star-pricked velvet of space as if hopeful of another glimpse of the vessel that tore their son away from them and death.

"Are you sure we did the right thing, Johann?"

"I'm sure."

"What if somehow no one does pick him up? Think of the agony he'll suffer when the food is gone—and the water—and the air. What if some terrible alien ship finds him first?"

"Shhhh." He embraced her tenderly. "It won't happen like that. It can't. It's not in the Pattern."

"You're always so sure!" she cried.

His eyes reproached her. He pointed out into the emptiness scythed through with bits of bright energy. His blue eyes blazed with prophetic certainty.

"You've tried to be a Believer for my sake, but something in your DNA threads won't let you, not quite. Believe *me* then, darling. I know Jon will make it. He has a destiny, a destiny more important than any man who was ever born of woman." His pointing finger traced out a pattern in the stars. "It's written out there—all of it. Can't you see it?"

## **PART ONE**

***“Like molten metal..”***

It was axiomatic, Jon Wood grouched, that these weird calls had to come when a man was busiest. Jon was hungry, having worked seven hours straight to clean up his important clutter, and he was irritable because early tomorrow it was off to Luna City again for an important meeting with the starplot executives. They had picked the Moon for their major offices; land was more plentiful, cheaper, and after all Luna City was the jumping-off place into the starplot star empire. Jon's handsome features, tending toward lean, tanned blondness, were drawn and cranky. Out of habit he had flicked on the vidphone toggle and the caller was in.

"Jon Wood?"

It was a woman. Her doll-size replica was pretty, and that helped. She had burnished ash-gold hair worn softly, not in the ghastly frosted, purple haystack fashion so popular these days, and there was a hint of the Eastern exotic in the tilt of her large, greenish eyes with their long, sooty lashes. She didn't smile at all, though her mouth was made for it; nor did she bat her long lashes or exercise any of the presumed feminine prerogatives. He found flirtations enjoyable when he was relaxing in some bistro after his arduous hours as starplot's top intuitive-dowser, but on his vidphone or in one of his twelve offices in the twelve major skipstone planetary ganglions this sort of thing annoyed him. Jon's offbeat talents for star-dowsing demanded enormous self-discipline and kept him very busy. At work, he had no time for female wiles.

"Yes, I'm Jon Wood. But I'm very busy." Jon glanced down at the autophone record left by his secretary. "Let's see now. You have called me exactly sixteen—no, seventeen times in the past week. My secretary talked to you before, but unfortunately she's through for the day." The appeal leaping in those oceanic eyes made him blink. "I guess that rates you five minutes. I said five minutes. Then down goes the switch."

She nodded. "My name is Venus Trine."

"Sure you're not putting me on?"

"You're very cynical."

"No. I'm very busy. Four and a half minutes."

"My name really is Venus Trine. My father was the scientist who—"

"Trine! Laurent Blake Trine? Yes, I studied some of his theories—mainly universal nonexpansion and the patterns in the intergalactic nebulae—but..." Then Jon remembered. Trine had been involved with a group of cosmic astrologists and, when their activities had finally been banned by law, Trine and the rest of the group had disappeared. Calling themselves the Space Pilgrims, they had taken several ships and gone in search of a world where they could find freedom of worship, or whatever they'd called it. Jon had always wondered how a strange group like the cosmic astrologists could have snared an important scientist like Trine.

Jon's lips tightened, and he said deliberately, "I never had much use for those crazy theories involving astrology, though I'll admit that some of your father's theories did kind of match up with what we know now."

"It has always amazed me," Venus Trine flung back at him, "how you top-level scientists find it so difficult to permit yourselves to admit that anything you can't add up as  $2 \times 2$  or  $N = 0$  cannot exist! Yet ten years later the very rules you set up are tossed into the ashcan!"

"Seems to me," Jon said as he smiled with a hint of malice, "that from



the bit I know about astrology, you star-gazers have to employ serious mathematics to compute the exact juxtaposition of the stars in your zodiacs whenever you want to know—”

“We ‘stargazers’ *invented* mathematics!”

Jon shrugged. “*Touché*. But I don't want any argument about peculiar ideologies. Your five minutes are gone and—”

“Jon Wood!” the vision in the vid gasped. “Don't you dare cut me off! I've spent too much time since my father died trying to find you. You don't know the efforts I've gone to—bribing employees in all the star-exploiting cartels for access to their records. Digging through billions of old news tapes.”

“Very flattering. And I'm sorry to hear about your father. In his way he was a brilliant man. Misdirected but brilliant.”

“Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Wood, that it might just be you and your money-hungry ilk—”

“My money-hungry ilk keeps the human race fed,” Jon pointed out. “Perhaps our system isn't perfect. Who says it is? But the huge profits starplot and all the others make go into space exploration and advance human progress along the way. It's better than the old way, when our governments scrambled around trying to foot the bills, overburdening the taxpayers. The cartels make profit, sure. But their competition with each other is what keeps mankind on the move—farther and farther out into the stars. Your astrologists and other fanciful groups spring up with a lot of ideological nonsense from time to time, but *their* way is diversive. Nothing gets accomplished. You have to have a plan. A pattern.”

“Then you do believe in patterns?”

“Yes. But patterns are a man-made concept. In nature they're random. Hit-miss.”

“Are you sure?”

“Not positive,” Jon admitted. “Anyway, if your stars and your astrology zodiacs know so much, why was it so hard for you to find me? Why didn't you just consult your stars?”

For the first time Venus Trine smiled. “I have a dandy answer for that.”

“Well?”

“Because you are who you are, Jon Wood!”

“And?”

“The ‘Space Waif!’”

Jon winced. “You know, I'm thoroughly sick of that ridiculous epithet and everything that goes with it.”

For years Jon had tried to stifle the strange story of his origins, but it always managed to crop up again to haunt him. As a baby, he had been picked up in a miniship, parsecs from any known Earth colony. In spite of all the investigations, no one had ever discovered where in the universe he had come from; the only clue to his identity was a name tag sewn into his bootie: Jon Wood. Now he gave Venus Trine an angry stare. “If you're going to rehash all that—if you're writing a book or something and you want—”

“No, no! Nothing of the sort! What I'm trying to say is that the reason I couldn't locate you by consulting the stars was that we had nothing to go on. No birth date. No pinpointing birthplace. As you probably know, to compute a person's natal chart it's absolutely essential—”

“I know,” he growled. “And me—I'm an enigma. Nobody knows who, where, when, why. Only that—”

“Only that you are obviously a Special.”

"Special?"

"You developed your intuitive talent very early. It's said that you were fascinated with the stars when you were only five or six. You'd stare up into them for hours—then suddenly you'd point up and say something incredible like the green men on 'that big yellow star' were beginning to split into two pieces and it made you giggle. It was a while before the Antarian fission-creatures were discovered. Eventually you were snatched out of college into the starplot star-dowser training school and became their most efficient star-plotter."

It was true—he did have this special, highly developed intuitive. Deep space was so vast that it would take a man a billion years to cover any sizable portion of it. The cost in money and manpower, besides the time itself, made space exploration prohibited until it was discovered that some human beings—a very few—possessed a kind of random empathy toward intelligent life within the stars. Something in their minds touched the minds of creatures in distant sun systems and, by parapsychical training, this ability could be developed to uncanny accuracy. He gave her a stern look. "But it was pure explainable science, not mumbo-jumbo. When man desperately needed to travel out into the stars, his complex mind leaped forward and—"

"With no outside assistance?"

"None! It was done by arduous, pedestrian lab work, and carefully controlled research into ESP and clairvoyance."

Little by little, serious scientists had realized that the human mind possessed latent powers, which once had been called witchcraft, and that these intuitive powers—the word was coined to include several specifics—were allied to *need*. Man had overpopulated his planet, and none of the planets in his own solar system was habitable. He needed food—resource. So out of sheer survival need he had forced the discovery of the time-warp and pushed out into sun systems that would sustain him. And because the gaps between habitable planets are so incredibly wide, man developed his latent talents of intuitive human-dowsing to point the way toward such useful worlds, time-jumping the vast distances between.

"With none of your astrology hocus-pocus!" Jon added.

The girl's grave look made Jon smile, satisfied. After all, Venus Trine was the daughter of a great scientist, however peculiar he had become in his later life; she must have some intelligence. Give him a few months and Jon would change all her crazy ideas. It was natural that Laurent Trine would have stuffed her full of his own nonsense, but after all, the basic intelligence was there. It showed clearly in those gorgeous eyes of hers. Might be fun to make a project of cleaning up all that rubbish.

Then Venus Trine laughed and spoiled it all.

"What's so funny?" Jon scowled again.

"That you don't know who you are. That you've learned so much yet have such a long way to go."

Jon sat up stiffly. "I think I've had enough of this. Out of respect for your father I—oh, hell!" His hand moved resolutely to the toggle.

"Please." The mockery was instantly replaced by that opened spillway of desperation. And panic. Yes, sheer panic. It shot out in waves, overwhelming his intuitive's mind, sending ice bits scuttling down his spine. He had moved out among strange, wild stars and seen horrifying things, yet within that sudden mind thrust of hers writhed tentacles of terror such as Jon had never dreamed of before.

His hand froze.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"It's no good like this, Ion Wood!" she cried. "I've got to see you. You're the only one in the universe, so far as I know, who can help. Maybe..." The last word was a forlorn wail.

"Me? Why me?"

"Because he hasn't got your natal chart! Don't you understand? He can't plot your probable course. He can't locate you exactly or—"

"More astrology bunk! Lord! I told you I can't believe any of that nonsense! For openers, it's based on the planets in this one small solar system, so how about—"

"I know, I know. But I'm talking about Cosmic Astrology. The *new* astrology—since father perfected the Master Computer." Her eyes blazed. "Think of yourself! You're a star-dowser, right? You select probable planets for exploration out of far-flung billions! Isn't that in itself suggestive? Can't you just for one minute permit the possibility of a pattern, one established by means of a super supercomputer, when all the variables possible are correctly read? Listen, Jon Wood! Your father was a Believer! One of the Lost Believers! He had to be! Don't ask me to explain all of the reasons now. Later. You must come and see me at my apartment—tonight!"

"Not that it wouldn't be jolly, but I'm leaving so damn early in the morning."

Venus Trine shook her soft, free-flowing curls. "No."

"No?" Jon laughed. "Of course I'm going. I'm one of those nine-to-five jerks who happen to be dedicated to the job he is doing and who happen to like it."

She sighed. "Of course, Mr. Wood. But just come and we'll talk. Give me an hour. Please. You've *got* to!" That all-consuming tide of terror again. "If I could only make you understand how important—"

Jon blinked away, grimacing. This was getting out of hand. He must get rid of her. The best way was to seem to fall in, make the date, then cop out.

"Okay. What's the address?"

While she said it and repeated it, Venus Trine's eyes moved from side to side, as if invisible horrors might be listening. Jon wrote it down on a pad, then, without looking at her face in the vid again, he reached out and snapped down the toggle switch.

Firmly.

Eventually Jon closed up shop and went out to eat. It was dark, one of those drizzly March evenings when the Bay fogs drift up off the black water and cling about the wharves and the dock sheds and those elongated ice-cube-tray apartments poking up all around Telegraph Hill like brittle monolithic idols. He kept telling himself while he chomped down his salad and steak and sipped away his split of Cabernet Sauvignon that he'd come all the way down to North Beach because he liked the atmosphere. He wouldn't permit himself the slightest suggestion that he had come here because Greenwich and Franklin was only three blocks from the little Basque restaurant. Not until he was waving away the flan and more coffee did he allow one hint of Venus Trine to leak into the mainstream of his thoughts. And that, he insisted, was pure masculine instinct. Fill a man up with wine and steak and what's the next thing he'll think of?

Venus Trine was pretty. Damn pretty.

The cluster of monoliths matching the address Jon had happened to cram down in his pocket just before leaving his office was patterned around an arched central plaza that managed by artful design to look much larger than it really was. Space was at a premium everywhere on Earth.

Sauntering through the pinprick drizzle toward the first of those arches, having run his car into the sub-basement parking lot, Jon thought about astrology with irritation. Imagine him—Jon Wood, starplot's top star-dowser—permitting himself even to think about such ancient nonsense! Holy Gemini!

It was true, of course, that the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians had believed that the stars ruled their destinies and that one could read within them that which might happen. Might, that is. What was it they chattered? "The Stars impel; they do not compel." Very smart of them. It left all kinds of outs in case they guessed wrong! Those ancient stargazers with their flamboyant star-spangled robes and their conical hats and their long beards weren't so dumb! Always leave yourself an escape hatch in case your king's headman gets itchy fingers. Come to think of it, the Greeks had had a crack at astrology. And the Romans and the French. India, too. Curious how widespread the belief had once been, among isolated tribes who'd had little contact with one another. A lot of odd coincidences. The Mayan observatory in Chichén Itzá and some of those weird crystal lenses were uncannily modern in many ways. And, of course, Venus Trine was right about mathematics' having its beginnings in astrology. The Aztec calendar, an intricate enigma, was based on the movement of the stars. Astronomy was obviously a projection of starry soothsaying. If one cared to go into it—if there were any logical reason to bother—one could become fascinated by all the ramifications and curious bypaths of astrology. If one cared to, that is. Jon's knowledge was rudimentary and he intended to keep it that way. As for Venus Trine, she was pretty and she was in some kind of trouble. Maybe he could help her out—and incidentally have a bit of fun doing so.

\* \* \*

The apartment number he had scrawled down was 90-18. A long way up. The curved door of the pneumatic up-tube swung noiselessly open and Jon moved his lean, long-legged frame out of the test tube and onto the soft

green carpet.

On the way down the hall he could have sworn he was being followed. Three times he snapped a quick look behind and three times nothing. Nothing at all. The long dimly lighted hallway and all its offshoots were perfectly empty. Odd. A sense of brooding fear tingled his scalp. When it happened a fourth time—that overwhelming certainty that somebody was breathing down his neck—and he spun around to find nothing there, Jon swore out loud. The abrupt sound helped exorcise his demon.

When he reached 90-18 he waved a hand over the eye-spy to indicate that somebody was without. There was no response. He put his face close to the peephole. There. That ought to get her out of the kitchen or away from her bedroom primping. The closer he was, the louder the bell-chime warning inside.

Nothing.

Damn!

Convinced after a five-minute wait that Venus Trine was only exercising her feminine right to keep her visitor waiting and titillated, Jon combed his long fingers through his untidy mop, pushed up a smile, and stood as close as he could to the door's peephole. After all, he'd been on the go for a long, long time. Many months. He was overdue for feminine companionship and Venus Trine had certainly invited him.

He waited. The smile dropped. The utter deadness of the air (as if something had drained off every mote of energy from it) made it all too evident that Venus Trine was not at home. Jon projected some of his irritable intuate through the locked door and confirmed the fact. While Jon's intuate wasn't perfect—nobody's was—his batting average was astonishingly high. starplot appreciated him and guarded him from their competitors with motherly jealousy; it was this flattering esteem more than the high pay that kept Jon happy with starplot, this and the fact that he was left to work in his own way and at his own time. For example, the built-in snooper had been removed from his scalp six months after he had attained his present top rating by proving his worth. Jon had insisted on it. Let the other star-dowers have their brains hooked up to starplot's spy computers "for their own protection" if they wanted to. Something within Jon rebelled. He worked hard. He gave them his best. That had better be enough or else.

No, damn it. Venus Trine was gone. Copped out. He was a prize idiot for wasting his time coming up here. If he really wanted a girl, the steel-and-glass woods down there were full of them. Jon wrenched a yawn. Sure he wanted a girl, but right now he was dead tired, and six a.m. came awfully quick.

Moving out into the gently writhing fog again, Jon was once more possessed with the uneasy feeling that something was close on his tail, matching step for step, waiting for the propitious moment to pounce. From the Bay foghorns keened and hooted. Somebody up on one of those ice-cube balconies laughed. It was a feminine giggle and it was significantly cut off when somebody pulled the woman into the apartment and closed the door.

Jon stood among the shadowy arches, in the dim glow cast by the ring of lights at the base of the central fountain, waiting for something to happen. Something was *supposed* to happen. The aura was there, surging in close, close. He froze. He waited.

Nothing happened. The portent sense withdrew, abruptly. The

nothing-something stalking him was biding its time. Jon shrugged and swung quickly down the curve of stairs from the doorway, across the court and the patterned gardens. Whistling loudly, he ran down the long ramp leading to the parking lot and slammed away into the night.

His Runabout was rented for him by the company. He could have had something a good deal more pretentious. A helio-car, for example, with a chauffeur. Jon preferred the next thing to a rattletrap, and the privacy of modest means and modest living quarters.

He was halfway through the Marin County underbay tunnel when he knew suddenly that he wasn't alone in the car. From anger and irritation, he'd slammed out of the parking lot without so much as a glance into the rear seat, and now, his muscles tensing, he realized that something was crouched down below the level of the bucket seats.

He switched into the autotrack, which he usually scorned; it seemed so babyish, so ineffectual, as if a man didn't have the brains to maneuver a vehicle himself. It did help if you were drinking, though. He pressed the stud which geared the Runabout into automatic and then started to turn. His nerves tingled; his body tightened up for an animal's spring.

"Keep going," a taut whisper stopped him. "Speed up to normal. Keep your hands on the wheel."

"Hey!"

It was her.

"Don't talk. Don't even think. I mean, you've practiced holding back from other intuates. Hold everything back. Especially me." Venus Trine's voice was husky with that same terror he'd seen when it barreled out of those gorgeous green eyes back in his office.

Jon clamped down his mind, instinctively obeying the compulsion of that bridling fear in her voice. Venus Trine was in trouble. He had made a move toward helping her, and now he was in trouble, too.

For the moment his instincts were purely self-defensive. All very well, these damsels in distress, but...

Silence. Then the girl whispered in his ear, "Where are you taking us?"

"I'm taking you!" Jon chuckled. "What's that you're holding in your fist, pointed at my back? Not a peashooter, I think!"

"It's a blaster," Venus admitted. "But it's not for you."

"Then why's it pointed at me?"

"HE might have taken hold of your mind. I had to be sure. I am now. Where did you say we were going?"

"I was going home to bed. Alone. But if you'd care to join me, that might be arranged. That is, if you—"

"Don't talk so much. Don't tell me where you live. Just go there. Pretend you're alone. You do live in Sausalito?"

"Yes."

"One of those car lifts that lets you park your car on the same level as your apartment?"

"Yup. Small but exclusive. Lots of what I need on these quick trips to Terra. Privacy."

"Splendid."

"Glad you approve."

The automobile lift zoomed them up to within a short walk down the hall from Jon's expensive utility apartment with the spectacular view of San Francisco and the whole Bay area. It was all-inclusive, with dinner and drinks to be had from central service for the pushing of a button,

robot-cooked, robot-served.

Jon Wood's life had been here today and a million parsecs there tomorrow; starplot arranged for his creature needs wherever he might happen to be at the moment. Considering the luxury that his unique position with the fantastically huge star company rated, this two-room jewel box was practically poverty.

Venus double-checked the lock on the door before accepting the brandy Jon poured out at the built-in bar. With growing interest, he watched her prowl the cubicle's nooks and crannies (there weren't many). She was a small girl but built with exceptional precision. Her burnished-gold hair just brushed her shoulders; her tight gold suit with its accents of glinting sapphire matched her hair and brought out the startling green of her eyes. She'd stashed the hand weapon somewhere on her person; where, Jon could not imagine, although he thought as he sipped his brandy it might be fun to set about finding out. When she had finished checking out the apartment, including the bathroom, she came over and sat by him on the long couch.

"Well now?" he prompted, cocking an ironic eyebrow.

She tilted breathlessly toward him, thoroughly absorbed in her secret thoughts. "Have you lived here long?"

Jon checked his watch. "About fourteen hours. Okay?"

"Fine. I—think."

"I wish you'd let me in on what it is you think. If it's any help at all, nobody knows I am staying here. I am anonymous, incognito, and one of those celebrities who never gets his picture on the vid, anyway. That's the way starplot likes it and that's the way I like it. My boss—and he is a big boss—trusts me implicitly."

"Against whom?"

"Competitors, of course. Just about everything's been tried to inveigle me away from starplot. First, they made me wear a goddamn gimmick in my head that kept tabs on every movement, in case I got kidnapped or something. I made them remove it. By now they are 100 percent sure of me and play it my way. I am not bugged, I am not checked up on. I am alone, period. The way I want it. And tomorrow, dawn, I take off for Moonside never to see this particular worm can again." He indicated the cushy walls and the fog-blurred windows with a flourish.

"Good. Good." She permitted herself a small sip, then a deeper one. "This is good brandy. Not that I'm a connoisseur or anything."

"Another?"

"No. I'd better not—"

"I think you'd better. Looks like you haven't relaxed for quite a while."

Her eyes darkened to bitter green. "Not since Trog killed my father."

He poured a liberal dollop into her snifter and a larger one into his own. He sat closer to her and took a firm, brotherly hold of her free hand to stop it from trembling.

"Tell me what happened. This Trog, I presume, is he. And now Trog is after you. That it?"

She nodded, shivering. "I'd better start at the beginning."

"Always a good idea."

"This is probably the only chance I'll get before Trog kills me. To tell someone who can help, I mean."

"Now, now!"

The surging desperation spilled out of her more strongly than ever. "If I

could only make you understand how universally important all this is! Your job—starplot all the political and business byplay that's going on in the Intergalactic Congress—it's all so pitifully insignificant compared to—”

“Trog?”

“What he means to do. Don't look at me like that, Jon Wood. I mean, cock your eyebrow as if I were *non compos* or something.”

“I was only thinking that, brought up by your science-renegade father in some cult or other, on some Lost Believer planet...”

She unleashed a tormented sigh. “If only you weren't so pigheaded! I'm—I'm so very alone in all this. Father's old friend Calvin Grey can't leave the Reader or the mountain.”

“Trog's after him, too?”

“It's not necessary. Calvin's bedridden, dying. He's over ninety. *Somebody* has to stay with the Reader and keep contact with Barrecrieth—”

“Wait a minute! You're way ahead of me! Barrecrieth?”

“That's the planet of the Lost Believers. The ones who left Earth and then every other known colony in our galaxies because they were persecuted everywhere they went for being Believers in the Pattern. About fifty years ago. You've heard about it. Nobody knows where Barrecrieth is except that it is farther out—much farther—than any other Congress ships have ever traveled.”

“Let's back up just a little. You said the Believers were persecuted everywhere they went. Maybe. But there's another point of view. They were always meddling, forever trying to tell the real scientists what to do. The *stars* said, ‘Don't do this; do that!’”

“If you saw someone about to fall off a cliff in a heavy fog, wouldn't you try to stop him?”

Jon swigged and moved back to the bar for another drink. He grimaced at the driving fog outside the bell-shaped window.

“All right, let's drop that particular ball. Let me see. Your persecuted Believers found themselves a lost planet way out someplace, leaving the rest of the far-flung human race to stew in their own abysmal ignorance of cosmic patterns or whatever. But your father, the ex-distinguished Dr. Laurent Trine, stayed behind with his old buddy Calvin Grey and his curly-headed little daughter—”

“I wasn't born yet, obviously. Yes, Father stayed behind to perfect the Star Reader.”

“So called because it reads the stars,” Jon said, grinning.

“Yes. It's not only an incredible computer designed to chart the personal horoscope for everyone of the Believers, but it charts the courses of planets and galaxies as well.”

“Wow!”

“Yes. It was the result of generations of painstaking work by the Believers. The stars themselves showed us how to build it, how to tune it to the minds of those who were destined to use it. Nobody who is not a Believer can read it. Right now—since Father's death—there are only two of us left on Earth who can. Calvin Grey and me. And Calvin is dying!”

“Where is this jewel?”

“In a secret place here on Earth. Not far from here. I don't dare tell you where! Not yet! Besides what I told you, the Star Reader keeps us in contact with its own twin—on the planet Barrecrieth.”

“I don't understand why your father and Calvin didn't take off to Barrecrieth with their families and to hell with good old Terra!”



Venus Trine's eyes stormed with reproach. "Don't you?"

"Well..."

"This is our home. We feel obligated to cherish it and help it, no matter what the smug know-alls think of us. We had to keep this bond with man's mother planet. The stars told us about an inconceivable horror that was to come upon us and"—the girl's face was bleached white, and, intuating, Jon felt his blood become like burning acid in his veins—"Father died trying to thrust this—black shadow—out of time. And I left the Reader to find you. You're our only chance, Jon Wood!"

"Me?" Jon downed his brandy dregs to bear the searching demand in her eyes.

"Yes. You see, Trog's got my chart. Which means he can find me eventually, wherever I am. But he doesn't have yours. Nobody does. You're an unknown quantity in the universe. So when I am dead—"

"Hey, now!" He grabbed hold of her shoulders, dropping his glass. "What makes you say a thing like that?"

"The stars, Jon," Venus Trine said softly. "I've known it for a long time—ever since the day I first saw his shadow—the day he killed my father. You see, the Reader told me I am to die. Calvin checked it with me, over and over and over. There is absolutely no out for me. Trog must take me. It's—in the stars."

### 3

Jon got up and tottered to the bar for another brandy. He needed it. When he tried to pour the girl some more, she put a hand over her glass. She just sat there, her pale features devoid of emotion. Resigned to what the stars had foretold, she was as good as dead already. Jon gave her a hard, hot look. Damn it all! He looked for self-pity. There wasn't any. As for Jon, he couldn't take this notion, not even a little bit. Some invisible enemy named Trog lurking over her. It had to make better sense than that.

"What's this about the stars impelling, not compelling?" he complained. "Isn't there always an out somewhere?"

"No. Not this time. You see, my mind virtually blends with the Star Reader. The new cosmic astrology concerns itself with cycles, energy cycles. What applies to the stars applies equally to the DNA threads within our cells. The energy within our molecular structure is part and parcel of the whole." She shrugged. "To me it's so easy. It's all one Pattern!"

"Suppose we find a way to break the Pattern?"

Venus shook her head. "Even if that were possible, think what might happen if you did! The Pattern is what holds all of what we call space and time together. If you broke the Pattern, what would be left?"

"Chaos."

"Of course. So when the Star Reader tells me I must die, that Trog will kill me, I must believe."

"Because you are a Believer," Jon grunted.

The girl got up with a shrug, as if to slough off her own importance in the scheme of things. "My life doesn't matter, Jon. It's the terrible thing Trog intends to do that frightens us to the point of insanity. You've got to stop him—or at least try."

"You keep piling this on me," Jon grumbled. "First, you slap me silly with the prospect of seeing you go up in smoke right in front of my eyes—with nothing I can do about it—and now I'm supposed to stop some black shadow from doing some damn thing or other. How about some facts?"

"Sorry. I can't give you any facts about Trog. He's too clever for that."

"Where does Trog come from? What is he?"

"In that one flash when he almost revealed himself to me, my intuate told me that he comes from another time phase. Our future, I think. Far, far in our future. Almost to the very end of the Pattern."

Jon stalked to the window, stared out into the drizzle and fog. "You make it sound too *damn* easy!"

"At times of great stress—at the time of one's death—it is surprising how unimportant the important becomes."

"This Pattern of yours. It includes everything? What *everything*? How much everything?"

"All that our human minds can contain. Our universe."

"Time?"

"All time phases which involve man and man's thought. To a being beyond our space-time Pattern everything is all of a piece, a cohesive, all-at-once whole."

"Einstein's fourth dimension."

"Think of an ant climbing up a wall. There are all kinds of things happening on other planes but, being virtually flat, he can see only the wall—now. Man is like that ant."

"Except his mind!"

"Right! An intuitive like you, Jon Wood, ought not to be so narrow that he rejects what all those other minds have worked so hard to understand since the first caveman looked up at the stars and thought there had to be some kind of sense to it all. Primitives have an instinctive power of belief. It's a lot like your dowsing power. Can't you see that? Science is often restrictive. It won't permit leap-outs, it concerns itself with small patterns and cycles, never allowing itself to imagine the whole Pattern all at once."

"Scientists like orderly facts. Their theories have got to be founded on reasonable data."

"Yet wasn't it the visionaries, the dreamers, who first realized that the Earth was not the center of the universe? And science-fiction writers who first postulated life in other star systems and humans going there? Dreamers have always been the ones who leaped ahead. They didn't worry themselves about 'facts' and orderly 'data.' Think about astrology openly and without bias just for one minute. Think how widespread it was. The ancient Hebrews read the stars and called the Pattern Jehovah. The Indians called it something else. The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Celts—they *all* believed in astrology. They *knew*, inside their cells."

"But that early astrology was based on the nine planets' revolving around our own little sun. I admit it's odd that they had all the planets pegged, when Pluto wasn't even proven to exist until 1930! But what has the effect of Mars trine Venus got to do with a human born on a colony world in Orion?"

"All that was correct for that particular time phase. The rules changed when man jumped out into deep space. Our new cosmic astrology includes the *whole* Pattern. The Star Reader Father perfected takes in everything in our universe, all of human time as well."

"We don't know it all yet," Jon objected.

"The Reader is provisioned for expansion. It keeps pace with the human space-tide."

Jon took a couple of minutes to swallow what Laurent Trine had taught his daughter. It would take a while to digest it and right now he didn't like the taste of it.

"Will you at least try?" she urged.

"To believe? Okay, I'll *try*. I won't believe, but I will try." Something about Venus Trine was getting to him, perhaps her subtle perfume, or perhaps the dull gray stone suspended from a silver chain around her neck and resting in the ivory hollow of her throat, above the cleft. Maybe it was that. Not what she was saying.

"You will believe."

He turned away, stalked around, sipped brandy, then came back. "You know, scientists aren't quite the dumbbells you suggest. I admit that the long, rich history of astrology and allied hokey-pokey is very impressive, but—really! How was it that the scientists didn't fall in with your Believers when the witch hunts were at their height? Defend them? Give them a chance to prove their Pattern theory?"

"Surprisingly enough, many of them did. My father was only one of many."

"You mean other scientists joined up and went flying off to Barrecrieth?"

"Yes. The more discerning ones did exactly that. The others, the ones who resented us so fiercely and stirred up such hatred against us among the laymen, were jealous because we seemed to be stealing some of their

thunder."

"Well, after all, they did pretty well on their own. Getting man out into the Deep. Keeping him from over-populating himself out of existence or committing genocide. Talk about your patterns. There have to be brakes on human behavior—especially when it starts getting all scatty and weirdo. There's a lot to be said for everybody working together—shoulder to the wheel—getting things done the normal, workaday way."

Venus nodded. "But there's another kind of progress—the kind that's harder to understand. Sometimes it involves horrors like atomic war, and sometimes it involves sheer genius, but this is the 'scatty, weirdo' brand of progress that spurts man far ahead—the kind of thing we Believers read in the star pattern. Believe it or not, we have kept man from tripping himself up completely more than once!"

"From the sidelines."

"From the sidelines, yes. After all," she smiled faintly, "we're human, even though we haven't always been treated like it."

Jon glowered down at the dark liquid in his snifter as he swirled the glass between his cupped hands. The girl was trying. She desperately wanted him to believe in all this, or at least to admit to some part of it. Which he did. His intuate told him that she was not feigning the part about her own imminent death—it spilled from her secret mind like the odor of the charnel house. He forbade himself to think it—to *know* it—yet he did. It was the intensity of her dark, deep emotional conviction that grapple-hooked his mind and made him know it was true. Jon knew the signs within himself. Sometimes his star-dowser's sense about a point in the immense blackness was so faint he felt it as a mere mind blink. Sometimes it was as strong as steel. Venus Trine's peril reached out and seized his secret mind and he was hooked.

