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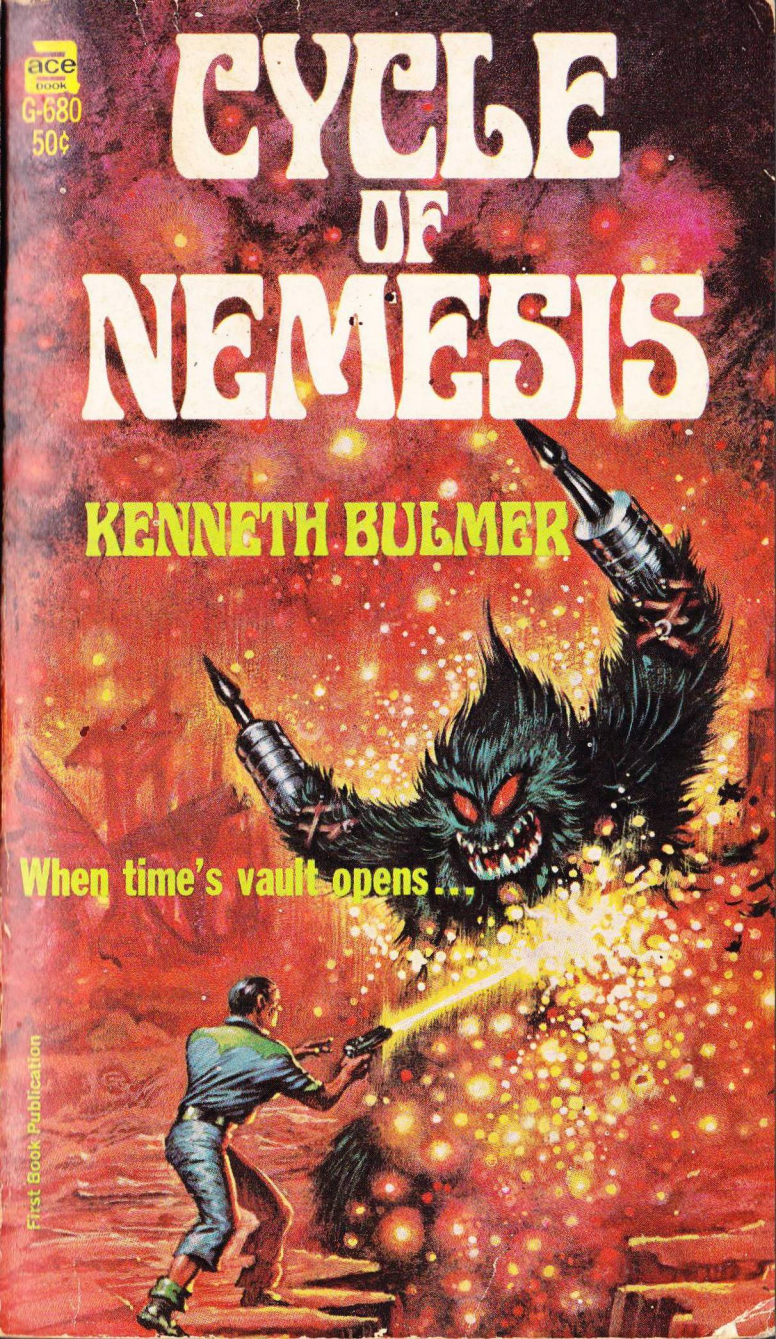
CYCLE OF NEMESIS

KENNETH BULMER



First Book Publication

THE WORLD-WRECKER UNLEASHED

My first introduction to the Time Beast was at the auction at Gannets, where I looked up to see a strange man wearing a blue and yellow checked Corinthian helmet. He not only looked like me, but I knew for sure he *was* me. . . . Then the headless body fell out of the chest I was going to bid on, and the unknown girl ran down the corridor, chased by an iron-booted, red-fanged horror, a creature of Khamushkei the Undying.

For the Time Beast was tossing us around in time and space, and interfering with the orderly flow of human existence. And unless we could stop it, to find a way to lock the Time Beast back in his vault, our civilization would suffer the fate of that other forgotten world of seven thousand years ago. It was the CYCLE OF NEMESIS starting all over again.

KENNETH BULMER

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Cycle of Nemesis

by

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I

"Lot Twenty-nine. Comprising a fine set of intestines, a reconditioned heart and a fully-functioning kidney—ah." The auctioneer inclined his head more closely at the catalog on the auction block set up on an antique table. "A left kidney, ladies and gentlemen, male, in excellent condition and barely used. Now what offers have I?" He raised his eloquent hands and eyes supplicatingly. "Yes—a lady over there—"

I assumed the lady in question, a purposeful lady large in every bodily requisite, wished to prolong her husband's life for a few more years of nagging and domination.

The ballroom of Gannets should have been left as it was, a place for fans and feathers, light laughter, the tinkle of punch glasses and the swirling intoxicating strains of waltzes, instead of being crammed in undignified disorder with most of the movable contents of the great house. Much we had seen earlier, walking soft-voiced through the long rooms of Gannets, seeing re-

vealed a broad perspective of a family's voyage through time, our catalogs in hand. Now, with coarser voices, we bid for coveted lots.

"If," said George Pomfret beside me, with a nasty undercurent of avarice brightening his voice, "if I don't get that Bernini Aphrodite I shall—why, it's lain here unknown for over a thousand years, in a private house, just a statue furnishing the hallway—" George Pomfret shook his head, quite obviously finding the pranks of time and fate too much for him.

He was a fine tall man with a ruddy brick-dust complexion and a pair of gray eyes he tried to make bore through people, and which then gave him the look of a man suffering from excruciating indigestion. He dressed loudly; he carried a shooting stick. But he was a good sport and good companion, at least for a weekend.

As for myself, I had come, as any idler does, with a friend to an auction. Grand and remote old country houses are few and far enough apart these days, goodness knows, for them to be of interest in themselves. In addition to its respected ancientness in its own right, Gannets had been found on the death of the owner to contain a private treasury of enormous, incredible and downright patrician extent and beauty. A story, reputed to be strange, clung about the house and owner whose portrait glowered down on us assembled barbarians. Pomfret could tell me the story over lunch; he owed me that much, at least.

I confess I did glance with interest at the humanoid-robot standing patiently in its place—Lot Fifty—with some idea of buying him for a body servant. But he was a Domestic/Gardener/Chauffeur/General duties robot, and although looking remarkably talented, was not a servant I could with justice see myself employing. Since

coming back a couple of months earlier from our Mediterranean aquiculture project and resuming my acquaintance with fresh air and sunshine, I had done nothing more strenuous than a few hard sets of tennis, a shooting expedition and a trip to my only relative, Aunt Nora, who lived in the tropical climate of the South Pole Estate and worried herself sick over her Siamese cats to the exclusion of her subaqueous nephew.

No, robots were all very well; but I fancied this fellow would rust rather quickly where I earned my living.

Pomfret had a long wait ahead of him: the Bernini Aphrodite whose marble limbs glowed with that secret voluptuous promise of warm reality found only in the work of the masters had obviously been selected as the great focal point for the auction; as the pièce de résistance she would occupy a place of honor. Probably, I decided with a wetnecks' cynicism, after lunch when postprandial digestive juices loosened wallets.

"She's beautiful!" sighed Pomfret, his florid face looking like a bull's contemplating a herd of finest Jerseys.

"And you'll have to pay a price—"

"I know. I recognize a handful of dealers down from Town. But there's no chance of a ring—on a find of this magnitude—"

"I can't understand why the estate didn't send it to an international house, instead of just lumping it in with the rest—"

"It!" said Pomfret reproachfully. "You are a heathen, aren't you?"

I was looking again at the subtle curves of the Aphrodite and admiring yet again the art and the craft and the girl herself—whoever she had been, a Baroque mid-seventeenth century waif from the streets of Rome, or a stormy rival to Costanza Buonarelli—when beyond that

exquisite shoulder I saw a man's face staring out at me from the shadows. I would not have been surprised even at the unexpected occurrence of someone standing just behind the statue in the shadows beneath the carved oak staircase, had not something about the face, some cast of features, some change of expression, filled me with an apprehension I could not understand.

I looked again, but the face had gone.

"A heathen, I said, Bert, and a confounded Vandal I meant."

Old George Pomfret liked to ride a horse once he began. That face—I'd seen it before, somewhere, of that I felt convinced and its very familiarity eluded me and made me infuriated with the gossamer-like evasiveness of face and name.

"Vandal?" I said, vaguely. "Well, hell, George, it's only a lump of marble—maybe it is Carrara—but—"

But, furious, his nostrils showing a crimping of white among the red, George Pomfret turned away from me. Smiling with the satisfaction of one who has successfully thumped a shark on the nose, I went back to trying to recall the shape and coloring, the expression and feeling, of that mysterious face.

And then, well, the old saws cut the finest; the doppelgänger effect had struck again. Of course. The face had been my own.

The fine set of intestines, and the reconditioned heart and the fully-functioning left kidney had been knocked down—I wondered without curiosity to whom they had belonged—and after the house's computerized atmospheric controls had been disposed of (a late addition to Gannets they could be stripped out without affecting the fabric of the house), I tried to stir an interest in Lot Thirty-three. Four fine rapiers.

That face—certainly the whole structure had resembled mine. I looked at once for a glass in the shadows beneath the stairs but was not surprised at not finding one. Could it have been—? I had no relations apart from cat-loving Aunt Nora. An angle of light, a trick of shadow, surely these must be the answer to that passing resemblance?

The upsetting feeling of imbalance made me irritable; an easy enough state for me to get into at the best of times and just for a moment, standing there in the soft early summer sunshine surrounded by the civilized artifacts of a dead family's life, I felt a great desire for the surge of water all about me and the welcoming sight of the lights of my undersea home dancing through the water toward me. I shook myself and looked at the four fine rapiers. Scottish, they were of excellent craftsmanshipn but I decided not to bid; I had too many rapiers already and these four, although fine, were nothing out of the ordinary. They went to a mousy-looking man whose delicate features must wince at the mere thought of what the rapiers were for.

"Lot Thirty-Four. Comprising two first editions: Wilfred Owen and Gerard Manly Hopkins, in remarkably fine condition, the twentieth century bindings intact, a little foxing and numerous bookplates and inscriptions on the flies—"

I tried but the price shot way up above what I was prepared to pay for what were, after all, merely books. I knew the Owen and the Hopkins and all their work graced my shelves belowsea; first edition mania had never, thank God and my bank manager's apoplexy, ever struck me.

I turned back and I stared at myself from behind a suit of Milanese armor—

This time, half-prepared, I took a step forward. Then as the man vanished I stopped, shaken and dumbfounded; for the vision *was* me—and it had literally vanished into thin air.

No doubt whatsoever entered my mind. The man had vanished. One moment he stood there staring at me with a lopsided smile—a trick of expression I hate and have been trying to correct for years—and the next I could see past the armor the flank of a cavalry group in bronze, the blue and crimson highlights striking back from swelling haunches of horses and spurs. Just like that—flick!—the man had disappeared.

I blinked. The reaction was normal. I swallowed. That, too, much as I might hate it, was normal reaction.

Taking another few steps I walked as carefully as I could, considering the circumstances, toward the cavalry group. I rested my left hand on the pauldron—the suit was amazingly beautiful and a possession any man might covet—and stared again at the cavalry, at the entwined thin legs, the drooping sabers, the stirrups thrust so rigidly forward. If the man had merely walked off and in the instant of his going I had blinked, a phenomenon of quite ordinary occurrence and so often explaining these so-called miraculous disappearances, he must have been still in the angle formed by the wall, the cavalry group and the suit of armor. He could not have got out any other way. He was not there. I had not expected him to be.

He had been wearing a strange costume, too: tightly-fitting gray tunic and slacks showed beneath a dark blue cloak that hung by golden chains from his shoulders. No flaring movement from the cloak had followed his vanishment, another clue to the manner of his going. The strangeness of the costume in this age of laissez-

faire in dress had lain in the Greek Corinthian helmet he wore pushed back on his forehead to reveal his face, for the helmet's bronze had been painted in vulgar blue and yellow squares in checkerboard pattern.

When I had first seen him staring at me from the Bernini Aphrodite I had not noticed the helmet, and I concluded he must not then have been wearing it. What significance that point had I did not know. I felt hot and uncomfortable and a little amused at my own reactions.

The absurd always makes the brain tick faster and locks that absurdity in the memory where reality and adherence to life is glossed over and forgotten.

George Pomfret, whose highly-colored cheeks did not for once bespeak a glutton, glanced across at me and then, surprising me, walked across quickly.

"Hey, Bert—are you all right? You look—"

"As though I'd seen a ghost?"

"Well—if you must have it, yes. You all right?"

"Yes. Thought I saw—oh, never mind, George. I think I must have been daydreaming."

"Hm. Well." Pomfret made up his mind, evidently, not to press the matter. "That cabinet we looked at is up next. Are you still interested?"

"Cabinet?" My mind spiraled back from impossibles to life.

"Yes, Bert. That trick cabinet that stood beneath a window of the picture gallery on the first floor."

"Oh, yes. I know. Of course." I saw Pomfret looking at me. "Well, let's get to it before it's gone. I'm all right now, George—for Heaven's sake!"

"All right, all right."

But he gave me another look as we went across to

the waiting crowd behind the double row of gilt chairs before the auctioneer.

The cabinet—a chest more, in a way—glowed in sullen and smoky orange walnut as the auctioneer's robot wheeled it into a vantage point on the trolley. Simple, austere but elegant lines and a functional directness spoke eloquently of the work of Samuel Bennet, who, although less renowned than his fellow Englishman Thomas Chippendale, yet commanded a rare price and following in the true lovers of antique furniture.

"You'll never afford it," said Pomfret with reluctant conviction.

"I'm afraid you're right." I realized, looking at the concentrated faces of the professionals bidding for consortia and groups, for international houses and for world-renowned museums and art galleries, that I was the worst kind of fool for even imagining that I stood a chance of outbidding them. But the experience would be fun.

"Lot Forty. A chest commode by Samuel Bennet, inlaid walnut, gilt fittings, about seventeen eighty"—the auctioneer detailed the rest of the mouth-watering goodies. I smiled at Pomfret at the assurance with which Bennet had been credited with the commode—it made little difference, now, really. It was not a Chippendale, that was the main thing.

The auctioneer's robot opened one of the drawers, the top half-drawer, to show how after all these years the wood stayed true and sweet, the fit perfect, the drawer squeakless. I had opened all the drawers myself only an hour or so previously in a last minute delight of the piece. I knew the chest was perfect.

The robot bent to the lowest largest drawer. His well-disciplined tug gentled the handle; the drawer did not slide out. He pulled a little harder and I frowned.

That drawer had slid out on one handle, so well had the piece been constructed; but now, the robot pulled again and I heard one or two people murmur a soft little under-the-breath warning.