He looked at her, knowing that those lambent green eyes were tight on him every second.

"I still don't see why it has to be me. Why *me*?"

"Because you are an intuate and can 'see' these things even when you won't admit that you do. Because your horary chart cannot be computed, even by Trog. Mostly because of your father."

"My father?"

"He was a Lost Believer. Don't you see? That's what it had to be! When they tried so hard to find out who the 'space waif' was, they got nowhere. Not one of the colonies knew anything about you. Many as there are, all births are still strictly recorded in the master records."

"Then—I am from Barrecrith?"

"Yes."

"And where is Barrecrith?"

She shook her head. "Nobody knows. Not even Trog,"

Jon went to the window and opened it wide to the night fog and the tang of the sea. He breathed in deeply. The brandy had muddied up his mind and the chilly wind lashing his face gave him a kind of stinging pleasure. What Venus Trine had told him was repugnant to him. He'd always, since he was old enough to think two-plus-two, winced at the occult, despised it. It reminded him of that little space crèche he'd been found in and all the malarkey he had been subjected to when he was a child, when phrases like "mystery child from nowhere" and all the other nonsense they'd dreamed up about him made him want to hide in corners.

Venus Trine was bringing all this traumatic child horror out in the open again, tearing loose the careful swathings he had wrapped around the old wounds. Making him remember things he wanted to forget, to deny ever happened.

And yet—Venus Trine was going to die.

He turned and looked at her. Her eyes were on him and they were very bright.

"Tell me about Trog," he said.

"Close the window. Please?"

Jon nodded and did. He came back to the couch and sat very close to her. Her fingers were toying with that oddly ugly gray stone appended to the chain around her neck. It fascinated him, yet right now he wanted to know about Trog. He earmarked the odd amulet for later.

"I can't tell you very much. Trog is far too clever to leak out any information about himself which might be used against him."

"But what is he? Human?"

She held tightly to the stone pendant. "Or what humans will eventually become. I told you he is from the future."

"I've always felt that time traveling was a little absurd. The idea of it, I mean."

"Not if you see the whole thing as one great big Pattern. When you think of it, memory is a kind of time traveling. And when you do your star-dowsing, it is actually seeing forward or backward into time—since you are sensing creatures on planets light years away who may no longer exist!"

"True. I suppose, yes. And if it's all a big tidy Now we only have to dip back or front whenever we damn well please and—"

"Not any time. There are strict rules to the Pattern, or it wouldn't be a Pattern! It all demands careful juxtapositioning of known facts. And the kind of wild talents we both possess. Mutated minds with feeble replicas of the powers Trog uses!"

"Because in his 'time phase' these talents will have been fully developed."

"All of us can see into another time phase momentarily. Mostly we dismiss these random glimpses. When we see a familiar street as suddenly changed, or a young friend grown old in a flash—then back again. The ancient astrologers saw best *because they believed what they saw*. They accepted. Sometimes they read the Pattern wrong. After all, they had only small parts of it to work from."

"And they became defensive, I suppose. When one of them got a reputation for predicting the future, he had to keep boosting it, true or

false. He was expected to be right 100 percent of the time, and sometimes he had to phoney it to keep his head on his neck. Well, at least starplot doesn't expect that from me!"

"No. But it's so very much the same—you and the ancient astrologers! Don't you see that?"

"I'm beginning to. But—what about Trog?"

Her star-bright eyes clouded over. Her sigh caught in her throat. "I wish I could tell you more. Mostly I only sense him as a dark, hovering shadow. I don't think he can quite manifest himself in our time because there is no contact point. Even Trog has to have that. The worst time was when he destroyed my father's mind. Father was in the star sphere and vulnerable—"

"Star sphere?"

"That's what we call the heart of the Reader. That's the limbo place where one's mind makes total contact with the Reader and sees what it sees in the Pattern. As I told you, it has to be someone who believes implicitly, someone whose mind has been programmed into the Reader through his total horoscope."

"And this contact made your father vulnerable?"

Venus nodded, gulped. "It was just after he had made one of his most intense tries with the Reader about the dark shadow—the menace we knew was there but couldn't pin down because Trog is so very clever. I think Father learned something that day, but he died before he could tell me anything but Trog's name."

"Trog took possession of him and killed him."

"Yes. Just at the point when Father was withdrawing from the heart of the Reader—from the sphere—Trog grabbed hold of his mind. Father fought him. He knew that if Trog took possession of his mind, he would get access to the Reader and the Lost Believers on Barrecrieth. So Father fought him—and died."

Venus closed her eyes, shuddering. Jon took her hands. They were very cold. "You saw all this?"

"I came into the outer chamber leading to the sphere just in time to see Father stagger out, choking, battling something in the air that looked like a dark smudge of smoke. He died in my arms, but before he died, I *felt* Trog within him. Trog looked up at me through Father's eyes and there was such monstrous evil in that look that it was like a window opening on some cosmic hell. All the wars we have ever known—all the vicious murders and rapes and supernatural horrors ever committed or imagined were trapped in that look. Father managed to force him back."

"By dying?"

"By forcing his heart to stop beating. It was the only way."

Jon squeezed her hands. "Why doesn't Trog try your father's partner—what's his name—Calvin?"

"Calvin's already dying. Trog wants a mind that's young and alert." Her hands pulled away from his and went to the amulet resting on her throat. "He would have taken me by now if it had not been for this."

"What is it?"

With an abrupt gesture and a curiously bleak smile she took it from around her neck and put it in his hand. Jon stared down at it, hefting it, stroking its nobby contours, trying to decide what made it so different from anything he had ever seen before.

"It's like rock, yet those little flecks of prismatic light in it suggest a rare mineral. All the colors of the rainbow." He held it up to the light. Yes.

He could see light shining vaguely through it. Many-colored spectra of light. "Funny. Those shapes inside of it seem to be moving! What in—!"

"Try turning it in different directions."

Jon tried. "Odd. It pulls away as if defying gravity. When it hits a certain point, it seems to want to dart off and—disappear!"

"Can you guess why?"

Jon scowled, stroking its cool, soapy surface. "It's like a projection from somewhere else. A part of something much larger in another dimension."

Venus nodded. "Father thought so, too. It came to us in a sealed container, automatically propelled from—" "Barrecrieth?"

"Yes. There was no message. Only this stone. Father thought that originally it came from much farther out. They sent it to us from Barrecrieth because we needed it. Father thought it came from outside our time-space frame of understanding. From outside the Pattern!"

Jon whistled. "What good is it?"

"For one thing, I believe it has stopped Trog from killing me. He has moved down repulsively, letting me know he's lurking there, but something always stops him from taking my mind. Also, I believe it's a key to the whole Pattern somehow, if only we could find out how to use it. Whatever set the Pattern in motion didn't mean for the stone to fall into our space-time."

"Even the gods can make mistakes?" Jon suggested wryly.

"Are they gods? Who knows what they are? Anyway, we've got this and we must guard it carefully."

Jon reached over and kissed her lightly. He smiled. "Well, if this amulet will protect you from all things dark and hideous—including Trog—I'm all for it. So much for your Reader and your certain death!"

He put the stone in her hand and curled her fingers around it. "I don't know how much of all this to believe, if any. For all I know, you might be a starplot competitor with a fantastically elaborate new pitch. But I do know that these security blankets do have a way of doing whatever you think they can, if you believe it hard enough."

He moved back to the window, full of wild thoughts, not the least of which was the sudden impulse to take her in his arms and keep her there until dawn struck and he must leave for Luna City. As for the rest, it was impossible for him to give it mind room. All his life had been dedicated to hard work, mental work. Everything that smelled of fantasy or of occult phenomena bugged him because it reminded him of those early child years. He didn't want to be different. Venus Trine had called him "Special." Well, maybe, with his talent for star-dowsing. That much was acceptable by modern science, but the rest? Forget it! Venus was a lovely girl—but he had no time, damn it!

"No," he said decisively, not turning to look at her. "No."

"Yes." Her whisper was almost sad.

"You know, when I first saw you on the vidphone, it hit me that we'd met before." He would keep the rest of their conversation on a strictly mundane basis. "Is that possible?"

"Of course. In Babylon, perhaps."

He growled into the night fog. "I don't want to hear about it. No more nonsense. I'm beat." He sagged against the curved glass, letting his forehead knock and roll against the cool surface. "It's late."

"I know. You must get some sleep, Jon."

Her reflection on the foggy window was wavery, the gold of her dress

made blurred coruscations when she stood up. She was like something out of his dreams, reflected in the curved glass. One of her hands, the hand holding the amulet, was stretched out toward him.

Jon closed his eyes. He had to or he might turn and take her in his arms and then forget his important job and all it meant to him. Integrity. Dedication to duty.

"Jon."

"Yes."

"Don't forget."

"As if I could!"

"It is up to you, Jon. There's nobody else."

Jon grunted and stayed put, eyes closed, for a long, weary minute. Then something, some soft sound, snapped him to. He opened his eyes. She was gone! The reflection was gone!

He whirled and shot a look at the hall door. It was gently closing behind her. *When I am dead, Jon...* He reached the door in a run. Hell. He couldn't let her go. Not like this. An impossible and precious dream was slipping away from him and it must not.

Hand on the doorknob, his eye caught hold of something dropped on the floor in front of the door where he couldn't miss it. A glinting silver chain and an ugly gray stone. It took only a couple of seconds to sweep it up before he flung open the door and thrust through.

"Venus!"

The long hall was empty. He ran out into the main hall. That was empty, too. The light above the elevator was out; the test-tube lift was not in use.

"What in—?" Ten yards away, above the immaculate green carpet, in the filter-washed air, was a dark smudge. A dirty swirling of disembodied specks, living motes that whirled inward and vanished while Jon watched.

Jon stood there, iced from head to foot with fear, staring at the black dust-devil, then down at Venus Trine's amulet of protection. It had all happened so fast; there was no way to push time back and make it not happen. That was for those who ruled the Pattern.

*It is up to you, Jon. There's nobody else.*



Jon was halfway across the dawn-glimmered tarmac. It took severe resolution and all the self-control he could muster to push one foot ahead of the other toward the moonship, waiting for him to climb aboard before it would make its routine leap to Luna City. The directors of starplot would be waiting for him, politely and respectfully, yet with a hint of well-concealed irritation that all of their immense space plans must wait upon one nonbusiness mind possessed of an oddball talent they didn't understand.

Jon wasn't thinking about them, of course. He was thinking about *her*. The smudges under his eyes and the tense lines around his lips told of a bad blanket-twisting night. A thorough search of the hall and the elevator and the downstairs hall had gained him nothing but more clutching fear. She had not come down that elevator, the lobby attendant had insisted, nobody had. It was three a.m.

By forcing his thoughts away from the whirling black dust-phenomenon, by half-convincing himself that Venus Trine's motives were competitor-predatory, he did manage to catch an hour's shut-eye. When the wake buzzer brought him out of that solid-walled sleep, he forgot at first all about her. There was too much duty motion to run through. Drinking some juice and coffee. Running his transistor shaver over his lean jaws. A super-quick shower. Then pulling himself into the grayish-blue starplot tunic he wore on these off-world treks (he didn't have to, but it made him less conspicuous) and then slamming his basics into that one utility suitcase.

He was climbing into the rented Runabout when he remembered the stone.

Something buried deep in his mind forced him to go back; that same something was in a panic that he'd lost it. No, there it was on the bar with the two brandy snifters, one of them smudged with Venus's lipstick. Jon grabbed up the stone in his fist, tempted by sudden savage anger against having his own pattern of life interrupted by such fantasy to fling it out the window. He tried. Somehow his fingers wouldn't open. He scowled and swore under his breath as he dropped it into his tunic pocket.

starplot's private port was located some thirty miles south of the Bay megalopolis and the traffic was, as always, murder. Jon stared at the moving masses with sullen displeasure, trying to whip up some pleasure at leaving this for the clean, austere mountains of the Moon.

It didn't work very well. Ordinarily he found these off-Earth jaunts stimulating. He enjoyed his work and found satisfaction in being an important part of man's great surge into the unknown.

*When I am dead, Jon...*

Hell's bells! If these kooks got themselves in trouble, it was their own fault. You have to swim with the tide, not against it. Usually these nuts asked for it. In a way, subscribing to strange ideologies was like taking psychedelic drugs—it was just that stupid. None of that was for him. He would stick to the script, do his job and do it well.

As for Venus Trine—

Halfway to the moonship Jon stopped cold, as if he had struck an invisible wall. He turned on his heel sharply. He didn't even realize that he had dropped his suitcase, as he began running.

The wind skirled around his ears. Somebody shouted from the ship, but Jon hardly heard him. When he slapped his long body against the glass

door of the port building because it didn't open fast enough, he almost knocked over a yawning desk clerk.

"Why, Mr. Wood! Whatever—!"

To distract his attention, Jon mumbled something and pointed back of him at the ship and some men running their way. Then he headed full speed for the lower levels. It was almost automatic, diving for the narrow labyrinths of the basements, which housed the warehouses, the functional machinery of the port, the personnel dressing cubicles. Jon had more than once changed here from his starplot tunic to something more suitable for one of his rare San Francisco nights out. He had a locker down there and now he headed for the locker room.

This was a quiet in-between time for the port, too early for the major runs and the full work shifts. Jon met only two maintenance men, and skittered past them.

The main locker room was occupied and he narrowly missed a pilot who knew him by darting into one swinging door of the shower-and-lav and then out another, keeping a wall of lockers between them. He moved quickly along the locker benches toward the six private cubicles at the end of the long, low room. He picked the smallest and dingiest of the six because this one was the least used, and eased in.

He slammed the inside lock and slid down onto a small bench, trying not to breathe too hard. His pilot friend was humming to himself, just off duty and in a hurry to make his brief Earthside leave count. Jon bent his long frame over and bit down into his thumb, waiting for him to leave. Waiting, too, for the inevitable patter of feet down the halls. Voices shouted as the men from the moonship, and others joining them, moved around the maze of narrow corridors.

Straining against the outer wall, Jon caught a word, a phrase.

"Something's happened to Wood...."

"What in—?"

"Who 'n hell knows? Sick, suddenly, or gone off his..."

"...know these kook dowers. They go rummy, all that concentration, all those wild alien minds they probe ... knew one once who thought he was a Proximan eely and..."

"Shut up and find him! Can't hold that ship much longer!"

The rumbling about went on for the best part of an hour. Jon sweated when the footsteps thundered right up to the door of his cubicle, but luck was with him when somebody else farther out yelled that Wood had been seen leaving the main foyer by one of the side doors. The footsteps padded heavily away and out.

Jon's mind tore in two. One half said: *What in the bloody hell are you doing skulking down here? At least act like a man and go and tell them you just don't intend to go to the Moon, period!* The other half warned: *You tell them anything and you let yourself in for a hatful of impossible explanations. You've never acted like this before. Tell them and you'll have medicos crawling all over you!*

When the clatter diminished, leaving only the vague hum of basement machinery behind, Jon noticed for the first time that his right fist was clenched tight. He hadn't turned on the light in the cubicle; he didn't need to see what that hard, roundish lump in his fist was. He knew.

He moved his closed hand up to his face and uncurled his fingers. The stone that Venus had willed him looked somehow different. Larger? Was it the shadowy light from the small opaque square of window? It seemed

almost—to move. No. It was him. His hand was trembling. His whole arm, his body began to tremble. Not with fear or anything related to fear. With eagerness!

Staring down at the stone so hard that it was as if he wanted to drive his sight sense and his mind, too, right down into that odd chunk of strangeness, Jon felt his heart jump up into his throat.

Something was going to happen. He was going to take a trip. That much he knew all of a sudden. Almost, he had known it the instant he stopped walking toward the moonship. And why had he known? For the same reason he had stopped himself from going to the Moon. He had unconsciously put his hand in his pocket and gripped the stone. The stone had told him what he must do and he'd done it.

He stared down at it, unblinking, waiting.

The stone began to show light, to glow. As the faint amber light grew within it (as if some other-dimensional pinpoint of light were turning itself inside out to the hypnotic demand in Jon's Special brain), Jon saw the shapes in the stone were indeed moving now. Slowly. Languidly. Then faster and faster, whirling like microscopic nebulae bursting into being.

Staring, Jon's genes tore loose bits of knowledge locked within them all of his life, unknown before, unwanted.

Somewhere he'd read that the past and the future are but winding paths both leading to *now*. And *now* does not even exist because it is forever becoming both past and future. Ergo, by simple logic, there is no past, no future. There is only now, and now does not exist!

"Babylon!"

Venus Trine had said it. They had met before in Babylon—maybe. Why Babylon? Was it a plant, a forced card? Was he even now with Venus Trine, wandering with her in the fabulous gardens hanging like jewels on the sky?

If the future and the past were merely other areas of Jon's personal time phase—if an extension of him was already there—why not snap himself back there? Why keep climbing up this particular wall? Reach out toward one of those other dimensions!

He looked down at the stone.

It began to glow with a sifting amber light. It felt warm in his hand; it was as though he had been walking along an ancient desert and idly picked it up. He was still in the fusty cubicle that smelled vaguely of perspiration and soiled clothes, yet another him sensed a blue sky over his head. Hot, bright. Then the babel buzz of ten billion voices washed over him.

Languages he knew became olden, quaint, archaic, semibarbarous. He sensed invisible faces crowding in on him.

The voices grew when he held the stone closer to his eyes. Then, as if a rickety TV tube had imploded, everything was silent. Time waited while Jon's mind reached out. Out...

## 6

Itti, the goatherd, woke up. He yawned and shook his lice-inhabited head. Something was wrong. The hillside around him was just the same as it was when he had gone to sleep under the scraggly tree that shaded him from the burning Middle-Eastern sun. The goat bells and the dry munching of the nannies and billies had a lazy, comfortable sound. Below the hill lay the winding river with its barges and lines of palm trees. Far off in the blue distance, heat-hazed so that it appeared to be a dreamy mirage on the horizon, was the city of Belshazzar the Great, its thick stone walls overleaped by its many ziggurats and palatial towers. The palace of the king stood at the summit of the sky-touching gardens, which were terraced and green always, radiant with color and fragrance, hanging in glory against the brassy blue.

Itti fingered his ears and shook his head again, in an effort to dislodge what had entered his brain while he was sleeping. He got up, scratching idly at the vermin crawling about under his filthy sackcloth robe. Shaking his head didn't do it. The intruder clung for a firmer mind hold. It seemed to be trying to force Itti's own mind back into limbo so that it could take full charge. It was desperate. It gnawed away at his thought processes like an invisible rat.

Itti took refuge in action. He kicked a big billygoat away from the tree branch where he was nuzzling the damp bottom of Itti's sheep gut of water that was hanging there. Itti took down the gut with skinny, dirty hands that shook from fear. He must be dying. Yes, that must be it. Everybody said Itti was sick. They didn't want him around. They wanted him up here on the hill, away from them. He was dying.

He unstoppered the gut and guzzled the tepid water from the Euphrates. It was rank with mud scents and the smell of dead fish. And it did no good. With a forlorn scream, Itti dropped the gut canteen, raked his hands down the sides of his greasy, lank-haired head, ran a few steps and then fell in a ragged heap.

\* \* \*

Jon kept his hold on the glowing brain; now, when panic and despair gave him his chance, he forced himself deep into the cretin mind. He climbed slowly up on his feet. He turned and stared unbelievably down at the broad river and the barges, the clusters of date palms and the mud-hut villages, at the long highway winding off from the quays toward the shining city.

"Babylon!"

The sun was a gold knife slashing the cerulean heavens, clean, cloudless. Barges of all kinds moved sluggishly over the wide Euphrates, to and from the vessels moored at the ganglion of docks where Belshazzar's warships dominated the commercial scene. The palm groves grew denser at the minor knots of poor villages; Jon saw great cedars as well, and tamarisks glowing with exotic flowers. Dung-bottomed sheep and kine were being driven along the river roads; off in the blue distance, a Syrian caravan moved across the desert in the direction of Babylon.

Jon loped down off his hillside, forgetting Itti's goats. His scrofulous body was agog at seeing what it normally had no brain capable of

encompassing. He trotted along the busy river road, gaping in amazement.

Huge rafts, planks borne up on inflated skins, carried building materials, cattle, produce; wicker boats like baskets darted in among the great rafts and barges, some to aid, some only to glean bits of food or useful debris that might tumble or be flung off the barges. Abject poverty stirred hopefully among apparent plenty. A holiday atmosphere swirled the torpid air; something important was about to happen. A crowd of river folk, fronted by bearded military, gathered at the docks and fluttered with incipient violence, suppressed but febrile.

Now, when the barges clumsily made way, a sleek, gorgeously painted bireme glided down through the heat mists. Its swart Phoenician slave crew bent glossy backs over the double tier of oars that flashed up from the swirling current, then down again. On the bireme's bellying sail was a great bull, sepia on vivid yellow. A flute player perched on the upcurved prow, piping the stroke, faster, faster, as the ornate vessel moved in view of the waiting crowd.

Shading his eyes, Jon could make out a tall, bejeweled, dark figure seated under a gold-fringed canopy just behind the flaming sail. He was flanked on either side by fat, oily eunuchs with plumed fans to ward off the flies that swarmed around the produce barges. The stiffly seated figure blazed with precious stones and embroideries of both gold and silver. Laggards were running quickly toward the dock; this rare glimpse of the king of all kings would bring some driplet of beauty and pageantry to their empty-belly lives. "Belshazzar!" Jon croaked, and ran also.

Shouts went up to greet the bireme as it side-bumped the stone abutment and slaves flung ropes to adjust and secure it. There were shouts of praise to the king.

"O King, live forever!"

White-robed priests were first in line, to bless the monarch and his selected lords, to thank Marduk and Shamash and Ishtar for his safe return, to implore his personal stars for his everlasting glory. The crowd pressed forward against the bearded guards, shouting hysterically. Belshazzar was a heartless, steel-souled tyrant, yet he was a great warrior and he was their king!

An orchestra of shofars and cymbals and drums set up a noisy anthem to add to the din.

Jon rubbed his eyes and slid his skinny frame forward among the mob cracks.

Jon dug for meaning to the babble going on around him; he found that by straining he could wheedle out the sense of it from Itti's simple, disease-curdled brain. It fed on itself, this new ability, and soon—as he learned to use the goatherd's arms and legs and senses—he was able to pluck out useful ideas and modest talents from Itti's slim frames of reference. To Itti, the great Belshazzar was like the sun itself; something afar that glittered. He was like the thunder, too, and the lightning. He made loud noises wherever he went and flung shafts of killing brightness. His warriors left bloody footprints behind them. No wonder the poor slaves of the ancients spoke of their rulers as gods. They were, so far as the poor were concerned!

Jon used Itti's knowledge and his own.

He rubbed his eyes and listened carefully and took it all in: the hideous poverty smells overlaid by the exotic scents worn by the king and his lords, the swagger, the pomp.

"May Bel-Marduk extend thy power to the ends of the world where eternity begins!" the priests chanted.

"May Ishtar increase thy sons to ten thousand!"

"May Adapa make thee wiser than thou art already, if that be possible!"

"May Ia see into the hearts of thy enemies and kill them all!"

"O Belshazzar, King of the Stars, live forever!"

The brass cymbals clanged, the shofars hooted, the drums rolled. Dancing girls, Persian and Egyptian and Hebrew slaves, moved out to display their bodies before the king in sensuous, voluptuous rhythms. Should Belshazzar condescend to look with favor on one of them, her lot in the pleasure palaces of the hanging gardens would be far kinder than it would be in one of the city's bordellos. The girls' owners smirked in the background, hoping to make a happy talent.

Ornate chariots with milk-white Arabian steeds waited to take the king and his lords to the city. A gold-tasseled parasol in a slave's fist protected Belshazzar's high-crowned head from the heat of the afternoon sun. He swaggered before the priests, the guards, the dancers, the crowd, with an arrogance tempered only by querulous impatience. One of the slaves dragged forward the day's catch. Belshazzar had been hunting on his kingly preserve, and when he moved closer to look down at the big bull lion his arrow had bagged, Jon got a close look at him.

Under his high trapezoidal crown, Belshazzar's face was rouged and kohled to the stiffness of a mask. His ebony beard was curled up in tight ringlets, stiffened with Persian oils; his cheeks were scarlet with rouge as were his heavy lips. The hawkish beak nose, the sullen black-ringed eyes, the cavernous jaws all bespoke a brand of lechery and cruelty beyond anything Jon had ever seen. His own time phase had been for the most part wiped clean of such selfish tyranny. In spite of the paint and perfume, the dazzle of gold cloth and webs of jewels, the multiple rings on every finger, there was nothing even slightly feminine about Belshazzar. He had on him and about him enough riches to feed a city for a year or to buy a small kingdom, but Belshazzar the Magnificent was all animal-man.

Jon shivered. Here was a glamorous monster. At his slightest whim a hundred citizens could be impaled, quartered, eunuched, beheaded.

"Not a bad day's hunt," the king said, preening. "Although my preserve grows thin. Fetch the lion taker. Bid him trap more beasts for my pleasure and make them all fighting bulls."

"We will see to it," fussed the minister of the royal hunt, kneeling in the dust. "Thank you, O Radiance!"

"Do so, or taste my headsman's blade."

Belshazzar whipped a sardonic scowl at the fawning circle, nodded abruptly to his hunting party of lords, and stepped up on his chariot. The milky chargers reared, but before the crowd could part for him to be off, one of his beaters pressed forward, a big hairy brute, pushing a half-naked girl ahead of him.

"O Light of All Stars, thou hast not forgotten what other game your worship has bagged this day!"

"Ah! The Judean wench we caught skulking in the marsh reeds." He motioned for an attendant to quiet his steeds. "Up on your feet, Hebrew slut! Up! Let your king see you so that he may decide if your flesh be worthy of his palate!"

The girl's dress was the ochre of an upper-caste household slave. She was dainty yet lithe; she rose to her feet with lissome grace and stood

before the Chaldean tyrant erectly, defiantly. Her raven hair swirled windily about her olive face; her deep, lustrous eyes met Belshazzar's look evenly and with a hint of contempt. Here was no mud-hut fisherman's lass; here was the captive daughter of some Israeli tribal chief. Her budding breasts heaved under the thin singlet.

"Down!" The lion beater crashed his backhand against her face. "Down before your lord and master, Jehovah scum!"

Belshazzar waved the brute back. "Nay, Katini. I would savor her, smutty face and all." He walked around her, stroking his crisp beard. "Yes. Yes. Let her not be harmed. The girl is plainly virgin, in the manner of these one-god lovers. Let her be taken to my concubine apartments, where she shall be bathed and anointed for my pleasure after tonight's triumphal feast."

When he seized her hair and yanked her face up for a close inspection, the girl cried out and pulled back in anger.

"Ah! A wench to be taken by force! Excellent! My day's kill shall be crowned with a chamber tussle and a blood whipping to break her spirit before I take her. I have had enough of easy meat and lick-spittle. Ready her to my use!" He flung her toward the twittering eunuchs, who seized her with their fat hands while Belshazzar leaped into his chariot and stormed away toward Babylon. The six-spoked wheels screamed on the pebbled surface of the road.

The girl struggled against being manhandled but was shoved aboard one of the large, lumbering wagons about to trundle after the king and his hunting lords. She fought the eunuchs and gave a wide, desperate look around her, as if to seek help somewhere in the crowd. The soldiers laughed and made obscene jokes. The crowd joined in their scorn, jeering. Once, only for an instant before she was engulfed by the eunuch attendants, Jon caught the urgent appeal in those lustrous, dark eyes and it sent an electric shock streaking through his goatherd's body.

"*Venus!*"

He yelled her name and leaped. A guard's fist crashed out when he reached the rear of the wagon chariot. He went down in a leggy heap and, when the wagon rolled away, one of the eunuchs flicked a whip across his back for his insolence.

Jon writhed against the dusty rocks, moaning, until someone among the Euphrates river folk reached down and helped him to his feet. It was a graybeard with a shepherd's crook.

"Ai, ai!" he clucked at Jon, and began delivering a small sermon on the futility of reaching out a finger toward the king's own. Then he got a good look at Jon, pulled himself hastily away from Jon's clutching grasp, and ran yelling and brandishing his staff for accent. Those nearby heard what he was screaming, and they ran, too. Soon those who had not already followed after the king's retinue on foot or ass's back surged raggedly away from Jon in panic.

Jon's back, where the whiplash had torn it open, and his swollen eye caused him such agony that for a moment he could think of nothing else. He lay there in the dust while the mob gradually moved away to their toil, their homes. The spectacle of their tyrant king among them was over. When Jon opened his eyes and tried to pull himself up, he couldn't. He flopped back, pain all but wrenching him out of this unhappy body he'd grabbed.

Presently some motor level of his stolen brain allowed coherent thought to struggle through the skeins of his pain. He looked down at his dirty,

scabby arms, then lifted the filthy robe off his chest. He moaned when he saw raw, silvered, disintegrating flesh.

A lagging boy turned back to shout:  
"Leper! Leper! *Unclean!*"



He was able at last to drag himself to a lonely spot on the river's edge where there was a thicket of marsh and cedar in which to hide his horror-inspiring body. He flopped down on his belly and slurped up the brackish water. He was crawling back against a dark cedar trunk to rest and try to think his defeated body into action when a wild flapping of wings struck him with cold terror. No. It was not Death's angel come to snatch him away. It was only a pink ibis flapping down and scolding him because he had wandered too close to its reedy nest.

Jon sprawled weakly against the tree trunk, stifling his weak body's impulse to drag itself out into the water and forget the whole thing.

By the waters of Babylon

There we sat down, yea, we wept,

When we remembered Zion.

Upon the willows in the midst thereof

We hanged up our harps.

Jon laughed a crazy laugh and sang, "I'll hang my harp on a weeping willow tree!" Then he babbled to himself, "Why'd I ever leave Zion!" His world was jammed with humans and aliens, each with his own hidden desires and faults, but it was a clean world and diseases such as leprosy had long since been reduced to nil. *Mycobacterium leprae* had, even back in the twentieth century, been called "Hansen's disease" and referred to in the books as only mildly infectious. The dreaded leper colony of Molokai had long since been transformed into a beautiful tropical haven for tourists. If only there had been some way to bring medical knowledge back!

He wondered miserably about it now. No. You couldn't bring anything back—or forward. Not even yourself. Not your body. Thanks to the stone from outside (still clutched in his physical fist back there in that dressing cubicle at the starplot port) his Special mind had made the time leap. His mind only.

Grabbing some kind of body to contain his mind had been hit-miss. He knew now why he'd ended up with this miserable specimen. There were two reasons: (a) there were far more miserable specimens than sound ones; (b) it had to be someone vulnerable for takeover. Itti, the leper, was that. Poverty and disease had made him docile, and he had walked hand in hand with death every moment of his life. He existed casually, like a fluffy dandelion seed blown on the wind.

Jon dwelled for a shivery moment on the boy's sorry life, and all those other wretched slaves, subject to daily lashings and miserable rations, with death their only release.

O daughter of Babylon...