Then the drawer slid open with unexpected suddenness.

It shot right out, jumping the retaining strips of wood and thumped to the floor. With quick instinctive response the robot had swung a hand up to catch the drawer and his metal fingers struck the wood jarringly. The drawer tipped over.

A long, rolled bundle toppled out.

I heard around me in that society of rich and dignified patrons of the arts, of matrons well-endowed sitting enjoying their auction, of professionals adept at hard-hitting bidding, of a world of art and refinement apart from any other world on the same planet, a sigh and a shiver of affrighted expectation.

The robot caught one end of the roll of cloth and spun it around, undoing, unwinding. From its revealed center an object spilled out onto the floor before the auctioneer and the crowd.

A girl's body, naked, decapitated and smothered in blood, sprawled laxly before us.

II

THE HEAD WAS NOT FOUND.

The elegance and refinement of the auction atmosphere in the great ballroom of Gannets had served at least to dampen the incidence of hysteria. I could not

help, despite the unnecessary gruesomeness of what had happened, a small malicious feeling of comeuppance. This gilded world of small talk and elegant gesture and afternoon tea was not mine. George Pomfret and I walked back across the gravel paths to his heli-car and watched the hasty exit of the would-be buyers when the police had finished.

"Poor kid," said Pomfret, shaking his head. "They'll never identify her, not with all their new-fangled forensic gimmickry."

"The odd thing is, George," I said with a thoughtfulness I tried not to make sound like fear, "the *damnably* odd thing is that we looked through that chest about an hour before. So the girl couldn't have been there then—"

"I heard the police doctor say she had only just died. The blood was still pumping out—you know how it spurts from a severed neck artery—"

"Yes."

"So she was put into that chest just before the robot wheeled it across."

"It's a tough nut, all right."

Pomfret wouldn't leave it alone. "Yet no blood was found anywhere in the ballroom, and the head—"

"I know. Look, George, we're late for lunch—"

"My dear fellow—this hasn't put you off your grub, has it? That would be a tragedy. Fresh salmon and a sauce—Montague got the recipe from Chancellor Zangwill's robot chef—which we thought would especially appeal to you. Fresh water, after all, you know—"

"I know, George, and thank you. Fresh salmon will make a change from kipper, herrring and haddock—"

Pomfret's heli waited for us with that faintly sly and disdainful demeanor you always find with an integral-robot piece of equipment. Much as I am not at home

with the humanoid-robots, integrals infuriate me more. At least the human-looking robots are open and transparent in their programmed effects.

We got in and the vanes stirred and whickered and the voice grille said: "Where to, sir?"

"Home, James," said Pomfret and then, because he was Pomfret, added: "And don't spare the horses."

I thought of the dead girl without a head and I thought of the man who had vanished and who looked like me.

I had not, of course, mentioned him to the police. I had a good idea they would either have taken no notice and written me off, or they would have taken me down to the station and probably tried to pin the murder on me. Either way would do me no good. This was a thing I had to work through for myself.

The heli slanted away in the sunshine and Gannets with its blue roofs and gray and yellow walls with their wide framed windows slipped back into its bower of green.

Nice place, that. Restful. What had happened there bore no relationship to the house's niche in history; a house, a home, a palace for a family—again I thought of the legends clustering around the name of Lester Northrop. Before I could start a conversation with Pomfret leading him around to telling me this tidbit of local scandal his phone rang. It was Benenson.

"Now look here, George! What are you doing floating around in your heli for? Have you got the Bernini already?"

Pomfret glanced sideways at me. "No, Paul, not yet, not yet. There was an—an accident. . . ."

On the screen the round harshly gray face of Benenson projected a strong personality. I didn't much care for

Paul Benenson. He was one of those uncomfortable people who seem to be incapable of a conversation but must at all times try to beat anyone else down, to argue without reason, always seeking to score points. Now he drew his brows down at George Pomfret.

"That's not good enough, George! I know we all agreed to let you represent the syndicate at the auction because you were local, but perhaps I ought to have gone myself. I know better than most how difficult it is to find trust these days—"

I refrained from listening to any more, reflecting that George had evidently talked himself into this one, and trying to extract some amusement from the thought of his joining up with bores like Benenson. Since the prices of art treasures and antiquities had soared up beyond even the purses of the well-to-do, leaving the field clear for the super-rich and the art galleries and museums, the fashion had grown for men of taste to club together in syndicates to buy art treasures and share them, sometimes on a rotational basis, sometimes by mutual sharing of a private gallery. As Benenson so often remarked, "I damn well want the Aphrodite and I don't mind sharing it with a few of you fellows who clubbed together with me. But I don't want a horde of grubby little public faces and eyes goggling all over it."

He said that again now.

Pomfret nodded. "We are resuming the auction in the morning, Paul. I think we can secure the Bernini, although there is tremendously strong opposition."

"Humph. Maybe. You can increase our top price by another half million. Marcel Lecanuet has joined our consortium. I don't care for him, but he brings another half million." Benenson's face on the phone screen showed clearly the overmastering greed in him. "And I

shall come down tomorrow, also. We must have it, George!"

As the screen died I said to Pomfret, "It, George? I thought Benenson was an art lover?"

"He's all right," said good old George, uncomfortably.

We spun down to his own villa, modest in size compared to Gannets, but filled with all the latest gadgetry to make life worth living. His robots took over the moment we alighted from the heli and the salmon was delicious. The rest of that evening passed in a fog of cross-talk centering around the headless corpse of the young girl.

As for me, I kept wondering who the devil could be the man who had looked like myself, and if he had, really and truly, disappeared before my eyes.

Inevitably, the more I thought about it the more rationality supervened. I had imagined his vanishment and some normal explanation accounted for the experience.

So it was that the next morning—the third of my stay with George Pomfret—I hurried over breakfast and with a quantity of sly digs at George induced him also to hurry so that we could heli to Gannets before the odious Benenson could show up.

Feeling only a slight quickening of excitement as we dropped down to the rambling and picturesque house, I still could not help wondering what was going to happen today.

The place looked unchanged from the outside and I found both a comfort and a normalcy in this; for almost a thousand years the house had stood here while motorways and monorails had passed on either side, while the high sonic booms of aircraft had drifted down from above and the deep entrails of the intercontinental sub-

way systems had penetrated the ground far below. Macabre and pitiful as was the death and mutilation of a young girl, this house must have witnessed other and more frightful scenes in its long and shrouded history.

George Pomfret, strangely enough, had thrown off my questions about Lester Northrop. "He wasn't the fellow they're talking about; he only lived here. Fellow you want to know about was old Vasil Stannard."

"Vasil Stannard?"

"Yes, well, kept himself to himself. That portrait up at Gannets, artist who painted that had to live in up there, own suite of rooms, own robots, not allowed to prowl about the house." Pomfret chuckled fatly. "I confess I wouldn't have missed the auction even if Benenson hadn't asked me into the syndicate, for the sake of poking about in Gannets. Regular mystery house, y'know, has been for years."

We alighted from the heli, seeing only two others already there in the rapidly-organized carpark, and walked up the scrunching yellow gravel paths past the trimmed box hedges and the weathered statues, noseless, armless and lichened. The day held all that subtle saffron clearness of promise that you find only early on summer days, when the whole world seems to be contained within itself, idling, waiting for the machinery of life to move into top gear, watching and listening and absorbing the promise. Always that, the promise, what is to come, the expected, the awaited; always that, so much better, really, than the blowsy blown fulfillment.

The blue roofs floated against the sky. I had never really thought about the color of roofs before and I suppose if asked would have vaguely said something about the warmth of red roofs, the vibrant glow of orange gables, the luster of tiles. But now, walking between

tended beds of early summer flowers rioting in color and perfume, I saw clearly that here, if nowhere else, blue roofs and gray and yellow walls formed the most perfect example of domestic architecture. They reminded me of my own silver sky back home.

In another place and another time, I would have preferred red brick and red tiles. But not here. Not at Gannets.

We went through the glassed-in portico and the anterior lobbies and walked directly to the ballroom. Pomfret could not wait to clap his eyes on his Aphrodite. Outside, the regular estate guards with their brown uniforms and holstered sidearms had been joined overnight by the more somber police, keeping their own watch on this place. If anyone had had the idea of stealing any of the fabulous Gannets collection, the guards effectively prevented the idea's execution.

I hesitated on the threshold of the ballroom, again fascinated by my feelings that this beautifully proportioned room should resound with the lilting waltz tunes and the swirling skirts and brilliant uniforms of a bygone era. The musicians' gallery with its carved balustrade and cunningly modernized lighting hovered above one wall as though on antigravs—and then I felt an irregular thump clot my heartbeat and I gasped.

I stared down at myself from that musicians' gallery.

Looking up, my mouth idiotically half-open, I saw the Corinthian helmet with its blue and yellow checks now all gorily smeared with blood—for no doubt existed in my mind that those ominous stains were anything other than blood—and the man's gray tunic and slacks showed more of the grim stains. His cloak had gone, but the manner of its passing could be conjectured from the

broken and dangling golden chains swinging from his shoulders.

I looked for a way up into the gallery.

The mahogany door toward which I rushed was fast locked. I looked about the room, seeing it stuffed with the bric-a-brac of the auction like a brilliant overturned wastebasket of the ages, and seeing no immediate way up. The man above me moved. I heard a hoarse and distressful gasping.

"Hey, you!" I called, springing out and searching again for him.

At first I did not see him. Then a single drop of bright red blood fell and splashed onto the marble floor before my feet.

There he was, huddled down against the balustrade.

"Are you hurt? Do you need help?"

No answer. The heavy tramp of a guard's footfalls from my rear and Pomfret's returning figure from my side convinced me that unless I could make contact with this mysterious stranger in the next ten seconds I would never do so.

"Bert? Did you call?"

"Listen, man! You're in trouble. And you wear my face. . . . Who are you? Can I help you?"

"Bert? Are you talking to yourself or something?"

No more blood fell. The glint of a broken golden chain vanished from the gallery.

"Yes!" I shouted back at Pomfret. "Yes—I am talking to myself!"

"Everything all right, sir?" The guard, a heavy brown-faced man in a brown uniform, whose square brown hands rested with negligent efficiency on his belt less than an inch from his holstered weapons, regarded me with that sub-surface knowledgeability reserved by the

authoritarian lower ranks of any military or para-military force in dealing with civilians. "I thought you were talking to someone?"

"Just to Mr. Pomfret here, sergeant, that's all."

He looked at us, without meeting our eyes, and then said something about doing his duty and walked off. His straight ramrod back and stiff legs made me itch.

"What the hell's going on, Bert?" Pomfret took my arm the better to make me understand his concern. "You were shouting at yourself—"

"Did you see . . . ?" Then I held my tongue. He couldn't have, and if he had he would have done as I should have done and roused the guards. Hell—there was a fortune beyond price on show here and men would go to any lengths to lay their own hands on it. All the guards from any of the Security Organizations wouldn't stop a really first-class tea-leaf operation I could have planned myself if I had had both the money and a criminal intent.

"You look awful. Come over here and sit down. I'll rustle up a drink—"

"It's okay, George. Really." I laughed and regretted that essay into imperturbability on the instant. "Just a slight impediment in my mouth I was trying to clear." I coughed, then with the desperation of the witless, added, "We wetnecks sometimes carry on in odd ways. You mustn't mind me."

He looked at me as though to say he was glad I was leaving him the next day, and smiled like chipping ice, and said, "You want to look after yourself; can't have you flipping your lid all over the place."

You had to hand it to old George. Nothing was going to make him change his mind about anything.

Before we went away I put my foot carefully on the spot of blood and scraped my shoe sole over it.

I didn't know why I did that.

But I felt the action fitted the situation.

III

As THOUGH BORNE on one of those tidal waves whose existence is at first suspected only through the more uniform undulations of undersea plants, I found myself being carried along on a dark wave of suspicion, fear and impending doom. Everything pointed, like the trailing fronds of those plants of home, toward a future that could hold only trouble, pain and disaster. That man in the blue and yellow checked Corinthian helmet, who dripped blood, that man with my face—why did he haunt me? Had he killed and mutilated that young girl whose naked and blood-spattered headless body had rolled like a macabre Cleopatra from some decadent sadist madhouse play?

Following Pomfret as he advanced on Paul Benenson I felt less like social platitudes with that bore than going five rounds with a tiger shark. Benenson's round gray face with the absurdly antique pince-nez in their rolled gold rims he affected smiled benignly upon all whom he met as though their day had thereby been fulfilled. I shook hands with a curt word or two and then went off for another look at a remarkably fine globe of the world that stood in globular dignity by itself in a corner. The ticket said Lot Forty-five, so that it would be coming up fairly soon during the morning session.

The events of yesterday and this morning had unsettled me—this was an understatement I could live with—and I had no deep conviction that whatever had begun was finished with. I looked at the South Pole Estate on the globe and, with that half-startled little chuckle of remembrance that your world has not always been everyone's world, saw that Antarctica was represented by whiteness, barrenness and a terra incognita. I smiled, forcing other thoughts out of my head; Aunt Nora and her Siamese and her warmth and comfort would have been regarded with open-mouthed disbelief by the men who had made this globe.

More people entered the ballroom and their muted conversation like that of a plate-glassed aviary in its platitudinous hum drove me further away. Nothing was coming up until the globe that I wanted, for the Bennet commode had been removed as material evidence, and I felt the need to divorce myself from this artificial if understandable world of refined art. We have our art galleries and museums in our cities beneath the sea, but somehow the very frontier-like pressures of our everyday lives are not conducive to this hothouse atmosphere of artificial culture.

I went out of the ballroom, not without a backward glance for the empty musicians' gallery, and trod carefully up the marble staircase with its glorious bronze and iron scrollworked balustrades. Brown-coated guards prowled watchfully and I got the impression that there were more of them in evidence than there had been yesterday.

Passing up from the ground floor to the first floor and going through to the long gallery, I saw a multiple series of reflected distorted images of myself receding and approaching as I walked. To some people I would now

be on the second floor, having walked up from the first; but to most modern folk these old-fashioned distinctions meant little. Undersea we had our own ways.

The long gallery led directly into the picture gallery.

Every picture had been removed by a London specialist company for cleaning, renovation where necessary, for authentication and valuation. They would form the subject of a later and separate auction. If I had the luck, I meant to be there—if only to see good old George Pomfret struggling to acquire the J. B. Morse collection —a collection that I, among others, would have given a very great deal to own.

Bare and shining and echoing, the picture gallery stretched before me, the long windows pencils of light, the pendant chandeliers glinting arabesques of reflections.

The gentle wooden floor, black with the polish of age, softened my footfalls. At the far end I saw a guard move into the gallery and then, with a hitch to his slung weapon and a characteristic stamp of one booted foot, turn and go out again, satisfied of my credentials.

I was alone in the picture gallery.

The floor beneath the third window showed its expected rectangle of lighter color where the chest had stood through so many years of long summer afternoons. Going to the wide wooden sill I looked out. The panes had been shut and the humidity controls would open them when the right time came; their polish dazzled me. But I could see a blue roof at my right from the protruding lower wing of the house, a shining circle of gravel between lawns of that deep emerald richness that centuries of lawn sprinklers and rolling and cutting alone can bring, and, just ahead beyond the lawns and bright flower beds, the first silent sentinels of the orchard that

lay on this side of the house. A deep quietness that hung over the scene affected me; even though the windows were closed, a hush, a waiting expectant hush, persisted and grew, as a spiritual continuation of that mood of the morning when I had walked here with Pomfret in that saffron early light. I turned away quickly, astonished and moved.

A girl walked silently toward me from the far door.

For a moment, not quite with it, I stared foolishly, mouth agape and eyes still dazzled by the sunshine.

Then, remembering that I was on dry land and my wetneck forthrightness would not be welcomed—or even tolerated—here, I moved with a mechanical precision to stare up at the nearest picture, too late to realize that they had, of course, all been taken away.

Like a cretin gaping at the moon I stood—and she laughed.

She laughed at me.

Not since leaving home had I been so pleased to hear another person's laughter.

"You can, my dear lady," I told her, "laugh as much as you wish. It is better than champagne at this moment to a desert-dry traveler."

"I'm sorry—but you looked so—so—"

"Silly?"

Her wide-spaced blue eyes opened in injured innocence—with everything else she had she was an actress too, then—and she was about to say something very tart, I could see, when a strange expression clouded those eyes and she pouted her soft pink lips. "Yes," she said gently. "But only in a startled, small-boy way, as though you'd been caught scrumping."

"And that wouldn't be the first time, either." I smiled at her. I liked the look of her. Young, her body was trim

and compact and curved just right in a demure but absolutely right dark blue suit—the sensation of her being just right for the situation became the dominant impression she conveyed to me. Her features while not beautiful were just right for a young, pretty, athletic girl on a bright day of early summer.

"You're buying?" I inquired politely. We had not moved from the window with the rectangle of lighter colored wood at our feet, the long plum-colored drapes of the curtains brushing the floor, with the empty spaces beneath their lights and hooks on the walls at our side.

"Yes. Privately. But I'm afraid the vultures have their choice of the pickings."

"That's true enough."

"You sound bitter—"

"Bitter? No—the way the world is going to hell in a bucket doesn't worry me anymore. It used to. But now I can see it's been going to hell in a bucket for the last four or five thousand years or so—and we're still here."

"Yes, we are. I'm Phoebe Desmond." She said it so naturally and held out her hand with so unaffected an air that I was delighted to respond.

"Have you fixed your eye on anything particular?"

"Oh, yes." She laughed, her head thrown back, her long white neck bubbling with good humor. "I want that dinky little doll's house with all the furniture and automatic dolls—the electronics are beyond my understanding but Timmy—that's my nephew—will love to run them for his sister Dolly—my niece and the girl for whom I want the doll's house."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that brother-sister relationship unless you know them very well."

"There's that bitter echo again—"

"Oh, no, that's not fair! I may have been thinking of

my Aunt Nora, but you've no right to strike me below the belt!"

She laughed again.

"Anyway, I think I know my own sister, and her children like me—adore me, is what Sally says—so I'm quite prepared to take the chance."

Before I could make a suitable reply the sound of running feet clapped in sharp staccato counterpoint from the far end of the long picture gallery and we both turned casually, interrupted in our verbal fencing.

Toward us over the dark planks ran a naked girl, her long reddish-blonde hair streaming out behind her, her arms imploring succor, her mouth open and red and gaping. Following her in a crouching loathsome waddle and yet covering the ground with ferocious speed ran a —I did not have the words to describe it. Furred, fanged, ferocious, feral. With deep crimson pits for eyes and with thick and heavy iron boots strapped to its feet, each boot—there were four of them—tipped with a long, sharp, ugly and obscene spike, the thing squattered over the floor after the girl.

She saw us. Her eyes widened and her heaving chest expanded as she dragged in a last despairing breath for a final scream. The scream began.

The girl and the thing vanished.

Only the scream remained, echoing on in my brain.

I felt Phoebe Desmond's arm touch mine and her hand grasp my wrist. She trembled. I glanced quickly at her and put my other hand on hers.

"I saw it, too, Miss Desmond. Whatever it was, it happened—but it's gone now. *It's gone!*"

"Yes." Her voice was a colorless whisper. "It's gone." She turned suddenly inward and buried her face in my lapels. "Oh—it was—it was—"

My hands were both caught up somewhere about the level of her shoulders and I could not move them. I said, "It was not pleasant. But it can't harm us."

After a time, she pulled back, put a hand through her hair, and, tossing her head back defiantly, said, "We'd better get back to the ballroom. My doll's house will be gone."

"Yes Miss Desmond. We'll do that."

I held her arm as we descended the stairs. She did not object. I received the firm conviction that she needed that human support.

The very normalcy and respectability of the atmosphere in the cluttered ballroom came to both of us as a shock. How could these very correct people immersed in their world of art and culture be sitting here so self-centered when above their heads naked girls ran for their lives and slobbering monsters pursued them with evil designs?

Finding a seat for Phoebe Desmond I stood behind her chair and looked about. Everything seemed the same; nothing had altered except the item under the hammer.

The bidding for a natural coral sculpture from an abandoned reef off the northeast coast of Australia crept up and up, the colored labiations of the coral sparkling from its plastic water-filled container. The sculpture certainly was a fine one, the directions of growth of the coral well-organized and directed, but I had at least six far finer at home and, pettishly, I grant, for a moment I savored a superiority to these grasping, avaricious, bidding drylanders.

A dry, meticulous, thin-haired man bought the coral sculpture. I could not imagine it gracing his bathroom; on the other hand, he could run to form and present it

to his mistress for mutual delighted study. The auctioneer's robot wheeled off the coral and another wheeled on my globe.

That globe fascinated me. Manufactured before the South Pole Estate had been conceived, before, even, the continental shelves had been cultivated and aquiculture had transformed the living standards of the worlds, it portrayed a world dead and gone. But that world had once been real and real people had inhabited its continents and islands and had fought one with the other for their possession. The globe showed a world that had produced well over half of the treasures thronging this room.

"Lot Forty-five. A globe of the Earth. Pre-space age and pre-suboceanic. In perfect condition with the single exception of a pin hole in a Kentish seaside resort called Greatstone—evidently at some time a flag had been stuck there."

"Well, I don't think any of us here will be likely to be going there just yet!" jocularly remarked the fat sweaty man whose eyes seldom left the Bernini Aphrodite. Each time George Pomfret saw this fat man—his name, I had been told, was Simon Rackley—George would purse up his lips and narrow his eyes and take on the look of a sleuth.

Bidding began desultorily. Little artistic merit could be assigned a globe of the world. That the world portrayed was not the world these men and women would visit in their jet aircraft merely reinforced their lack of interest. Just yet, at any rate, geographical worlds—even physical representations, as this was, and not the ephemeral political globes of yesteryear—were not in fashion.

With a strange feeling of command and buoyancy foreign to me on dryland, I spoke the bid I felt certain

would secure the globe for me. The shaky old lady against whom I had been bidding turned laboriously in her chair to see her competitor, her silks and nylons and strings of beads hampering her movements, her yellow old face like that of a bird inquiring of the bird table in the garden, and before she could make up her mind whether to go on or not the hammer fell in sonorous sealment.

She smiled at me, revealing a perfect set of super-white dentures, and ducked her head in token of defeat.

I bowed.

The man who had entered during this exchange of politenesses took my arm. I stared at him, off balance.

"You have just gained that globe?"

"I have."

"I want it—"

He wore a decent dark suit and pigskin shoes. His hands were broad and powerful, with square cut nails shining with attention and health. His shirt showed in the currently fashionable lavender hue, set off by a maroon tie figured in purple arabesques. These facts of his person I ascertained immediately, and as immediately passed them by in an absorbed study of his face.

Used as I am to the immediate judgment of a man and to the arrival in a snap flash of the mind to a considered appraisal of character and personality, well-versed in the arts of concealment, I had to look twice at this man who so importunely grasped my arm.

The way in which I would have assessed him below-sea would have been simple: I would have trusted him with the last oxy cylinder and the last harpoon in a frothing sea of killer whales. Square-faced, strong-jawed, keen-eyed, beak-nosed, wide-mouthed, all the descrip-

tions of strong men and heroes fitted him; but in the very essence of himself he transcended all these purely physical attributes. He was a man.

"Why do you want it?" I said, not bothering to wonder why I spoke as though I had known him for years.

"I cannot tell you that. I would have been here earlier but my heli was—was damaged. I beg of you—"

Evidently, he did not feel for me any of the strange sense of comradeship I felt for him. I sensed this as a loss to myself.

"I particularly want that globe. I have bid for it and—"

"Money? Is that your problem? I'll give you double what you gave—"

I smiled at him. Headless naked girls, naked girls pursued by ghastly parodies of monsters of nightmare, men who looked like me, vanishing, and now a man who would pay me two hundred percent for an old but normal globe of the world, all these happenings had occurred to me at what should have been a perfectly respectable country house auction.

I could not get to grips with the vanishing man who looked like me. The girl and the monster had also vanished. And the first headless girl was dead.

But this man stood before me, smiling his strong silent smile, and holding my arm, and offering to pay me over and above for this globe . . . Oh yes, there was no doubt in my mind.

"I think," I said with exquisite politeness, "you had better come with me. You and I have a few things to say to each other. Oh, yes—and we'll bring the globe with us, too."

And I took his hand from my arm and in turn gripped his arm in my fist.

IV

THE MAN WHO had introduced himself to us as Hall Brennan banged a fist on the table more in compliance with the idea that this would illustrate to us the importance of what he had to say rather than in any habitual intemperance of expression. George Pomfret raised his eyebrows a fraction, as though to say he hardly expected such behavior in his own house, while the girl, Phoebe Desmond, sat hunched together, the bang of the fist startling her and making her shudder deep within herself.

The globe which had aroused such deep passions sat smugly on the floor at our side, where I had moved it out of the direct path of the sunbeams falling through Pomfret's lounge windows. Pomfret, not at all loathe to leave the odious Benenson to await the Bernini Aphrodite, had agreed with alacrity to my request to use his house for the interview, while Phoebe, clinging to my arm, had refused to stay in Gannets another minute without a friend at her side.

"For you are my friend, now, Bert. I feel it to be so. We both went through that ghastly experience together and that bonds us—"

"Like the brotherhood of the trenches?"

"You can joke all you like," she had spat back fiercely. "But you damn well know what I'm talking about and you damn well know it's true. So there."

So there we were, gathered around Pomfret's lounge

table and listening to the fairy story being spun by Hall Brennan.

"I've been following up clue after clue for twenty years now. Ever since that first time when I saw myself I determined to get to the bottom of it."

That remark, alone, had hooked me.

"But what brought you to Gannets, just like that?" demanded Pomfret. "I mean—the sale of these wonderful effects has been widely enough advertised."

Brennan passed a hand across his clipped moustache. He smiled with the rueful air of a man acknowledging that fate is not with him. "The final clue led me to the globe. One globe out of countless thousands—I thought my search had come to an end, and then, like a lucky win on the rocket races for a wetneck, I saw an account of Gannets and the discovery of all those incredible treasures. I came here as fast as I could. My heli—my heli was attacked on the way."

"Attacked?"

"I'll tell you later." He produced a pocketknife. "Right now I want to open up that globe."

"Just a moment, Mr. Brennan." I felt absolute confidence that I could protect my property in any physical scuffle that might develop, but I harbored the unpleasant conviction that he would prevail upon me to deface the globe merely through power of will. "Just a moment. That globe is mine. I didn't buy it to be cut open—"

"I know, and I will pay you twice—"

"That's not the point. I'll agree to this operation only on condition that you fully satisfy me. In other words, I want to know what's going on."

The butter rich slabs of sunshine that lay across the carpet in Pomfret's lounge and dazzled from his windows, the fresh air, the sound of birds, the scents of

early flowers drifting in across those sunbeams, all these homely natural comforting things chilled as Brennan began to speak.

I felt a tickling pressure on my hand and, opening the fingers, felt Phoebe's hand snuggled within mine, my fingers grasping and closing over hers.

"The story is very simple," Brennan said in a dull voice that rang with the echo of lead. "Simple but lethally so. I suppose none of you has heard of the Time Beast? The Time Beast lying for all eternity in his Time Vault? No? Well, I thought not, and it is natural enough, God knows. I sometimes wonder if I am the only one unnatural, accursed, forsaken upon the face of the Earth.

"I speak of Khamushkei the Undying."

The name splintered deafeningly against my consciousness. I stared around at my companion, and for a moment I thought the ormolu clock on the mantleshelf had stopped ticking, that the dust motes dancing in the sunbeams had stopped trembling.

"Khamushkei the Undying," Hall Brennan said, on a breath, his head held up, chin high, his fine eyes chips of azure beneath his thick brows. "I speak of the Time Beast in his Vault of Time."

I swallowed, about to venture some remark, when Pomfret said, "I don't know the fellow. What's he got to do with Bert's globe?"

And the moment of timelessness fractured.

Phoebe laughed and shivered and her fingers tightened in mine.

"The first time I stumbled across the name," Brennan said with most of his attention focused on me, as much as to say that even though I owned the globe he could at least find a kindred spirit in me and not, alas, a Philis-

tine ass like George or a beautiful numbskull like Phoebe. If he did think that, as I for a moment had guessed he thought, then he would be wrong. Probably I did him an injustice. Brennan went on: "I was poking around some of those very early city-sites they've recently discovered and begun to excavate out into the desert from the pipeline from Kirkuk. Of course, all around there and mostly southeasterly is well dug over; I mean, further south, Akkad and Sumer are archaeological tourist traps now."

"I thought they'd brought the desert back into cultivation now, with grass and seedlings and water and weather control." I tried not to let my interest in these things cloud my defense of my globe.

"Oh, yes." Brennan laughed. "Archaeology out there isn't like the old days, with trial trenches, and thousands of natives for labor, and machines if you have the money, and digging and digging and more digging. How those old boys must have worn out spades by the basketful!"

"What's this got to do with that—" began Phoebe.

I pressed her hand. "We don't know, Phoebe," I said in a low voice although not a whisper, "that what we saw has anything to do with Mr. Brennan."

"Anything at all has to do with me if it affects my life's work!" said Brennan with restrained fierceness, as though what he had spoken were a self-evident truth.

"I'll grant you that," I told him with a smile. "Get on with the story. You have my interest, at the least."

"The Tigris, what they called the Hiddekel, has changed its course from time to time, and so has the Euphrates, the Great River. I struck more southerly, had a flier and a couple of friends, and we went archaeologically probing southward, off the usual run. Actually

hit some real old-time desert, too. We found ourselves a city."