Happy shall he be that taketh and

dasheth thy children

Against a rock...

Of course, there was always that other Babylon, the Babylon of kings and high lords, of perfumed palaces and shining white ziggurats dedicated to Bel-Marduk, to Ia, and to Ishtar. The world of fighting warriors and flamboyant grandeur, the world of silks and spices and lovely slaves, and rich commerce with Persia, with Arabia, with the Pharaohs of Egypt. Aye. The Chaldean Empire in the fertile Assyrian valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates was blessed by the stars for a long time, with abundant

harvests, with great cities, with knowledge of writing, iron, textiles—and plunder in wealth and slaves on all sides.

What about Venus?

She was here! In fact, it was she who had drawn him back to Babylon with her! Why? There had to be a reason. Jon's battered body took on new life, knowing that at least she was *alive*. Trog hadn't killed her, after all!

Alive, yes, but a pleasure slave of the sadistic Belshazzar, whose very breath was law.

"I've got to save her!"

He clawed grotesquely to his feet; he stumbled down to the muddy water's edge for more water against the heat. The sun had sizzled down out of sight like molten copper but its summer's evening fever yet lay over the purple land. Jon was starved. He found a few wormy dates on the ground and devoured them. But his compulsion lay in the direction of Babylon and Venus. How a leprous weakling like Itti could even find his way up—up into the fabulous hanging gardens and the king's palace to save the girl from Belshazzar's lechery was something not to be thought of at this point, lest despair defeat him before he even tried.

This much he knew: he might have Itti's emaciated, sick body for his tool—but he had Jon Wood's *mind*. He must use that mind, and well.

To begin, he knelt down, scooped up handfuls of gelatinous blue mud from the riverbank, and slapped his bare arms and legs with it. His face, too. Better dirty-looking than diseased-looking. The cool mud helped his cuts, too.

Now he set his wobbly legs on a path for one of the mud-hut villages he'd seen along the river. He prowled about the palms and oleanders and wattle fences until he found what he needed—a handmade wool garment hanging over a bush to dry. He sneaked along behind the rude windowless huts until his hand could dart up and snatch the garment, and then he fled.

It was overlarge for his stick-boy body. Well, so much the better. It had a shepherd's cowl on it and with this and the long sleeves and skirts he could move into the city without fear of detection and the dreadful cry, "Unclean! Unclean!"

He grabbed up his goat staff and made for Babylon at a ragged lope, keeping shy of the broad highway itself, which was still busy with wheeled commerce. The sky above his head began presently to twinkle with bright stars, and a faint breeze rattled the dry lower fronds of the palms which marched along either side of the highway toward the city like fuzz-plumed warriors.

It was some comfort to know that Venus's peril was not yet critical. Belshazzar had decreed that she should be bathed and perfumed and dressed to his taste, as if she were an item on his feast menu. The king would rest from his day's lion hunt; then he, too, would be suitably bathed and perfumed and bedecked for the night's feasting. A long procedure, by the look of him. One thing among so many troubled Jon much: the girl's uptilted chin when she faced Belshazzar. The Jewish slave girl would not submit. She would die first. If beating her was his pleasure, then he must beat her to death, for she would not give in ever. And, this being true, would she not make some effort to kill herself before Belshazzar's feast?

Jon speeded his pace across the deepening landscape. His stomach seemed to be filled with gnawing rats. He must find food before he collapsed. He grinned inwardly to realize that his own hideous goat smell had ceased to outrage his smell sense. He was getting used to his own

foulness.

Nearing the great sloping wall and the forbidding gates, flanked on either side by the massive winged bulls of Assur-bani-pal, it occurred to Jon to dart into the deepest shadows and enter by one of the lesser openings reserved for peasantry and slaves. Itti's feet carried him out of sheer habit to the correct one.

A tall mailed guard was in the process of locking it for the night. It was rumored that Cyrus the Persian was sending spies to Babylon in order to discover the city's weaknesses and plan for an overwhelming battle that would destroy Babylon forever, and the city was at night an armed bastion.

Jon yelled out a piteous cry and leaped forward to press himself through the crack before the single iron gate could clang shut in its archway. His sandaled heel was pinched between iron and stone and he went sprawling, yelping with pain.

"By Bel-Marduk! What swine fodder have we here!" bawled the guard, out of surprise, then anger. He made a downward jab with his spear.

Jon rolled away from the wicked blade with an inch to spare.

"Only a poor goatherd, O noble one!"

"Noble, is it, filth! I'll show you noble! And where are your goats, if you are a goatherd?"

On his knees, groveling before the burly giant, Jon babbled that he had been set upon by robbers who had stolen his animals and now he would be beaten half to death by his master for losing them.

The guard grunted and grabbed him up by his robe. The wool ripped and the flame of the sconced torch in the wall splashed down on flayed silvery-white flesh. The giant dropped him and made to pin his leper's body to the street stones with his spear. But by that time Jon had scrambled like a rat between the hairy legs and scuttled off across the way into the smallest, darkest hole he could crawl into.

His human mouse-hole led to others, many others. This poverty-flayed area of Babylon the Magnificent was a veritable labyrinth of rat warrens. While Belshazzar and his lords drank scarlet wines from vessels of gold and sniffed the heady odors of musk and heliotrope, nine-tenths of Babylon slept eight or ten in a warren, drank ditch water, and smelled their own filth in corner pots. It was said that you could be born under this man-made mountain of stone and mud brick, live there, and die there at the ancient age of thirty without having once seen the sun.

Jon plowed his stooping way over the filth heaps, some of which surprised him by being alive; his latter-day mind panicked after an hour of virtual darkness that was filled with crawling vermin and night things. The malodor was stifling. Sometimes he had to clamber over a roomful of sleepers or fornicators, since the slaves and peasantry had nothing to do after dark except sleep or fornicate. Here and there a fat lamp glimmered over bleak, demented faces, smudging the wall, adding to the stench. But mostly the poor endured the dark; it was better not to see what went on around you. If you woke up alive, you were lucky.

Finally he saw light ahead of him! And felt a merciful wafting of night air. Jon hurried forward, sucking in the relatively fresh oxygen and with it the inviting smells of street-stall cooking.

His oval hole opened out just above a busy market street where those with enough money could buy highly spiced meats cooked on open braziers, or fruits, or flat, round breads. A slatted ladder dropped him to the street's level. Jon darted and dipped nimbly about the well-laden stalls, tucking

here a ripe melon, there a round of hard unleavened bread, and even a thin ewer of sour wine, under his robe. At an early age, Itti had learned the ancient art of stealing his rations, and now ravenous hunger and Jon's alert mind added to his native skill. Then it was back into one of those holes, but not too far, where he wolfed down his ill-gained supper. He saved the casaba for dessert; its sweet, musky pulp was ambrosia.

The wine provided him with the bravado Itti's poor body needed for the long, hard climb up to the hanging gardens and the palace. He found his best route along the rooftops, avoiding the patio gardens of the wealthier merchants who enjoyed the penthouses above the mazes. Between leaps, he blinked up at the spidery minarets of the star temples. By this time Jon had taught the leper's scrawny body that it was do or die, better death by a falling plunge than by the whip or starvation.

He reached the lower wall leading to the downmost garden terrace and tumbled against it for a rest. His body yearned for sleep and it was all Jon could do to keep his eyelids from snapping shut and his limbs from sagging into jelly. Blinking, Jon looked up.

The wall seemed to rear up to the white summer stars. Beyond the wall was a garden of palms, of flowering oleanders and tamarisks, cascading riots of fantastic flowers.

"I'll never make it," Jon groaned.

Judiciously he began circling the wall, searching for the best place of attack, and the effort brought on a coughing fit. He could never make it. Never. He was too puny, too sick.

Still Jon's mind doggedly pushed Itti's reluctant body forward until he reached the wide marble staircase used by the lords of the palace and providers for the king's feasts. He watched the small army of litter bearers and basket toters wind their way up the stairway between the tall guards who stood at every tenth step, guards armed with spears and broadswords.

From behind a great flower urn Jon followed the method that the guards used to screen the feast providers, noting which guards were most alert, which least. By the appearance of this army, this mountain of food and wine and flesh, tonight's affair was going to be one of Belshazzar's more spectacular orgies—the kind he was so famous for—and might last three or four days. The cortege of panniers and baskets, fronted by the potbellied produce merchants, seemed as if it might go on all night.

Good. Jon must brazen it out. He must dart into the moving mass, become part of it. But first he must provide himself with a bundle. He drew back into the deep shadow, whipped off his robe and improvised a bundle by stuffing it with branches from the flower urn and debris windswept behind it. Now, rested from his quiet watching, he sidled to the stairway and got into line with the merchants and their slave toters. The dusk helped.

All went well until he reached the last terrace but one before the great doorway to the outside kitchen. From native fear and exhaustion, Itti stumbled. His bundle went bouncing down the long steep stairway, spilling its spurious contents.

A guard leaped out from his post, perhaps to snatch up a goodie from the lost bundle for himself. When he saw what it was, he yelled curses and warnings up to his fellows. While the diversion was still only at the laughter stage, Jon fled. He scrambled over the low balustrade to the garden terrace and ran down the perfumed pathways until his lungs threatened to burst out of his rib cage. He tumbled into the shrubs,

panting. He had only enough strength left in his spidery frame to drag himself farther into the bushes before footsteps and raw, cursing shouts sullied the perfumed beauty of the garden.

He heard them and quaked in terror, but then he didn't hear them at all. He shuddered into the grass and slept.

Jon's waking thought was one of defeat. He wanted out. He wanted to go back where he belonged, back to a world of science and sense, back to his reasonable orderly job with starplot. He'd had more than enough of this pitiful, disgusting goatherd body! Now. Now. Don't think about it! Just do it. Take off now, before this bad-old-days brand of existence has you trapped again! Before quixotic duty grabs you by the bowels for more twisting agonies!

He tried hard. He couldn't. Not quite. An oval face framed in ash-gold waves, a pair of green eyes with nebulae of stars in their lustrous depths, a voice: *When I am dead, Jon. It will all be up to you.*

"No!" Jon leaped up so fast he cracked his untidy head on a flowery shrub branch. "You can't be dead! I saw you—in the Jewish girl's body!"

But—had he? Doubt scraped across his heart, his bowels. Had he been mistaken? Had Trog taken Venus after all? This was quite a different time phase and how could he be sure that *back in that other time phase Trog had not killed Venus, just as she knew he must because the stars had said it!*

Jon groaned. The sweet, cloying air of Belshazzar's personal paradise, the sharp crescent moon swimming above, all this served but to accentuate his feeling of enormous loss. He knew now—quite suddenly—that Venus Trine was the only woman he would ever love. That, too, had been predestined in the remote, implacable stars. And she was gone. Lost to him, forever.

He brushed aside the fern fronds and the moonflowers and sought a path that wound farther up in the direction of the gleaming tapers and the feasting. He found a splashing fountain gurgling up pure water from some vast arterial network of plumbing leading from the distant Euphrates itself. While he cupped hands and drank, Jon thought grimly of the ways of ancient kings. Most of the books he had read about them gave them glory and greatness, ignoring such truths as how they'd set their slaves to ingenious tasks such as this pipe labyrinth that fed Belshazzar's magnificent hanging gardens.

He was cooling his arms and his neck, bent over the gushing fountain, when a hairy hand reached down and yanked him up.

"What do you think you are doing? Drinking the king's clean water! This water is for Belshazzar's flowers! For slaves like you—ass's urine!"

Jon twisted to free himself from the palace guard. Until the mailed monster let go of his robe, he could only sputter from being choked purple by his own garment, and this gave him an idea. If he were dumb he need not answer embarrassing questions. Let the guard interpret for himself. Assuming a fawning crouch at the bearded brute's feet, Jon made guttural noises in his throat and pointed at his neck.

"Dumb as well as stupid?"

"Eiiighhhh."

"One of this garden keeper's bastards?"

"Eiiighhhh."

"I've never seen you before."

Jon rolled his eyes and made vague hand motions to indicate that he was, indeed, beneath notice.

"You know it's forbidden to enter the gardens other than at morning

work hours! Your nauseating stench offends the air!"

"Eiiighhh."

"I've a good notion to run you through with my blade. Teach your father not to let his brats sneak around when the king is having a great feast."

Jon made appropriate genuflections, knocking his head on the ground, mostly to keep the guard from seeing his face clearly or his bare arms, where the water had washed the river mud off. When the guard let his sword drop back in its leather scabbard, Jon made grateful moanings, then, half-fearfully, half-hopefully, he pantomimed that he was hungry and had been promised scraps at the kitchen.

The guard pointed, then gave him a kick to speed him on his way.

Jon loped off like a gazelle; on the way to the slaves' kitchen entrance he concocted a bold plan. He plucked a huge sheaf of the biggest blooms among the shrubbery that he could find. For such as he, it was death to pick even one flower, so when challenged he would pretend to have been sent by one of the high servants for feast decorations. No one would dream that a scroungy ragbag like him would dare touch a single flower otherwise.

It worked. Partially because the slaves in the half-outdoors kitchen, which smelled nobly of barbecued mutton and pork, were all in a fever of activity. Holding the bouquet up where it would hide his bare arms and face from detection, Jon slipped through the noisy bedlam and into the narrow ramp labyrinth leading to the main feasting chambers. Finding the way was not difficult. All he had to do was to trot along after the current slave line carrying steaming trays of fresh-cooked meats and fishes.

When he heard the raucous babble of lordly feasting, and painted walls replaced the stark clay-gray of the nether regions, Jon darted into one of the side alcoves. He must not enter the main feast hall itself. He was too filthy and he was not wearing the right kind of robe. The serving slaves wore bright orange.

Darting from alcove to alcove, sticking carefully to the minor corridors and dim light, Jon managed to work his way to a curtained gallery that looked down on the great feasting hall.

He peeked down.

The orgy was in full swing. The mammoth room was crowded with lords and ladies on couches, and with slaves to fetch and carry for each couch. Dancing girls in diaphanous gowns weaved in and out of the feasters. On a platform to one side an orchestra of hooting horns and banging cymbals held sway, yet it only marked time for the raucous bacchanale. Jon saw one fat lord pouring wine down the throat of a dancing girl while in one corner another messy drunk was relieving himself, unabashed. The noise was deafening.

Jon thought about Belshazzar and his famous feasts. While millions starved and toiled under the careless whips of his sadistic slavemasters, all was abandoned fun and games up here. Yet there was one feast to come.

Daniel, the star prophet, had stood right here in this great hall before Belshazzar, and had defied him. "Your father, Nebuchadnezzar, was mighty, too. Yet his conduct outraged Jehovah, the God of all Gods. 'For your wickedness, O King, you shall be brought to your knees, yea, to your belly; you shall live with wild asses and eat grass as they do.' And it did come to pass that Nebuchadnezzar did crawl on his belly, naked and filthy. He did eat grass with the wild asses. And you—Belshazzar—*I warn you!*"

But the evil heart of Belshazzar was not touched by the prophet Daniel's predictions. He praised not Jehovah. He believed not what the stars wrote

on the heavens. He worshiped instead gods that were brass, and iron, and wood, and stone. And when the time of the stars was fulfilled, while Belshazzar feasted in this great orgy chamber, in the midst of the drinking and the leching, there came forth fingers of a man's hand, writing in letters of fire on the palace wall.

"MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

"MENE!" The God of All Stars hath numbered thy kingdom and brought thy evil to an end. "TEKEL!" Thou are weighed on the great balance and thou art found wanting. "UPHARSIN!" Thy kingdom shall be divided between the Medes and the Persians.

And so it came to pass. Cyrus and his mighty hordes drove down on Babylon, the Seventh Wonder of the World, and leveled it to dust. In that very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean tyrant, was slain.

It was some comfort to Jon to know that on just such a feast night as this one, Belshazzar would get his come-uppance. But that was not tonight, and tonight Venus—in the body of a beautiful Israeli captive—was decreed to be the tyrant's dessert. The Hebrew God was slow in measuring out His justice. The stars moved slowly in their designated paths of the Pattern.

Urgent fear for Venus compelled Jon to action. He rustled around in the small rooms of the long pillared gallery until he found an orange slave's robe. He put it on. Then he crept along the shadows until he was directly above Belshazzar himself. The king was jeweled and painted. His royal couch wore glittering gold cloth and was raised three wide Persian-carpeted steps off the floor so that all must look up to bear witness to his greatness. Belshazzar was flanked by Nubian giants whose black bodies gleamed like polished ebony. Eunuchs fanned him with great peacock fans and there were clusters of satraps and fawners seated about him on the steps to catch whatever crumbs of glory he might flick their way.

The king's heavily rouged features were slack with drink. While Jon watched, he waved for more wine, which he guzzled from a jewel-encrusted goblet of pure gold. He belched and spat into a silver dish that a slave hastily provided for the purpose. Belshazzar had, Jon decided, just about worked himself up to the point of abandoned lechery with Venus his target.

Where was the girl?

When the king's kohled eyes turned to a point just under the gallery where Jon was hidden, Jon guessed what those lidded, speculative eyes were savoring. Venus was just under this long balcony, beneath him.

Jon waited. The musky scent of the perfume being sprinkled about by near-nude crimp-headed boys to mask the smell of sweat and spilled wine and vomit drifted up in a drowning wave. Jon could not quite get used to the idea of these fierce hook-nosed nobles painting themselves up like harlots, having their blue-black beards oiled and curled into dandified circles. They seemed almost to be overdressed mannequins placed ornamentally around the room for some Hollywood spectacle. Some of the things that were happening, the excesses that the trained-to-masochism slaves were committing, were beyond belief.

Teenaged girls fawned and kissed their masters' fat painted toes. The Arabian dancing girls were virtually nude and obviously working the lords up to orgiastic pitch with their ever-closer gyrations and hip movements. Everything was color—violent reds, purples, blues, yellows. Sculptures of winged bulls and springing lions topped the wild bacchanalian murals painted on the walls between the pillars. Jon stared down and thought of what an Arabian wise man had said: "A thousand must die so that one man



may smile."

When Belshazzar moved and gestured toward the unseen girl, Jon knew he must get going. He dipped back and found a curved stairway leading to the outskirts of the feasting room. His orange slave's robe made him only one of dozens. Jon found an empty wine urn set aside on its tray and moved in behind it. He stood along the wall as were many other wine slaves, waiting to be called.

He saw Venus Trine.

She lay on rich silk cushions, artfully placed so that the king, by a casual glance, could titillate his jaded palate with her beauty and the rape to come.

Jon gasped. The girl was gorgeous. Belshazzar's eunuchs had outdone themselves in bathing, perfuming, and dressing the Israeli captive for their master's pleasure. She was every Chaldean's dream in her Arabian-style pantaloons of virgin white, so cobweb-thin that they showed every delicate curve of her long ivory legs. Her breast cups dazzled with red rubies. A white headband of seed pearls enhanced her thick black hair, high and ornately coifed. One blood-red ruby was suspended by a string of seed pearls just above her lustrous, deep-brown eyes. Her wide lips had been painted to the king's taste, too harlot-like to please Jon, but then he had not been consulted. It was as if this well-formed girl from one of Moses' lost tribes had been born and bred for this one night.

Tomorrow she would be soiled forever, or dead.

Jon stared so hard at her loveliness that at first he didn't notice it when Belshazzar lurched up heavily from his couch and moved stiffly, grandly, down the three steps toward the shrinking girl.

The time was now.

Belshazzar dropped his jeweled goblet carelessly and signaled to his two Nubian guards to remove the girl to his private chamber. Venus stared at them, rigid with horror, then tried to run. It was no use. One of the muscular blacks reached her in a panther's pounce. The other seized her other arm and, sobbing and screaming, she was carried to her fate through diaphanous hangings like cloth rainbows.

Belshazzar stalked grandly after them, swaying and tottering a little from too many goblets of wine.

Jon yearned to leap after them. Wait! Just now all eyes were on Belshazzar's jeweled back and the lamenting girl. Even the music was still, for this was the king's moment of truth and all of his lecherous court must take vicarious pleasure. They must envy him, lick their lips; all must know that what the great Belshazzar wanted he took and it was for them all to admire what he was about to do. In this there was worship, too.

Jon's next moments were sweating torment. It was only when the girl and the king had vanished and somebody commanded the music and dancing to begin again that Jon moved. Holding up the wine vessel, he slipped soundlessly through the gossamer curtains and found the right door.

The two mahogany giants before it, arms akimbo, pectorals bulging, muscle-knotted legs stiffly apart.

Full of smiles and confidence, Jon pointed to the ewer he held. He was so insignificant that the great king could boot him out in a trice should it happen that he was not in the mood for more wine just now. Yet what the king was about was hot work, especially the whipping, and he would need more wine presently, would he not?

The guards moved apart to let Jon bob quickly through.

Luckily, Belshazzar's robed back was toward him, as he bent over the girl, who was crouching against a brilliant flock of silken cushions. Over the king's shoulder she saw Jon.

Jon waved for her to avoid calling attention to him; the girl's eyelids fluttered, then, after a swift bob of her head she set about distracting Belshazzar with her wails and outcries. What did such a bull of a man want with such an insignificant, ugly girl as her? she pleaded. Why her, when he could have a thousand maidens more lovely than she? Only recently she had been sold in the marketplace for ten shekels. Was that a fitting slave for the magnificent king of Babylon? Besides—she was blemished. See, O Lord of Lions! Look! See this mole on my thigh! Look closely, O King of Kings!

Belshazzar's winish lurch brought him down even closer to the cushions. Jon grabbed the narrow-necked ewer in his right hand and brought it down with all the muscle in his slave's body.

Venus matched the noise with her loudest, most terrified scream. Belshazzar the Great fell headlong into the cushions and lay still.

"Hit him again," the girl advised critically.

Jon was glad to comply. He made it two, then three, with Venus's contrapuntal sex wails for cover.

"Keep begging and screaming," Jon told her. "Those giants outside the door expect you to kick up a fuss." He added ambiguous grunts and harsh growls to her outcries, playing Belshazzar in a typical rape scene.

"How do we get out of here?" he whispered, between growls.

"There's no door but that one. The slaves who bathed me took much pleasure in advising me about all that was going to happen to me. The girl slaves knew from experience and the eunuchs were getting their vicarious pleasure. No. There is no other way out."

Jon leaped to the wide-open windows. "How about the balcony?"

"As you can see, a hundred-foot straight drop. It's hopeless!"

Jon moved to the stone balustrade and peered down. Far below, the scented gardens ran riot under the waning sickle moon. The balcony itself jutted out from the wall, which was as smooth as glass. If one of Belshazzar's conquests, in crazed fear of his whip, had ever jumped, it was sure death. Hopeless. Yes.

Behind him, Venus was moaning and begging for mercy, for the benefit of the Nubian guards. Jon leaned far over the balcony, listening hopefully.

"Wait! There's water dripping under the balcony!"

"The palace is alive with fountains to keep the gardens surrounding it green and beautiful. Earlier in the day they made picturesque waterfalls, but they are turned off at night. They are noisy and—"

"Marvelous!" Jon gave a low whistle.

"I'm not quite in the mood to admire Babylonian technical ingenuity just at the moment."

"You ought to be," Jon said, grinning. "With all that water needed to feed Belshazzar's Wonder of the World, not to mention utilitarian uses, the clay pipes from the Euphrates must be enormous! Lord knows what kind of hydraulics system he uses to pump it through the network of pipes and inlets but—yes, and naturally there have to be ladders and holds for repair service. Don't you get it? It's our way out!"

He leaped to the top of the balustrade, beckoning urgently. "Hurry!"

Venus delayed long enough to snatch up a length of heavy silk drapery

and improvised a sari to cover her nakedness; Jon edged cautiously to the small balcony's right-angle corner and slid his skinny body downward to where he could see the water-pipe outlet.

"It's big enough," he whispered. "And luckily it's turned off, although it leaks a little. Needs a washer, king-size, someplace down there."

"Can we make it?"

"Yank down the heaviest drape you can find and tie the end to the top of the balustrade. We'll swing for it. If we miss..."

Vines had crawled tenaciously up through cracks in the masonry and Jon's desperate clutch managed to grab hold of a tangle of them as he dangled in the air. Little by little he strained his puny body up into the mossy, slippery pipe. While he was fighting for a footing, Venus's lithe form came leaping at him from the end of the burgundy drape-rope and knocked him sprawling.

"Sorry."

"My pleasure," Jon said, lifting her warm body gently up off his spindly one. "Let's get going!"

It was cold, clammy, and very dark. But it was their only road to freedom. They skittered down the slimed shoots, clawed down rope ladders, pelted down long straight pipelines, crawling when the outlets mysteriously narrowed. They ran against time to reach an egress from the city, before some enterprising palace plumber turned the water back on and sent them spurting back into the hanging gardens and certain death.

There was no time for questions or explanations. Eventually their huge, slimy pipeway assumed a straightness, which assured Jon that they were almost home. They were out of Babylon now, burrowing under desert sand. There would be no point in making the pipeline any deeper than necessary so Jon slowed the panting girl's pace and his own, straining to see telltale starlight. It came, finally. A service offshoot up the pipe wall showed them twinkling desert stars, prodigiously bright after all that clammy darkness.

"There's an iron grating over it," Jon groaned, from the top of gouged-out hand holds in the clay. "If I only had a hacksaw or—"

"Try this."

Jon caught the miniature dagger Venus tossed up, and wondered vaguely how and where she had managed to conceal it, but went to work at the base of the ironwork without comment. The brown river clay had been inexpertly fired and crumbled to his industrious scraping. A sinister rumbling of water in the distance goaded him to quivering haste.

"Hurry!" Venus cried.

"I am. I am. It's one of those jobs that just take time."

"Time we haven't got," Venus quailed. "The water'll be on us in a minute!"

"Climb up and grab hold of my legs."

"It won't do any good—"

"Do it, anyway. I've almost got it. Hurry!"

The thunder of water rushing down on them thickened Jon's throat with desperate fear. He felt the girl clamber up the wall holes and then pant sobbingly against his back, clinging. He scraped, pulled, scraped, pulled. It was loosening but it would take one or two more cross irons before—

The thundering water came upon them in a great wall. Its windy echo was like earth demons screaming. Venus reached with one hand to help Jon bend the grating inward. Jon's back scraped iron as he pulled himself up. The swirling, charging wall of water almost had the girl, but there was useful muscle in those ivory arms and she held on to the grating tightly until the first foaming thrust of water had passed and the current became a steady flow. By this time Jon had anchored his limbs within the narrow egress and was able to pull her sodden body up into the starlight.

They collapsed in the shadows of a palm copse by the river.

"By the way," Jon said. "You *are* Venus Trine."

"More or less. Half of the time."

"Only half? I'm the leprous goatherd, Itti, all the time."

"That's because you took hold of a weak body by sheer mind force and are keeping it the same way—by squelching Itti's own mind into limbo."

"And you?"

"Mine is the healthy young body of Bestha. I was invited in. We share her body and her mind."

"Invited? *Share?*"

"Bestha understands. She is a Believer. Not that she sees the total truth any more than we can. Not that she would be able to appreciate all the subtleties of our time phase. But in her somewhat primitive way she grasps certain aspects of the Pattern better than we do. She doesn't have our inbuilt shield of sophistication to hamper her understanding. You'd be surprised how intuitively wise these ancients were—uh—are."

"She must be somebody important"

"She is. That is—her father was."

"Her father was *who*?"

"Ezekiel. Favored prophet of Jehovah."

Jon gave a shrill whistle. "I can't get over it. I mean, our being here at all. But—*Ezekiel!*"

"Yes. Bestha bears much the same relationship to her father as I to mine. Both of them were wise and great beyond their time phase or any time phase. Both taught their daughters all they had learned, to"—a faint smile—"to their level of acceptance. We are in a sense time twins. Not an unusual phenomenon, actually. In our case, it made access easier. It drew me right to the target."

"Which target is that?"

"You've read your Old Testament, I presume? I mean, from your awe about Ezekiel."

"I know vaguely who Ezekiel was. One of the greatest of prophets, who saw the great Wheel when the heavens opened that day by the river Chebar. There's a whole book of his prophecies about the kings of Israel and whatnot. But as you said, Ezekiel was favored by the one true God Jehovah. What's all that got to do with astrology?"

"Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"The ancient Jews were devout students of star knowledge. Hebrews have always had extremely vivid and puissant powers when it came to clairvoyance and ESP and all that goes with it. These things all spring from the stars—from the Pattern. Nostradamus was Jewish on his father's side. Gerard Croiset, the fantastic Dutch clairvoyant whose powers were scientifically documented for years and years, was Jewish. There is more than a hint of the Pattern in the dictum that the Hebrew tribes were 'God's chosen people.'"

"But that's pure theology, not carnival horoscope reading!" Jon protested.

The girl's twin selves bridled up. "I thought we had settled all that."

"Brief me again," Jon suggested. "I seem to need it."

"Carnival horoscopic readings are rather on a par with phoney visions of the Madonna which occur more or less regularly with money as the motive. There may even be some truth in them, but not much. It takes serious study and serious gifted work to read any significant portion of the Pattern. Like all of the other Hebrew ancients, Ezekiel read his prophecies in the stars."

"He was an astrologer?"

"Certainly. So were the wisest of the Chaldean priests. The Persians. The Egyptians. The mystics of the Indian Vedas. The Chinese. The Greeks."

"In brief, just about everybody."

"Everybody," Venus corrected. "If they referred to the Pattern as Jehovah, as Vishnu, as Amon-Ra, as Jupiter—as any of a thousand other names—it was only to label it toward better understanding. But whatever name you give it, the truth is always up there!" Venus stood up and pointed at the stars twinkling through the lazy fronds.

Jon grinned. "I'll try to remember that. But what about Ezekiel? You said your 'time twin' led you to the target. What is that all about?"

The girl sighed. "I'll have to make it brief. We mustn't be seen.... As I said, when the Lost Tribes were wandering in the wilderness, it was the

star pattern that led them—to water, to shelter, to food. The stars taught them when to do their planting, when to seek whatever they needed, when to fight.”

“They missed a few,” Jon ventured.

“We all miss a few.” Venus frowned. “But there were readers of the stars who were more adept, more intuitive than the rest. Ezekiel was the greatest of them all. He learned something about the Pattern so vast—so overwhelming—that seekers of the truth sought him out from the very end of time to wrest it from him!”

“Sounds—ah—unlikely.”

“It was all written down in the book.”

“Hey! Easy!”

Venus nodded firmly. “Very well, listen! I will quote it to you verbatim. It happened as you remembered, by the river Chebar. Ezekiel saw visions when the heavens opened.

“And I looked, and, behold!, a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud with a fire infolding itself, and a brightness round about it, and out of the midst thereof as it were glowing metal, out of the midst of the fire. And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: They had the likeness of a man; and everyone had four faces and every one had four wings; and they sparkled like burnished brass.... They turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward; whither the spirit was to go, they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was of torches; and the fire was bright and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.”

“A flash of lightning, eh?” Jon gulped when Venus stopped for breath. “That sounds to you like time travel?”

“You must interpret, dig just a little. Consider the changes and translations the story underwent. But—think! First of all: *living creatures*. Not angels. Not spirits. *Living creatures*. And they came out of the heavens in a flash of lightning. But they didn't come on foot. They came in a machine!”

Jon blinked. “Machine?”