The way he spoke convinced me of his sincerity.

"When was this?" I asked. "The last major city discovered, as well as I recall, was that remarkable complex on the outskirts of what had been the Indian Thar desert—fascinating—" I shot it at him. "I don't remember any new Assyrian city in connection with your name."

"Point taken," he returned like a tennis player negligently flicking back a weak backhand. "Naturally, I didn't publish anything."

"Naturally?"

His smile chilled me for the first time in our short acquaintance.

"My two friends—good hearted, fine in an emergency —I won't tell you their names—they're dead. Both of them. Dead. Khamushkei the Undying. You don't advertise too much—"

"Go on!"

"That city was an eye-opener. Oh, I know we've dug up ceramic pots and bits of copper wire and from that theorized that the Babylonian priests worked their idol's miracles through a crude form of electricity. And much of what we do find we can't fully understand. You turn up a broken statuette of a nude woman and at once scream 'Primitive goddesses! Ishtar!' when in all probability what you've found is the remains of little Lulu's best doll. The most simply explained models and pictures in terms of children's toys or pictures for enjoyment and decoration are invariably given a god or goddess appellation. Nothing ever found is ever anything less than an offering, or an idol or some great and wonderful religious artifact. It's understandable. It's far

more important sounding and the museums are going to queue up if you find a goddess, an Ishtar or Astarte, rather than a little girl's doll."

"So?"

"So we went in there with our eyes open. If we found anything we'd handle everything with exact and scrupulous scientific care. We found the temples and palaces of an early pre-Akkadian city, reasonably well-preserved. That curious formation of brick, the carvings in soft stone, the potsherds, all spoke eloquently and we went at it hard. You could go back there tomorrow and find everything as we found it. We desecrated nothing—well, only one thing—we recorded only."

I saw that his hand trembled slightly and he, seeing the direction of my gaze, snatched it off the table and hid it below the wood, on his lap, out of sight.

"We found cylinder seals, very primitive, and we found tablets. One of the men with me could read hieroglyphics off pretty well and I'd brought a Johnson-Hayes computer, one of their little Mark Sixes, and we fed the stuff through and out came the translations like hot pies. It was a great way for archaeologists to carry on." He spoke with an affected toughness of speech now, a melodramatic devil-may-care insouciance that I, for one, found uncharacteristic even in our short acquaintance, and saddening. "We shot the stuff in and out came the answers, in out, in out—Khamushkei the Undying came out."

He took paper and pencil from his pocket and, with hands no longer trembling, wrote the words for us to read.

"But what—?" began Phoebe.

"I have the whole translation and you can read it at your leisure, some other time."

As he finished speaking Brennan glanced uneasily around and then stood up and walked with a stiff-legged gait, rather like that of the brown-clad guards, over to the window and looked out. He cocked his head up to stare into the bright dazzlement of the morning sky.

Clicking his tongue, he returned to the table and as he passed by the globe he paused to put a hand on the quadrant, as a man lays a hand on his mount before a long chase, and then he resumed his seat at the table.

All the time he had performed these small actions we others had sat quite silently and still, watching him.

"Briefly," he said as though no interruption had occurred, "in the beginning was darkness. Then the spirit of the darkness moved and was alone and cried out in his agony of loneliness and the waters of his tears fell and multiplied and swirled into a mighty ocean in the darkness. And some passed to the left and some passed to the right and some dried upon the center into a small cloud." He glanced at me. "After that we come to the familiar bits about the sweet water Apsu and the salt water Tiamat, but told in a much earlier version than any I had previously seen. There were differences, too."

"From the feminine spirit, the sea, the blind forces of chaos, from Tiamat," I said, "and from Apsu, like the River Oceanos primordially dedicated to creation by Homer; from the fusion of these two waters came all things and all peoples and all gods—"

"What a load of old horse-rubbish!" said Pomfret, his cheeks tastefully purple.

"Yeah, maybe," I said. "Nowadays. Go on, Brennan."

"If we're in this thing together you'd better call me Hall. I'm apt to answer quicker."

Phoebe smiled at him. "I'm Phoebe."

"I had noticed." He gripped a fist up to indicate the

break for station identification was over. "The usual Assyro-Babylonian mythology kept popping in and out of these tablets—they must have been the forerunners of much of the Akkadian and Sumerian legends on which the later Assyrians and Babylonians—and Jews—built. After that and the birth of Lakhmu and Lakhamu, the monstrous serpent twins, the story differed considerably. Next to be born was the Fair-haired One, the Lord of Light. Notice how early in the story he makes his appearance, antedating, for instance, Marduk very considerably."

"So?"

"So he was set upon by the next to be born, Anklo the Desired—there were some statues of her that would have rendered the rest of the pornographic market completely passé—and after one of those long and confused Giants and Gods wars, eventually the Fair-haired One was taken and bound."

"Long live reaction, then, situation normal?"

"Oh, after this there was again the usual catalog of intercenine warfare. But what struck us was the way this next incident was handled. Anklo the Desired had the Fair-haired One castrated and cast his genitals into the sea, and immediately a host of fiery serpents rose up and were about to devour her. She cried aloud for succor—that's interesting alone—and down from the sky plunged a great and burning light. The light was described as burning. Without description, without any other introduction, Khamushkei the Undying swept into action and, we are told, devoured all the fiery snakes and all the opponents of Anklo the Desired."

"Bully for her," said Pomfret, glancing at his watch.

"What happened then?" demanded Phoebe, entranced.

"The usual thing that happens between a subjected

woman who has asked for deliverance and the heroic conqueror. But before the fruit of that union could be born, Khamushkei the Undying went off on a rampage of destruction. For by this time the Earth was being populated and men and cities were growing and commerce was booming along. A whole wonderful Earth, filled with the finest creations of the original fusion of the seas and their godlike offspring, whose own arduous labors had helped fashion an Eden, a paradise; a world where men were the masters of their own destinies with the gods well-wishers and encouragers but not interferers, and all was created and intended for the good of mankind.

"Sounds great," said Phoebe without the slightest hint of malicious modern cynicism. "And?"

"Khamushkei the Undying destroyed it all. He pulled down the cities, he devastated the fields, he slaughtered the beasts and the birds, and he pursued and killed every man, woman and child on the Earth."

We sat, silent.

"All that he left alive was the family of the serpents, to bring grief to anyone he might have missed in his world-wide career of murder."

"I say, that's a bit strong, isn't it?" Pomfret licked his lips. "I mean—where did we all come from?"

"Now, George," said Brennan with a small smile, "you run on into the normal stories of the Creation. You must be familiar with them. But they all take place after there had already been a perfect Earth."

"You said something about the fruit of the union?" I asked. I admired the casual way Hall Brennan told his tale. Had he tried to spin a pseudo-biblical turn of phrase, a mystical verse-form, a sort of quasi-Gilgamesh epic from his material, I would have written him off

much more readily than I was now prepared to do. The way he said what he had to say more than what he said carried conviction.

"The fruit?" He laughed now, a real laugh. "Bad eggs sometimes hatch good chicks—that's true if you think about it. Anklo the Desired gave birth to the twins Mummusu and Shoshusu—the most beautiful girl and boy the world had ever seen. There was a lot of hanky-panky about Khamushkei the Undying trying to kill them and Anklo the Desired—redeeming her life at the end—sacrificing herself, freely, for their sakes. The twins decided that they must deal with their father. But he was Khamushkei the Undying and they could not kill him even had they been prepared for patricide. So they hit on a plan."

"Anyone care for a little drink?" asked Pomfret brightly "Thirsty work, this, y'know."

Phoebe rolled her eyes up at me. Brennan said with perfect gravity, "Thank you, George. Something soft, for me, please. That will be very pleasant."

"What was the plan?" demanded Phoebe aggressively.

"They lured him into the finest house—a palace, rather —they could contrive and then, once their father was inside admiring his living quarters, they shut him in with a seven-locked incantation they had learned from Anklo as she lay dying. It took all their strength and all their powers of mind to finish the incantations for as soon as Khamushkei the Undying felt the first strands binding him he roared his fury and charged toward the doors to get outside to kill his son and daughter. So strongly did he rage that they had to build themselves an addition to the palace where they could live permanently to keep a guard on their father."

"Selfless devotion to duty," said Pomfret, coming across from the drinks cabinet. "Here's your glass."

"They dedicated their entire lives to keeping their father imprisoned, for the slightest lack of caution on their part, a hint of weakness, and he would break the incantations and escape—and then—"

"He'd jolly well wipe out this second Earth we have!"

"Right."

"But some powers he did retain, for the seven-locked incantation did not quite close. Only six shut fully. The seventh hung, and strain as they might, Mummusu and Shoshusu could not quite close it. So from that day to this they stand unending watch. And Khamushkei the Undying can reach out with some of his creatures who will sometimes do his bidding. He has other powers, too, that I will tell you of later." Brennan finished his drink. "The most important information on his powers, though, came as a sort of postscript. We'd been digging down where we'd found the tablets containing the full story of what I've just told you; it was pretty hot and we were tired. So I called out to everyone to come up and take a break. One of 'em—remember, no names—came up with this white shard in his hand. By that time we all knew the hieroglyph for Khamushkei the Undying—pictograms, really, you'd call them—and so we fell on it at once."

"Like the rayed disk of the sun for Shamash, the sun-god?"

"More or less, like a dragon and the marru for Marduk. Khamushkei the Undying was represented with a comet. At least, we took it to be a comet, with a fanged and winged beast riding it."

The feeling that Brennan had been hedging around what he really had to say had been growing stronger to

me for some time and now I recognized what he was driving at, at least in that last piece of information.

"It's all of a piece," I said more solemnly than I liked. "Everybody knows about the wheel."

"We sat there on the lip of the trench, hot and tired and dusty and so thirsty we were upending the bottles one after the other, and we read off what this last little white shard had to say." Visible emotion gripped Brennan now; his fingers clenched and relaxed as though they held that white shard on George Pomfret's lounge table.

"And?"

"And it said that Mummusu and Shoshusu, who were, never forget, the children of Khamushkei the Undying, would weaken over the years and the centuries, and the day would come when, unless they received succor in their turn, the giant strength of their father would prevail and he would snap the seven locks one after the other; then, roaring his anger and his venom, he would fly from the Time Vault to rend the sons of man and once again destroy the world."

"Well, now, I wouldn't tell that to my nephew and niece before they went to bed," said Phoebe, with a primness I was forced with a little shock to attribute to fear.

"It isn't pleasant reading." Brennan nodded his head. "Those old folk were red hot at calculating out astronomical timetables. They knew their stuff. As near as we could figure it, they estimated the twins could hold out for about seven thousand years."

"The seven again . . ."

"We estimated—and this was a pretty wild guess in context—that the city we'd found had thrived at about the latter half of the fifth millennium. Pretty good long

way back—and for the purposes of what happened, I, now, can stick my neck out and say with some degree of certainty that it would be something like three hundred years back into the fifth millennium."

"Very pretty," I said. "From that date to now is exactly seven thousand years."

"Oh!" said Phoebe, on a breath. Her hands, which had tended to want to lead a life of their own, now clung with sudden renewed strength to mine.

"Now?" said Pomfret. Then, as he added it up: "Oh! I get it—you mean Khamushkei the Undying is due to break out of his Time Vault now!"

V

THE RELATIONSHIP between Khamushkei's beast-bearing comet and Ezekiel's wheel and ancient myths of space travelers visiting this world had to fade now. The central fact lay in that simple and devastating statement that Khamushkei was due to break out of the bonds his children had cast about him, was due to emerge from the Time Vault, was ready to ravage the world again.

George Pomfret stood up, putting his drink very carefully on the table. His face held a look at odd variance with the look one would have expected him to hold at this moment: a look of gimlet-eyed determination making him a caricature of a drunken owl. His face showed flat and taut, the lips firm, the complexion a shade paler than usual. He walked toward a cabinet built into the wall and heavily locked with the latest electronic brain-

rhythm devices. He put the electrodes to his temples and the doors opened to the matching key sequences. He reached inside and came back to the table carrying a gun.

The gun was a Farley Express, not their latest model, which I, among others, still did not trust, but a well-proven positronic incoherer. A weapon at once adaptable as a single or two-handed weapon, with telescopic sight and shoulder butt optional extras, it fitted snugly into a suit pocket. It could cut a hole through ten yards of tungsten steel and neatly atomize a man's midriff without really trying.

"If," said Pomfret, "we are going to deal with this friend of yours, Hall, we'd better go prepared."

My opinion of George Pomfret underwent a drastic revision.

"Now just a minute," said Phoebe, rearing back from the table. "What—"

"Easy," I said gently. Then, to Brennan: "Hadn't you better finish? I mean—old George here might go off half-cocked right away."

Pomfret favored me with a look that meant, "I'd kick you downstairs if you weren't my bosom pal."

"There's little left to tell, at least from my end," said Brennan. He kept looking at Pomfret's Farley Express with, I thought, the look of a professional. "I, too, realized that someone has got to shut those seals on the Vault if everything we've built up over the past thousands of years isn't all to go smash. So I began working on that." He looked at me intently, finishing with, "That's when my two archaeological pals were killed."

Phoebe asked the obvious.

"That globe," answered Brennan. "I'd been following up scattered ideas, references, clues—they scarcely merit

the importance of that name—when I met—this was in Singapore in one of those back street underground dives —this fellow Northrop."

"Ah!" said Pomfret.

"Not the chap you'd have known, who took over Gannets. This was his son. Just about dead of drugs, the stupid idiot—no one needs to do that anymore—but I gave him a helping hand—a helping hand to die decently. All I could do. But he mentioned this weird character, Vasil Stannard. And the globe. It meant nothing to Northrop, of course; but it did to me. So I came as fast as I could."

"Your heli?" I said, delicately.

He made a face. "I crash-landed. A rotor blew. Lucky."

I cleared my throat. "Some rather—unlikely—events occurred while we were at Gannets. I brought you along here because of that, mainly, and not through any altruistic idea of giving you the globe—"

"I offered to buy it—"

"—for double. I know. No, Hall. You tell me why a rotor blew on your heli. Then I'll maybe tell you what I think."

Brennan smiled. He looked every inch the toughly competent man of action who had faced danger a hundred times all over the worlds and satellites of the system. "I can guess, Bert, and I'll say this—yes, you're right."

I glanced quickly at Phoebe Desmond, and Brennan, following my eyes, killed his smile. "She'll have to be counted out, that's for sure."

But Phoebe Desmond was not so easily written off as that. "Oh, no!" she said with a flare of pride. "I'm coming, too."

"What the hell are you talking about now?" demanded Pomfret, his face puzzled.

We all laughed. "Khamushkei the Undying doesn't take kindly to people wanting to chain him up again, George," said Hall Brennan as though conveying the state of the game.

"Oh!" said Pomfret. He reached for his gun.

"What did Northrop tell you?"