“Out of the midst of the fire *as it were glowing metal*.”

“What d'you know! But—my understanding was that we can't travel back and forth in the Pattern in time machines. Only by taking possession of bodies that—”

“We can't. But Trog can. Whatever man has become at the Pattern's ending can do it. Listen, there's more! ‘Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold, one wheel upon the earth beside the living creatures. Their work was like unto a beryl and their work was as it were a wheel within a wheel.’ He described the contrivance further but—what does ‘wheel within a wheel’ suggest to a scientifically trained mind like yours?”

“I get it,” Jon snorted, “a time device of some kind. But—”

“Think of the story as you've never considered it before. The Russians, way back in 1966, postulated that some of the Old Testament ‘visions’ sound remarkably like extraterrestrial visitors. So did many American scientists. Some of the most ancient temple carvings show ‘angels’ wearing what look to be space suits of some kind. To my father and to Calvin Grey, Ezekiel's ‘creatures’ seemed like far-future men.”

“I still don't—”

“Let yourself *try* to believe these things. Don't keep on fighting it. My

intuate—and my father's born in me—brought me to Babylon. Why? Not to be raped by Belshazzar!”

“Why, then?”

“To seek out Bestha, to discover just what strange fragment of truth about the Pattern Ezekiel's star studies had stumbled onto.”

Jon blinked up into the deep cobalt night and the massed points of light between the shadowy palm fronds; he was startled for the first time to notice subtle differences. His own preoccupation with those fields of other suns had made them as familiar to him as the lines in his own palm. Somehow the retrogressive sweep of several millennia was pounded home to him even more than all the grandeur and stench of Babylon itself.

Venus understood.

“That's because you are of the stars, Jon. An important jigsaw in the Pattern.”

Jon's shrug was to slough off old memories, unwanted child's fears. Long-ago shame and embarrassment when he was made by his boyhood friends to feel like a freak.

“Let's not harp on that! You said Bestha was supposed to feed you some vital bit of knowledge. Well, why hasn't she? What are we doing hanging around? I'm fed up with *this!*” He grimaced down at his scrofulous body.

“Sorry, but we've got a way to go yet. Ezekiel didn't tell his daughter the secrets.”

“Then we've got to find Ezekiel?”

She shook her head. “Ezekiel is dead.”

Jon leaped up. “What then?” he demanded. “What next?”

“There is a great temple in the desert called E-Zida. It is so important that none of the warring tribes, whether they be Assyrian, Persian, Hebrew or whatever, will touch it. It's like a great seat of knowledge—a sort of ancient university where the greatest minds of this time go to try to wrestle out the most profound secrets of philosophy, of mathematics, of all branches of advanced learning.”

“From the stars, I suppose?”

“Of course. These secrets are all woven within the stars. The ancients understood this. They realized that every facet of their lives, collectively and individually, was delineated in the Pattern. They didn't call it the ‘Pattern,’ but they *knew*.”

Jon frowned. “What has this got to do with Ezekiel?”

“Before he died, the great Hebrew prophet wrote down the secret on tablets and left them with the high priest of E-Zida. It was thought that the revelations he made known to the kings of Israel were complete. They were not. The secrets written on the tablets of E-Zida are known to no one, not even to the high priest himself. Ezekiel chose E-Zida well. He knew that the desert plunderers left the temple of learning, dedicated to all gods of all faiths, alone in their maraudings. For one thing, E-Zida carefully avoids all show of wealth and ostentation. The priests and their acolyte students live in bare cells like medieval monks. The treasures of E-Zida are of the mind and the spirit.”

“But *why* did Ezekiel go to all this bother about his precious tablets? He must have meant them for somebody!”

“He did.”

“Who then?”

“*He left them for us.*”

It was Bestha who cut off Jon's babbling disbelief, cautioning him that it was time to leave. Dawn was wavering in the eastern sky and the river dwellers were beginning to stir about. But first, Bestha said prudently, they must steal mounts for the long desert trek. They would never make it on foot. They would die of thirst long before they reached the Eternal Temple of all gods; that is, if some band of desert robbers didn't overtake them for the bounty on escaped slaves.

They skulked through the palm groves until they reached the first mud-hut village. Jon sneaked ahead to scout out a likely animal corral that had what they needed in it and was situated for rustling. Horses were too much to hope for. Horses were for the elite or for more advanced thieves. Jon spotted two long-eared asses tied up in a lean-to by a wattle hut. Tendrils of blue smoke were beginning to puff out from the mudded cracks indicating that the mother of the modestly well-to-do family (who owned a small band of sheep, several goats, and those two small white-eared asses) was blowing the banked fire to life.

The sheep were Jon's main worry. He had untied the corral gate and was halfway across the chopped-earth yard when some of the half-grown lambs started bleating. Jon froze, unable to decide which way to run when the hut door would open.

Just then, human lambs inside the hut started up their own bawling for breakfast and the mother had too much to do to worry about the animals outside. Jon thought, with a grin, that the old man was probably still snoozing and swearing at the kids under his breath. He darted like a skinny streak across the dung piles and untied the asses.

Before they took off, Venus insisted on dropping several of her ruby ornaments by the corral gate where they were sure to be found by their unwitting benefactors.

"Won't showing such treasures around draw attention to us?" Jon wondered.

"These poor people won't show them around. They would only be accused of having stolen them and would get their heads lopped off. No. These river folk are ingenious and in a good position to make contact with foreign merchants who ply their trade up and down the river. They'll find one glad to take gems like these off their hands and sell them far away in another city."

"Cheat them."

"Of course. But all the same they will be rich enough from this to buy a dozen donkeys."

All too soon the heat of the sun manifested itself. All too soon they had to forsake the tree fringes and strike across barren sand wastes. Because Bestha's body was accustomed to the desert heat and minimal water, Venus was more easily able than Jon to withstand the hardship. Jon's goatherd body had never been more than a few miles from Babylon in all its wretched life, and for him it was tough going. Venus, with occasional promptings from Bestha, kept him occupied with tales to make their slow-paced journey seem faster, and Jon learned much of Bestha's history.

Bestha and her party of dedicated followers of Ezekiel had been on their way to E-Zida when an ugly band of Assyrian slave traders caught them unaware, by night. The older men and women were slaughtered; the



younger ones, sold in the Babylon slave market. Bestha's great beauty, and the fact that she was virgin, made her too rich a prize to waste on themselves. She was worth far more untouched.

Sarush, an old wealthy merchant of Babylon, bought her. As any slave of courage must, Bestha lived only for one thing: escape.

"Belshazzar's beaters found her hiding in the rushes on the king's hunting preserve, many miles from Babylon," said Jon. "What was she doing way out there?"

"Escaping. Her master, Sarush, was very old and—uh—inactive. His eyes did for him what his body had ceased to do. Praise Jehovah for that! Anyway, Sarush knew all too well what would happen to his ornamental new bauble if Belshazzar ever laid eyes on her. He had sons and nephews of his own to worry about, too. Sarush wanted Bestha all for himself, even if he couldn't—"

"Cut the mustard?" Jon finished.

Venus gave him a grimace. "How well you put these things!"

"Sorry. Go on."

"Sarush owned an estate out of the city, not far from the lion preserve. He knew it was only a matter of time until Belshazzar would get wind of his new virgin slave so he had Bestha taken to his country palace by stealth. She was well treated, given more or less the run of the place. After all, there in the middle of nowhere, with a gaggle of hand-picked ferocious lions next door..."

"Bestha didn't let that stop her, eh?"

"I had to try!" Bestha flashed back, intruding. "I had been given a trust by my father. I had to see it through; if I died, that was unimportant. Far more important is the enormous need to prevent what must happen to us all—to the stars themselves—if the enemy reads the truth in the tablets first!"

"The enemy?"

But Jon knew what the Hebrew girl meant, having learned the full meaning of horror from Venus, her mind twin. He had thought that the harsh, burning sun had taken all the moisture from his body, but now suddenly he broke out in a sweat that seemed strangely cold.

*Trog.*

trog. The creature from the end of time, the harvest of evil from where the Pattern stopped.

Itti's goatherding years, since he was eight, had accustomed him to cruel suns, but back on his hillside overlooking the river, scanty as the foraging was for his deserted animals, there had been that single tree for shade, and there had been the barges and triremes to watch lazily as they moved to Babylon's docks. The constant jogging of the brave little beast under him, the dizzying, shimmering landscape of sand on all sides were becoming too much.

Finally Jon had to beg for a rest. There was no shade from that great merciless fire eye, but Bestha knowledgeably helped them fashion a kind of miniature half-tent from the heavy drapes that Venus had snatched down in the rape chamber. They ate dates and bread, also stolen, drank tepid water, and then they slept.

The sun was smoldering, scarlet as flame, against the monotonous horizon when they took up their dogged journey.

A sharp-cut slice of moon shone down on pale blue ziggurats; it seemed a lifetime, but there it was at last. Bestha exclaimed, flinging herself devoutly on her knees, "Praise be to Jehovah, the True God of All Stars! He has brought me to the Eternal Temple, where I may follow my father's precepts and live in peace to the end of my days!"

Jon mumbled, through cracked, bleeding lips, "What does she mean, Venus? Are you there?"

The kneeling girl turned after a moment. She smiled gravely. "Hadn't it occurred to you that these lives we have interrupted must go on after we are gone? Before he died, Ezekiel admonished his daughter to seek the sheltering wisdom of the Eternal Star Priests. She may well marry one of the young star students and live here happily ever after."

"So we've been of some help, after all." He flung a pitying look down at his sand-flayed body. "How about this miserable object?"

"The priests of E-Zida have healing powers. If Itti is not too far gone, they may even cure him. At least he will be suffered to live out his life in freedom. He won't be pampered, no more than they pamper themselves, but at least he will not be mistreated."

Jon nodded approval. There was hope for the stick boy, after all.

\* \* \*

They were met at the great half-moon gates of the temple city by two white-robed young priests, keen-eyed and smiling, who asked no questions as to who they were and where they had come from. They were fed and watered, as any weary pilgrims of the desert would have been. High Priest Khatin was not asleep, no, but he was contemplating the stars in the loftiest ziggurat—the observatory—and must not be disturbed. Better that they sleep a few hours. Whatever their errand, it would be better performed after a decent interval of sleep.

"Very well," Venus grugged. "But no more than the three hours before full dawn. You will waken us then?"

The young priests assured them of it.

\* \* \*

Jon's exhausted sleep was ravaged by nightmare. He was a child, naked, running in panic through great fields of stars like gigantic yellow flowers. Running. Screaming. A great black shadow made of sifting cellular motes was chasing him. There was no escape. The sky was rawly open, the universe a vast airless expanse around him. There was no up, no down, yet he must flee. He must find some hole in space itself to crawl through and hide. Yet there was no corner left to hide in. The galaxies lay wide and transparent on every side and the stars themselves were against him, revealing with their brilliance his childish, running body, stark and white.

It seemed eons, this panic and pursuit. Ages, while insects became apes and apes, men.

When all seemed lost, the little boy saw in the pell-mell splash of stars something strange. He saw that they were not really so random and pell-mell as they seemed, but within their gyrating chains and labyrinths was a pattern.

Little by little, the subtle pattern revealed itself to his childish eyes; as his understanding grew (after several millennia more of running from the shifting shadow) he was able to make out a path. A path in the star maze.

Hope. Sanctuary. If he could only become much, much more intelligent, the mathematics of the complex pattern would eventually become clear to him. It was agony, the way the path revealed itself for one sharp, lucid second, then dissolved into a meaningless mishmash again. There were signal stars within the complexities of the maze. Now he saw them. Now they were lost.

Where? Where?

"Help me! *Fa-ther!* Help!"

The breath of the pursuing shadow was on his back and it was freezing cold.

He screamed louder. "fa-ther! help me! where do I GO? SHOW ME THE PATH!"

Something dreadful happened. Something that tore the universe into shreds and tumbled his consciousness into oblivion and chaos. Jon woke up shivering in icy sweat, and found himself pressed into the cell's darkest corner.

There was one small window high up the bare wall of his sleeping chamber, and rose fingers of light were creeping through the filigree. Jon unfolded his stick arms and legs and leaped to guilty awareness. Just then, the young priest opened the cell door and announced softly from the shadows, "It is time. The girl is already breaking her fast."

He scrubbed his arms and his head at the communal wash trough in the patio court outside the dining hall. When he went into the hall, he found Venus eating a simple meal of corn gruel and warmed goat's milk.

"You look better with some of the dirt removed," she remarked.

"Maybe. But I don't like what's underneath." He slid his spindly legs under the table opposite the girl and began to wolf down the peasant's breakfast set out for Him. Itti needed no invitation to eat. His body had not known many days without those gnawing rats of hunger.

"I'm sure they'll be able to help Itti. E-Zida boasts some of the finest Phoenician doctors in the world. How did you sleep?"

Jon told her about his dream.

"Good!" Venus cried. "I mean—you're beginning to remember your father. And, of course, the thread of symbolism is obvious. You're beginning to admit to yourself that there is a Pattern and to want to find it."

"Before Trog finds the key." It popped out of Jon's mind unbidden. He knew she was right. He'd needed a lot of convincing; his childish distaste for what touched on the mystical, his adamant science training, these had to be overturned first.

"But how is it that I called on my father? I never knew him. I was only six—eight months old."

"Your cells remember. Don't you see? You are beginning to reach back in what we call 'Time' with much the same intuitive power you use sending your mind out into space when you do your star-dowsing. You are beginning to prove the Pattern for yourself! That, of course, is the best way. When it comes to these mystical or preternatural areas, nobody else can convince us—not really. We must convince ourselves!"

"With a little help from the right setting." He gestured about him.

"Or the right emotional climate. The phlegmatic, has-to-be-shown scientist may be good at pragmatics but it is the sensitive—even poetic—scientist who is really able to reach out and explore the unexplorable. The emotional content has to be there. We weren't given our rich emotional capacities for nothing."

Jon gulped down the last of his gruel. He flashed a grin. "I believe you, love of my all-times. I would like to show you how much I love you, but it wouldn't exactly be fair to Bestha—or Itti, either. We mustn't muddle up their physical lives."

She reached across the table and took his hand. "You are right. I love you, too, Jon. I always will. Remember that. Even when Trog . . ."

Jon leaped up with a growl. "He won't get you! I won't let him!"

"Won't you, Jon?" Her eyes were sad.

"He didn't! You're here with me, right now! Different bodies, but *here!*"

"In another time phase, dear Jon. Other voices. Other worlds."

"Then we've got to stop him, somehow! Let's go!"

\* \* \*

There were preliminaries to be got through before they were permitted access to the secret library; they had to prove themselves. The knowledge with which Ezekiel had entrusted High Priest Khatin was far too potent to dispense except to those for whom it was meant. The secret library was shielded from discovery by a tortuous maze which denied its very existence. Only the high priest had the key to the tablets.

Getting to Khatin was no easy process. The formalities involved questioning by three sharp-witted (seemingly ingenuous) sets of lesser priests. Was Bestha indeed who she said she was? Was the leper really a goatherd slave? The questions were both subtle and penetrating. The last group of priests, white-beards with their old eyes already looking out on eternity, asked questions that revealed that Venus and Jon were not even what they seemed—that they were from beyond a great time gulf. Yet that they were not the Enemy, who must never find the tablets, but indeed the ones who would fight the Enemy, with the knowledge written on Ezekiel's tablets.

At last the sages were satisfied.

At last they were ushered into the presence of the ancient high priest of

the Eternal Temple of E-Zida.

High Priest Khatin was old, older even than the three sages who had preceded him. His shriveled body, swathed in snow-white garments, did not move. His deep-set eyes shone brilliantly, like star fire, as if during his century of communication with the stars, their radiance had become part of him.

He stared long at Venus, his bone-white features as placid as an idiot's; it was as if he had run the gamut of all human knowledge and had then returned full circle to infancy.

"I—knew—your—father."

"Ezekiel? But he didn't bring the tablets here himself! He—"

His bald head moved slightly from side to side. "No. Not Ezekiel. I did not mean him. I mean *your real father*."

Jon felt the girl's body tremble. "Yes. He told me. The dreams. I didn't understand but—seeing you—I think I do, now."

The lipless line that was barely a functional mouth contrived the faintest of smiles. Now High Priest Khatin turned his fire eyes on Jon.

"You are from out of the stars."

"Yes."

"You have been where few men have been. I have seen the crystal cities in my dreams. It is good that you have come." Khatin's sigh was a mere breath on the air of his small, empty chamber. "My mind is about to become one with the Pattern. I could not leave until I had executed this terrible trust put upon me by the Hebrew prophet. Ezekiel saw what none else saw, or must ever see again."

"Why him?" Jon demanded. "I mean—why *anybody*?"

"They who created the Pattern willed it so when the Pattern was dreamed into being. It was to defeat the Enemy who waits at the Pattern's end. Do not question. *Act*. Learn you must, and then, by your great father's will, *act*. Come closer now, both. I will whisper to you the key that will unlock the door to the tablets."

They knelt near the shriveled child shape huddled in its white robes on a simple mat and listened closely to catch his faltering words. When they were spoken and the star-trapped eyes closed, Jon touched Venus's arm and they moved back a few steps.

A harsh croak from the high priest stopped them.

"When you have read," Khatin said, the words seeming to rattle out of another dimension, "destroy..."

Jon nodded and they moved toward the rear of the chamber behind the high priest, toward the secret door in the deceptively blank wall. Khatin's trembling smile before he died was a benediction; it was also in hope that they would use Ezekiel's secret star knowledge to good effect.

\* \* \*

The tablets lay covered with powdery clay dust in a dark niche in the wall. Nearby was an oil lamp, like Aladdin's, and a stone hammer. Jon lighted the lamp and held it up so that Venus could reach trembling hands into the shadows and lift out the seven tablets.

The bottom one cracked across in her hands.

"They're very fragile," Venus whispered.

"Handle with extreme care," Jon quipped. "I know what the hammer is for!"

"To smash them into the earth they're made of as soon as we have read them," Venus said.

"My father, as a final precaution, used a special code that only I can read," Bestha said.

Jon could see by the indefinable change that came over the girl's face when she began to decipher the secret tablets of Ezekiel the Prophet that Venus had totally released Bestha's own mind to the difficult task. Jon held the lamp as close and as steady as he could, excitement and a kind of space rapture boiling up within his intuitive mind. To learn at last the truth about time and space and what it all meant, even fragmentally! It was too much almost to bear!

The lamp flame flickered oddly. The air in the windowless cubicle grew cold and began to stir, as if a wind out of eternity itself wished to blow out the lamp and prevent release of such monstrous knowledge. Jon watched the girl's lips move involuntarily as she traced out the star truth, tablet after tablet. He watched her large Semitic eyes grow larger still with awe and a kind of terror in learning what Ezekiel had learned.

The seconds ground on painfully into minutes, the minutes into an hour. Two. The double translating—code into ancient Hebrew, Hebrew into English—came slowly, and the end result was mystifyingly fraught with symbolism.

"When the four from out of the molten metal came and went it was like the noise of great waters. And over the first creature's head I saw a great plain and a circle of stones. And over the second of the creatures I saw a cross and a fire on a high hill with one in the fire who burned and burned while the multitude below the burning fire laughed and shouted. And over the head of the third living creature was a wide plain and a misted firmament on which there hung beautiful cities that shone like the stars because they were made out of crystals, indeed they were cities created out of many-colored precious stones which lay within the great mountains of the planet in shimmering splendor for the taking."

"Barrecrith!" Jon muttered.

The girl's half-glazed eyes reproached him. She seemed eager to have the thing over and done with. She dreaded the knowledge to be revealed to them, yet since it was her trust to decode it as it had been Khatin's trust to preserve the tablets safely and unseen by others, she must flog her mind to the task.

"Sorry," Jon whispered. "Go on. Please."

"And the fourth of the living creatures was the most terrible of all, for it was he who had created the fire wheel within which they moved and came and went. And this fourth creature was terrible to behold in that, while he seemed like unto the other three, indeed he was not. The fourth living creature wore his body as it were a mask over it all, hiding what not I or the others must ever see. For should it come to pass that the fourth creature were to remove his body mask and reveal himself in his true appearance to the others and myself, Lo! the end would be *now*. For the Pattern would be shaken and shattered by the sight.

"And I knew now why the living creature with the body mask had come to me from the end of the Pattern and why he had brought the three from other rooms in the Pattern along with him. For it was given to the five of us to form a key to the Pattern; and if it were not us, then it must be our offspring to such a generation as has been written in the Pattern.

"Yet the creature with the body mask cared not for the Truth for its own

sake. Being from the end, it was for him to *use* that Truth in his own terrible way..."

The girl's voice had grown shriller and more terrified as she cried out the decoded words of Ezekiel the Star Prophet. Now, with a harsh gasp, she stopped for breath.

Jon bent toward her with the oil lamp licking light on her tortured face. *Hurry, hurry!* He didn't dare say it out loud lest her tormented nerves snap completely. The delicacy of this moment was like a silver thread being pulled tighter and tighter.

Bestha-Venus felt the angry swarming of malefic motes more than Jon did; he could tell that by the confused, staccato manner in which the final truths began to spill out.

"...for there are worlds and star patterns beyond our own Pattern where dwell others to which we are as the ant crawling in a dung heap is to us. The others know and it is they who set the Pattern in motion and guard it in the name of Jehovah.

"And it shall come to pass that the days of the Pattern shall be numbered, and it is when the ending is come upon our wholeness of stars that the Enemy shall—"

The unholy sifting of shadows deepened. Bestha-Venus broke off with a moan of supreme terror when the room—the air—the world itself—seemed to shift slyly.

"He's here!" Venus wailed. "Trog has found us."

Jon's arm cupped her shuddering shoulders. "Maybe he was onto us all the time. Waiting for us to lead him to the tablets."

"Dare I read more?" she wailed.

"We've got to! We've got to find out what we can do!"

"I don't think—"

"Try! Ezekiel left them as a clue."

"But it's double-edged! Trog will learn, too—and what Trog learns—"

"Read!"

Bestha's fearful eyes swam across the word forms, but now the sifting black dust was all around them, clouding the lamp light. She wrenched out a few more words in a harsh whisper:

"...forbidden ... Jehovah's blinding sword ... the Pattern. ... The Enemy will seek too far ... smash all ... and the key is—" Bestha-Venus screamed as the black motes took horrific form and sent out tentacles that reached for the tablets.

Something within Jon's cells screamed that Trog must not have the tablets. He seized them out of the girl's convulsively shivering hands and just before the strangling net of disembodied black tentacles could envelop them, Jon grabbed up the hammer, slammed the tablets back on the lip of the niche and smashed down hard. Again. Again. Until there was nothing left of Ezekiel's fearful secret but dust.

**PART TWO**  
***“A Circle of Stones”***



*"I can't see you, Jon! He has drowned all the light in the world!"*

*"No, darling. Trog's gone! Can't you sense it?"*

*"When you smashed the Tablets—"*

*"That's it. He lost contact or gave up."*

*"No-o." Jon felt her shiver against him. "We don't know that. Maybe he saw more than we did. Maybe he got just what he wanted. That's why he left!"*

*"We can't give up now...."*

*"What—what can we do?"*

*"Find one of the others!"*

*"Where?"*

*"I think I know where. Ezekiel saw above the first of the living creatures a circle of stones."*

*"But—"*

*"We've got to drop these bodies, darling. Grab hold of my mind and—hang on!"*

It was a time of rapine and slaughter on the foggy little island. Queen Boadicea wanted Roman blood, and her fierce, proud Celtic tribesmen were glad to follow her in rebellion against the legions of Nero, and the tyranny that had cost them their freedom, their property, their gods. Let her soldiers take full and terrible vengeance; let Rome take fearful heed of the name Boadicea. Kill the men, rape the women. Level the great Roman fort to the ground, so that the very name *Londinium* would be forgotten forever.

Jon swung his battle-ax at the heads of the three mailed Roman soldiers who had cornered him in the wallside battle. A red kill-haze swam before his wide, bristled face.

He must die. That much was evident. But, by Ler, he would take more than a few of the Roman tyrants with him! The body encasing him was almost pure brute and it took joy in killing the enemies who had made slaves out of Britain's forest and cave folk. Even dying had an impermanent, transitory aspect. And while he cleft a helmeted head in twain with a mighty grunting blow, Jon thought on his own level that these people, these examples of man's evolutionary childhood, might well be closer to the truth of the Pattern than the latter-day scientists of his own time phase who had piled up so much knowledge and so little true philosophy.

Still, as the wounded brute sagged back, driven to the wall by the two Romans who were left, Jon heard alarm bells telling him that he had misjudged.

"Venus!" he cried out, his voice a thick-throated growl. "Are you with me?"

A forlorn cry cut through the fog.

"Jon! Why *here*? Is this what Ezekiel—?"

"No! I missed by a couple of centuries. Hang on! Here we go!"

\* \* \*

This bright summer morning the Haymarket was alive with vendors. Vegetable carts rumbled over the cobblestones to find their appointed

posts; wagons were heavy with bleeding beefs and mutton, and the housewives and their cooks rushed to make their selections before the rising sun could begin its less happy chore of fostering maggots and flies. The top-heavy buildings leaned in on the narrow streets. The hurly-burly noise mounted to a din level within the time it might have taken the dandy in silks snoring under the tavern sign "alfred and cakes" to sip down a small tankard of ale. That is to say, if he, Robert Coiner, second son of the Earl of Southwick, late of King Alfred's army, had not passed out some three hours before from too much of the same.

Annoyed by the shrill cries of the hawkers, Jon cocked open a drink-stung eye. When he saw the motley crowd milling around him, smelled the pungent smells, he sat Robert Coiner's body up in spite of the pain it cost his hungover head. He sat there for a long moment, on the steps of the locked tavern, trying to bring his misted eyes into focus. It was a dousing from a pan of dirty water, thrown from an upstairs window, drenching his dandy's boots and his silken-hosed legs, that brought him to his feet with an ungentlemanly oath for the pot tosser.

He looked down at his well-tailored fawn breeches and his scarlet silk waistcoat with a grin of satisfaction. Rumpled from a busy night on Londontown as he was, and fuddle-headed besides, he could tell by a glance down those long, well-formed legs under the fawn-leather hose, and by the feel of the virile young muscles with which he was sheathed, that Robert Coiner was a man to hold his own in a sword fight or in bed. Jon found a pane of glass and took a critical look at his new face. It was narrow, somewhat hawkish and dark, and the sardonic cast of the heavy-browed gray eyes suggested something of a rounder. What the hell! He was a second son and would never have the earldom because of his elder brother's four male brats; this had driven him into the army and the army had done the rest. Robert Coiner held life lightly in his hands, his aims mainly wenching and drinking and whatever came to hand; thus, when some mysterious force decided to invade his mind, let it then! Let it and see what adventure it might bring to relieve his boredom!

Jon moved warily along the cobbles, trying to avoid dung and debris and more pails of slop flung out of windows. He slapped the beefy arm of a stall butcher and asked, "What year is this, man?"

The little eyes in the red face squinted. "Year? How should I know the year, Milord? D'you take me for one of your scholars? It's all I can do to keep my family fed and to get my taxes paid, what with the king taking all but—"

"That would be Alfred?"

"Aye. He's our king, more's the pity of it. And so hellbent is he to build London up into the greatest city in the world that he drives us to the ditch with his tax collectors!"

His fat wife waddled out from behind the stall.

"Be still, Giles! Can't you see who 'tis you're blabbering your fat lips at, man!" She swung heavily in front of Jon and, assuming a dirty-toothed smile, she grunted a curtsey to acknowledge his high station. "My man meant no harm, Sire. Pray, do not take it amiss that—"

"Forget it." Jon fumbled a coin from his smallcoat. "I'm looking for a girl."

"Company is it!" she leered. "And so early in the morning!" She gave his trim figure a sweeping look. "Well, I'll be bound that a young handsome buck such as you might enjoy a gel almost at any time of day. Not like that

lump I sleep with. Sleep, I said and nothing—”

“As I said,” Jon broke her off. “There’s a girl in the neighborhood. I don’t know her name but...” He winked for need of useful words.

“Ah! That would likely be Mother Shippey’s. Mother is ripe for business any time of the night or day, be it a snagged snuffbox or whatever. Gels? Aye! Clean, too. Not a pox on the lot, I’m told.”

Jon followed her fat finger pointing down an upwinding close where older buildings tottered doubtfully. He nodded thanks and moved into the alley, giving the inset first door the benefit of his knuckles.

An ugly, ancient face with coal-sack eye sockets peered out from an open peep window.

“Eh, dainty? What’s to do?”

“I’m looking for a girl. Name’s Venus.”

“Venus, is it!” The wrinkled chins wobbled. “It’s too early and my gels is respectably pooped, but I daresay we can find you the kind of Venus that pleases you. We’ve got Venus in all shapes, sizes, and inclinations.”

Jon waited for the small wooden door to creak open, dipping to move on into a small parlor where heavy food and ale odors battled with cheap scents. Mother Shippey was a gargoyle sculptured by poverty and misuse into a posturing, painted, overdressed bundle still trying to look young. Her cheap jewelry and paint only accentuated her grotesqueness. She went right to business, dickering price.

Jon ignored her and moved to the narrow, steep stairway at the rear of the low room. He cupped his hand and yelled up.

“Venus! Are you up there?”

He waited and in a few moments a gaggle of half-clad females of varied ages, some astonishingly young, began to crowd down the stairwell. Jon surveyed each critically with his sharp hawk’s glance. He found nothing responsive to his intuate among the simpering gigglers and was about to leave. Just then from behind the others, hidden in shadow, he saw a head of auburn curls and a pair of sleepy green eyes.

He pushed the others aside and drew the redhead down into the parlor. The girl had to be dragged, as if she were new to all this; she stared up at him with her sunburned face and her round peasant eyes. Jon pulled her out into the lamp’s unsteady light and studied her carefully. The fresh country-lass face needed no artifice, as did those others. It still retained its milkmaid cream and roses and the burgundy fall of her curls over half-bare shoulders bespoke innocence. When she pulled away, he felt the strength in her arms, gained from haying and carrying heavy milk pails and stripping fat cows’ udders.

“What is your name, child?” he demanded. Robert Coiner’s hangover was still on him enough to make his voice hard and cranky.

“Maybelle, Sire. Daughter of Hook the farmer. The others call me Cherry.”

Jon grinned. “Because of your lips.” When he tried to sample them, she wrenched away stiffly.

“You haven’t been in this brothel long, have you, Cherry?”

She shook her head. “Father died and they took the farm for the tax.”

“I found her wandering the street.” Mother Shippey moved in behind the girl and caressed her hair significantly with a heavy claw. “I took her in, fed her, bought her this dress.” She put a protective arm around Cherry.

“A piddling investment for what you mean to drive her to,” Jon scowled.

“Here now! I’ve been a good mother to her, like all my gels. Cherry here,

now, I'm saving for better things. An earl's mistress, even. Ain't that better than haying it on the street?"

Jon was studying the girl's eyes, still not sure. Cherry stared back, seeing a sporting cavalier with jaded eyes and well-plied lips. Jon drew the girl away from the hag and forced her to look deep into his eyes.

"You must come with *me*, Cherry. You don't know why yet. It's all too confusing, everything happening so fast. But you must not be afraid."

She resisted.

"Where?"

"To the country. To Salisbury."

Her eyes grew wistful. "I like the country. It's so noisy in Lunnun."

"Well?" Jon found a gold coin in his smallcoat and tossed it to Mother Shippey before she could do more than puff up and make outraged turkey noises.

Cherry demurred. "My cloak! My beautiful new cloak!"

"Get it, then. Hurry!"

Jon found a silver coin to curb Mother's bellowings about the cloak being lately from a duchess's sedan chair (via one of her sneak thieves) and worth a tidy sum. The girl came bouncing down the stairs wearing it, carrying a hastily packed bundle of pitiful belongings; Jon whirled her off into the crowded Haymarket.

\* \* \*

The wood fires of Haymarket and the high roofs of King Alfred's rebuilt London lay far behind them. The horses Robert Coiner had "borrowed" from the stables of a well-to-do cousin clopped drily on the deep coach ruts of the flat, winding river road that carried them south and west toward Hampshire. The black bay Jon straddled was the Coiner cousin's own favorite, nor was the young chestnut Cherry clung to grimly less than choice. When detection and pursuit were minimized and the city vanished into a dark smoke smudge on the horizon, Jon slowed slightly. An east wind driving from off the Channel carried shower clouds along with it as the afternoon shadows lengthened. It cut through sharply and presently a mizzle of pinprick rain dragged untidily across the glooming landscape.

Jon-Robert's soldierly knowledge kept them moving right when the coach highroad ended abruptly and they had to choose between lesser roads in forested hill country. He paused now and then to squint up at the clobbering skies or ask a wayside fieldman which was the road to Salisbury. It was hard by the little fishing towns of Bournemouth and Southampton in the Spithead, he was told, but what business carried them there in such a hurry? The plain thereabouts was wide and barren—and haunted.

Cherry begged for a rest and a drink at a rill that babbled down a rocky hillside where the wood ended. She made to sit, with a great weary sigh, until Jon pointed up, at the hill's brow where a pair of crow-plucked highwaymen still dangled on gibbets as a warning. She gave a cry and leaped back on the chestnut.

Farther on, an hour's ride, Jon pulled off into a lonely, pleasant brake where oaks screened them and where there was a cool spring and no corpses. He flung himself on a moss bank and beckoned.

"Well, Venus!"

"Well, Jon!"

He drew her down into his arms. There was a curious multiple thrill

about the contact. Four minds, two bodies; all willing, all young, desirable, healthy.

After a while they lay back lazily and watched the V trails of fowl move across the deepening sky from the south coast, listening to the friendly sounds of nature.

"Exactly where are you taking me, Jon Wood?" Venus demanded when curiosity overcame indifference to all but themselves and their blissful propinquity.

"Didn't you guess?"

"No."

"Marlborough Downs. Stonehenge."

"Of course! 'A circle of stones.' But couldn't there be a thousand others?"

"I'm an intuitive, remember? Trained to dowse out the one true choice in a wilderness of possibles. England, Europe for that matter, is alive with dolmen rings and cromlechs. The Hyperborean Celts ranged all the way from North Germany to Italy. They even conquered Rome at one time. But which of the stone rings was the greatest? Which was most closely allied with the worship of the sun and the stars?"

She snuggled closer, smiled. "You're very knowledgeable about these things for a nonbeliever."

"Had a lot of time to read on my star treks. Always fascinated by Stonehenge. Furthermore, there were more books to be had about it than any of the others."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay. Nobody knows exactly who put that strange huddle of 'hanging stones'—which is what the name means—in precisely that dreary, barren spot. Or why. Best guess is that it was done about five thousand years before we were born. It is built of gray sandstone slabs called 'sarsens'; they're so huge that the wonder is that the Neolithic primitives who built Stonehenge ever managed to drag them from the downs twenty-five miles away, much less tip them up on end with no knowledge of higher mathematics. The sarsen stones weigh over forty tons each!"

"How did they? Magic? Levitation?"

Jon shrugged. "Could be. The experts claim they laid down bedrods of round logs and then rolled the stones across them by brute muscle. Then they made log stages and hand pulleys to tip them up."

"Sounds impossible."

"Damn close! Even in our time we'd have quite a job. But the biggest wonder of all is—*why?* Why do such a thing?"

The girl stroked the perplexed frown on his forehead. "I think I know why."

"And?"

"The Druids passed down an old legend that the stars told them they must build it—to save the sun. It all has to do with our sun, the giver of life."

"Lots of legends in all sorts of cultures about some malefic force snatching away our sun. Way up in Finland they have a myth about what caused the ice ages. A horrible witch took the sun away and hid it."

"All these legends. Don't you see, Jon? They're like astrology itself! They sprang up here, there, everywhere, long before the Eastern civilizations and the Western ones ever made contact—at least as thinking animals. Don't you see a rather terrifying significance to the whole thing? A

pattern?"

Jon stood, pulling the girl up with him. "I see, all right. I also see that we've got a long ride ahead of us and we've got to get to Stonehenge before dawn."

"Dawn?"

"Tomorrow is very special. I pinpointed this year—this month—this date—with all my fingers and toes crossed. It took a lot of questioning, if you'll remember. King Alfred's people are pretty sketchy about dates. But tomorrow dawn is one date your star-picking peasants know all about."

"Yes!" Venus exclaimed. "I should have realized it! Midsummer solstice!"

A raw wind whined across the dark Wiltshire plain when Jon pointed out a full mile ahead the dim trinity of circles, the "three Stonehenges." He veered their slackened pace toward some lumpish hillocks with scraggly brush furred on them in patches. Here they dismounted, and Jon tethered the horses in the thickest copse.

"We'll wait back here," he told the girl. "The Druids are skittish about their star worship in these Christian days. Robert tells me there've been rumors popping up for decades about human sacrifice. The ancients always felt that the gods would be more likely to grant them good crops and many sons if they gave them back something valuable in return. Old ways die hard. In some ways the Druids were shrewdly scientific; in other ways..."

Venus nestled down with him behind a huge boulder.

"Now can we eat?" she begged. "I'm starved."

Jon unwrapped the cheese and cold mutton he had bought with one of his dwindling supply of coins at a wayside tavern, along with two flat rounds of Scottish cake like those Alfred had allowed to burn. A flask of rather bitter black ale served to wash down their indifferent fare.

"Tell me some more about the ring," Venus said.

"Actually, the three rings were built by different cultures over a period of several hundred years. The Late Stone Age folk who built them used deer-antler picks to set in the uncut heel stone. Inside the outer ring are ritual pits filled with cremated bones. Seems they gave their sacrifices the flint-knife treatment, then burned them.

"A couple of centuries later, newcomers trenched in the heel and the entrance, which has two smaller sarsens as well. It was these Neolithic people's descendants who did the most ambitious touching up. They erected the sarsen circle and the horseshoe-shape trilithons with the four station stones at the outermost circle. The twin pillars toward the center are called the 'slaughter stones.'"

"Ugh."

"Ugh is right. Now the secondary ring of bluestones were dragged well over two hundred miles from the Prescelly Mountains! Hard to believe, what? The whole trinity of rings forms a fantastically accurate pattern and the midsummer-solstice ceremony, just when the rising sun hits the bridge lintel stones, was contrived with unbelievable precision!"

Venus said, "I remember Father's reading me an old tale about how Merlin the magician was really the one who did it. He whisked the great stones over from Ireland in a single night! I just thought of something—the Druids didn't fashion the rings, right?"

"Right. It predated the Druids by at least two thousand years."

"But that's *before* Ezekiel!"

"So? Do I have to remind you of your own Pattern, where Time takes on the same all-at-onceness as Space? Who knows what the Stone Agers who built it had in mind? Maybe one of their priests had the same kind of a flash of truth that Ezekiel had. Only thing was, they had no written language. They did, however, make a note of it within yon circles of forty-ton rocks!"

"And the Druids, more learned, more subtle, were able to intuate glimpses of that truth!"

"I think you've got it, my fair lady," Jon said, grinning. "We won't have

to wait long now to find out. Look!" He pointed cautiously down the knoll where a long, straight thread of torches winked across the wide plain in the direction of the stone rings.

Faint traces of beclouded dawn showed them three long lines of dark-robed figures moving in on the heel stone, each of them holding a flaming oak torch in his left hand.

Behind these forest priests came less organized knots of shouting men and women in hairy animal skins and with crude Nordic-style leggings.

"Who are the others?" Venus wondered.

"As a guess, cave dwellers. Atavistic types, descendants of the Neolithics who first built Stonehenge, only mongolized through inbreeding and inability to absorb new cultures. I've heard of strange underground troglodytic cities in the cliffs of Spithead. These are inbred remnants of the true cavemen, the ones who gave rise to all the legends of under-earth dwellers and fierce, misshapen trolls who steal babies."

As the long fire threads converged to form two solemnly slow lines at the entrance to the triple rings, one to the left of the heel stone and the two slaughter stones, one to the right, there drifted up on the morning wind the sound of low chanting.

"I'm going to sneak in closer," Jon said. "You stay back here. It's safer."

"But—"

"I'll give a lark whistle when it's safe to follow." Jon's order left no room for argument.

He pulled his dark cloak tight about him and loped down, close to the ground, a hundred yards closer, then another hundred yards. He flung back a glance to make sure Venus had obeyed. A brief, pale hand flutter placed her, and now he turned his attention to the ancient ceremony of the forest folk.

Predawn light dragged reluctantly over the bleak far horizon; the chanting grew in volume and now Jon could hear the high priest, taking his place before the lintel altar stone, begin to shout out invocations while the robed priests, forming a flaming circle within the stones, chanted a capella responses.

Dawn labored hard in its borning. Almost, it seemed, the Druid priests were the midwives who must drag it into being with the sonorous rolling of their sun chant. The barren heath after a while took on the appearance of a soft study in gray. The wind continued its tormented moaning and sobbing across the great plain. It seemed that all the voices of the dead were involved in this important ritual.

Jon bellied closer so that he might be able to catch the meaning of the chanting; thanks to the wind direction, he managed to catch the loudest of the shouts. The high priest, an impressively tall figure with long snowy hair and beard almost to his rope-girded waist, shouted loudest, booming out the harsh syllables in the wind.

*Sun ... O Giver of All Life ... Seer of All Things ... Point us the Way through the Stars! Show us, O Soul of Life! Reveal the Pathway Beyond All Stars that we may live as True Children of the Pattern!*

The hairy-skinned troglodytes were kneeling outside the sacred perimeter of the trinity of stones, so preoccupied with the awesome ceremony taking place within that Jon decided Venus could safely leave the cover of the copse and join him. He turned and tossed back a careful bird call for her to move up.

No answer.



Jon ground out an oath against such feminine pique; a faint scratch of boot on rock indicated that she was still back there so he returned his attention to the stone rings.

The chanting took on a wild, songful timbre as the gray-purple of the faraway horizon brightened. Right now, with those cloud bars smearing the summer sky, it seemed definite that there would be no glory in the sun's coming, no divine finger of light to strike that miracle of primitive engineering. Clear dawns were rare on this fog-blotted coast of England, even on such a vastly important day as this one, for which that Druidic circle of priests had waited a lifetime.

Still, down there hope surged. Jon could feel it wash the plain in a great tide of emotional fervor. The stag-hide drums began to beat and from somewhere unseen came a low Pannish fluting, a soft, insistent three-note theme repeated over and over. Now, under King Alfred, the Christian broom had already swept away the vestiges of paganism—yet the ancient gods of the forest and the stars still called these folk, and who was that simple man of Galilee against such genetic demand?

Now the high priest's great crown, entwined with magical mistletoe, was placed on his head by a girl in white. Now his arms went up three times toward the muddled eastern sky, sleeves whipping in the wind. He shouted ancient names in raw syllables as basic as wind and thunder. The chorus of priests answered, torches pointing at the horizon.

The fever pitch of ardor climbed in a great crescendo. Very suddenly the drumming stopped. The piping stopped. The chanting stopped.

The priest ring held its breath.

Even the wind was stilled.

The sun seemed to strain, and now the far clouds began to churn, to boil, to fling open some mystical window in space.

"Venus!" Jon shouted. "Something important is going to happen! We'd better—"

He cut off abruptly when he saw the three new figures moving down the long avenue to the slaughter stones. Two of them wore animal skins and pushed the other forward between them. The middle one had long, struggle-loosened hair of auburn; she was stumbling and struggling as the two hairy-faced cavemen manhandled her along between the knots of near-beasts, risen to their feet in a kind of ecstasy.

The Druids were enduring another kind of ecstatic torment, a spiritual kind, for now the clouds were boiling open so that the first rays of the sun thrust across the earth to find the altar and the high priest's face in blinding glory. For a moment, a long moment, Jon's body was trapped by the supernatural spectacle. Then, with a great yell, he ran for the stones.

It was like dream running, flinging himself across the rocky field to the long avenue that led into the area of sacrifice, shouting her name over and over. "*Venus! Venus!*" In a blur he saw that the Druids' dream of cosmic benediction had been fulfilled. The priests had become statues of gaping wonder, their torches faltering, drooping. The golden light tore their eyes, yet they waited for more. This was the phenomenon for which the world would have to wait another thousand years, until the star Pattern recycled and gave them a glimpse *Beyond the Pattern*—one terrifying moment of impossible splendor when not only the terrestrial cloud banks, but the universe itself would open and, within that time catch, the mites of humanity could actually glimpse Outside.

Somehow Jon knew all this and it stopped him cold, halfway to the heel stone and the slaughter stones. The god's finger of light, viewed down the Stonehenge axis, struck the towering heel full face with a creeping shadow so black against the dawn glow that it seemed to erase reality and pave the way for the event to follow.

In a blink the sun vanished. Another took its place—farther back. A spiral of coruscating splendor swam back—back—back to more suns, farther away but infinitely more brilliant. Jon felt his knees quake, his muscles shudder and melt against his bones. He thought of Caesar's death; how the whole world had then seen the Triumvirate of Suns, as it was called, and attributed it to Caesar's death. Yet it had not been that at all, no more than Halley's comet had heralded Mark Twain's birth and death. It was *This*, one fantastic glimpse of that greater universe to which the man-known Pattern was like a toy.

Staring at what man had forbidden himself to believe, Jon knew that here—just here on the plains of Salisbury—the miracle was fulfilled. Many thousands of years ago, cavemen had stumbled across the secret and cherished it, dragging great stones two hundred and fifty miles across wild country to mark the place. And now, once in a thousand years, just here, a few Believers in the Pattern saw into that greater universe beyond. Jon's cells and the double helices within them responded as if singing to the privileged sight.

Now, abruptly, it was over. Jon woke from his infinite rapture when his ears were bruised by the sound of forlorn cries.

The shrouding clouds seethed together and a cold shadowy wetness took possession of the landscape. Jon was jarred into movement by Venus's second cry, like a child lost in a deep wood. He pulled his eyes toward the sound. The girl's body had been half-stripped; her hands were tied with leather strips above her head, her feet, at the ankles. She lay at the base of the second slaughter stone, which was flat at the top, and the two Neolithic brutes who had taken her (Jon wondered if the horses must not have betrayed her, damning himself for leaving her alone) were seizing her and carrying her up a wide log ladder to the sacrificial altar.

The knots of tangle-haired cave dwellers were moving forward stealthily, as they stalked their kill in the coastal forests, so that the robed Druids would not see what they were about to do. Not until it was too late. Some deep need within these atavists demanded that the gods be appeased and thanked by human sacrifice. Finding the redheaded victim alone in the copse was a sign that their blood-hungry deities were blessing them, urging

them toward the rite of sacrifice.

Wind-driven fogs blurred the low, sloping foreheads of their faces as they bent over the struggling girl on the slaughter-stone altar and signaled for their own cave priest, who leaped eagerly up the wide-runged ladder, flint knife in his fist.

A virgin life, a heart held up, fresh and quivering, torn warm from her breast—this would thank the star gods and assure favorable hunting.

Jon unfroze and gave an inhuman yell as he pulled his sword and leaped toward the slaughter stone. The clan's wielder of the ritual knife was intent on his sadistic act; when Jon bolted up the long ladder, his sweeping blade severed the caveman's knife hand and sent it flying into the Druid circle.

The caveman killer screamed and toppled after it, writhing in his agony. The two holding Venus down let go and howled in feral unison at sight of Jon's blazing fury. Jon crouched and lifted the girl, nipping his blade between her thonged ankles to free her. She sagged against him, then launched into a half-Venus, half-Cherry outburst about preferring Mother Shippey to *this!*

"Sorry," he winced. "I should keep better watch on my property."

"Property!"

"I bought you from Mother, remember? Oh, well, never mind, wench. Let's get the hell down off this bloody stone!"

He cut off her wrist thongs and carried her down the ladder where the Druid priests, who had by now scattered the cavemen, stood solemnly waiting.

\* \* \*

The high priest was tall and slender as a marsh reed. As it had been with Khatin, Keeper of the Tablets of Ezekiel, his eyes burned with cold star fire out of a white-frothed face like serrated parchment. The miracle of his lifetime was still upon him so that he trembled and viewed the world around him as something of trivial significance in comparison to the Glory; not until he had peered deep and long into their faces did he give them the full benefit of his attention.

His gnarled hand touched Venus's shoulders; he motioned his young priestess to recover her cloak and Jon put it over her shoulders. Behind, others were reprimanding the cavemen for what they had tried to do. Others were carrying away the moaning knifer and his dripping wrist stump.

"I'm sorry," Jon said. "But when I saw that knife coming down on her, I had to stop it. There wasn't time to be nice."

"Nor is that savage. Conek of the cliff caves delights in the smell of blood. It is Conek who keeps the Ancients stirred up with forbidden human sacrifice, because he takes pleasure in it Yet," added the high priest sadly, "the Ancients have always been ill-treated by other British tribes. Every now and then they have a strong need to retaliate in any manner that comes to their hand."

"So they take out their vengeance during the solstice rites," Jon said.

"Aye. We of the forests have long ago dispensed with killing. We ourselves must hide and perform our ancient rites in secret. Yet the stars say naught of killing. Such evil spills but out of the beast in our blood."

"You permit the cave folk to witness the rituals?"

"How shall we not? It was their own forefathers who marked this sacred place. Are they to blame that their minds could not keep pace with our star

science?"

Jon shrugged. It was rather like expecting an Australian aborigine to understand Einstein. He was possessed of animal intuition to survive, true. Yet it was intermixed with an animal's need to kill, to prove himself worthy of survival. Not so long ago Britain had been broken up into a hundred different tribes; there was no reason that survival instincts and intelligence levels should be exactly the same with all. Those who chose to skulk in cliff caves remained savage; others took what seemed useful from the Celts, from the Romans, from the Vikings, and blended it to great purpose.

The Druids had sought the shelter of the great oak forests they loved, yet their eyes were forever turned up into the stars.

"You are their king?" Jon guessed.

"Priest and king, aye. My name is Arbe." The odd blue eyes searched Jon's hungrily. "You have the appearance of a loose-living lord turned soldier, perhaps. Yet—your eyes..."

"My mind is not what my body says I am."

The frosty eyebrows twitched, pinched together. "Where—where do you come from, soldier?"

"From—later on. From what is to be."

"Ah!" King Arbe drew a deep, hopeful breath. "It was written that one such as you would appear! No, by the Pattern, *two!* This child is more than she seems, as well!"

Venus nodded. "My father was as you are—a Reader of the Stars."

He searched her eyes, avid for full understanding. "I think that once I met your father—in a dream."

"Are you sure it was a dream?" Jon asked.

The high-crowned head wagged its windy snows. "Having seen the Glory at last, I am not sure of anything. But—come! Let us not stand here in the fog and wet. My old bones are weak from a long night and I feign would learn what brought you to us out of the cross webs of the Pattern before I close my eyes forever."

King Arbe's handmaiden was ready with his oak staff, and the three of them led the priestly procession out of Stonehenge and across hillocks and rockbeds toward the faint, faraway wall of sheltering green arbors where the Druids had their hidden village. The way was a long one and the king seemed disinclined to overburden his faltering senses and organs with conversation while they tramped. Behind them, the long line of hooded priests chanted a gentle hymn to the stars that had given them this morning's miracle.

A humble half-circle of thatched huts fronted a concealed cave mouth in a thyme-grown bluff. The cavern, half-natural, half-dug, was the Druid's village temple, great-house, and King Arbe's forest palace as well.

The old king lay back on a worn couch of blue-dyed woolens, motioning for Venus and Jon to seat themselves on hand-carved oaken stools before him. Glancing about them, they saw no rich kingly trappings. The great trees, the wild flowers, the sounds and scents of nature—above all, the stars—these were the Druids' priceless baubles.

An old woman brought them broth to warm them, then a barley ale with honey in it to sip while they talked to the king.

"You were telling us about your strange dream," Jon hinted. The need for haste seized hold of him, as it had in E-Zida, when Bestha had reached into the niche for the dusty tablets.

"Aye," King Arbe nodded. "I was asleep, here on my couch. The curtains

were drawn. I had seen strange omens in the stars that very night, then something bade me seek my rest. I had not long to wait. During my hour of sleep, it was as though I died and had some wondrous rebirth.

"First, there was a voice calling out my name. The voice came from a monstrous distance, as from the stars. Then came the shadow, shifting grains of black sand that never stayed still but churned and twisted, straining to burst out of some small hole pricked out of space by a pin.

"Then wild sheets of fire and the machine appeared—just there!" He pointed.

Jon felt fear crawling like microscopic animals on his scalp.

"Machine?"

"Aye. A made thing. I could not begin to tell you what it was made of, nor how. There were sections in it, though, for others. And it flamed like molten copper in a smithy's cauldron."

"...like molten metal!" Venus breathed.

King Arbe's nod was awed in the remembering. "The creature within the first section beckoned for me to enter the second one, for it was empty. I was filled with cold terror at the appearance of the living creature—"

"*Living creatures...*" Venus murmured.

Jon touched her hand for silence. "Go ahead. Tell us where the creature took you in the machine. Wait! First—*why* did you find him so terrifying? Apart from the strangeness of the dream itself, what was so special about him?"

"I don't know," the Druid king said, wagging his head, perplexed.

"Unless it was that he was not as he appeared. He appeared like a man—"

"But he was not a man! He was like a being wearing a body-mask to make him look like a man!"

King Arbe stared fearfully at the place where the "molten metals" had appeared. "That might be it. I can't be sure of anything but my fear of him. It was all so incredible. But I knew that I must accompany him—somewhere. It was very important to—to all mankind. When I entered the encasement, it was as if lightning leaped on every side. There was a sound as of the tide thundering into the Spit. Then we were there."

"Where?"

"Something within me, perhaps knowledge which the stars had lent me, told me I was in another time, another country. There were more small machines and a man standing in awe of us beside a wide river."

"How many others?"

"Two others." He blinked up at Jon, stiffened. "Strange!"

"Yes?"

"One of the others was very like you, my son. Not the you I see before me, but what I see within your eyes. He was quite tall, very blonde of hair, with penetrating blue eyes. But he was older. As to the other—" He broke off, sipped thoughtfully.

"...above his head was a cross and on his breast a pentacle and the figure of a centaur drawing a bow."

King Arbe nodded. "He was a huge bull of a man with fierce dark eyes and he wore heavy black velvets. His black hair was curled prettily around his huge ears which were adorned with flashing jeweled rings."

"The pentacle?"

"Yes. The spiraling circle was figured in gold on his Frankish robe and he wore about his neck a heavy chain with Christ's cross on it."

Venus's hand gripped Jon's arm. "Who—?"

"We'll have to figure that out. I'm beginning to have ideas. But what about the meeting? What was said?"

King Arbe shook his head. "Either the memory has faded, as even the most vivid dreams must, or the desired consummation of the meeting was unfulfilled. It seemed that the creature who brought us to this strange timeless land—he whom I feared more than I had ever feared any demon out of fire or air or water—demanded that the prophet by the river reveal certain truths to him. It seemed that the knowledge of these truths regarding the Pattern, combined with the knowledge that the other three of us possessed—without knowing that we did—would give him an enormous and terrible power! Such power as would crack open the very sky window which we were privileged to see by the star gods this dawn. But the prophet by the river refused to comply with the demands of the creature of the time wheel! He faced him full and unafraid, calling on his Jehovah to smite—to smite—"

A sudden rumbling like thunder and roaring water silenced the king. It grew. It was as if some cataclysmic tidal wave had rolled up over the Spithead cliffs and was rushing across the great plain toward the oak forest; and with it came the sensation of thunder and storm bearing down from the sky, from space, from the stars themselves. They leaped to their feet as the cave, the earth under their feet began to shudder.

"No!" Venus shrank against Jon. "*Trog!*"

"The Enemy from the End!" the Druid king mourned. "He has discovered the secret! It is over! *Even what has been shall cease to be!*" He sank back helplessly onto his couch, awaiting doom.

"No!"

Jon pulled Venus with him out of the cave. The village was in pandemonium. The sky was a swirling mass of ominous death colors, tornado winds out of nowhere. Hut roofs were flying off in all directions; even the thick-branched, deep-rooted oaks were thrashing and straining as if wishing to pull loose from the earth and escape some terror.

"He's going to destroy the whole village!" Venus cried.

"He wants us!" Jon cracked. "We've got to get away from here! Draw him away! *Run!*" he yelled in her ear to be heard.

They fled from the howling winds between the rocking trees, driven by the insane, unnatural forces Trog had unleashed against them. It seemed, as before, that Trog was fighting the Pattern itself. That any human creature—no matter how supremely intelligent in comparison to the time phase Jon and Venus knew—would attempt such a search for knowledge was blasphemous. Yet so it must be. Trog was from the End and, when the most intelligent race the Pattern had ever allowed had reached the End...

They ran across the wide, dark plain. When shafts of monstrous lightning tore the black sky, they could see the magical rings of Stonehenge in the distance. Some compelling thought from outside or from within Jon's cells drove him, stumbling, toward the rings, with the girl stumbling and sobbing at the end of his vise grip.

"If we can reach the center of the rings," he screamed, "we'll be safe!"

"Why can't we leave these bodies now?" Venus wailed.

"Trog will destroy them out of anger. We are responsible."

"What—what will happen to Cherry and Robert?"

"Don't you know? Cherry will tame him down. They must have their chance for happiness!"

"But—if there's going to be—*nothing!*"

“Maybe it's still up to us! RUN!”

When the girl dropped flat from sheer exhaustion, Jon grabbed her up, with a wild yell at the stars for the strength to make it. At last he was staggering down the long stone-lined avenue to the heel and the slaughter stones. The sky was black as night by now. The wind tide had mercifully deafened him. The girl hung limp and uncomprehending in his arms when he groped into the inner circle and toppled against the high altar stone.

## **PART THREE**

### ***“The Pentacle and the Cross”***



Jon found himself on his bare knees, in predawn darkness. Around him whispered twenty or more young voices. Jon's eyes were closed so that at first it was only sound which brought him back to consciousness. The rote-learned murmur was devout and monotonous. The fanatical devotion of his alter ego resented its own unwilling surrender to the monotony. Every Latin word was like fire! Every syllable must burn brightly in his brain, must be reborn with every repetition!

*Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, Factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium... Et in Spiritum Sanctum, Omininum et vivificantem, qui ex Patre Filioque procedit...*

He—Jon—cocked open one eye to see what he was all about. The stones his knobby knees rested on were rough and cold. He looked up. He was in a long, drafty hall with little slots high in the ponderous stone walls that permitted air and feeble morning light to enter. Ahead of him and rows of tonsured bowed heads was the figure of a slender woman in sky-blue garments, holding a child cradled in her arms.

The kneeling figures in their brown sackcloth garments droned on and on in ragged unison. Now and then, one stifled back a yawn for it was very early and the prayers were long. Jon's alter ego kept interfering with his attempts to decide exactly where he was by chiding him and itself for not dwelling devoutly on the meanings of these early matins. The Latin phrases tumbled out in a fierce cataract, at the same time begging forgiveness for *mea odiata culpa* in permitting outside intrusion into the prayers.

Jon flashed a fast look over the shaven heads. Light was beginning to leak through those stone slots in earnest now, bright autumn light.

Yes! Provence. The South of France! It was as if the birds outside in the well-tended monastery gardens sang it out for him.

So far so good.

Jon's neck itched from the rough cloth. He had a sudden longing to leap up and run. Where, he wasn't quite sure yet, but he would get no place here. Heaven, perhaps?

The prayers went on and on.

Be merciful, spare us, O Jesus.

From all evil,

From all sin,

From Thy wrath,

From the snares of the devil,

From the spirit of fornication,

From everlasting death,

From the neglect of Thine inspirations...

"From Trog," Jon added devoutly, to his alter ego's dismay. The other mind began censuring him severely, and now Jon learned something fascinating and helpful about the body he had thrust himself into.

His name was Michel Bois. Brother Michel Bois. Actually, he was not really entitled to the title yet since, like the others, he was at present only a novice, not ordained yet, although his severe scholarly training was nearly over. The "Brother" was indulgently permitted them, perhaps in the hope that at least some of the would-be parish priests would choose to remain up here in the stoney sanctuary of St. Gabriel overlooking the medieval town of Aix-en-Provence.

Provence! Jon dipped down into the other's mind for more information. He remembered that this pleasant wine-country town lay at the head of a beautiful larch-lined river flowing down to the Côte d'Azur, the French Riviera. But, if he had intuited right, this was hardly a time for floods of American tourists and bikinis. No. This was the sixteenth century, a tricky time to attempt mental takeover. Disastrous for anyone suspected of heresy or evil possession. Should Brother Bois so much as open his mouth and speak any of Jon's thoughts it could very well mean that he was harboring a satanic demon and must have that anti-Christ demon burned out of him at the stake!

Careful, Jon told himself, retreating. Make each move with extreme subtlety.

One plus-factor was already clear from Brother Michel's nagging devotion. Born of peasant stock, young Michel had since early childhood cherished secret dreams of spiritual blessedness among ordinary men. He felt that he was different, special. He yearned for the kind of miracle which the glorious saints had been permitted. If he must endure martyrdom for it, he would endure it gladly. He wandered about the hills and along the river, praying devoutly for God to appear to him, for wolves to tame, for heavenly battles to fight. Nor was this any wonder. These were just the times for such preoccupations. Religion flamed high in peasant hearts since, after all, there wasn't much else. Wars raged on every frontier, and why should a young man go off and be killed for a mere duke or even a king, when he might put his life to God's work and lay his life down on the altar of Christ, instead?

Michel Bois yearned for heavenly visions, for one glimpse into the shining halls where archangels dwelt in glory. Jon decided that he would be Brother Michel's "vision." They would work together on this thing.

Michel Bois's semihysterical devotion was Jon's aid.

\* \* \*

He learned more at the long, plain breakfast table from his sharp-nosed neighbor. Cautiously, he leaned across his bowl of gruel and bread.

"Brother Laurent?"

The narrow face shot him a frowning glance. "That has indeed been my name since we were boys together and your father furnished mine with our sabots. Although I must say that the 'Brother' ought not be spoken with such confidence. Haply one day soon it shall be '*Father* Laurent.' What is it, Brother Michel?"

"I was wondering—"

"You usually are wondering and wandering about," Brother Laurent quipped with a thin, superior smile. He was the sharpest Latin scholar of the class and well knew it. Brother Michel was indifferent when it came to letters, albeit strong on dramatic fervor.