"Simply that strange events had clustered about Gannets and that this Vasil Stannard had once told his father that he had seen himself walking there many times, in company with strangers he did not know. Stannard had dug over much of the territory we had skirted on the way down to our city—"

"And you think he dug up a link in the story of Khamushkei the Undying?" demanded Phoebe, once more rapt and absorbed by the old story.

"Yes. And whatever it was he found is in that globe!"

I looked at my globe. Well. It was important and a relic and a link with the past. But if inside it lay something incredibly more ancient that would finally give us the clue then, well . . . I took out my knife and handed it hilt first to Brennan.

"Be my guest."

Brennan chuckled his appreciation. "If Vasil Stannard was digging around near where that old story of Khamushkei the Undying was found, he could easily have uncovered details of it that would, by definition, have precluded our finding them. Whatever it was, if it bears on my search, that will be enough for me."

I nodded at the knife, guessing that Brennan, after all his searchings had at last brought him within sight of his goal, now had those last minute reluctances to go on and uncover the secret, lest it prove false. Or, with

the irrationality of mankind, lest in its proof of correctness it destroy some spark of his own fire to find out. The search is often more rewarding than the eventual finding.

"Go on, Hall." Phoebe Desmond could barely keep still with excitement.

Brennan took my knife and poised it over the globe.

"Be as gentle as you can, Hall. . . ."

The feather-like tickle of there being something wrong now stirred my mental activities into sudden action; my arm thrust up and I caught Brennan's descending forearm with my hand forming a crutch and taking the downward jolt. He reacted with startled surprise.

"What the—?"

"Just a minute, Hall. Look at this globe. It's supposed to contain a clue left there by Vasil Stannard, something he dug up that you missed, or that he found close by that you never got to—and yet the globe was made a few hundred years ago, that's clear—"

"Anyone can see that." Brennan showed his frustration.

"Well, if you look carefully you'll see the original plastic print is undamaged. The globe hasn't been tampered with, nothing can be inside."

"What!"

"But what about Northrop?" demanded Phoebe, incensed.

"What about him," I said tartly—more tartly than I meant. I felt I was protecting my property. "I'll be the first to open up the globe—but we'll do it without damage to it. That fair?"

"Suppose," said Pomfret with an amazing grasp of essentials. "Suppose we just find out what you expect to find in there, Hall."

Hall Brennan glared at us. We'd all accepted his story

at face value, its preposterous ideas taken in and digested and regarded as possible by us without comment. Now, I saw, this was our way of comment on that old story of Khamushkei the Undying.

Heavily, Brennan said, "I told you my heli was damaged. I told you my two associates were dead. I've indicated something of the power still remaining to Khamushkei the Undying. Now you're pushing me—"

"I think we're entitled to that," I pointed out. "Confound it, Hall, you've spun a pretty ferocious sort of yarn. That I, for one, believe you, doesn't make the story true."

"Granted. I'll say this. I've been on the trail of Khamushkei the Undying for some time now. Little bits here, little bits there, traces of folklore that have been regarded with contempt by researchers falling into place and taking on meaning because of what I already knew. Things like that." He smiled across at George Pomfret. "You talked of having to shut the Time Beast back into his Time Vault, George. A praiseworthy, if dangerous, idea. But—but just where do you expect to find this Vault?"

And there it was, of course.

That was the problem my globe was supposed to solve.

Phoebe stood up and walked across to the globe. She spun it deliberately beneath her fingers so that the continents and seas blurred into a racing chromosphere.

"I've been sitting doing nothing for too long," she told us. "Now I want to do something exciting. Good grief!" She sounded comical in her vehemence. "If this isn't the greatest chance for some *fun!*"

"If getting killed is fun," Pomfret said guardedly.

I had to make the decision. I didn't know the others

particularly well; George Pomfret with his money and his fine villa, his vague business associates from whom the money came, and his bluff hearty sportsman pose, well, I suppose I knew him better than the others. But Hall Brennan was a mystery, and Phoebe Desmond even more of a mystery. And yet, I knew, quite without equivocation, that if we opened up that globe we would be committing ourselves to a course of action from which we would not be able to draw back.

The decision had already been made, but, being by nature irritable, I like to sort things out first before telling those decisions. "All right," I told Brennan. "Open it up—but treat it gently."

"But," said Phoebe, annoyed, "you said there couldn't be anything in it."

"I was still working it out, Phoebe. Just let Hall do his surgical stint, and then we'll see."

Brennan bent over the globe. The knife blade caught a glint from the sun and spattered red reflections. "Here," said Brennan, sharply. "The plastic has been heat-sliced and resealed. Polystyrene cement, melting the edges and melding them—a neat job . . . but . . ."

The knife blade disappeared in plastic. With a distinct and musical *pop* the globe sprang into two hemispheres.

A nylon-wrapped bundle fell out, trailing wires and retaining strips of plaster.

"It's there!"

"Let me—"

Who spoke, who grabbed, I didn't know. But it was my globe. I put out a quick hand, knocking away another grasping hand, said, "Wait! Hold it. That wire is connected to the interior of the globe—"

"A booby-trapped time-bomb?" asked Pomfret.

"If it was that," I told him sourly, "it would have gone off already."

"Thank *you!*" said Phoebe, sweetly venomous.

"What Bert is thinking, I imagine, is the wire must be connected to a place on the sphere that corresponds with a geographical site on the outside of the globe." Brennan glanced at me and I realized it was his hand I had knocked away. "I'd figured that, too, Bert."

"All right." I decided not to feel foolish. "But you might not have."

Phoebe with her delicate woman's fingers felt around inside and then ran her other hand over the outside of the globe. "Here," she said. "Roughly, anyway."

She pointed a manicured fingernail at a spot on the globe. Iraq. Well, what else, when you thought about it?

"Is that the place?" asked Phoebe. "Or is it just where Stannard found this?" She touched the wrapped packet.

Brennan lifted the packet carefully, not detaching the wire, his face concentrated on what he was doing. "That's not the place where I dug," he said softly, so we had to crane to hear him. "The wire will give a location a few miles in diameter, at the least. There must be a more detailed coordinate somewhere here."

"Cut the wire and open the packet," I said.

Brennan glanced up at me and then licked his lips. He gripped the knife more firmly. "Here goes."

We all winced back as he pressed the blade of the knife against the wire and with a quick jerk cut through.

Nothing happened.

"Well, I didn't think it would, old sport," said Pomfret on an explosive breath of relief.

"I wish I had your confidence," I said dryly.

Brennan unwrapped the parcel.

A clay tablet, broken, revealed itself as the wrappings

peeled away. Brennan's fingers, those broad powerful hands with the shining well-attended fingernails, and the whipcord tough wrists, all moved with a delicate balanced precision, stripping away plastic and packing to reveal the baked clay tablet.

We all drew in our breaths.

"A beauty!" said Brennan with deep affection.

"As sharp and clear as though it had been baked this morning," I said. The light from the window fell across the indented writing, angular and sharp, somehow deeply moving simply by being there, the still-existing proof of the continuity of mankind.

Square, with a corner broken off, the tablet measured by the tape Brennan produced from a pocket sixteen and a half millimeters in thickness where the edge was broken away and he could measure without distortion due to the cushion effect, thirteen point seven centimeters in length and ten point nine centimeters in width. He stood with it on his palm, just looking, for a long time.

"Can you read it, Hall?" asked Phoebe.

"Bits and pieces. Look—" He pointed out to us the unmistakable beast and comet, the attributes of Khamushkei the Undying. "They're at the top. They dominate everything else. And, significently, the rest of the tablet is divided into seven segments." He looked up at us and I caught the glowing glimpse of triumph beginning in his face. "Seven."

I said, flatly, feeling like a traitor, "The last one has the corner broken off."

The darkened biscuit color of the tablet showed the sharp incisions of the writing with a mocking reminder of what had been lost.

"Archaeology," I said into the silence that had fol-

lowed my last observation. "I've had some under the sea. Nothing is perfect, much as you may will it. We've got to do what we can with what we have. George"—I turned to Pomfret—"can you get hold of a computer? A Johnson-Hayes, I think you said, Hall? A Mark Six?"

"That will do at a pinch," answered Brennan.

"Yes. Yes, I can manage that." Pomfret went at once to the phone.

"Well, at least something is happening." Phoebe Desmond bent over the little baked clay tablet. "It looks so —so small and fragile and so, oh, I suppose you'd call it archaic."

"It's rather old, Phoebe—"

"I mean, old in concept and idea. I mean—we can put a whole encyclopedia into a thimble these days. So painstaking, so dark and old and primitive—"

"Someone had to start." I had my own opinion. "Someone had to think up the idea and then put it into practice. It was a big thing. A pretty big thing, writing, when you think about it."

"It's okay," said George Pomfret, rejoining us. "I've hired time on Capital. That stands to a Johnson-Hayes as a hydrogen bomb stands to a bow and arrow. Okay?"

"The bow and arrow would have done the work quite satisfactorily, George." Brennan smiled at Pomfret. "But thanks. The thought was there."

The days when the decipherment, translation and rendering into coherent English of Babylonian cuneiform had taken the devoted time of experts and the semantic juggling of syllabic groups, word associations and the sheerly inspired Biblical language of Victorian discovery were long past. Now, assuming everything to be in order, we could expect a standard English transcription

within five minutes of putting the tablet on Capital's screen input.

"Go ahead, Hall," Pomfret said, indicating his phone.

With a little smile at himself, no doubt, Hall Brennan walked across to the phone, sat down and showed the tablet to the scanner.

"What do you think . . . ?" began Phoebe.

"The whole system is a place of mystery and wonder," I said with what I hoped was not a patronizing inflection. "And our Earth is not least in providing us with some of those wonders. Why don't we just wait and see what Hall and Capital between them come up with?"

The other phone rang and Pomfret, with a face at us, answered.

On the screen, angled so as not to interfere either in scanning or reception with the other phone, on which Brennan was waiting for an answer from the computer, the gray face of Benenson showed. He seemed to be in a remarkably mixed state of anger, disappointment, fear and downright ditheriness. By that, I mean a man who fiddled with his oxy taps undersea. Benenson was a dryneck of drynecks, but the impression he gave was precisely that.

"What's the trouble, Paul?" asked Pomfret politely.

"Trouble? How should I know?" Benenson swabbed at his neck with a handkerchief. Maybe I'd been wrong; he wasn't so much of a dryneck as I'd supposed. "It's all gone wrong here. I'm coming across to you, George. I don't understand why you left the sale at all."

Again Pomfret surprised me. "I thought you'd do a good job, Paul, on your own." Pomfret winked at me, off sight.

I smiled back. Pomfret, despite his awful upper-

crusty appearance, was turning out to be an interesting comrade.

"Well, of course I'd have done a good job!" brayed Benenson, his gray flabby mouth swabbing away at his jowls. "But there have been the most crazy goings-on here! Men and women running about stark naked and firing guns! You've never seen anything like it!"

"No—" Pomfret swallowed.

"We sure haven't," I said to Phoebe, with a frown.

"So we weren't—" she began; but I cut her off with a quick shake of the head.

"We'll be expecting you, then, Paul," said Pomfret, breaking the connection. He faced me, a bluff, brick-red-faced man out of his depth. "What the hell's going on Bert?"

"So they've had to shut down the auction after all," I chuckled. "Sorry if I sound heartless, George, but, like Phoebe, I don't intend to get maudlin over this. If we handle this right it could all be Great Fun. And damn me for an insensitive Philistine if you wish. I am perfectly well aware that a girl has been murdered."

"I know what you mean," said Phoebe, all in one breath.

"Well, I'm blessed if I do!" grumbled Pomfret. He went across to the table and picked up the Farley Express and hefted it. "We've been hunting together, you and I, Bert, with nothing more lethal on our sights than a camera. If this little lot demands something more final, I'm as ready as you." He lifted his head then, and his rich port wine laugh bubbled. "Even if I don't understand the finer nuances of it all."

"You will, George," I promised him. "Before it's all over. You'll know why."

Hall Brennan was taking longer at the computer ex-

tension than I'd expected, but I refrained from wandering across and peeking over his shoulder. I knew how I felt about kibitzers when I was working.

"This reminds me of waiting for a tricky experiment to prove or disprove me an idiot," said Phoebe, brightly. "And I've had some of that, believe me."

"Oh?"

"Why, yes. I'm not a wealthy layabout like you or George."

"Who says I'm a layabout?"

"Well—at least I earn a respectable living at the University while you spend your time larking about beneath the sea."

I laughed. "You think what you like, madam, about me. As for you, how do you—?"

"Physics. A moderately difficult and unrealistic corner of the field. Having graduated rather well I was given the opportunity of staying on in post-graduate work, with a spot of tutoring thrown in—mainly cloth heads who can't keep up with the general pace."

My ideas of Phoebe Desmond subtly shifted to encompass her lecturing in a tutorial to a group of clothheads. The concept intrigued me. Like using a razor blade to chop firewood.

"Damn and confounded damnation!" shouted Brennan, stamping back from the phone.

"Trouble?"

"I'll say! The tablet is just a compilation of ritual curses. There are no directions or signs of any indication at all of where the Time Vault of Khamushkei the Undying could be!"

VI

WHEN PAUL BENENSON turned up we were all sitting around cuddling drinks and trying to think what to do next.

He brought a red-headed girl with him. She simpered a little as Benenson introduced her curtly as Lottie, not giving her surname, trotting her out perfunctorily and then edging her into the background as he started rampaging on about the disgraceful scenes at Gannets.

As soon as I saw Lottie I exchanged horrified glances with Phoebe.

Phoebe nodded desperately at me.

"It is!" she mouthed.

I nodded back. Then I glanced again at Lottie, at the girl I had first seen stark naked running for her life down the picture gallery, fleeing from a loathsome monstrosity spawned from some unnamed hell.

My glance wanted to linger on her; with a sudden upturn of her head, however, she stared straight at me, her dark eyes intent. I looked away. There could be no mistake. The naked girl fleeing for her life and this secretary of Benenson's were one and the same.

". . . turned us all out!" Benenson was braying. The fool had lighted a cigarette and now puffed out clouds of filthy blue-gray smoke. I waved a hand and George Pomfret, pointedly, stood up and snapped an order at one of his house robots. The robot trundled across and robotically bypassed the automatic controls and opened

up the ventilation. Phoebe and Brennan coughed a little, and then the ventilation sucked the vile smoke out and we could return to civilization.

"Turned us out! And the Bernini hadn't been put up yet. I tell you, George, if they sell it before I've a fair chance to bid I'll raise such a rumpus it'll break the auctioneers."

"Well, now, Paul," bumbled good old George. "They wouldn't do a thing like that."

"What happened?" I asked bluntly.