"I was wondering whether you thought I might be excused from lessons this morning. I have something I must do down in the village."

"Excused from lessons! Village! I think not, at this late stage. Do you realize that the bishop's examination will take place in three days? And what urgent business has our Brother Michel in Aix, may I ask?"

"I only thought—"

From the table's head came a reprimanding cough and a rap of wooden spoon. Jon cut off hastily. He held his peace, attending to his morning Latin

lessons with a vigor that charmed his doubtful monk teacher. Brother Michel had hidden capabilities after all, it seemed!

They were permitted a breather for meditation and exercise in the garden before lunch. Jon moved Up and down the tidy walks between the exquisitely tended shrubs and aster beds, simulating the devoutly bent head and prayerful murmur of the others while his thoughts raced. Now in October the rose trees were blooming their last, with red and pink petals fluttering to the ground at the touch of a roving butterfly.

Jon meandered to a rise where the trees outside the high wall broke open and he could get a partial glimpse down into the wide river valley. Through smoky mists, Aix-en-Provence lay like a medieval hamlet in a child's picture book. In effect, the central town was a Renaissance manor, its fortress walls punctuated at obtuse angles by barbicans and bartizans, although the flourishing hamlet had flowed over its heavy walls so that now there were huts and merchant's shops on either side of the stone bridge across the river and beneath the great arched town gate. Across the wide valley, at the summit of a winding road lined with tall cedars, was a magnificent chateau. That, Jon guessed, was where the lord of the manor now chose to live, away from the vine-tending peasants. A cobbled coach road zigzagged between the sparkling leaves down from St. Gabriel's Monastery.

Jon's prayer book drooped while he strained on tiptoe to drink in the silvered river, the larches, the steep-slanted roofs far below. Was Venus down there? Where? Ill luck had beset his time gamble, positioning him behind monastery walls where females were *verboden*. He must get down there! He must find Venus! Clutching fear belied the rich autumnal beauty and languor of the landscape; and, while this little wine hamlet seemed prosperous and serene, these were hard, fateful times for France.

Jon moved to the high iron grating of the coach entrance to St. Gabriel's, dazzled at the thought of actually being where he was. Middle sixteenth century. In 1498 the Duke of Orleans had become Louis XII. The Renaissance had already swept away much that was black and plague-haunted; monkish science and learning were pulling humanity slowly upward in a rising curve. The Borgias to the south were gone, yet battles among the princes of North Italia still fertilized many a field with human decay. France was occupied with wars on virtually every border. Martin Luther was protesting, to the disgust of Pope Leo's faithful. Yet Rome itself had been sacked by Bourbon hordes for rich booty. Aye. These were chancey times and the devil took the hindmost.

A dolorous singing pulled Jon away from the locked gates and his historical maunderings; he nearly stumbled over Brother Simon, who was, as usual, on his knees plucking out weeds around a flame-blossomed shrub.

"Oh, Brother Michel! Sorry!"

Jon adjusted his skirts. "Brother Simon, don't you ever give those weeds a break? Let one so much as poke its head out overnight and you're out here snatching it to its death."

Brother Simon's cherubic face mooned up at him, chiding him. "Our Lord himself gave his disciples the parable of the tares and—"

"Very well. Skip it!"

"Skip what, pray? These expressions have no Christian ring to them."

"Sorry." Jon crossed himself devoutly. Brother Michel's mind told him that the flower-loving Simon was as gossipy as any midwife. Here, then, was a goldmine of information.

He marched straight to the point.

"They say that my namesake, Michel de Notredame, visits Aix."

"Do they not!" Brother Simon's nose wrinkled. "A converted Jew, they also say of him. Then, why would he not visit Provence since he was born in nearby Saint-Rémy. They say further that the star seer is wearied of the court of Louis and in ill favor with the queen for an unpleasant omen. These stargazers!" Brother Simon prattled on. "They say Nostradamus is of Issachar of the Lost Tribes of Israel. This is a pose he takes, methinks. Still," he tittered on, "while I have never seen this self-named prophet, they say he does resemble Issachar in that he is a 'great strong ass' of a man!" Brother Simon slapped his knee and giggled.

"Then you have no faith in the prophecies of Nostradamus?"

A pudgy finger flew to the fat lower lip in deep thought. "The Old Testament tells us of wondrous prophets favored by Our Lord,"—cross—"such as Elijah and Ezekiel"—cross—"and one might say to one's self, 'If this insight was given to those of a race that denies the truth of Jesus Christ the Messiah, then why may not the Lord grant revelations to good Church members of our own enlightened day as well?'"

"Very true. When one thinks of Saint Joan, our Maid of Orleans—"

"Saint? *Saint?*"

Jon winced at his gaffe. Joan of Arc was a long distance yet from canonization. "A slip," he murmured. "I have always admired the Maid of Orleans and felt that the accursed English—"

"Careful, Brother Michel," Brother Simon said. "Next you will be calling this dubious stargazer Nostradamus, *Saint*. Still, who are we to question the ways of God? If He wishes to trace out His gifts in the stars for Nostradamus to pluck out, that is His will. Heathenish it may seem, yet even the stars blooming in the night sky belong to the Lord, do they not?"

Jon nodded. "I should like to meet this great prophet who is so much admired by Catherine de Medici and our Henry of Navarre. Do you think such a thing might be possible?"

"Forget it," Brother Simon said, smiling. "Tonight we begin our prayer fast, locked up tightly within our cells. When we next see daylight, it will be the day of the bishop's examination."

There was no other way out than to feign temporary insanity and bolt it. He couldn't possibly wait three days! Not three hours! No telling how long Nostradamus would remain in Aix-en-Provence and—an icy wind whirling up out of his intuitive talent and the rapport binding the two of them insisted urgently that Venus Trine was in terrible danger. Already Jon suspected just what that danger was, but he must not torment himself with guesses. No! He must get out—at once!

The student priests marched the long gray corridor in devout lockstep. Jon shuffled his sandals along with them toward the small cell where he was to meditate and purify himself by prayer for the next forty-eight hours. Along the way, others dropped off to theirs. Cell doors clanged shut behind them.

*Now.*

The cell door opened before him.

"Sorry, Brother Michel!" Jon muttered. "Sorry, Bishop!"

He shrugged loose from the tight brown line and fled.

Nobody gave chase. The glances he got while he sped down the high vaulted glooms were more sorrowful than anything else. He realized now that, after all, Brother Michel had come here voluntarily and might leave any time he wished since he had as yet taken no vows. With such a terrible world out there to go back to, would not a man have to be mad to seek it without the boon of priestly frock? Brother Michel had gone suddenly mad. That must be it. Pity him, Brothers! Pray for him!

Hoisting his shoddy skirts about his waist, Jon pulled his long stringbean body hand over hand up the wall's ivy.

He grinned at his alter ego. "Sorry, Mike! Maybe I can get Nostradamus to put in a good word for you later. Maybe you'll get your visions and your priesthood after all!" He must do all he could to leave his borrowed ego in good standing.

Meanwhile . . .

Slapping sandals down the twisting cobblestone road, Jon mused on the idea of a change of clothes. These long skirts were a damn nuisance and a dead giveaway. Yet, were they? By the time he had gained the long, straight avenue of swaying larches by the river he had changed his mind. His brown robe might itch and was ill-sewn, but priests and holy men generally were held in respectful regard these days by nobles and peasants alike. The body he'd plucked out of Time's grab bag was skinny and awkward and not fashioned for combat, nor had it any skill with a blade. Aye. Brother Michel was spindle-shanked, gawky, possessed of Swiss blue eyes and a deep dimple in his receding chin.

No. Keep the scratchy singlet with the rope about his waist, by all means. There was nothing about it that identified him positively with St. Gabriel's and Brother Michel was not known in Aix, being from a village on the outskirts of Marseilles. He would assume the role of a peripatetic pilgrim wandering about the countryside in search of truth.

Which he was! How far had he not wandered already in search of it!

He shuffled across the long bridge and through the arched gate into Aix, which in celebration of the wine festival was decked with autumn flowers and vines. The town square was abustle with vivid color and animation. On every side townsfolk and regional visitors milled about the splashing

fountains and the statues. The whole town wore its best scrubbed holiday face; the folk were togged out in their brightest clothes and gayest smiles. Chattering knots of farmers gossiped among the stall shops and flimsy stages erected for mystery and miracle plays. Children screamed and laughed at Punch and Judys, and the tantalizing aroma of cooking foods at other booths reminded Jon by contrast of the monastery's frugal fare and his empty belly.

He threaded his way through the fortune-tellers and spangled acrobats to the ribboned wine booth near the tantalizing braziered meats.

His hand dug into his robe pocket and came out empty.

His innocent blue eyes drifted hungrily to the platter of delicious-looking cakes and the glasses of red Provence wine. The buxom *fille* behind the booth counter noticed his involuntary lip smack. She gave him an appraising look, then, because she wasn't busy for the moment, called over.

"*Jeune Frère!*"

"*Oui?*" He bowed, noticing the ripeness of her breasts and the way they strained under her tight-laced bodice.

"You there, Pilgrim!"

"Yes, madame." Jon nodded and came closer. "I am indeed a poor wandering pilgrim of *Le Bon Dieu* who seeks everywhere for truth and alas finds little."

She showed strong white teeth when she laughed. "Nor bread either, I'll be bound."

"Quite right, madame—?"

She grimaced and started to decant a liberal mug of wine from the keg behind her. "No more am I Madame, alas. My husband died last year, rest his soul. A vat of grape mash fell over on him. Aye, Jacques Fouchet was not young but he was a good man and now I am alone. Drink this, Father!"

"I am not entitled to bear the name. I am not ordained."

"All the better, then. Let us drink to Jacques and to those pleasures that are missed."

"I have no money. Not a sou."

"Pay me back in your best prayers, then. That I may find a—a husband to comfort me in my lonely widowed state. I am too young for black veils and grief."

"I can see that." Jon felt Brother Michel's personality bursting with other hungers. He sipped gratefully. The widow Fouchet pushed the platter of cakes closer.

"Have a brioche as Well."

"But I have no—"

"*Tcchh!* I will take it out double on the next sot who staggers my way." She winked. Then, "Sorry, Pilgrim. I only meant that they go home with empty pockets anyway and if I don't get it some cutpurse will. There are many abroad during the wine festival."

Jon wagged his head gravely for the dishonesties in human nature, and asked about the yearly wine festival. He found out that the great chateau across the valley from St. Gabriel's belonged to Charles, Count de Guynaud, whose family had owned the vineyards which were the district's principal asset for many generations. Once each year, following the grape harvest, the Count de Guynaud provided the townspeople and his vineyard workers with this wine festival as a reward for their labors. Under his aegis, Mayor Pelletier culled the coastal areas and as far north as Lyon for entertainment for this week of merrymaking; wines and foods were sold to the townsfolk

and visiting farmers at minimum cost, although, as Madame Fouchet said with curled lip, Aix's fat-bellied mayor saw to it that his own pockets were puffed out a little with every jot and tittle that was sold.

"I suppose," Jon wondered innocently, "that if a famous man were to visit Aix he would come here as the mayor's guest?"

"Depends. If he were just another town mayor or one of the military, he would be put up at the hostel belonging to Madame Pelletier's brother. But if he were someone *really* important—" She pointed carelessly up at the umber chateau roofs gleaming among the far trees.

"Of course! He would be the Count de Guynaud's guest at the Chateau!"

"So? Drink your wine and forget the count's whims. He is not likely to invite you to his own festival parties. They say his guests this year number more than one hundred." She added with a malicious smirk, "Not that a ragged pilgrim seeking truth is likely to be invited up there among those painted dandies. Even our Mayor Pelletier and his fat wife are lucky to sit in a corner and watch."

Jon sipped glumly. Madame Fouchet laughed and poured him a second drink.

"Anyway," she triumphed, "this year we have a genuine *piece de resistance* to cap the festival, which all can enjoy!"

"Oh?" Jon's intuate leaped.

"You have not heard, Pilgrim?"

"Not a word. I just arrived; my journey was long and rambling."

"Then I must tell you." The bosomy wineseller's eyes glittered with anticipation. "It is this woodcutter's brat, Amabel."

"Amabel?"

"Amabel Rappo. Her father, Black Rappo, is from the north lakes and woods area of Lombardy. Rappo got into some trouble there and escaped by the skin of his teeth to our forests, where he became a woodcutter and charcoal burner. Old Rappo was a sinister animal of a man and nobody liked him, but he managed to eke out an existence deep in the forest."

"Yet he did snag himself a wife."

"Snag' is the right word. She'd fled from slavish mistreatment and horny cousins. Black Rappo trapped her as he might a vixen or a rabbit. They say he kept her chained in his hut. In any event, Amabel tumbled into the world as a result of this peculiar union, and when the girl was old enough to take her place, the mother was permitted to run off into the wood and get herself eaten by wolves or whatever prowls in those haunted thickets."

"But Amabel managed to survive?"

"By animal cunning. Oh, Black Rappo drugged her half to death and beat her daily out of the pleasure it gave him. But Amabel grew, nevertheless. She learned much from the animals of the forest, mostly how to evade Black Rappo's beatings and how to keep herself clean and nourished. Rappo was not named 'Black' for naught. His ugly face was black as his charcoal and his soul even blacker."

Jon clucked, wagged his head. "I suppose all this made the girl—odd." Almost he could see it coming.

"Fey, *oui*. Amabel was an animal herself, with no mother and a *bete noir* for a father. The town children made fun of her skins for clothes whenever she wandered into Aix. So then she made friends with the deer and the rabbits. The birds whistled songs to her and Amabel whistled back."

"Amabel sounds delightful."

Madame Fouchet's eyes flashed angrily. "Some of the town's lusty young

bucks thought so when they glimpsed her loping along the wood's edge. But they couldn't get within a league of her. Amabel was too fast for them. All except the two Fossan brothers. The Fossan farm is a meagre bit of rock that won't grow vines or much else, so naturally Giles and Henri Fossan had little to offer any would-be brides besides their hulking, carrot-topped bodies.

"Giles and Henri Fossan decided to trap Amabel to do their farm work. They were very persistent. Finally they caught her asleep in a lonely hollow deep in the forest. They jumped her from either side. They almost had her, but thanks to her long vixen fingernails and her agile twistings, she raked their faces and escaped.

"Of course, the Fossan boys' mother knew that Amabel could not have escaped from two six-foot hulks like hers so, when she saw the animal marks on their faces, Mother Fossan knew at once that Amabel Rappo was a witch!"

Jon swore under his breath. "Of course. And then—?"

"It wasn't just that. Soon after that their best cow dried up, and Henri Fossan tumbled out of a hayloft and broke his ankle. A neighboring farmer got a carbuncle on his backside that festered and wouldn't get well, so now the word began to spread fast. Other farmers in the area noticed other things...."

"Everybody had to get in the act," Jon ground out. "Typical peasant hysteria."

"Hey!" Madame Fouchet protested. "After all, wasn't her father a sinister wife trapper? Didn't she spend all of her time in a forest known to be haunted by demons? Why, even here in the town the folk began to notice peculiar things happening. Soon a group of outraged citizens marched into Mayor Pelletier's office and demanded that he send a party of officers into the wood to set fire to the charcoal burner's hut—to destroy the both of them, sire and witch brat!"

"And, of course, it gave these honest citizens a sense of importance to meet with the mayor and the town priests like that. The farmers got a day off from their toil and the town scoundrels could lie to their heart's content."

The wineseller gave him a sullen scowl. "You speak very strangely for a man purported to be of the Church! As if you favored witches and demons!"

"I seek only truth, a rare commodity."

"Anyway," Madame Fouchet finished off triumphantly, "it all came out very truthfully in the end, and that must suit you, Monsieur Pilgrim! Mayor Pelletier didn't have to send his officers to fetch Amabel. Her own father dragged her through the town gates on a chain!"

"No! The old sadist! To save his own miserable neck, he was willing to see his own child burned!"

"Not quite," Madame Fouchet said smugly, "The girl admitted that a demon had come to her in the wood and had taken possession of her! She was terrified that her immortal soul was lost forever! She begged the priests who questioned her to burn the demon out of her, if they could not exorcise it! And, of course, they could not. I assure you, Pilgrim, they *tried*, every ritual they knew and the demon would not leave Amabel. So now—the morning after our festival so as not to blight it—the witch is to be taken out to Mandrake Hill and burned! How is that for truth, Pilgrim?"

Jon refrained from telling her, although his lips went white and his fingers threatened to break his ill-fired wine glass. Madame Fouchet gave a



wide, happy leer and doled out half a glass more for him for listening to her gossipy tidbit.

"Amabel even gave her demon a name!" she tittered.

"Name?"

"Aye. And a name such an untutored bastard wench like Amabel could never have heard of."

"What name?" Jon knew but he had to hear it to rowel him into action.

"Venus, if you please! The pagan love goddess, Venus!"

Demon-possessed Amabel was incarcerated in the deepest dungeon of the twelfth-century Norman castle at the center of Aix. What was left of the slab-stone fortress was now the hub of all of the town's political and military activity. Mayor Pelletier had his offices one flight up from the cobbled courtyard, where the civil officers' horses were stabled. Jon's monkish toga and air of innocuousness almost got him past the yawning gate guard.

"Where do you think you are going, fellow?"

"I was sent for," Jon lied.

"Sent for what? The offices are all closed. It's a holiday, don't you know that?" The mailed sentry gave a sullen, wistful glance in the direction of the square and its merry noises.

"One of the prisoners is to be shriven," Jon tried.

The thick guard squinted him up and down. "You're not one of the regular priests. In fact, I doubt if—"

From an upstairs window a prissy voice called down, "Who is it, guard?"

"Says he's a priest come to shrive a dying prisoner."

"Ah! Don't let him through. I'll be right down."

Jon thought to make a leap through but the broadsword dangling from the guard's thick middle and a glimpse of other guards warned against it. Having no other weapons but cunning and craft it seemed the better part of valor to cool it at this point. Getting his head whacked off wouldn't help Venus.

The mayor's flunkey was a fussy little bantam with a wide black moustache and shiny boots he evidently took much pride in. They shone like twin mirrors. Two men-at-arms ambled along behind him.

"Mayor Pelletier is gone!" he snapped out, giving Jon's mean robe a thin sneer. "And you have no business here, monsieur! Have the goodness to take yourself off at once!"

Jon must try. "I don't wish to bother Mayor Pelletier. I came about the girl."

"Girl? Girl?"

"Amabel Rappo."

"The *witch!*"

Jon nodded. "I must see her. I have information of great importance."

The bantam puffed and barked a derisive laugh. "You? The witch has already been examined by the bishop himself! The holy decision was unanimous. Amabel Rappo is possessed of a powerful pagan demon and must be burned for the salvation of her immortal soul."

"How can they be sure—?"

"Sure? Sure? I attended the trial myself. It was more than fair. Every word the girl uttered put her that much nearer the flame! Father Dominic came all the way from Marseilles to preside, since he has had much experience in witch matters. He tried to find some loophole for Amabel, but there was none. You see, not only did the girl admit that she was possessed, but she proved it by speaking in tongues!"

"Tongues?"

"Pagan anti-Christ tongues spoken only among demons in the nether regions!"

Jon wagged his head somberly. Evidently Venus Trine had picked badly

this time out. She had gotten herself tangled with a fear-straddled girl whose smatterings of knowledge and animal instincts battled constantly within herself, and the addition of another enemy—within her own body—was too much to bear. Burning at the stake would be a pleasure after all she had been through. Yet, not knowing what else to do, Venus had stuck to her bargain!

"If I might just see her?" Jon coaxed. "Offer a simple prayer?"

The bantam was iron firm. "Everything possible has already been done. I have express orders not to permit anyone to see the witch. There are always those who are curious and morbid enough to put forth all manner of pleas—"

"I assure you, I am not merely curious, nor—"

The functionary's eyes narrowed. "Then what are you, fellow? One of her demoniac consorts? Nay. My advice to you is, join the revels and leave Amabel Rappo's soul to those more qualified. Else," he hinted, "we might find that *two* burnings would cleanse the air of our countryside even better than one!"

\* \* \*

Lagging on his way back to the carnival crowd, Jon determined that he had but one course to follow; actually, both of his problems could be resolved by taking one path, and that path wound up the distant hillside to the Count de Guynaud's chateau. The count celebrated his grape harvest, too, but not in the low company of his purple-footed peasants. He invited his peers from a wide area to help him mark the event by lordly feasting.

And among them—Nostradamus.

While he trudged, Jon assembled his fragmentary knowledge of France's greatest star sage. Michel de Notredame was born in Provence, in Saint-Rémy, in 1503, under the sign of Sagittarius, the Sage and Counselor. There was little doubt that his ancestry was Jewish, at least on one side of his family, and less still that he was possessed of incredible gifts of precognition. Kings and emperors sought his advice and, whether they were pleased with what he told them or not, he gave it and gained fame from the court of England to Russia. Wherever Nostradamus went, there were demands on his astrological talents. Businessmen yearned to learn how to get richer; kings, how to hold on to their crowns and the heads under them; lovers, how to woo and win; soldiers, how to win battles.

All of this made for lavish gifts and Jon had none. He did however, have something that ought to interest the soothsayer. A story to tell, and a wild one!

But first he must get to Nostradamus—face to face. No easy matter.

The carriage road was a steep one and at the wide oval garden that fronted the chateau it wore a gilded wrought-iron gate across it like a pompous watch fob. Jon dodged into the trees to avoid the Swiss guards posted behind it. Jon grinned. Who did the Count de Guynaud fancy himself to be? The Pope? Come to think of it, Jon remembered vaguely that the world had at one time been blessed with *two*, a French opposition group having been set up somewhere along the south coast.

The wall was high and spiked at its top, so Jon gave up the idea of climbing one of the great October-flamboyant trees to scale it; there was sure to be a rear entrance if he followed the glade paths far enough. There was, and, thanks to deliveries being made, the gate was open.

He darted through and moved past the stables and the stone-flagged rear courtyard to the kitchen door. A great aproned bundle of woman opened to his timid rap.

"Well? What do you want? We're very busy!"

"A sip of water, kind lady. A crust, mayhap? For a poor wandering peripatetic in search of the truth."

Her sour, moustached face squeezed more sour still.

"Peripatetic! Truth! A fine excuse for vagabonding and shirking your military duties!"

Jon smiled winningly. "They sometimes call us beatniks or hippies. Or just plain bohemians."

"Do they now? I could call you plenty! Well," she bundled behind the door a little so that he could squeeze through, "come in then, since it is a holiday and even rogues may be fed. Sit in yon chimney corner by the back stairs away from the main kitchen. I'll have the fire drab bring you a bowl of scraps. Mind you don't snoop about, now!"

Jon clucked both gratitude and mild reproach as he crossed the tiles toward the indicated bench. He watched the cook bustle off into the great busy kitchen, alive with savory cooking scents, for the count's great last-day banquet. Presently, a lank girl of thirteen with chopped off hair and warts sniffled in with a dog bowl of curdled milk and crusts. Jon took it and smiled.

"You look tired, child. Sit a moment."

She sank by him with a sigh, not having the wits to reject any definite order. She eyed him shyly, picking her nose.

"They make me light all the fires. It's dark and cold then."

Jon clucked and patted her warty hand. "What's your name?"

"Lili, may it please you."

"It does, Lili. Tell me this, since you light all the fires early in the morning, you have seen most of the count's guests?"

"Some."

"There is one in particular: a big man, like a great bull. He wears a black robe with strange signs embroidered on it, and a great pendant hanging down just here." Jon pointed at his chest.

"*Oui!* He frightens me! His eyes are like dark coals! And—he is big—like a giant!"

"Lili, what does this giant man do with his time? For instance, what would he be doing now in the middle of the afternoon?"

"I heard the countess complaining that he spends far too much time in his own rooms, studying. Or resting, perhaps?"

Jon pulled her homely little face in line with his, holding her hands tightly. "Lili, I want you to do something for me."

"You're not eating, monsieur. Aren't you hungry?"

"Lili, the chateau is like a labyrinth. I want you to show me the way to this giant man's apartments. Will you do that?"

Lili drew back in terror.

"No!"

"Then tell me! Can I reach it from these back stairs? Where do I find him? Quick!"

Lili began to sniffle. Jon caressed her dishwater hair and she stopped out of astonishment. "Well..."

"Hurry, Lili!"

"Well, it's up these stairs, then up another flight. The countess gave the

giant man the north tower rooms so that he could have privacy and study the stars at night. Why would he do that, monsieur?"

Jon brushed a kiss on her forehead, handed her the bowl. "If your kitchen mistress asks, I left. Thank you, Lili!" Jon moved like a brown shadow for the dark, steep stairs.

Two winding staircases up, he found a hall window from which he could place his position and that of the north tower. He swept a wide glance across the fountained courtyard and the rows of outbuildings beyond—the stables, the piggery, the granary. The north tower was to his right, at the very corner, with a great plane tree twittering its leaves under the mullioned windows.

Voices down the long, tapestried corridor pulled him back into an alcove. He waited, listening. It seemed, from their conversation, that half of the count's guests were off on an inspection of the wine caverns; the rest were resting for this evening's revelries.

Eventually the ambling voices disappeared around a far corner; Jon sped for the north tower rooms. The door was locked. Jon was about to rap on it when he noticed that the corridor window abutting it was wide open. So were the door-windows of the tower-room balcony.

Jon leaped to the ledge and angled his way along it to where he could nip hold of the balcony ledge and then draw himself up onto the balcony. He rested there a moment, panting, swabbing the sweat from his face. Then he moved in.

This lower north tower chamber was evidently Nostradamus's study. The broad, black-clad back was toward Jon. The sage was busily making computations and consulting huge ephemeris tomes and star symbols, totally immersed in his work. Papers scribbled with mathematical figures or cabalistic designs fluttered to the oak floor. When the great man turned that wide bull's countenance once toward the windows, Jon read in his smoldering, reddish eyes the glazed withdrawal from the world of the true intuate.

He grinned and coughed.

Nostradamus blinked up sleepily.

"So you are the man who predicted the French Revolution, the St. Bartholomew's massacre, the British domination of the seas—and Lord knows what else!"

The giant moved around ponderously. He was incredibly large. His size alone gave kings pause, yet it was the implacable certainty of purpose and poise in his dark, heavy-jowled face that struck one dumb. Above that cabalistic amber-fire pendant was a thick neck with many chins that wobbled now with flushing anger. Nostradamus was ugly to the point of beauty.

Jon could only gulp, petrified by those blazing, hypnotic eyes.

Nostradamus continued to examine him somberly for a long moment. Then, suddenly, he thrust out a many-ringed hand in his direction.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

"A humble wayfarer, sire. Who—"

"None of that!" Nostradamus's jeweled fingers swept away Jon's façade. "Wayfarer, mayhap. *But from where?*"

"From a long way in space and time."

The giant wobbled his chins when he nodded. He sighed.

"I have been waiting for you," he said.

Jon blinked. His glance flicked to the huge astronomical map on the side

wall near the winding stairs to the high tower, inaccurate but fascinating.

"You are from out there," the giant man grunted flatly.

Jon nodded. "Yes, but I am human. In my day, we range quite far out." He walked across the room. "I could correct some of your mistakes."

Nostradamus shook his head. "Better not. Leave the Pattern alone, as much as possible. That is the law, is it not?"

"I guess it is. But you don't seem surprised. You've read about my visiting you—in the stars?"

The smile was as thin as the pendulous, purplish lips would permit. "I have read many things in the stars which I dare not talk about, of star voyaging and time voyaging at which I must not even hint. My head, as you can easily see, is well anchored to my gross body. I prefer to keep it that way." He displayed his jeweled fingers lavishly. "Also, I have grown accustomed to a rich mode of living. If my sybaritic inclinations place me a world apart from your ancient prophets who lived in caves and depended on Jehovah's ravens to feed them, then I must openly declare myself guilty of self-indulgence. If I juggle what the stars reveal to me to gain the good will of kings and high ladies, I must nevertheless protest that insofar as I am able to, times being what they are, I speak mainly truth. That which I omit, well..." He waved, chuckled. "And now that I have revealed a wee bit more to you than to any other man, pray tell me who you are and name your business with me."

Jon told him as much as was needful, ending with a fervent plea that Nostradamus use his influence with the count and the mayor to free Amabel-Venus.

"Ah! The forest witch! I have heard. The magistrate begged my attendance at the last of her trials, but, frankly, I prefer to hold myself aloof from these hysteria cases. Witches and wizards are common as the pox these days. Who is to say truly that some of these poor wretches are not in truth guilty?"

"But Venus is from my own time! She came with me!"

"So you said." Nostradamus rose from his heavy chair and paced the carpet ponderously. The folds of the black velvet robe he affected, with its mystical gold weavings, caught the wash of late-afternoon light. "Let me think this all out. Your Venus Trine took over the body of the unhappy woodcutter's chit as you took over Brother Michel's. Your aim?"

"To see you!"

"Ah, yes. About my strange dream of Ezekiel and the 'living creatures.' I am to help you destroy the Enemy from the End of the Pattern."

"You've got to!"

Nostradamus shrugged. "I know nothing beyond what you have already learned. The creature you call Trog brought us to Ezekiel in order that the bits of knowledge each of us had learned might be pieced together for his fiendish uses. Yet—what is this knowledge I am supposed to possess? The stars have poured out their secrets to me, true, yet while some seem clear as crystal, the majority of them are swathed in enigma. What must I tell you? How can I repeat the learning of a lifetime?"

Jon's heart sank. As with King Arbe, the Druid, Nostradamus had knowledge he didn't know he possessed because it was so fragmentary, because it needed the knowledge of the other star-favored prophets to give it sense and meaning. And Ezekiel had refused to divulge his portion of the secret—truly the very heart and core of the cosmic mystery! Ezekiel had saved that for his Tablets.

"Tell me everything that transpired at that meeting!" Jon urged.  
"Everything! And then—anything you can think of that suggests the Pattern and the path beyond the stars!"

"'Path beyond the stars.' Well put, wayfarer. There's no doubt that what your Trog from the End seeks is information about existence *outside of the Pattern*. Beyond the Pattern within our universe that gives our lives, individually and collectively, some semblance of order." He shrugged, gave a bullish snort. "*Tiens*. That, my friend, is God's province, is it not?"

"Is it?" Jon wondered.

The wide, dark face glowered down on him. "Of course it is, never for one moment forget it! Now, as to the meeting in my dream..." He told the story in long, sonorous sentences that rumbled out from his cavernous depths. His recall was vivid and total. Jon sopped up every syllable like a sponge. Nostradamus went on and on for the best part of two hours. He dipped back in his memory to all those wondrous nights studying the secrets of the heavens, flinging out bits of information in all directions, for Jon to pluck out of them what he could. Jon gathered it all in, hopeful of finding the one mote of truth which—added to the others—would provide what was needed to defeat Trog.

Finally, snorting and perspiring, the giant man collapsed in his huge chair, swabbing his face and his thick neck with a vivid-scarlet silk handkerchief.

"That's it, wayfarer," he grunted. "What more can I do for you?"

"Save Amabel!" Jon blurted.

Nostradamus grimaced like a gargoyle. "Why, pray? Your co-worker has but to remove herself from the wretched girl and both of you could get yourselves hence to your own time sphere, your own bodies!"

"Leaving Amabel to burn because of us?"

"She was destined for misery. It is in her stars."

"You've computed her chart?"

"I didn't have to. Life's cheap these days. Cheap and very precarious. And while we are on that point, I tread between eggs myself, every day of my life."

"You?"

The giant shrugged. "Surely you can see the dangers which dangle over my head. If I make good omens for this high lord, his enemy becomes mine. If I make bad—however truthful—omens, lopping off my head would seem to be the best way of preventing them from happening."

"I get it. The mere pronouncing of the forecast starts psychological forces in motion. Because of your many successes people *believe* that what you say will happen. Believing, they themselves often make the things happen by their own involuntary actions!"

"However you wish to say it," Nostradamus groaned. "Perhaps now you can understand why every so often I hide myself away in some odd corner of France to enjoy a brief holiday from lurking jeopardy." He faced Jon sternly. "As to opposing Mother Church in the matter of this tiresome little woodmouse, I'm afraid that I cannot help you. I have heresy charges against me already, enemies who would pounce on my defense of a proven witch—enemies in high places—and light up all France with the fats of my burning carcass!"

Before Jon could put forth his protesting plea, there was a loud rap on the door. Nostradamus waved silence, his rings flashing.

"Who is it?" he called out crankily.

"It is I, Monsieur Nostradamus. Back from the wineries. I must have a private word with you before tonight's fete deluges us both."

"The count!" the seer whispered. "He has been trying to pin me down for a private reading ever since I arrived, and this is his last chance. We leave tomorrow."

"But—"

"Go, if you wish to hang onto your head! The Count de Guynaud is monstrously suspicious of intruders. Go!"

That was Nostradamus's last word before he started toward the door to open it; Jon fled for the balcony, leaping into the sheltering arms of the great plane tree beneath in a suicidal rage of defeat. He clambered down into the courtyard so disconsolate that he didn't care if he was seen or not. But, as it was just before dinner, the chateau's army of servitors was occupied, and there was only a mangy stable dog to protest his presence by biting him tentatively on the leg as he slipped from shadow to shadow across the court and off into the forest.

Nightingales were singing plaintive songs in the chestnut trees when Jon made his way into the town square. Merriment was at a feverish height for this was the last night of festival before a tedious winter of hard work and thin rations. Of course, there was the witch burning at dawn to look forward to. Meanwhile, wining and wenching.

Jon wandered about glaring at the jugglers and the acrobats, endeavoring to take scholarly enjoyment in the oddly naive miracle play, and indeed in his own miraculous advent into the flamboyant Renaissance. Here was the real thing, yet behind the color and pageantry, the gaiety and the pretended chivalry, lurked Dürer's black-cowled skeleton. Death came in many forms. Disease, poverty, lordly whim, military expedience. Life was brief and not nearly so merry as it sounded in the books.

He wandered to the walls of the municipal fortress at the town's center and made a desperate effort to reach Venus's mind. He had tried intuate mind contact with her before and the results had been indifferent. Filtered through two different minds, the rapport was as tenuous as milkweed, and Amabel Rappo was fighting Venus every inch of the way. Resisting as she was, there was no room left for Jon to tuck in his thoughts. Not even a shred of hope for the demand that Venus quit this body and go back where she belonged!

He moved back among the music and the dancing, aware of a hollow gnawing in the region of his stomach but not impelled to do anything about it. He had no money, in any case. For Brother Michel's sake, he might beg for his supper with the other mendicants lined up where the revelry was loudest.

"Heigh! *Wayfarer!*"

Jon blinked, turned. His feet had brought him back to the wine and cakes stall of Madame Fouchet, the buxom widow with the roving eye. She was busily decanting red wine for a lively crowd of customers, yet she had glimpsed his long, sad face in the movement and remembered. It seemed that there was something virgin and desirable to her about this lean,



hollow-cheeked peripatetic with the dimpled chin. His shyness, perhaps, for Brother Michel was abnormally shy with women. He had kept his mind and his body as pure as the lofty snows of Grenoble to the north.

Jon's broodings cut through all this and he moved somberly over to the stall, essaying a bashful smile for the plump widow. Perhaps it was up to him to do something about Brother Michel's shyness with women.

He accepted her liberal tot of red wine gratefully.

"You remembered me."

"Aye. Don't know why, exactly." She gave a careless toss. "Not much meat on your bones, I'll be bound. Still, 'tis the last night of festival and almighty warm for October."

She winked and, if Brother Michel didn't understand, Jon did. He drank deep. The new wine circulated through his young virgin body, feeding its glandular desires, awakening vulgar thoughts with every glass the widow Fouchet laughingly splashed out.

It grew late. Jon was surprised to turn and find that the crowd had diminished by more than half and that many stallkeepers were dismantling their pole-and-sacking booths while shouting "Last chance!" to the drunkards lurching by them. They dared leave nothing for the morrow; thieves out of the alleyways would have it all.

"Well?" Madame Fouchet directed. "Help me get my things onto my wagon in back! Then we'll be off!"

Jon helped dutifully, fumbling at the pegs and knots and finding the widow leaning close over him at every turn. When the booth was no more and the two-wheeler hand cart was loaded, he asked, "Where are we going, madame?"

The widow laughed gaily. "Just grab hold of those cart handles and you'll find out where!"

Brother Michel's caution intruded. "But I don't think—"

"Make up your mind, wayfarer!" Madame's voice had a scornful edge now. "If you don't want to share my hay, there are others who do!"

\* \* \*

He awoke to the strong scent of hay, and with the overwhelming guilt of having dallied in carnal lust while terrible things had been taking place. It was still half-dark. The low-ceilinged hovel Madame Fouchet had brought him to was clean enough, although its clay walls and thatched roof smelled of a thousand spicy meals and a thousand spicy sins. And there was the widow on her own straw pallet, snoring blissfully away.

Jon held onto his head when he got up. He bumped his pate on a low cross-pole but dared not cry out lest he waken the voracious widow. The lees of all the new wine he had consumed spun in his cranium as he tiptoed gingerly out between the dark lumps of Madame Fouchet's meager furnishings.

The narrow street was dark but, listening, Jon thought he heard the murmuring sound of a crowd far in the distance.

He would follow that sound.

He loped down the cobbles, taking in great drafts of morning air to cleanse his blood of the grape, and found himself at the tail of a procession winding out across the bridge through the open gates of the town. Where? A craggy hill, about a half-mile's distance from Aix, already wore a crown of fiery torches around its lopped-off summit. At this focal point the town

would enjoy a splendid spectacle, without in some cases even leaving their homes, but merely seeking their rooftops or the town wall. Invalids, shut-ins could bear witness to the devout deed from a roof. Still, there were plenty eager to see the witch burning close up, not to miss one of her moans and screams, or the sight of the flames licking off first her ragged shreds of fawnhide, then her delicate skin in long, bloody strips.

Many of the crowd carried torches and waved them as they sang bawdy songs dedicated to Amabel's bucolic beauty and how the flames would try her quaint virginity. Some carried jugs of wine and food for a breakfast picnic.

Jon closed his ears to the fevers of excitement and forged his way ever closer toward the fore—to Amabel herself, bound and dragged along in the center of a soldierly square-knot, behind the chanting priests and the upheld cross.

If only Nostradamus had been willing to help! Might he not have presented a phony omen from the stars denouncing the burning? Still, the temper of the half-drunk crowd was not such that would accept reason. As with any lynch mob, the fire was upon them. Those who were not sadists were so steeped in the belief that Amabel's young body was possessed of a demon that any words of scientific intelligence would fall on deaf ears. If it came to that, Amabel herself believed it! Venus had found her, perhaps asleep in the wood, and had revealed herself to the girl—with disastrous results. Amabel's inbred fear of satanic possession and all things anti-Christ had overridden any native intelligence she might possess. The truth was, Amabel Rappo was possessed by a strange other mind. Venus! How could Jon—or the great Nostradamus, for that matter—ever convince this blood-hungry mob of a truth as fantastic as the real truth?

The woodcutters, led by Amabel's own father, had busied themselves throughout the night preparing the scene with infinite care. This hill had been used before, often, and the gibbet imbedded in the flat stones had had to be removed with its latest occupant to make room for the stout oaken pole to which the witch would be tied. Faggot bundles of brushwood tied up with woodbine had been placed artfully around the raised rock at the base of the fresh-cut post. Then long dried shakes, thin pitch strips, and uprooted burls to insure that the fire would burn efficiently.

Jon got his first full look at Amabel when two black-hooded headsmen in close-fitting scarlet tunics dragged the screaming girl up onto the rock and chained her thoroughly to the high oak post. A third headsmen showed off his prodigious strength by coupling the ends of the heavy chain with his bare hands.

They moved back down where mailed soldiers held the crowd at bay. Jon stared up at her, groaning.

Amabel Rappo could not have been more than fifteen—a mere child, yet the lithe, graceful curves of her healthy woods-taught body suggested the abundant charms to come. She was lovely, even while overtaken by desperation and terror. Her eyes were like great, wide wood violets, her tousled chestnut-brown hair curling in a moist tangle over half-bare shoulders and throat tanned by a life in the forest. Her mouth was a wide, red wrench of fear as she stared around her at the jeering crowd.

Then she saw something and her eyes widened. She saw a hunched, black-bearded brute grinning at the fore of the dirty wood-hauling crew. Her father, Black Rappo. Even from a distance of twenty yards, Jon read gleeful satisfaction in that wolf's grin. He was getting even with Amabel's mother

at last for having escaped from him.

Now the faggots were heaped even higher so that they framed the bound body on three sides, leaving the front artfully exposed. Jon felt hatred for those who had stage-managed the witch burning, and horror, and disgust for them all. Any trace of pity for them and their woes was swept away by a wave of contempt and loathing.

He whipped a savage look at the cowled priests. They were stationed next to Mayor Pelletier's officials, praying and making signs to heaven. The crowd was happy in its anticipation of what would happen, but as time dragged on and the mayor made no sign to the headsman to put their torches to work, it grew restive. First, the murmurs were sporadic and scattered; finally, the clamor mounted and became convulsive waves of restless anger. Their wine-sotted bodies were beginning to take on the querulous nerve throb of hangovers.

Action!

The scene was set. The players were ready. *Get going, you fat little pig! Give the word!*

The round little magistrate moved pompously before them and held up his hand.

"Patience, my folk!"

"Patience!" snarled a thick voice. "Dawn is pinking up the eastern hills! It is time!"

"I know, I know. But," the thin, gray moustache twitched uncomfortably, "just last night the count sent down word from the chateau that his guests—especially the illustrious Nostradamus—wanted to enjoy the burning before they return to their own castles."

There was a ripple of sullen distaste about having to wait on the lords, but careful and *sotto voce* lest sharp ears take note of it and write down the name of the grumbler. The Count de Guynaud was *grand seigneur* of the whole district, and not a man, woman, or child among them did not owe his existence to de Guynaud's good graces. Some of the festival acrobats made a nimble pyramid to have a better look beyond the concealing bluff at the chateau road. A pale salmon smear on the horizon tipped the froth of shadowy trees with light.

"Aye!" shouted the acrobat at the top of the pyramid. "I can see the coaches coming! There are eight—no, nine!"

The lordly entourage lined up at the end of the hill road where the incline steepened and became a footpath. Velvet-cloaked lords and satined ladies were helped down by their footmen. The lords made small jokes at which the ladies tittered as they made their dainty way up the hill. Mayor Pelletier motioned for his officers to make a way through the mob for the count and his party, while others hastily brought in chairs for them to sit on. The crowd forgot to be restive, goggling at their glittering betters; it seemed worth the wait, somehow, now that they were here. It added glamour to the event.

Nostradamus came directly behind the count and his pretty young wife; he was like a great crow, with his black velvet cowl to cover his great mane of hair, with his dark robes flapping in the breeze. The Count de Guynaud, a hawk-faced man with leaden gray eyes, gestured the seer to a seat next to him, on his left. A shaft of dawn caught fire from the rubies embedded in the heavy *crux ansata* dangling down Nostradamus's bullish chest when he placed his bulk carefully in the chair.

There was some fussing and rearranging to be made among the nobles

and during this time Jon saw Nostradamus, after one long, searching look at Amabel in her chains, swivel his great head ponderously across the crowd in all directions.

The prophet was hunting.

For him.

Jon strained his lanky frame to tiptoe and stared back. There was a faint nod.

Jon dispatched a wondering sigh. That dark, thick-jowled face was an enigma. Had Nostradamus really decided to help them? Or was it only his preternatural curiosity about all things strange that had brought him here to witness the witch-burning? With all the intuitive power he could muster up, Jon projected the urgent thought in his direction:

*Do something! Help Amabel!*

The elephantine figure in black showed no sign that he had received Jon's plea. He continued to blink sulkily at the sobbing girl chained to the pillar. Then Jon saw de Guynaud lean toward Nostradamus and say something, after which the giant man plucked a crimson kerchief from his sleeve and waved it in the direction of the waiting mayor.

Mayor Pelletier bowed and pattered over to him. The crowd was silent, straining to catch any pearls of wisdom which might fall.

"Monsieur *le maire*."

"*Oui*, Monsieur Nostradamus?"

"I have asked the count's permission to question this girl before you burn her. I am now asking for yours."

Mayor Pelletier turned briefly to the count, who nodded.

"But, of course!" He lifted his plump, womanish hands and waved them at the crowd. "Silence, everybody! Our distinguished guest wishes to ask the witch about her demon!"

The official guards shouted downhill to those at the periphery, and all sound died, save only the faint sobbing of the morning wind, or was it Amabel herself?

The deep bell voice of the seer rang out. "Amabel Rappo! I am Nostradamus! Do you know me?"

The fear-blanching face lifted.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Who am I, then?"

"You—you read in the stars what is to happen."

"Very well, child. May I ask how you have heard of me? They tell me that you have lived all your life in the haunted forest."

"I—I steal into the town sometimes. I listen to what is said from hiding. Sometimes there are lords and ladies hunting in the forests. I listen to what they say."

"Ah! Then you are brighter than they think, aren't you?"

"No, monsieur. I am only a poor creature possessed of a demon."

"Indeed. And has this demon of yours a name?"

"Yes, monsieur. She is called Venus."

"Ah! A girl demon. A demoness."

"Yes, monsieur."

A shuddering sigh rippled over the crowd. They pricked their ears up for more revelations. Demons were indeed fascinating, if fearsome. And a girl demon! The priests began to murmur prayers and make signs while the acolyte with the incense waved it briskly at the bishop's nod.

"What does this demon named Venus do, child?"

"She sits within my head whispering! Whispering! Telling me what I must do!"

"And what is that, Amabel? Did she tell you to dry up the farm cows and to place a carbuncle on someone's backside? Did she urge you to perform these evil things?"

The girl shook her head, perplexed.

"You did none of those things?"

"No! No, monsieur! But *she* must have done them! The Fathers who questioned me said she must have and *they* know!" Her face twisted craftily. "But I keep pushing her back! Sometimes I become weak and she tries to take over my body so that she can force it to go where she wants it to go and do the things *she* wants it to! But I won't let her! I fight her! I fight her every moment! Sometimes she woos me with clever words about what fine things she will get for me if I give in to her. But I won't! Never! Let her die so that my immortal soul will be safe! Kill me so that she will die!"

Amabel's raw burst ended in a weak moan and a forelorn look at the bishop and his priests. The bishop hastened forward with holy water and Latin prayers.

Nostradamus waited, then, when Amabel's sobbing had subsided:

"Amabel!"

"Yes, monsieur." Weakly.

"There is one thing you have not done. Always before you have kept your demoness behind a wall in the back of your mind. Even during the trials you kept her in hiding. Now—you must free her. Amabel, *let Venus take over your mind!*"

"Monsieur!" the girl bleated.

The bishop wagged his head at Nostradamus severely; the priests twittered; the crowd made odd howling sounds.

"Do not be afraid," Nostradamus said. "See, my dear count? The girl is chained. We are safe from this demoness. Think! We have not as yet heard from this Venus herself. Is it not meet that we hear from the true witch herself—not merely from her unhappy vessel?"

The bishop's *no* was less emphatic and a kind of delicious hunger to see the face of Evil electrified the morning.

Nostradamus got up heavily. He pointed a jeweled finger at the witch girl. His scowl was a storm.

"*Venus!* Show yourself!"

Amabel writhed in her chains.

"No! No!"

"Yes, child! Free your demoness! I must have words with her. Perhaps," for the bishop's benefit, "we may learn from her ways of dealing with Satan!"

Amabel fought, but the power in the seer's eyes was too much for her. She rolled her eyes. Her mouth gurgled out spittle. She tore her lips with her small teeth so that the blood flecked her white skin. After five minutes her thrashing subsided. She opened her eyes and stared calmly at the seer.

"You are the demoness? You are Venus?"

The eyes flashed sparks. "I am Venus Trine, but I am no demon. I am a star reader, the daughter of a great star reader such as yourself, Nostradamus." The chin went up; defiance spilled from the dirt-streaked face, so forlorn a few minutes before.

The crowd muttered and pressed forward to catch each word of this

unexpected revelation. What was the demoness saying? That her demon father was what Nostradamus was? That Nostradamus *himself*—?

Jon pushed out an urgent intuitive message to the girl. Nostradamus was treading on eggs indeed, and Venus wasn't helping much at this point. *Take it easy!* he told her. *I know you've gone through seven kinds of hell and hate everybody right now but—the man's trying to help you! Give him a chance! Watch me for your cues! Remember that Nostradamus was born into a tough witch-hungry world! He himself is not invulnerable!*

With Venus Trine at the fore, the witch girl's whole body seemed to change, to glow like soft fire in the bursting gold of the autumn dawn.

Nostradamus turned blandly to the priests and the magistrate, not forgetting a swift ironic glance for the count.

"Had it not occurred to anyone that the spirit within this simple child of the forest might have come from—?" He pointed a forefinger straight up. "Had no one of you considered that this humble vessel may not at this very moment be filled to the brim with heavenly fire?"

Cheers, Jon grinned. Nostradamus had taken his own cue from the subtle change Venus's personality had made *in* the girl and the blazing effulgence of the sun's sudden transfiguring wash of light on her.

"But the cows!" Mayor Pelletier ventured. "They went dry! The carbuncle! The broken leg! And how could a simple girl fight off two great hulking farm boys?"

Nostradamus sucked in a sharp breath. "Could she not—if some benign angel of God saw her defenseless, about to be raped by two brutish swine, and gave her of his divine strength?" The Count de Guynaud clapped his hands together lightly, smiling thinly.

"*Touché*, my friend. I can see what you are about. Turning false demons into false archangels. Very astute. We applaud you, do we not?" The lords around him hastened to agree.

"But what about the carbuncle on the farmer's rump?" Mayor Pelletier blurted.

"Lords," Nostradamus began. "Monsieur *le maire*. Our esteemed Bishop of Marseilles, good Fathers. We are men of the world, are we not? At least we are scholars. We understand how these things come about. Once some poor creature is branded a witch, immediately a hundred more 'victims' rush forward to add charges, to bask in a moment of left-handed glory. I think we can safely forget about the farmer's rump and all the rest."

It was as if Mayor Pelletier feared that his perspicacity in capturing this witch was to be lost. He began to fret.

"Yet she has time after time shown such demon's cunning in escaping her father's beatings and—"

"Cunning learned from the animals of the forest. Aye. For her defense, indeed to keep herself fed and clothed, Amabel has survived by mocking the beasts of the forest. Assuming their manner, their food, their dress. Must we blame Amabel if her father's beatings and her own loneliness have made her strange?"

Mayor Pelletier said stubbornly, "But she admitted to being a witch! Not only at the trial—time after time—but just a few moments ago! We all heard her! You, yourself, heard her denounce the demoness within her and beg to be burned!"

The priests nodded gravely among themselves. They resented having this bejeweled Parisian come among them and tell them their own business, which of their parishioners were possessed and which were not!

Even the lords and ladies had come to see a burning; to give up their sleep, to come such a dreary distance at such a ghastly hour...

The crowd showed temper as never before. They had come to see a burning and they would not be cheated.

"Burn her!" they shouted. "Burn the witch! No more talk!"

For a chaotic moment it seemed as if they would run right over the half-circle of swordsmen between them and the focus of their mob hysteria and set fire to her themselves. The restraining guards themselves were indifferent to their task.

Mayor Pelletier called out to them; then, ignoring Nostradamus, he made a beseeching gesture to the bishop, who nodded solemnly. Then his eyebrows puckered at the count, who, at a giggling nod from his wife, shrugged.

The mayor turned to the itchy executioners and their flaming torches. "Light the fire!" he cried.

Jon's hoarse shout was lost in the cheering uproar as the hooded giants moved to obey. Nostradamus leaped in front of them and the girl.

"Hold!" he thundered.

The executioners could not but obey. Among other things, Nostradamus was a good friend of the count; burning him along with the witch would bring trouble on them, sure as God made little purple grapes.

Mayor Pelletier's moustaches vibrated like a cicada's antennae. "May one ask the meaning of this, monsieur?"

"Of course." Nostradamus smiled graciously. "When I questioned the girl, I learned something which agrees with what I have been told by the—ah—stars. You all know that God has seen fit to grant me certain powers of precognition, that is to say, of reading the future. What I have learned from the stars about this girl assures me that that which has taken possession of Amabel Rappo is no demon."

The bishop and the priests were first to protest.

"But the trial, monsieur! There was no doubt at all that—"

"Please let me continue. If, as I have proposed, the spirit within Amabel's poor body is indeed from Heaven and not from the anti-Christ, would it not be a blasphemous act for us to attempt to destroy it? If Heaven sent down an archangel to save this pitiful child from rape, must we not make some effort to recognize such divine intervention? Are we of Aix to be considered stupid boors who cannot recognize God's holy will when we see it?" His face was dark with wrath as his hypnotic eyes burned down on the mayor and his sycophants, melting only slightly when it swung to the priests. Yet Jon thought there was almost a twinkle, a wink, in them when they moved to the Count de Guynaud and somehow included Jon in this private irony. "Aye, citizens! Consider this fact. Witches one burns by the dozen. But would not Aix-en-Provence be forever blessed among mortals if we were all to bear witness to a heavenly miracle?"

"*Touché!*" The count gave a mocking bow. "I shall have my scrivener advise the Pope to commence canonization proceedings at once."

Mayor Pelletier's puffed cheeks turned scarlet, then white, then took on a veritable glow. He could already see the long lines of pilgrims descending on his town to kneel and pray at the hallowed place of miracles. Miracles which *he*—Mayor Jules Pelletier—had been first to see. Others had been blind—but *he*—how he had wept! entreating the life of this saintly child! Oh, it had not been easy, messieurs!

Still, caution.

"B-But," he sputtered, "if we cannot believe that the possessor of Amabel's body is a demon—how can we believe in an archangel?"

"True!" cried the bishop. "We must remember how clever the Evil One is, how he might even trick Nostradamus into misreading what the stars have foretold! Let us not be too hasty about creating saints at a moment's notice. I for one will never put my name to any such conspiracy."

"The good bishop has a point." The count's eyebrow cocked at Nostradamus. "Should the Pope send his devil's advocate to disprove our 'miracle,' I believe he would have no difficulty whatever in doing so." He added, with a small nod, "With due respect to you, Nostradamus."

Jon watched the great velvety bulk seem to shrivel as it swayed a step away from Venus. His heart sank. Nostradamus had indeed parried well. He had fought a townful of blood-hungry witch hunters—bishop and mayor and lords and all—to a standstill. There was no doubt that his sly appeal to their self-interests had shaken them. Turning their town into a town of miracles would certainly help business; even the simple peasants would benefit from it one way and another. These days a saint was a definite asset. Yet the bishop was from Marseilles and was, as much as the general corruption would allow, an honest man. His word would stop their saint-making cold.

Nostradamus had lost.

Or—? For a long time the seer remained in deep thought, his eyes pinched shut. Then, suddenly, they blinked wide and turned on Jon with occult significance.

"There is one way," he said, his voice wistfully gentle.

"What did you say?" The mayor had strutted importantly up and down, expecting Nostradamus to move back to his chair so that the burning could commence. Now, it appeared, there was to be further delay. The warning murmur of the crowd drowned the seer's words. "Eh? What was that?"

Nostradamus held tight to Jon's eyes.

"There must be a sign. A sign from Heaven."

Count de Guynaud turned from nuzzling his pretty young wife's ear. "Of course. But I doubt if God will oblige us. On such a bright clear morning. With not so much as a cloud in the sky."

Nostradamus continued to stare at Jon.

"We must be shown by an unmistakable sign! If the stars are in Amabel's favor, then somehow they who have been given power must use it—*now!*"

The seer's curious bloodshot eyes burned with star fire. *If you are who you say you are, you must do something. Surely there must be something you can do to convince them. I have done all that I can do. For the sake of my own neck, I dare not do more. The time for words is done! A sign! A sign!*

Jon groaned. He thought of a hundred, a thousand science wonders he might have performed had he the wherewithal to use them. He had nothing! Nothing but his wits and his words—and had not Nostradamus said it all?

But he must try. He must try.

His forward leap caught the nodding swordsman off guard. He gyrated into the center of attention in a stiff lurch, like some kind of monk zombie. His long, hollow cheeks, his outflinging arms flapping wildly, the unexpectedness of such an isolated action from out of the crowd caught them unaware. All gaped at him and his priestly rags. Nobody moved. Nostradamus had set the scene for a sign. Was this it?



Venus saw Jon, knew him.

"Jon!" she cried. "I knew you were here, but I couldn't locate you! What can we do! Help me!"

"Hang on!" he yelled back. "Get ready to take off when I do!"

"I have to hang on!" Venus moaned. "I've tried to get out, but I can't! First, she fought me, then she wouldn't let me go! Amabel's got this fierce, fanatical idea that the demon in her has got to die! It's hopeless. She *wants* to die! She insists on it!"

"We've got to try to save her, anyway!"

Jon turned to the stunned crowd.

"I have talked with the angel in the girl Amabel! I have seen the place where the vision comes from! I see great shining white cities whose buildings reach up to touch the sun! I see great ships that are made of hollow metal flashing up to the stars! I hear Heavenly music singing out of the air itself! The world which the angel in Amabel comes from is shining-white and clean. There is no sickness, no poverty. Wonders and miracles happen on all sides!"

Jon babbled on in wild phrases, describing his own time phase, his own world and a hundred others he knew. Then, to add the proper touch, he flung himself on his knees before Amabel and kissed her bound, bleeding feet.

"What is this nonsense?" The mayor signaled to his men to drag this ragged would-be priest and his pretensions off to some dungeon.

Jon clung to the *girl*, sheltering her. The guards were reluctant to use their swords, at least not yet, against such a droll ragbag. The crowd was amused. Even the count and the lords and ladies smiled. A harmless nut, driven into an ecstatic state by the seer's orations.

Jon continued his ranting.

"The spirit within this girl has shown me such visions of wonder that they would blind you all—if you were not blind already! Abused and tormented all of her life, Amabel Rappo was chosen by the stars themselves for true glory!"

The burly, bare-chested executioners had hold of him and were dragging him away for incarceration. By a supreme effort of will and eel-like squirming, Jon wrenched free and leaped upon the faggot heap. He clung to the fire post behind the *girl* and yelled up into the blue, blue sky:

"Father, You set me on this course! help us now! ezeziel! king arbe! You of the pattern and behind IT—*HELP!*"

Things began to happen and fast. The hill, indeed the whole vine-rich area, began to shudder. There came a horrific thunderclap to end all thunderclaps; it seemed about to split the blue morning sky wide open. The calm October air was alive with invisible movement.

The mob on the hill emitted a low, concerted moan of terror, then the mindless panic of stampeded animals took over. They shrieked and fled in every direction. The lords and ladies bolted up from their chairs and joined the pell-mell exodus. Mandrake-Hill became a hive of crawling, screaming activity while the fearful thunder and leaping lightning—where there were no clouds at all—ripped the sky above it.

Jon found a dropped sword and hacked at the girl's chains until she was able to wriggle free. When she collapsed out of numbness and loss of blood, he managed to hike her up into his arms and shout into her ear.

"We've got to find Nostradamus again! Talk to him!"

"Too late!" Venus wailed. "Look!"

From out of the thunder and the roiling air came a sifting of inimical black dust, moving down on them. Jon stumbled away and fell on top of the girl to shield her when the dust seethed down.

"Get away!" he told her. "We've got to move on—fast!"

The girl's eyes welled with tears as she clung to him. "Not this time, Jon. This time Trog ... wins...."

Jon bellowed his despair when the black dust wrenched Venus away from him and at the next instant sped away into Time.

## **PART FOUR**

***“In Crystal-Templed Barrecriith”***

There was no sensory involvement in the process of leaving sixteenth-century France, yet some fragment of Jon's mind was able to take satisfaction in the fact that Amabel Rappo had not been burned and would not be. Nostradamus had had his sign, and Brother Michel had had his moment of heavenly vision. The areas through which Jon Wood's mind now moved were pure star-energy areas and multidimensional. He moved 'way, 'way out this time. Beyond what advanced man, except for a favored few, knew anything about.

Before the constricting awareness of a body's bones and muscles and nerves returned to him, he was, for an indeterminate time, able to see beyond that long, three-dimensional wall man-ants crawl along, and to know everything at once. Then he was encased within a human (or human-made) body again and the complexities of the Pattern were again enigmas, the star paths lost.

Jon lay in darkness, cool darkness. After a moment of adjustment, light glowed from the crystal walls around him, softly, kindly.

"Jon," a gentle voice said nearby. "My son."

His borrowed heart missed a beat. He pulled in a deep draft of the clean pure air.

"Father?"

"Yes, Jon."

"But how can that be? You died in the spaceship with my mother when I was a baby!"

"Because we are Believers and see into the Pattern, some Specials are able to overleap these paradoxes. Your mother and I did die in that spaceship. We did send you off in the miniship, alone."

"But I have a body! I can sense the blood, the nerves!"

"It is an android body, Jon. We fashioned it for you to inhabit when you came to Barrecriith—before. We knew you must come here to our hidden planet on the edge of the universe after—"

"After I had learned what I could from Ezekiel and the others!"

"Yes, Jon."

"But I didn't learn anything! Not anything important!"

"Perhaps it needs to be pieced together. Each fragment is of itself meaningless, yet when it has all been formed together *in your mind*, it will suddenly reveal a truth."

"About the Pattern!"

"At least as much of the Pattern as any human mind dares know. Enough to stop Trog from his terrible deed. You, my son, were born to kill Trog. If he *can* be killed!"

Jon bolted his made body upright. He began to make vague sense out of his new environment. "Tell me about Venus! Where is she?"

The shadowed blur of his father took on shape and substance. He was very tall, very blue-eyed, bearded, and he wore an opaque white tunic which glittered slightly as if made of crystalline cloth.

"I'm sorry, son. Trog has the girl. There's no doubt about it. It had to happen. She knew she must die."

"Why?"

"Perhaps because she has knowledge within herself to defeat him."

"How about me?"

"Your horoscope cannot be read accurately. Barrecriith is on the cusp of the universe. Trog can't compute your natal chart or follow your star *because you have no star.*"

"What do you mean?"

"Barrecriith is unique. It is a planet without a sun!"

"But how can—"

"I will show you presently."

Jon's agony wrenched back to Venus. "Can't we use the Star-Reader counterpart you've got here to find out what happened to her?"

"We can try. Come."