"Happened?" Benenson blew more smoke, his fat gray face like a slug enveloped in slugkiller. "A girl with no clothes on ran out into the ballroom, the brazen hussy. She saw us and tried to get away but the guards were too quick." His face, that a moment before had brightened with lecherous thoughts, clouded in puzzlement now. "But the guards lost her, somehow. Then a—" He stopped and said to Pomfret, "Got a drink, George?"

"Certainly," said Pomfret, and I chuckled to myself at the lack of the familiar "old man" that would have been Pomfret's unfailing tag of yesterday. He flicked for the robots to do their duty.

"Did you recognize the girl?" asked Brennan. He had asked my question for me, so I could go back to a little eyebrow wiggling at Phoebe, warning her.

"No, of course not. I only caught a glimpse . . ." Benenson sounded regretful over that. "She had auburn hair, like Lottie's, but that was all."

He hadn't been looking at her face, that was for sure.

But—but if the girl was Lottie—I glanced again at Benenson's secretary. Could she have got away and dressed herself in time to join the odious Benenson as the police emptied Gannets? If that were so—then why did she sit like a silent mannequin; why didn't she say it

had been her? Why, in fact, wasn't she having the screaming hysterics right now?

Phoebe lifted her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug that never happens in real life except in circumstances like those in which we found ourselves. I smiled back at her and then rose, meaning to inveigle her out for a quick notes-comparison, when Pomfret said, "It's time for a meal—I'm starving. We'll think better on full stomachs."

"I don't need to think!" snapped Benenson. "I know what I saw."

"Too right," said Brennan, standing up. He yawned widely. "I'm tired."

"You'll stay the night, Hall?"

"That's very civil of you, George. I'd like that."

The robots prepared the meal which we had elected to eat from trays clipped to our chairs rather than make a formal meal of it. I noticed Pomfret's robot butler, a splendid ironman, a good eight feet tall with a plug-ugly metal face as though he had gone fifteen rounds with a steam roller.

"That's Charlie," explained Pomfret with a laugh. "He fell down the cellar steps when I'd just bought him and he's been a little—peculiar—ever since. I've never bothered to have his faceplate remodeled. I think he has character the way he is."

"I'm sure," said Phoebe.

"He knows what he's doing." I thought of the Domestic/Gardener/Chauffeur/General duties robot I had for a wild moment considered bidding for at Gannets. Charlie must hold all those accomplishments in his memory tanks with a whole lot more. Butlers were one of the highest grades of robots, more akin in their random sampling of human traits to a human than any other

robot engaged in any other business, maybe because some of the sheerly quirky behavior patterns of the human beings they deal with rub off.

Now Charlie superintended the automatic vending of our meal with a smooth and silent perfection of overseeing that delighted me. I wondered if I could be irritable with Charlie.

Benenson ate in the way one would have expected.

I thought of an old and hungry grouper snouting along near the bottom.

Outside, the daylight began to fade, almost unnoticed by us as the interior lights strengthened in compensation—almost, for I knew I shared a common feeling with the others who knew of Khamushkei the Undying that with the going of the light and the coming of darkness, forces—symbolically, at least—could be released that might alter entirely what we were doing. One can wait all night for dawn; equally one can wait for darkness. And we were waiting for the more menacing of those two expectancies.

For Benenson whose postprandial digestive juices were, from the point of view of the auctioneers and owners of the Bernini Aphrodite, going sadly to waste, our odd behavior must have seemed in a queerly inverted way to be an expected homage to him. He was, as we knew, a powerful man of business, dealing in airlines and factory complexes and banking houses and trusts; our halting speech and sidelong glances must have been familiar to him. For myself, I still could not quite take the situation seriously enough. I thought of the dead girl. That was serious. But that had happened with the fleeting inconsequence of a play or an old tragedy, impinging not at all on my true life.

Finally I could stand it no longer.

Standing up and wiping my mouth with a paper napkin, I smiled at Benenson with the right treacly content and said, "I have some work to do which won't wait any longer—"

Before I had finished speaking Hall Brennan and Phoebe Desmond were standing at my side.

"We'll help you, Bert," they said.

The three of us walked off toward Pomfret's study.

"D'you mind if we use your study, George?"

"Go right ahead," Pomfret said, with a smile like that of the man on the scaffold who isn't sure what his part is. "I'll join you as soon—ah, that is, later."

Benenson took out another cigarette.

We left hurriedly but in good order.

In Pomfret's study we grabbed the globe and Phoebe said, "This has got to work right—I never thought we'd get away from that horrible little man."

"He's a very big man," Brennan said, feeling along the wire. "And don't you forget it."

"D'you know him, then, Hall?"

"Of him. No wish to go further in that acquaintanceship."

I didn't press. Brennan would tell me about himself when he wanted to. As for Phoebe, she was a tutor at the University and therefore moved in a sphere for which I held ambivalent feelings.

"It's got to be right here," said Brennan. He had his fingers inside the globe, feeling around the wire, and his other hand pointed a fiber-point pen a millimeter off the surface. The pen wobbled.

"That's no good, Hall." Phoebe sounded practical. "The problem of transferring a point from the interior of a sphere to a corresponding point on the outside without making a hole through—"

"Is a tough one," I put in helpfully.

She chuckled like a little girl. "Science will always find a way. We can't use the old light and shadow technique, but we can use magnetism—"

"Of course!" said Brennan, annoyed with himself. "Now why didn't I think of that!"

"You're not a physics man—or are you?" I said.

"Nope. Where's the magnet, Phoebe?"

We took apart a panel in one of Pomfret's automatic consoles and soon found a long enough magnet so we could isolate one pole. Carefully, Brennan shoved the magnet up against the wire, moving it to an exactly arranged position alongside. Then Phoebe dropped a pinch of iron dust she had nail-filed from a wall-bracket. The iron filings slithered and shimmied as she tapped the globe with a shining fingernail.

"Gently—gently—" She breathed to one side as she spoke. "We're not after pretty concentric patterns. What we want—is—uh—a *dot!*" She looked up with a cry of triumph. "And there it is!"

I checked the distance the magnet would be against the wire, cuddled up against it, and the direction. Then I put Brennan's fiber-tipped pen down in a single small dot.

"There."

"Hmm."

We all stood looking at that dot, a little lost.

The globe was—or had been—a fairly good-sized representation with Iraq shown in some detail; but now we had gone beyond that scale. I went over to Pomfret's bookshelves and pulled out the big Oxford Atlas, feeling the comfortable weight of the pages. Tape recordings had undercut book publication for years; atlases

tended to be a trifle difficult—although not an impossibility—to put on tape for the civilian.

I opened the atlas.

"Iraq. Well, Phoebe, you're the mathematical genius around here. You figure in the area on this atlas that the dot on the globe encloses. Can do?"

"Easy. Take a little time—not too long."

"Check. While you're doing that I'll ransack old George's shelves for an ancient atlas. If he has the Muir we're in luck."

I didn't mean an atlas produced, like the globe we had bifurcated, in the past, but an atlas showing the world as it was in antiquity. Modern states have given new names to old places. Babel had become Babylon, so they say, and we were now researching in an area of the past where Arabic names meant little. Eventually, tucked down on a low shelf among assorted magazines and fishing papers, I found a Manxton Historical Atlas.

Back at the table I opened the atlas at the pages devoted to Sumer and Akkad and then looked across at Phoebe, bent over her pencil, her brows drawn down, a pink tip of tongue visible between her teeth. I figured she was probably doing something in her head for the first time in a long time, without the use of a handy computer. In that, as I quickly found out, I did her an injustice.

"It's as well I keep my brain in trim with mental problems," she said, brightly, looking up. "Have you the atlas, Bert? I have the coordinates here."

I smiled at her, giving her a mental apology.

On the Oxford Atlas the circle centered around a dot marked cryptically: "As Samaiya." That stood on a thin broken line representing one of the old caravan tracks where, in these days of aerial transportation, only a few

diesel-electric buses would speed dustily over the desert sands that for so long had borne only the shuffling pad of camels.

Transferring that across to the Manxton resulted in a circle of nothing.

"Right in the middle of nowhere!" said Phoebe, disgustedly.

Brennan and I heaved sighs of relief.

"If these coordinates had given us a place around, say Eridu, or Uruk, or Dilbat, I'd have been very uneasy."

"Disappointed and alarmed." I upped the stakes.

"But why?"

"Because," explained Brennan, "that would mean the area had been very thoroughly dug over. You know the sort of tourist traps those old Sumerian diggings are these days. No, with a blank map to start from we stand a good chance of uncovering something new." Then he stopped, shook his head and laughed. "What I mean is: if Khamushkei the Undying is there, we would expect to find him in an area not particularly well explored."

"Savvy," nodded Phoebe understandingly.

"Nearest jet-field would be Baghdad, I suppose." I cross-checked with the Oxford as Phoebe hunted an airline timetable. "They'll have jet services running into the desert from there."

I glanced across at Brennan. "I'm a wetneck myself, Hall. I do know the desert a little, but . . . ?"

For a moment he hesitated. I wondered why. Then he said with decision, "All right. I'll take charge. But if I'm running this show I'll expect absolute obedience to orders. I do know the desert."

"That's okay, Hall. I can't answer for the others, but you have my word."

"And mine, Hall," said Phoebe, looking up at him. She bustled across with the timetable, moving with a sudden nervous energy puzzling to me then.

"Now just who said you'd be coming, too?" asked Brennan.

She put the timetable behind her and arched her body back. She looked very nice. "I'll hide the timetable if you don't let me come too!" she threatened. We laughed. Corny as the joke was and despite, or probably because of, the perils of what we planned to do, we took a pleasure in this free chitchat. We hadn't yet reached the time or place for frightened monosyllables.

"We can catch the twenty-three fifty-nine midnight flight from Hampden," she informed us when she had looked down the flight listings. "That'll give us time to organize here."

"We can hire most of what we'll need in Baghdad," pointed out Brennan. "But you'll want to take a few personal things. I shall. We'd better get George in on this. He'll want to come, of course."

"This is quite an adventure," said Phoebe. I could not fail to notice the sparks flying out of her eyes and the warm pink glow radiating from her face. I glanced at Brennan and began to get the picture.

At that point in our deliberations a shrill scream scythed in from the other room, followed by an immense roaring, human voices yelling, the hard metallic clatter of robot feet and then the unmistakable bacon-frying-in-a-pan sizzle of a Farley positronic-incoherer being fired at full power.

The three of us dived for the door.

Brennan wrenched the door open and then we tumbled to an astonished halt. The scene was nothing if not lively.

Lottie had flung both arms around Pomfret, so that for a moment I missed seeing the Farley Express in his hand pointing at the ceiling. Benenson sat in his chair like a discarded wad of chewing gum. On the carpet a brilliant pool of blood shimmered in the artificial lights like a giant crimson ink blob. Smoke and the smell of charred flesh hung in the air, making my nostrils quiver in disgust.

"Are you all right, George?" asked Phoebe, the first one to speak and break that macabre tableau.

George Pomfret swallowed. His left hand around Lottie's waist remained firmly in position. "I'm fine," he squeaked. He swallowed again, harder, and in his normal voice said, "What a whopper!"

Charlie his robot butler said, "I do not understand this thing. Your instructions, please, boss."

Trust George Pomfret to substitute the normal robot's "sir" with the adrenalin-jerking "boss."

"Hold on a sec, Charlie. I'm not sure I understand this myself." Pomfret's hand tightened on Lottie as she went to move away. She felt that pressure against her back and, seductively, swayed forward again against Pomfret. He put the Farley Express down on the chair wing at his side and put the thus freed arm around Lottie.

"You'll be all right, Lottie."

"I do not like this," Charlie staccatoed in his chirrupy metallic voice. "Something—"

"What the hell happened?" bellowed Hall Brennan.

The west window that had been covered by dark blue drapes, drawn when the last of the daylight had gone, now burst inwards. Curtains, glass, metal framings, the whole fifteen foot square window, showered in like a slow motion bubble. Shards of glass pattered down like

flung spears. I caught at Phoebe but Brennan already had her around the waist and was hurling her into the cover of the overturned dining table.

"It's another one!" shrilled Lottie.

The wad of chewing gum in the chair quivered.

Pomfret snatched up his gun.

Hall Brennan, his left arm familiarly around Phoebe Desmond, fished out a small gun from an inside pocket. I saw it was a Creighton Forty, a projectile weapon capable of blowing a hole in an elephant over half a mile away.

From the dark blue curtaining and the smashing uproar of the destroyed window emerged a shining figure.

In a single flashing glance I saw the figure, recognized it for what it was, and smash went another cherished myth.

Without dignity I joined Brennan and Phoebe at the back of the table.

Brennan was breathing in thick jerky gasps, his face upturned and a look of absolute unbelieving awe on his face as though he had seen the millennium. "Just like the ones on the entrance to the palace of Sargon at Khorsabad!"

I nudged him hard.

The thing that had broken through the window now heaved its bulk up from the floor, fluttering and fanning its heavy coppery wings and creating draft enough to blow debris away from it in all directions. It stood a good twelve feet tall and its hooves shone silver. Its bull flanks glowed in angry bronze, every curled hair in place. Its wings of red copper with every feather indented and in place settled now stiff and formal over its back. Down its chest depended a curled and gold-threaded beard, hanging from a face at once baleful

and idiotic, with thick lips and almond-eyes and a mindless serentity made all the more awful by the glory of the crown that sat atop that gruesome head.

"A lamassu," Brennan croaked. "A tutelary genie—"

"A winged human-headed bull!" Phoebe said. "And it's *alive!*"

Then what Brennan said penetrated, for she coughed, "A tutelary genie! Hoo, boy!"

I said sharply, "Look after Phoebe, Hall."

That should bring him around, as well as her.

Across the room George Pomfret shouted, "Don't give it a chance this time!" But Lottie's convulsive attempts to climb all over him threw the Farley off. He daren't pull the trigger now or he'd bring down the roof.

The winged bull roared: a Bashan-like bellow that shook everything and made my head ring. It swung its hooves and they sliced razor-sharp into the carpet. Its human face swung around, the dark shapely eyes saw the three of us crouching behind the table, and its face went meaner than ever. It charged.

The solid mahogany table flew across the room split like a cheap orange crate. The wings clapped forward to smother us. The fore hooves lifted in a glitter of silver to slice us to pieces. I snatched the gun from Brennan and fired and saw the bullet explode on the feathers of a wing.

The genie did not stop. It came on unnervingly. I fired again at the face. Where the bullet went I didn't know, for the thing had reared up and turned about, screaming. Blood siphoned from one side where Pomfret, desperately jerking his gun hand down, had fired a snap shot. Another shearing blast removed a wing and more dark blood gushed out. Charred flesh hung in rib-

bons. The thing went mad. It thrashed about, lashing its tail, and opening its bearded lips to scream and hiss.

Then Pomfret fired for the third time and the thing's head, crown, eyes, beard, lips, vanished in a puff of incoherent positrons.

The body slumped fatly to the floor.

Then, clearly visible to us all, quite without the slightest margin for error, the body faded, thinned, became transparent, vanished. It disappeared before our very eyes.

Only the pool of blood was left, joining the earlier blood in a canal of crimson across the carpet.

We remained frozen in our positions for some time; then Phoebe said, "Whew! I wasn't dreaming that—was I?"

"I'm afraid not, Phoebe."

Brennan released her and stood up. I held out his gun to him. He took it, smiled ruefully. "Would you believe me if I told you it was like seeing a Sphinx in Trafalgar Square climb down off its pedestal?"

"I'll believe you, Hall. Whatever it was, it meant more to you in that way than to us. To me, it was just another menace, a personal peril to my life, similar to many other intriguing monsters we have in the deeps."

"Lions, stupid," said Phoebe.

"Sure, anything you say. Lions, tigers, sphinxes—but that was a real honest-to-God three thousand year and more old carving from the gates of Sargon of Akkad's palace at Khorsabad. I've seen 'em—"

"So have I, old boy," said Pomfret, still holding his gun in his right hand and Lottie in his left arm. "But what's concerning me more is they vanish when you shoot 'em!"

The wad of chewing gum emitted a long shuddery

gasp and then tried to heave itself to its feet, quaking.

"Let me out of here!" yelled Paul Benenson when he could articulate. "Help!"

"Sit down, Paul, and take it easy," sagely counseled Pomfret. "I'll fix you a drink."

"And me, too, darling boy?" cooed Lottie.

Brennan, Phoebe and I looked at one another, then we laughed spontaneously together. Reaction it may have been, but we all knew exactly what the others were thinking.

Still and all, she would be good for the old stick-in-the-mud.

VII

"THERE'S A SIMPLE, solid, scientific explanation for it all," said Phoebe Desmond firmly.

"I'll go along with you on the last two S's," Hall Brennan told her with a shake of his head. "But not the first. No sir. This just isn't simple."

We sat in Pomfret's study while the household robots cleared up the mess and repaired the window, sitting there and talking about it, having missed the twenty-three fifty-nine midnight from Hampden. We hadn't asked Phoebe to look up the time of the next plane. Speaking for myself, I needed time to think.

As Brennan had said, "Now you know what smashed up the rotor on my heli. Although it wasn't quite like that human-headed winged bull. The one I tangled with was a winged griffin, potentially more dangerous but in my case a lot smaller than this last one."

"So that," I said to clear up a point that had been puzzling me, "is how Khamushkei the Undying has found out about us. He was following you, Hall, and now we're all in the same pitch-pot."

" 'Fraid so, chum," said Brennan. He smiled at me and I returned that smile; I, for one, did not blame him. As men who lived dangerously as part of our profession—I had automatically assumed Hall Brennan to be in a similar social position to myself—one more danger would just have to be figured into the odds.

Although, in all honesty, this quality and kind of problem posed questions far greater than any shark or squid or killer whale.

"I was thinking about your findings on this globe," said Pomfret, "when I was entertaining our guest." He glanced across at Paul Benenson who sat huddled in his misery in a chair, cradling a drink. He hadn't as yet come out of the shock. His single panicky yell had not been repeated. Lottie sat conspicuously next to Pomfret.

"A smart piece of work, yes?" inquired Phoebe.

"Maybe. I just thought it might indicate the place where Vasil Stannard found the clay tablet."

He might have dropped another winged bull into our midst. Good old George could always see the obvious.

"The devil!" exploded Brennan in mock amazement.

"Sure," said Phoebe.

"You've saved us the plane fare to Baghdad, anyway, old boy," I said with a chuckle to Pomfret—who was staring around at us with amazement.

We explained to him what we had been about to do before the lamassu burst in.

He screwed up his face and tried to look judicial and succeeded only in making me want to offer him an in-

digestion tablet. "We-ell, maybe," he said pontifically. "But I tend to adhere to my original theory—"

If we hadn't stopped him, good old George would have pontificated on for some time. Phoebe said, "If we don't go to Baghdad and then into the desert to try to find this place, what else do we do?"

Lottie, in her sultry voice, asked, "Do we have to do anything?" She looked around with a bright infectious smile. "I mean. Do we? Wouldn't it be *dangerous?*"

We each left it to the others to say something, so George Pomfret had all the time he liked to lean over, press Lottie's hand, and say with deep meaning, "I'll look after you, Lottie."

"Yes, but—" she said.

"Yes but nothing!" snapped Brennan. "I've been chasing a way to get to Khamushkei the Undying for a long time. If he's not shut up tightly in his Time Vault—the whole world will be written off again!"

Lottie giggled weakly. We'd filled her and Benenson in on essentials. Benenson just hadn't taken it in. If Lottie did it was only because she had seen the lamassu.

"And that's odd," I said to Brennan, following my own train of thought. "For I've always understood the lamassu to be the good genies. They looked after men against evil powers. The evil genies were the utukku and they appeared in terrifying forms of chimerical power—lions and eagles and serpents bodies all mixed up."

"That's so, Bert," Brennan said shortly. "All this shows is the power of Khamushkei the Undying—he can order fundamentally decent creations into acts of violence against us. It's all of a pattern."

We did not discuss further the moral implications of what we knew. I suppose each of us must have thought that this thing might not have happened to us, that we

resented its happening to us at all. Someone else, we all must have thought angrily, someone else should have been involved, not us. As to going to the authorities, even with the evidence of a headless girl's naked torso, I did not believe we would have received much of a hearing. Following through that train of thought and confirming my belief in what the others were thinking, Lottie said petulantly, "Well, why don't you tell the police? I'm sure they'll know what to do. After all, they are our servants, aren't they? That's what we pay taxes to pay their wages for, isn't it?"

"You can try if you like," said Brennan harshly. "I'm more concerned over the next attack."

"The next—!"

"You don't think that a Time Beast like Khamushkei the Undying will relinquish the struggle after a little preliminary skirmish like this, do you?" Brennan thumped a fist into his palm. "If only we could be sure of where the Time Vault *is!*"

"It would be wise," I said softly, "I think, if we moved on. Those beasts found us by following you, Hall, and we're still in the same place they last attacked. Simple tactical common sense indicates a move."

"Check," said Benenson. "Let's grab what we need and hightail it outta here!"

Outside the house the night encompassed the land save where men's lights drove back the darkness. For all the lavish expenditure of energy only a relatively small part of the world would be illuminated by night and I felt all too conscious of the dangers we faced. As we rose to gather what belongings we would take, Lottie moved to the phone. She used the standard emergency procedure for calling the police.

I, for one, did not blame her. How she would sub-

stantiate the vague story she could tell I did not know; her courage alone both surprised and amused me. She was wasted on Benenson, that was for sure.

"Come and choose a weapon, Bert," Pomfret called. I went across to his armory and was content to choose a companion weapon to his Farley Express. He'd ordered the pair, he'd said, on a quick-drawing Wild West fad that had bitten him. Brennan, with a sour comment about his own vest-pocket Creighton Forty, selected a Creighton Eighty. "That," he said flatly, "should punch through all right."

Lottie came back from the phone with a face sullen and scarlet and ill-tempered. "They wanted to know if I'd gone onto drugs as well as booze." She shook her head as though to rid it of a buzzing noise. "They're sending a man out. I got the impression he was going to take me in rather than investigate my complaint."

"Didn't you tell them about the naked girl running into the auction?"

"Yes." She drew a deep breath and Pomfret's eyes widened in admiration. "They said they thought it might be someone not too far away."

"They accused you, then?"

"Not in so many words. But"—here a puzzled expression dominated the storm of outraged emotions—"they said they had a description and it fitted. They didn't say who it fitted, but—"

"You'd better clear out of here with us," I broke in tartly. I couldn't tell her that she had been that girl; if she didn't know, then no amount of talk would convince her. It wasn't possible, anyway, that it could have been her, except that Phoebe Desmond shared my belief. "Come on, Lottie. Stick with us."

She looked at Benenson, who had managed to stand

up to refill his glass at Pomfret's drinks cabinet. "What about—"

"Forget him, Lottie!" urged Pomfret.

"I was going to say," she observed sweetly, "that I don't have the kind of cash to buy tickets for Baghdad on me."

If good old George not only bought that but bought the ticket as well, I, for one, wouldn't object. Pomfret said, with a trill in his voice where he was trying to keep the thrill out, "Oh, don't worry about cash, Lottie. I can always cover you for that, until—"

"Oh, George! How sweet of you." She swung around and picked up her coat. "Let's go."

As we went toward Pomfret's heli where the automatics had brought it up out of the garage, I thought I caught a glimpse of an immense winged figure against the moon, swinging down onto the house. Then the heli whined away into the night and the house fell away below.

"That copper is going to have an interesting experience," I said. "If that was another genie, it won't attack him."

"Crack on some more speed, George," said Brennan.

We had brought Benenson with us. Obviously, we could not leave him at the house with a policeman arriving or with a baleful genie arriving; either one would do him no good: the genie permanently, the policeman by finding out where we were off to and taking us all into custody along with the brave wad of chewing gum.

The heli flickered through the night with its robotic controls locked into the national grid. Below us the countryside spun past, nests and ribbons of light passing steadily away to the rear. Very soon now, if the policeman decided to take the matter further, he would

call his station and they would check with various computerized controls. One center they would check would be the national traffic grid and then they would see our copter, individually identified by registration licensing George Pomfret to fly her, on the master route control plan. The phone in the heli would ring and if Pomfret answered he would be politely told to land at the nearest station.

We would be traced as unerringly as a bloodhound's quarry.

"Give him fifteen minutes, George," said Brennan. He was talking about the policeman. "Then we'll put down at the quickest drop-out locus. Check?"

"If you say so, Hall. You're running this show."

"We haven't hit the desert yet," said Brennan cryptically.

Phoebe was checking the unrolling map in the center of the console.

"Little Larksrise is the likeliest place," she said in her crisp professional voice. "Just a village church, a couple of pubs, one shop and a gaggle of houses. Hasn't changed since the last century—and won't now, not with these new zoning laws."

"We'll put down there." Brennan's voice came taut and controlled. Despite his words of a moment ago, he was taking command. "We can whistle up a taxi on my name. That'll throw 'em off the scent."

The heli spun down into the old carpark behind the largest pub and we alighted before the rotors had stopped. Benenson looked about blearily. Pomfret produced a brandy flask and Benenson took a long swig.

"You'll enjoy this before it's over, Paul," he promised.

I chuckled. Brennan went to the call box on the wall of the pub and dialed. Somewhere a robot clicked into

response. When Brennan rejoined us, he said, "Should be here in ten minutes. We've got to put your heli into that inconspicuous corner of the carpark, George."

When it was found we ought to be digging in the sands of Iraq—if we were lucky, penetrating down to the sands of Akkad.

The taxi arrived, not by any means a modern model, and we all piled aboard. Lottie and Pomfret, and Brennan and Phoebe, as though by chance, were sharing two seats. I looked at Benenson. "If I'm sharing a seat with him," I told Pomfret, "hand over your brandy flask."

The robot whisked us into the air. Its rotors whirling windily, the taxi bore us away on course for Standstead. There we would hire an aircraft. After that, it depended on Khamushkei the Undying as to what happened to us.

This dark, and suddenly and unwantedly dramatic flight assumed proportions frightening to ordinary mortals. We were calmly setting off to shut the seals on a monster enchained for seven thousand years. I suppose it was because of the very incomprehensible nature of what we thought we were doing that we were acting in this insouciant way. Jokes and laughter were as much weapons as were positronic incoherers.

If what Pomfret had suggested was true, that the location toward which we were now making our way was merely the place where Vasil Stannard had found the clay tablet, then we were a pack of fools. Somehow, though, I doubted that he would go to the lengths he had to conceal that location if it had been merely where he had found the tablet. Why should he do that? Why the tablet wrapped inside the globe? Why the wire? Surely he would merely have noted the location down? The more I thought about it as the taxi whirled on

through the night toward the airfield at Standstead, the more I became convinced that we were following the truth.

What Phoebe and Lottie were up to with their men I didn't know. Benenson had appropriated the brandy and was fast relapsing into a stupor. I could see the wisdom of bringing him along, but I heartily wished we could be rid of him.

When the taxi slanted into the parking bay at Standstead the dawn was only a few hours away.

Without fuss or undue delay Hall Brennan arranged for the hire of a jet to carry us to the Middle East. He had no need to specify exact destination in this age of instant decision to travel for fun, where men and women would frolic all night aboard a jet aircraft circling the world, where businessmen had grown tired of continual conference by telephone and more and more took to the air to commute to conferences. Without surprising me, Brennan displayed credentials of a fully qualified pilot with a commercial license, so that we could dispense with the largely superfluous pilot the hirers would have wished on us.

Just before takeoff we had to decide about Benenson.

I was all for buying him a bottle of brandy and leaving him in the waiting room.

Brennan wanted to take him with us.

Lottie said she couldn't care less, that she had a new employer now, who knew much better how to take care of a secretary.

Pomfret couldn't have cared less about Benenson, but recalled the Bernini and his business associations with the fat gray man of finance, and so put in his vote to leave him to that world of business.

Phoebe clinched it by a remark that, in its indication

of what she felt for Benenson, revealed what she felt for Hall Brennan.

We left Benenson in the waiting room, giggling foolishly, trying to extract the last drop from Pomfret's brandy flask. They didn't have time to buy him the bottle I had suggested; our aircraft was ready and waiting on the apron.

As the flight bus took us out we looked back at the cheerfully lighted windows of the airport lounge. Benenson, it could easily be, was the lucky one of us.

Once we were airborne Brennan locked the automatics into a flight envelope that would take us out over the Mediterranean and ring the alarm when we would be crossing the eastern coast. He had routed us south of Cyprus and north of Beirut. With a yawn he announced, "I'm for some shut-eye. It's a long time ago you were bidding for that globe, Bert."

"True," I said. "We could all do with storing up some sleep against whatever lies ahead." Then I felt like a fool. I went aft to the jet's individually arranged sleeping berths and turned in. I was asleep the moment after my head hit the pillow.

Lottie woke me up, staring at me with a face pinched and gray, her red hair screwed up into a scarf of some sort on top of her head. She looked frightened. Her makeup gave her the appearance of a melting wax doll.

"Wake up, Bert! Hall wants you up front!"

"What is it?"

I swung my legs over the bunk and stood up. Lottie stepped back. I'd slept in my clothes; she looked as if she had, too. She shook her head and ran out of the cabin. I swallowed, rubbed a finger across my teeth, and followed.

The control cabin contained within its sweep of angled

windows all the necessary equipment to direct the aircraft. Also provided were thickly cushioned seats for the aircrew: two pilots, navigator, flight engineer and a supernumerary seat. Brennan sat in the pilot's throne, with Pomfret in the copilot's; Phoebe hunched up in the navigator's and Lottie had gone quickly to the flight engineer's. I've been a supernumerary before.