Jon pulled his created body up off the lab table where it had waited so long for him to come to it. He followed the blue-eyed stranger who was his father down translucent white halls decorated with unfamiliar star symbols. His father brought him to a curving balcony where he could look out over the city. Barrecriith gleamed with inner fire. Every color of the spectrum leaped out of the warm parapets and causeways, the sky-thrusting towers. There were no machines or perhaps all the city's functional needs were hidden deep within. There were people moving about, propelling themselves across the air from ramp to ramp or tower to tower by means of delicate webs folded between their arms and torsos.

"It's like a casket of jewels!" Jon cried.

"Yes. When our ships first found it, we despaired. I said Barrecriith had no sun. I didn't quite mean that, of course. This lonely, lifeless rock at the very end of the elliptical Pattern has no living sun. Yet, our people were at the end and there was no place else to go. Our fuel was exhausted; we couldn't even go back. But when we burrowed into the rocky crags for warmth and shelter, we found a strange phenomenon. Barrecriith's fiery heart is alive with curious jewels and the jewels produce their own energy. They are *life*, actually, of a kind we can never understand. So we proceeded to set up a symbiotic relationship with the crystals and they have since provided us with all we need—building materials, warmth, beauty."

"How about food?"

"The Believers had long since learned how to synthesize their food during their long, lonely treks across the stars, unwanted by humans or aliens. The jewels helped us, too. They seem to like having us here, to enjoy the idea of becoming colorful cities and artifacts—and even clothes."

Jon stared at the great beauty that was his birth planet. His mind hungered for what was lost, for the life he might have had here among the friendly jewels.

"Your sun is so far away." He stared up through the artificially produced atmosphere into a profound darkness; even the stars were so far away they were mere hints of light. Barrecriith was truly lost. "No wonder the inter-galactic fleets have never made contact. Your sun's dying, if not dead already."

"Yet our crystal comrades give us what we need." The blue eyes twinkled. "Everywhere we went we were persecuted. Science had no room for us because we had leaped beyond it. Barrecriith became a haven where we could study the stars and ourselves in peace. But we bear no malice. Man is essentially a fighting animal. He extended his range of combat into the stars and, when he found no form of life as intelligent as himself, he became king of the stars. It was planned that way. But as for ourselves, we have no wish to trespass or to dominate—only to *learn*. We tend our jewel gardens and synthesize our food and study stars we can hardly see. But

we're happy."

"But there's no challenge!" Jon blurted. "Nothing to strive for!"

"There is challenge, my son. Knowledge is incomplete still. We are avid to learn all there is to know about the Pattern!"

"And *beyond* the Pattern?"

"It is forbidden."

"Why? Why must there be *any* end to knowledge?"

Jon's father shook his head. "Your mind is young, eager for the battles youth fights, forever straining toward the unattainable. But you will learn presently that man's warring nature is futile. After all, what has man actually accomplished? He controls the universe as he controls the other animals on his Earth. So?" He shrugged. "Perhaps we here on Barrecrith are a dying breed. We accept that. The Pattern carries us so far and no farther. We are content."

Jon frowned mistily out into the self-lit city of a billion jewels.

"I'm not quite so content."

"Good enough. You have a destiny. It demands a fighting heart!"

"Trog?"

"Yes."

"Right now I'm thinking *beyond* the Pattern," Jon said glumly. "How come Trog was permitted if he is so dangerous?"

"I don't know. Our belief is that he is a fluke. There at the very End of the Pattern something within his genes jumped out too far. The answer is that he was not permitted. Trog just happened. That's why he must be destroyed!"

"What exactly do you know about Trog?"

"Not very much. That he is the Last Man. What humans will have become just before they vanish, when the Pattern has come to an end."

"And what's that?"

"As I said, man's nature is to conquer and corrupt. We who believe, who have been battered about the universe from one world, one galaxy to another, are regretfully certain that man's vicious nature must overtake him and that is what will destroy him. Thus, Trog is the accumulated wickedness of all man has carefully prepared for himself throughout a long history of ill deeds on his own planet and then in all corners of the Pattern. His barbarism, his cruelty have become very refined—very subtle—so that it bears many pretty labels, but underneath, it is even worse than before. How man has escaped genocide before is incredible; his lack of philosophy, of understanding is incalculable."

"So Trog—the last of a corrupt breed—sits there smugly at the End, realizing that he is the Last. So what can he do now? What final monstrous evil can he commit before he is snuffed out?"

Jon's throat was furry with desert dust.

"What can he do?"

"I believe you already know, my son. Trog can do but one thing: *break the Pattern!*"

A coldness billowed up in Jon's bowels. Still, a kind of youthful rebellion compelled him to argue about it, to dissent.

"Hasn't it always been man's nature to battle the Fates? To challenge the Gods?"

"Perhaps. And in the beginning, no doubt, this was as it should be. Primitive man was beset with a million problems to solve and he had to fight God and nature to survive. But don't you think, my son, that when life

became easier, when his science had solved all his creature-need problems, he might have become a finer being? What did he do instead? He flung out into the stars and 'conquered' them—taking over planets and sun systems as his ancestors had taken scalps and heads! There was no end to his avidity."

That core of new-generation rebellion flamed up stubbornly. "Then we must submit to the Pattern? We must not even try—"

"No!" Jon's father glowered and the cords in his neck stood out like ropes. "*Who do we think we are? We cannot become God!*"

"That's what Nostradamus said."

"That's what all men of conscience and sense must say! Think! Think, my son! Why was the Pattern created? To give us life and being, yes. Are we not grateful for that? Think further! The Pattern made our universe an *organized* thing—not a chaotic pandemonium. It is true that individually we move off in many directions. The stars do not compel. Yet the mainstream of life goes on and on. Why? Because the Pattern permits it! Even when man himself does everything he can think of to destroy himself, he persists! Why? Because the Pattern has not been yet fulfilled! Are we not grateful—we with our feeble little bodies and minds? We owe our existence to the Pattern and must never permit ourselves to forget it!"

"And Trog is setting himself above God," Jon muttered.

"Call it that if you like. But consider what existence becomes without a Pattern! Don't you see, my son? Does not your soul tremble to think? If Trog succeeds in doing this last *humanly* terrible thing, he will erase the whole thing! Everything that has been, that is, that can be! Trog has nothing to lose, being the Last Man. What does he care? He is evil incarnate, an accumulated cesspool of all the evil man has committed carried to the penultimate depths. When he shatters the Pattern, Trog will remove the very possibility of man. Man will never have existed. Not only man, imperfect as he is, but everything else as well. By smashing the Pattern, Trog will have reduced this time-space continuum to a mindless chaos,"

# **PART FIVE**

## ***Trog***



Jon looked down at the rock, dead in his hand now, like a petrified toad; he could hardly believe all the things that had happened to him. The events of extracyclical mind life had been imagined, dreamed. They were too out of key with his disciplined dowsers' life.

He squinted around him. The little dressing room was stuffy, dim, and it smelled of perspiration and strong soap. He *couldn't* have been here very long. They'd have found Jon Wood's mind-shed body here and carted it off to a hospital or someplace. Still, it was possible, wasn't it, that he'd fallen asleep or passed out. One thing, he was ravenously hungry. How long? He looked down at his watch. Lord! It was past midnight! How come?

He slipped the rock in his pocket and went out. The locker room was empty, with only night lights to illuminate the benches and the gray lockers. He moved stiffly to the lav so that he could wash; splashing cold water on his face and neck helped some.

He mused glumly about the Pattern; if Time was all *now*, why had he been sitting in that cubicle the whole day? Why not all-at-once, with him coming out of his multiple jaunts across time and space with no now-time wasted? Was there a residual amount lost along the line here and there? Between the jumps maybe? Or had he actually fallen asleep, his mind needing relaxation after all it had been involved in?

Something clawed at his insides and that something was fear. Fear for Venus Trine. Venus was real, whatever else wasn't. While he stood there, holding onto the porcelain basin and dripping cold water, his mind washed up a hundred memories of what had happened to him. It was all too vivid to dismiss.

He thought last about his father and Barrecrieth. They *had* consulted the twin Star Reader in the forlorn hope of locating Venus. What had happened? Nothing! The other Star Reader—the one here on Earth—was defunct, dead. No response at all. Why? The answer made him shiver. Trog had killed Venus. Calvin, Dr. Trine's old partner, was dead, too. With no human mind to blend with it and maneuver it, the Reader could not function. What had Venus told him? That it had to be a Believer and, what was more, one whose mind and horoscope had been programmed to mesh.

"I've got to find the Reader," Jon groaned. "Maybe it won't work for me, but at least it's a try!" What else was there?

Futility tore at him. Still, there was one sharp, clean emotion in the hopeless mess to goad him on. *Anger*. Boiling, bloody anger against Trog. Right now, all of their peregrinations in Time and Space made no sense at all. But they must have happened for some good reason! The thing to do now was to locate the Star Reader. Maybe it could somehow help him make sense out of the muddle, shape him a weapon with which to find and kill Trog.

\* \* \*

A faint scuffle of feet *in* the outside corridor snapped Jon back to where he belonged and to the need for immediate action. He wiped his wet face hastily on a disposable towel, then moved carefully out into the locker room, to the hall door. He listened at it. Nothing.

He eased it open.

Two lugubrious round eyes stared at him, scared as hell.

"What you doing here this time of night?" an old voice trembled out.

"Forgot something, Pop." Jon grinned and flashed the night swamper his Specialist Class A I.D.

Pop squinted at the card, then up into Jon's face. "Hey! You're *him!* You're Jon Wood! I'm supposed to—come *back!*"

Jon slipped out adroitly just before the dawn broke; he loped swiftly down the narrow hallways and off-angles to the remembered rear basement door.

It was not late, not really. Yet activity at the huge starplot spaceport had minimized to basics. Ship servicing and the like. A few workers moved through the windy dusk between the rings of light and Jon found only one air-cabbie idling time away before the next scheduled moon-drop flight in the compound reserved for local commercial helios. It was a scroungy-looking chopper, practically an antique, not one of the sleek regulars, but Jon was in no mood to quibble.

"How's business?" he asked the cabbie, who somewhat matched his spit-and-baling-wire craft.

"How would it be for a Yellow Cab dropout?" The bearded wonder provided an unsavory grin and a look of universal indifference. "Don't tell me you're going to take a chance on this!" He jerked a greasy thumb up at the horizontal blades.

Jon squinted up, gave a fast look at the controls, and at the engine, too.

"It'll do," he said. "Just barely."

"Well, thanks a bunch, pal," the cabbie sneered. "Would you like me to sprinkle some rose water on the seat for your ten-minute ride into town?"

"That won't be necessary. How much?"

The cabbie shrugged. "Seeing as it's late and I'm all you got for choice until the next Yellow shows up—"

"I mean I want to buy it."

The bleary eyes leaped. "You're putting me on, pal."

"I am not putting you on, pal." Jon nipped his credits case out and began validating them with his I.D. chop. "Say when."

The cabbie's eyes popped with greed until Jon paused at a likely figure; then he squeaked a dry "When!" The deal consummated, Jon accepted the appropriate papers and some gratuitous advice about how the battered craft might best be kept intact long enough to get him where he was going *first*.

The engine's snarling cough was anything but encouraging, but finally it did turn over and the blades spun and he was off into the cloud-smudged night.

\* \* \*

As to where he was going...

Jon's starplot specialist training had, of course, involved flying most types of planetary small craft, but this crate was something else; it demanded all of his attention for the first fifteen minutes and it was all of that before he realized that some compelling intuate drive was pulling him toward the high Sierras and wild Feather River Canyon country.

"Mountains," he mumbled. "Venus mentioned *mountains*. And—what else?"

He strained to remember all the bits and hints Venus had given him that night about the hidden Star Reader. (*Last night!*)

*Where is this jewel? ... In a secret place not far from here. I don't dare tell you where—yet!*

At that point, Jon had been supremely indifferent to the whole business. And a little later?

*The star sphere ... that's the very heart of the Reader , . . blends with a Believer whose total horoscope has been fed into it... whose mind is programmed to become part of it...*

"Damn!" Jon swore. If only he had asked her *where!*

The craft had by now bypassed Sacramento, Auburn, Colfax, and was skimming the snow-packed heights of Sierra County, Plumas. Wild, craggy country and kept that way by government dictum, for a game preserve. The flimsy copter whirred closer to the peaks, then up again, in uncertain elliptical circles. Now in early spring, the thawing process had begun just enough to mess up the skiing enthusiasts' various paradises on the more agreeable slopes, but summer had not yet arrived for the wilderness lovers and their pack-mule trains; these tortuous hills were mostly barren of life, at least human life. Just the proper wilderness for concealing an illegal, tittered-at activity such as the creation of an ultimate Star Reader. But where? *Where?*

While he'd been consciously occupied with learning the idiosyncrasies of his lame-engined aircab, Jon's intuate had taken over and brought him this far. But no use straining or consciously misdirecting the functional top part of his mind. It didn't work that way. Jon's star-dowsing was a specialized skill that had a virtual infinitude of possibles to pick from; pinpointing one minuscule device hidden down there in the wrinkles of those blue-white mountains was not so easy. His very urgency and emotional involvement tore it.

"If only I had a contact!" he groaned. "Something that's identified with Venus—that's been near or in the Reader—that has picked up residual mind energy from..."

Jon gave a cry of self-disgust and grabbed the stone out of his pocket. He held it to his lips and then rolled its surface across his forehead.

"C'mon, baby!" he babbled.

His hands forgot their indecisive flaccidity and firmed down on the controls without a second's hesitation. The craft wheeled like a homing bird and streaked down into a narrow canyon where an ice-rimmed streamlet gossiped over ancient stones; then, its blades missing the bare walls by inches, the copter dipped confidently under an outflung wing of sawtooth rock.

There was a hole suddenly, under that great natural wing of rock, and enough light for Jon to bring the helicopter to a raggedy landing. What seemed a mere scooped-out ledge, a natural freak of ice-age erosion, was, Jon saw when he jumped out, an artful entrance to a long self-lighted tunnel bored into the heart of the mountain. He grabbed a torch from the ship's gear and moved.

He loped down the tunnel quickly until he struck a blank wall. It looked as if some secret mining had been started here—after all, this wasn't far from the original California gold strike—and given up when the paydirt was not forthcoming. Even now Dr. Trine's pride and joy was safe. Safe behind a door that looked just like part of the mountain.

"Open, sesame!" Jon told it.

Nothing happened, so he started banging on it with the torch, then, inspired, with the stone.

The stone did it.

The rock door labored up and away under the demands of unseen autopower forces.

Jon leaped through and sped down another corridor, this one metallic, until he came to another door at the summit of a brief stairway. The high metal door here would not open to his shove, nor did it respond to the caress of the stone either.

"Open up, damn you!"

Jon banged on it for several useless minutes.

Then, "Venus!" he yelled. "Calvin Grey! Are you in there?"

The door swung open. Names were its cue, it seemed. If an intruder somehow got this far, he would have to know who was within the sanctum if he was to get any closer to the Star Reader.

The holy of holies was not large, but somehow Jon had the impression that the circular walls around him were merely shells that hid incalculably intricate machines. There were no banks of blinking lights or moving memory tapes, nor did Jon expect any. The science of electronic data processing, analysis, and cybernetic mnemonics had moved far beyond the need for bulky rolls of plastic; it was all done by light waves and chemical spectra. Nevertheless, Jon was aware of having every facet of his personality studied carefully while he stood there in the center of the room deciding which way to the star sphere. There were no clues; the cylinder-room's walls were smug, impenetrable, and—waiting.

Jon decided to try what had worked before.

"Venus? Venus Trine?"

Nothing. Jon's insides iced up at what that must signify. Venus was gone. Venus was no more. Venus was dead.

"Calvin Grey?"

An indefinable electronic voice sighed.

"Yes." The voice was wholly human now. Human, old, and very, very tired. "This is Calvin Grey. And you are Jon Wood, lately of starplot. It is well that you have come. I will not express pleasure since there is no capacity for pleasure within me at this point."

"Where are you?" Jon shouted. "Come out and let me see you?"

"—regret that I cannot meet you face to face, but that is unhappily impossible."

"Venus? Tell me what happened."

"I must tell you what happened to Dr. Trine's daughter while there is still time," the voice went on, harsh with strain but otherwise without emotion. "Venus has told you about our work here and about Trog, as much as we know, otherwise you would not be here. You understand that the Star Reader is available only to those whose minds have been programmed to mesh with it. As for Venus herself—"

"Where is she?" Jon's tortured voice spun echoes round and round the metal room. *Where is she? Where is she? Where is she?*

"—only that she has vanished without a trace. But she did return here, just for a few moments. I sensed her presence here in this room and in the sphere itself. It was as if she were attempting to find you, Jon Wood. On Barrecrith. To reach out to you in the stars, to tell you something before it was all over. She didn't waste time with me, knowing that I was dying and that my faltering mind at no point possessed the insight to help you do

what you must. Nor could Venus project her mind to Barrecriith. The shield around the lost planet is too strong, Trog's hold on her was too great; only one born on Barrecriith as you were could ever hope to reach it."

"But why didn't anyone answer when we tried to make contact with the Reader?"

"—that time Venus was unable to fight Trog off any longer and the black dust whirled her away. And, of course, you must realize by now, Jon Wood, that what you are hearing now was recorded hopefully for your benefit just before I died."

The voice cut off and Jon was surrounded again by waiting silence. For a full minute his brain was numb; he must think, then act, but the certain knowledge that Venus Trine was dead was a numbing needle piercing his brain, freezing it with total, utter futility. Then, anger stirred in him, and he knew what he must do. Rage took hold of his body and shook it.

*Kill Trog.*

That was all there was left.

*Find Trog and kill him.*

That it was impossible did not matter. Jon and all the random flecks of knowledge he had sopped up since Ezekiel would MAKE it possible!

The Reader would help. The core of it—its very heart and brain—was behind that wall. He must go into it and demand that the stars guide him to Trog so that he could destroy him. It was for this Jon Wood had been born. It was for this he had been made Special. For this his father and mother had died. For this Venus had searched him out and given him the stone. For this Ezekiel had buried the secret Tablets in the Eternal Temple of E-Zida. For this King Arbe. And Nostradamus. And Barrecreith.

And now...

Jon hefted the stone in his palm, then walked straight forward, knowing that the solid wall in front of him must open before he reached it.

It opened.

Now he was within the sphere, in the center of slow-swirling galaxies of stars like radiant dust. He stared about him, and it was like his dream—that small naked boy running across the star fields, searching for a path. Only this time Jon was not searching for a hiding place, somewhere that Trog could not find him.

"Trog!" he yelled out into the universe and beyond it. "Where are you, Trog! I want you!"

For a moment, while the stars crashed down on him, he thought he must fall into them and be lost forever.

Then he saw the path....

\* \* \*

It was a strangely transparent face with overlarge silver eyes and only a hint of nose and mouth and no hair or ears. Yet it was human, or what would pass for human in the End.

Jon stared at it sullenly.

"Trog?"

"Since there is no one else around, I must be he." The thin mouth didn't move; the words merely rippled across Jon's mind; but what surprised him most was the hint of humor in the expressive eyes.

"You're the only one left on Earth?" Jon's hands were itching fists, itching to smash that pallid globe head until it spilled its supercontents all over the wall.

The round, bland face moved up and down in assent.

"What happened to them?"

"Since this world's total resources have long been used up, indeed all the resources in the Sol system—including Sol itself—"

"The sun is dead!"

"Yes. We're deep underground. There is a long shaft reaching up to the muck and waste that is now the surface of the Earth which provides me with a breathable atmosphere. As for food, chemical synthetics. Unfortunately, this mode of living did not work out happily for pro-creation and—well, I'm all that's left of glorious man."

"But there are other men—out there in space! Billions of them!"

Trog shook his round head. "No. Your time phase was the triumphant one. Man pushed his way into all the galaxies and, not finding any other form quite as intelligent—or greedy, or vicious, or warlike, or whatever you want to call it—he took over. Then, King of the Mountain and no more worlds to conquer, an odd thing happened...."

"What?"

"Of course, humans had always dabbled in hanky-panky with the lesser breeds, even when the species were fantastically different, but then it began to happen on a wholesale basis. Away from his own planet, with more aliens than humans around, man gradually lost his identity. He did it on purpose, it would seem. There were wild outcries about it, scholarly books written, and so on, but it made no difference. It seemed almost as though man wanted *back!*"

"Back?"

"Back to his evolutionary childhood. The aliens with whom he could blend were mostly savages or near-savages. A kind of rebellion against intellectualism took place and little by little man became lost in the shuffle—lost back in some alien eolithic dawn."

Jon drew in a hard, long breath of the largely artificial air.

"And all his space legions? His marvelous knowledge of science and art?"

"Gone? Oh, I suppose genetically the residuum is still there. But it can't come back—ever."

"Why not?" Jon demanded.

"The repeat cycles have been fulfilled. I thought you knew that, Jon Wood. We're at the End of the Pattern. I, Trog, represent the last remnant of Man at his greatest. But then, I'm a fluke. There were quite a few of us, some while back. We stuck it out here on Earth, when common sense told us to leave our dying sun and get out. But we realized finally that staying here was the only way we could prevent what happened to all of *them* from happening to us."

"I still don't see why it had to happen!"

"It's not difficult, actually. Man spread himself pretty thin throughout the galaxies. He had to interbreed, both to keep control of his colonial empire and to bring in new blood. Finally, the alien factor became the dominant one and *the alien factor resented the intelligence which had defeated it in the first place*. So much that it weeded out intelligence in favor of neoprimitivism!"

"How about Barrecrieth?" Jon gulped.

"Your father must have hinted what would eventually happen to the True Believers."

"They were interested only in knowledge—"

"Exactly. And the totally mental life can only lead so far. They learned all about the Pattern and delighted in knowing it, but then after that there was no challenge at all and, with no outside blood strain to feed the genetic cells..."

Jon had a fast inner glimpse of the glowing jewel cities, the blessed

peace, the scholarly beauty. Alas, Barrecriith!

Something bursting out like long-tailed comets behind Trog's enormous silver eyes mocked Jon; here was an effete neuter at the end of Time, playing sick games because there was nothing else he could do, avid to destroy everything because of a kind of grotesque, warped ego—toying with him, taunting him with the agony of mankind's last, futile struggles.

He leaped for Trog's throat to kill him, to watch those big eyes bulge out and show at least a trace of the terror Trog himself had caused. But he was suddenly moving in slow motion, hands out-thrust, fingers curled. Trog smiled thinly as he glided effortlessly away from him.

"Easy, Jon. It's no good, you know. I haven't kept myself alive, gone to all kinds of incredible effort, to let your primitive kill instinct prevail at this stage of the game."

"Game! That's all it is to you, Trog! You killed her!"

The smooth face somehow registered astonishment.

"Venus? Why should I kill her?"

"You killed her father!"

"Correction. He killed himself."

"But you forced him to do it! You tried to take over his mind so that you could control the Star Reader! He killed himself to keep you out!"

A fleeting irony—and amusement.

Then, "Sorry. I am unable to indulge in false regrets for unavoidable happenings. I have found it necessary to toss out emotionalism. You must understand that, at least. Can I cry for Venus's father when all our time-space has run out?"

Jon stiffened. "All I can think of right now is—Venus."

Trog's laugh was a genetic memory, but it was there. "Good! That's what we need! True Love Conquers All!"

He waved one of his spindly arms and a door opened in the wall. Venus stood there; she flung herself into Jon's arms. It was a while before Jon released her and they turned to Trog for more answers.

"Why?" he yelled. "WHY?"

The silver eyes glowed with mischief.

"You mean why let you go on thinking I'd killed her? That, even now, I intend to slaughter you both in some nameless fashion?"

"That'll do for a start," Jon granted.

"Simple. I had to create an illusion and it had to be good. I had to arouse in you the strongest possible emotions. Hate. Fear. Terror. To a cosmic level. And in order to convince you, I had to convince others, since emotion feeds on emotion. An obvious primitive syndrome. A demon inspires all-consuming dread in one only if everybody around one fears him, too. I had to set up what amounted to a satanic myth about myself, reinforcing it every now and then with demonstrations of my demonic powers. You two weren't going to be easy to convince, yet it was you who must be convinced, otherwise my plan would fail!"

"Plan? Us? What is this?" Jon held onto Venus. "You expect us to help you smash the Pattern?"

Again the half-smile.

"That's what you had to think! And why this maelstrom of emotions? Because of the power they created *within you two!* The basis for all psychical supernormal powers such as precognition, telekinesis, clairvoyance—in fact, all manner of wonder-working, orthodox or pagan—is emotional. As I told you before, I am beyond all serious emotion. I can only



indulge myself in the more trivial ones such as mild satire and that only with the refreshing catalyst of primitive egos such as yours."

Jon turned to Venus.

"Do you know what he's talking about?"

"I'm beginning to understand," Venus said. "The whole thing was a monstrous put-on. We had to be convinced that Trog was the horror to end all horrors. The emotional build-up—especially our fear for each other—would provide the force which would draw us to him." She quivered against him. "I—I don't know why he wants us here, but—"

"I think I do!" Jon broke in. "That True Love Conquers All bit! He wants to keep mankind alive—not to destroy the Pattern. Somehow we're it. We're Specials and by the knowledge we pieced together from Ezekiel and the others we—hey! But this is the End! The dropping-off point! Finis!"

They turned to Trog.

"I'm afraid it is. Your Believers were right about the Pattern, the Great Universal Pattern they read bits of in the stars. This is the End of the Pattern."

"Well?" Jon grated. "Why did you go through all this? Was it some kind of game? Did you bring us here so you wouldn't be all alone at the end?"

Trog's silver eyes blazed out.

"No! Don't you understand yet? When I realized that I'd be all alone here at the end of everything, that when I died—soon—that would be the end of man, I rebelled. There had to be more! There *was* more, only not here! *On the other side of the Pattern!*"

They stared in awe.

Jon cried out: "But we can't! Our minds weren't made for it!"

"No? I wasn't sure. There were hints all along the line. Ezekiel. King Arbe. Nostradamus. Your father. Hints about a *pathway* into that infinitely greater universe. Glimpses. I realized that I was too old to make the attempt; that, if man was to survive outside the Pattern, it must be by young blood—fresh, eager, Special minds! Your minds!

"I would provide the means of making that first shattering thrustout into the Outside, but young, active minds would be needed to make the best use of what was up there and to assure continuation of our remarkable species."

They stood in frozen silence for a while.

"B-But," Venus ventured, "whoever or whatever set the Pattern in the first place never intended us to go beyond this time-space barrier. It's taboo!"

"That's what the Shoshone Indians said about Yellowstone Park." Trog's odd laugh was jubilant with triumph. "Since when has man let a little taboo stop him? Maybe whatever's up there put a bug in my ear, let slip on purpose those hints about how to get Outside! Anyway, time's all but run out. Will you accompany me to the shaft now, please?"

"But—"

"No buts. We could stand here while I explain all the details until doomsday. Tomorrow, that is."

"Tomorrow!"

"The Pattern is finished. There's nothing anybody can do about that. Even—" He pointed up.

\* \* \*

The three stood before the open door of the great air tube with its series of filters and mixers to make the atmosphere it dragged in acceptable to human cells. They could see nothing, but from far above them in the huge hollow tube there came a low, windy moan. The mixers, densifiers, perhaps. Or—?

"That's how the whole thing ends," Trog quipped. "Not with a bang but with a whimper."

Jon's heart was dragging the bottom of some deepest, hell at the thought of their kind and the whole arduous process: novas into suns—suns into planets—fire into metal—metal into dust—dust into life—life into intelligence—and on and on to the farthest galaxies. All this to be suddenly gone in one great cosmic belch. (How many years? Centuries? Eons? What did that matter if there was no life within the Pattern to take notice?) Venus was weeping in his arms, seeing what he was seeing. He whirled to Trog.

"You can make jokes about it!"

"What else? When you reach the utmost culmination point in despair and frustration, what else? An Irish wit once said, 'Simplicity is the last refuge of the complex.' I'm the living proof of that statement. You see—Jon, Venus—I know everything there is to know. I've had all the time in the world to learn it and nothing else to do."

"Your cranium doesn't look so big," Jon said.

"It's not in my head. It's in the DNA threads of my cells. I can dip back into all the intricate labyrinths of all man's history through my genetic inheritance and instantly bring up any bit of knowledge man has ever had." His silver eyes beamed at them. "I'm very pleased with you two. You are alert and sharp and you love each other. Emotional enough without being sickening. From just exactly the best era man ever had. Oh, he got brainier later on but he lost a lot. Yes, indeed. I'm very happy with my choice for Adam and Eve. Second time around, that is."

"Second?"

Trog shrugged. "Third? Fourth? Billionth? Who knows? Anyway, up there—forgive my saying 'up' but what else can you say—you two'll do us proud, I'm sure. Now for the last-minute formalities." He whipped out a long needle like a glittering stiletto. "Stick this in my head, just here. All the way." He indicated the base of his neck.

Jon jumped back.

"He'll kill you!" Venus wailed.

"Of course. Wasn't it written in the stars? *Jon Wood was born to slay Trog*. His own father said it. Ezekiel said it. Everybody said it, believed it; they got their knowledge directly from the Pattern itself. So—!" His emaciated long fingers proffered Jon the needle while he bowed; his eyes shone like white suns.

"I can't do it," Jon grunted.

"You've got to do it! Do you want to make liars out of all those august readers of the stars?"

"I really don't give a damn!" Jon moved away firmly.

"Then all my careful planning and plotting is for nothing? Then mankind does go down the drain after all?"

Jon groaned.

"Why? Can't you go with us?"

"I thought I explained that. No? Well, anyway, I can't. I've had it. I'm ancient."

"But you're so terribly clever," Venus protested. "Isn't there some way for you to make yourself young again? After all, if we can somehow thrust out not only our minds, but our flesh-and-blood bodies—!"

Trog shook his head.

"You two are young because you *are* young. Age takes all of us. I most of all because I represent the shriveled-up dregs of mankind, brain or no brain. The bitter end. I'm all but extinct. The fact that you two were able, with my prodding and needling, to haul your bodies along with you into this last time phase of the Pattern indicates that you are able to take the great giant step out beyond the Pattern. With my help," he added modestly.

"But I can't—"

"Take the needle. Do it! I'm as good as dead anyway. Make my wild plan to outfox the Pattern Makers work! Do the thing! I'm dying so that you can see what is out there!"

The needle went in easily—as if Trog had greased it with a lifetime of urgent demand. Jon's arms held the girl tight while they watched the bulbous silver eyes lose their light, the gnomish body sag into a nondescript heap at their feet.

"*I'm dying so that you can see what's out there,*" Venus repeated hollowly.

Jon pulled her eyes away from Trog.

"Let's go!"

"How? What do we do?"

"Just *go*. His cumulative knowledge is the catalyst. It brings all our isolated bits of knowledge together and gives them meaning."

"We went back all that way to find out how, never knowing what we had found out."

"Until now." Jon smiled. "Ready, Venus Trine?"

"Ready, Jon Wood!"

Hand in hand they stepped to the edge of the air tube, then out. Out and up. Where familiar stars waned and blinked out, one by one. Beyond, infinitely. Like blended motes of silver dust. Like thistledown seeds seeking some new and fertile field to grow in and multiply.

— The End —