"What's this all about?" I asked a little too pugnaciously. If it weren't important I would be annoyed over being woken up into a pale and friendless dawn; if it were serious, then I would be annoyed about being the last one informed. Either way, I meant to be as irritable as I felt.

"Look over the side, Bert," Hall said. By twisting, the others could all look through the windows. I complied.

"It certainly looks as though either you or the autopilot's gone on the blink," I said sourly. Below us marched a procession of unending waves of gray stone, sharp-edged granite spines, roofs of veined rock that extended into a misty horizon. The sun placed slanting rays of light across the scene and set thick black shadows in the lee of every ridge. "I don't recognize the landscape."

"The computer says we are flying over Lebanon. There should be sand, with olive and date plantations. There should be roads and houses and cities."

I put the knuckles of my forefingers against my eyes and rubbed experimentally. It felt like sand graters at work. I blinked, opened my eyes and said, "Well, we're certainly not there. The computer's off its tiny head."

"I've checked. I know how to run a plane's computer. We're where we expected to be at this time; we've crossed the coast—"

"Well—this country's a big place. It's not all cultivated

yet; a lot is still desert. Maybe this is where the sand's been blown off the ridges—"

"Go whistle in the dark somewhere else, Bert!" Brennan spoke with heat. The others had left this wrangle to us. Clearly they had no idea of what had happened.

"All right, Hall! You tell me what you think."

"I will." Brennan's tough face showed his distaste for what he had to say. "I believe Khamushkei the Undying has got to us in some way. He's done something to us—or, rather, to the world around us!"

I felt a quiver of fear. I knew, well enough, that the scene outside did not belong in the world I knew.

A desert of sand, yes; not a sea of unending rocky waves.

Pomfret cleared his throat. He had changed his clothes and now wore a neat khaki suit and a vivid emerald scarf around his neck. "The question is: what's to be done?"

"We can't land. That's for sure. We're not equipped with V.T.O.L. apparatus on this jet, so—"

"So we either go on hoping for a field until our fuel runs out, when we will crash"—I looked around at the others—"or we turn back and see what the sea is like."

"We turn back . . ." Brennan repeated. His face suddenly tightened as though he now understood something he should have realized long ago. "Of course! That's the answer. If we turn back we are no longer heading for Khamushkei the Undying."

"Well?"

"That's the answer." He stormed at us. "Can't you see? Why is Khamushkei the Undying called the Time Beast? I didn't know—not until now! But now I understand! Somehow Khamushkei the Undying has flung us back in time. That land below us must have existed before

the rock broke down to form the sands of the desert; before the seas, before—"

"Now hold on, Hall."

"If we advance toward him now he will hurl us about in time. If we turn back—"

He seized the controls, uncoupling the auto-pilot, swung the plane around in a long smooth bank. When he had put the aircraft on a reciprocal course, he sat back in the pilot's seat with a little gasp.

Expectantly, we all stared out the windows.

I have no idea what I expected to see. A miraculous change of the landscape, perhaps, in writhing undulations of rock and sand. Below, the fleeting shadow of the aircraft, clearly visible to us now that we flew westward in the dawning, a black cross rising and falling in swift irregular surges over the unceasing hogbacks, remained imprinted on the same tortured landscape.

Brennan let rip a curse.

"I thought—"

"Give it time, Hall." I had my own ideas. "This isn't pretty. Don't let's make it worse."

He understood what I meant and glanced covertly across at Phoebe Desmond.

She was looking through the windows, her face screwed up and a growing look of horror on her face.

Quickly I followed the direction of her gaze, almost aware with a sickening precognitive fear of what I would see swooping down out of the sky upon us.

This time the beast was an utukku; clearly no benign influences had ever throbbed in that beastly breast. What combination of animal horrors had gone to make up the winged genie I couldn't clearly make out for, without a moment's hesitation, Brennan had flung the jet aircraft forward and up at full throttle.

"The thing's actually gaining on us!" shouted Pomfret. "I've given this crate full boost!"

"It's darting in—"

The aircraft shook with a sullen blow, moving sluggishly, and I felt the unpleasant sensation of moving nothingness beneath my feet. "A blasted chimera can't hurt a jet!" I said harshly; but I knew I was merely fanning my mouth.

Again the plane shuddered. The jets began to cough. What they had ingested I didn't know, but I could no longer see the utukku.

"It's gone into the intake!" yelled Brennan, twisted around in his seat up front, his face contorted.

The plane nosed down.

Lottie fell forward and Pomfret struggled to get out of his seat to reach her.

"Can't you hold her up, Hall?" I yelled.

He wrestled with the controls.

"Without power she has the gliding angle of a brick. I'm trying."

In a frightened group we watched as Brennan fought stubbornly to hold the plane up.

The jagged blades of rock masquerading as a landscape leaped up below.

Lottie sobbed and buried her face in Pomfret's shoulder. He looked at me across her red-golden hair and tried to smile. I looked away. Phoebe huddled in her seat, not taking her eyes off Brennan.

"Strap yourselves in," he said curtly, not turning around.

Pomfret managed to strap Lottie in somehow. I helped Phoebe. Our ears popped as we lost altitude. I didn't like this one little bit. But Hall Brennan was up there in the hot seat and I remembered how I'd figuratively

trusted him with the harpoon and the last oxy bottle; now he had the controls of all our lives in his hands.

""I'll try to put her down athwart the ridges. If we're lucky we'll slide far enough to break our speed before we slip into a valley." His shoulders heaved as he fought the controls. "Then the wings and tail will rip off and we'll slue. Be ready to smash your way out at once. We'll probably burn. I've set all the automatics, so the foam will come on, but . . ."

I've been through some excruciating experiences in my time. I never want to go through another airplane crash.

Looking through the forward windshield I could see the evil razor-backed ridges racing for us like a petrified sea storm. Lower and lower we swept. The wind screaming past the fuselage tortured our nerves. I shut my mouth and tried to hold my jaws locked yet relaxed. I didn't want to scream. . . .

Lower. The nose came up with painful deliberation. Brennan hauled back on the stick. It looked as though we were going straight into the spine of a ridge. Then the starboard wing dipped. Brennan cursed and crossed the stick, pedaling the rudder controls. Laboriously the plane evened up but the nose dropped.

Before Brennan could pull the nose further up it struck.

The noise battered past my eardrums and rang insanely in my head.

Giant sparks flew off the metal hull; foam gushed from the fire outlets. I was thrown forward against the straps. I saw daylight spring into being past jagged sharks' teeth of metal as the nose broke away from the fuselage. The wings fell off. One engine catapulted

across the next ridge like a murderer's head decapitated by one stroke.

Sparks blazed up inside my head, behind my eyes, dazzling me. No pain struck, yet I knew I had been cruelly smashed against the bulkhead as my seat supports gave way.

The last thing I saw before the blackness fell down was Brennan's head bent over his controls, his arms and legs and body still trying to direct the shattered wreck that had once been an airplane.

VIII

ANY IDEAS I may have harbored that the altered ground below—that soul-shriveling expanse of naked ridged rock in place of the open sands of the desert—had been a form of mass hallucination imposed on us by a malign outside agency had vanished completely and brutally in the moment of impact.

A groan reached me and I tried to move. The straps restrained me. The weight of the chair had not fallen on me directly, fortunately, and I was able to wriggle a hand free and snap the clasps free. I could feel pains all over; standing up and moving arms and legs and neck convinced me I had no bones broken, though.

Then I set about helping the others out.

Standing, finally, outside the smashed fuselage on those hard and brittle slopes of rock, we presented a pretty miserable spectacle.

Lottie sniffled into her handkerchief tissues. Phoebe

kept close to Brennan. Our clothes had been ripped and we had contusions and scratches enough to exhaust the first aid box. Patched up, we took stock of our situation.

"If we tried to walk on that we'd ruin our shoes in half an hour and have bloody flayed feet in another quarter," Brennan said gloomily.

"But we can't just stay here," pointed out Pomfret.

"I know. So what do we do?"

"It's not," I said unhelpfully, "as though we'd crashed in normal circumstances. The radio is smashed anyway, but I'd gamble if Hall's theory is right all we'd hear would be static. There just isn't anyone else around to help."

"Well, I'm not going to be beaten by that crumb Khamushkei the Undying without a fight!" snapped Hall Brennan. Mentally, I applauded his show. For the sake of the others, particularly the girls, he was whistling in the dark with a vengeance.

Unless we had the intervention of another party there would be no way out of this for us. So much was clear. Now all we had to do was hope that the third party—the intermediary between us and the Time Beast—would hurry to make his appearance; already I was thirsty and eyeing Brennan's water bottle with a calculating eye. We couldn't hold out for very long on these naked slopes of rock, with a sun scorching down and growing every moment more balefully brilliant.

When the distant drone of an aircraft engine reached down to us with fingers of mechanical hope the others reacted as though the impossible had occurred. They jumped up excitedly. Pomfret whipped off his tattered khaki shirt and began to wave it over his head like a maniac. Even Brennan shaded his eyes against the sun

and tried to see the dot of the aircraft long before human eyes could pick it up against that steely glare.

"The sound will carry along way in this absolute silence," I said, still sitting on the cushions we had dragged out and arranged in the shade of the fuselage. "Whoever it is will get here soon enough now."

"Well!" said Pomfret, astonished, I saw with a chuckle that held no malice for the brick-red-faced man. "You're a cold-blooded fish, all right, Bert!"

"Not so. It is obvious that whoever that is is coming for us. It just has to be like that. The Time Beast couldn't have worked it any other way."

Brennan lowered his head. His face showed stark orange and brown and silver highlights in the heat. "You're pretty sure, Bert."

"Look." I pointed and then stood up, leisurely. "There he is."

An airplane slanted low across the ridges, like a bumbling moth over a cabbage patch. Now we could distinctly hear the soughing beat of turbo-prop engines. The other four all waved and halooed like mad. I watched. Then I took out the Farley Express and held it loosely in my hand, pointing at that harsh rock beneath our feet.

The machine up there was not a helicopter nor an antigrav flier, the usual crafts for short-haul routes within city boundaries, so it must be some version of vertical takeoff and landing aircraft very familiar a century or so ago. I wondered why. It came to a swaying halt above us as the wings slowly rotated around their main beams until the engines and propellers pointed skyward. Then, with a screaming whine from the turbo-props, the aircraft began to let down.

"He'll never make a landing on these knife-edges of rock!" yelled Pomfret.

"Warn him, George!" shouted Phoebe, both hands clasped together under her chin, her head tilted back.

Four long stilt-like legs thrust out from the fuselage of the V.T.O.L. turbo-prop. Two reached down perhaps two feet, the other two reached down a good ten feet.

With a soughing jolt the aircraft came to rest. The props stopped spinning as the engines died. The silence creaked back.

The canopy opened. A dark figure appeared, turning its back on us, climbing down. I heard a gasp from Pomfret.

"Charlie! For Pete's sake! *Charlie!*"

"I trust I find you in good health, boss," said Pomfret's robot butler, his battered, comically ugly face bent quizzically above us.

"You old son of a gun! But how the hell could *you* be here?"

"There are a growing number of things I do not understand," Charlie said in his cheerfully metallic voice. "I have been programmed on a liberal basis, thanks to your generosity and broad-mindedness, boss. I deduce we have in some unmechanical way been hurled back into the past."

The way Charlie said unmechanical gave it the connotation of the deepest depths of depraved evil.

"Yes, we'd figured that out. But—why you as well?"

"I followed you, boss, when you left so hurriedly without a program for the house, without a forwarding address, without any means of contacting you—your radio channels were closed out on your heli—and when the police began asking awkward questions." His metal face glinted in the sunshine and I could have sworn it

held the father and mother of ironic smiles. "Then another of those peculiar winged-bull creatures appeared. I then realized you must be in some danger and so I contacted my robot friends who quickly told me you had taken a taxi to Standstead. From there you left a plain trail—"

"Oh, no!" Brennan shook his head. "I won't have that. No one could have followed us—especially in a propeller plane. You—"

Charlie moved his head and again the lights made me think his face smiled. If quartz lenses and speaker grilles can hold an expression, then he did. And who, in this amazing world, is to say that a robot's face cannot express his reactions to external stimuli?

"You'll pardon me, sir. I took the liberty of booking on the rocket flight to Beirut. From there I hired this antiquated desert buggy—the rocket must have passed your jet at considerable altitude and speed during the night." His mechanical insides whirred. "Not so?"

I laughed out loud.

Phoebe jumped as though I'd stung her.

"What's so funny?" demanded Lottie truculently. "I'm roasting alive. Let's get aboard and have a drink."

"As usual," said Pomfret, helping Lottie up the plane's ladder, "Lottie puts the most important essential in a nutshell."

"That I'll grant you," I said cheerfully.

"And, anyway," said Pomfret, when we had collected in the smaller airplane's cramped cabin, "you, I suppose, Charlie, must have used my name to hire this?"

"Why, yes, boss. I could not have obtained the hire otherwise."

"If we go back, and assuming we can get back into our own time again, the cops will be waiting for us.

They'll probably book us all for the murder of that girl at Gannets." Pomfret took a long swig from the glass Charlie had provided by some robotic sleight of hand and sighed.

"We go forward." Brennan spoke matter-of-factly.

"Forward?"

"We go on our mission. We have plenty of fuel, we have weapons, food and water. Once Khamushkei the Undying sees—in whatever way it is he sees what we are doing—that we haven't given up, that we're still after him, he'll have to do something else."

"Something else nasty," Phoebe said, with a grimace.

"Sure. But one thing's certain: we won't be left to rot here."

With that, Charlie at the controls, we rose into the air, turned sharply eastward and began to pick up speed.

Flying lower than when we had driven faster and higher across these frozen waves in the jet, I was able to study them more clearly, and reach one or two conclusions. Granites and not limestones meant that we must be a long way back in time—assuming Hall Brennan's theory to be true. Nothing moved out there. No loose sand or dust whipped back from those petrified crests. A lifeless world fled past beneath our wings, a world which waited for the green hand of life to fall across it, a wait which would last for millions of years.

The plane tilted. Charlie reacted with robotic speed and precision. Again the plane swung and this time it tumbled across the sky in a sickening sliding motion before the robot had it under control again.

The sun went out.

The world went black.

Lottie screamed. Brennan cursed.

Then the sound of wind screaming past the fuselage

told us the plane was diving. Charlie hauled back. Below us mist coiled as sunlight burst out again, bright yellow sunlight that bounced back from that silver mist below and stung our eyes.

Among the oaths and screams and cries, Charlie remained aloof and calm. The aircraft pulled out of that pitching dive and like a skimming skate rose into the sunshine.

Below us the mist extended as far as we could see.

"We're on course for Khamushkei the Undying," Brennan exulted. "And he doesn't like it! He's panicking!"

After that terrifying alteration of the world around us, we *had* to believe, where I think that previously we had not fully comprehended our situation, and with that understanding came fear. I know I wished, then, that we could turn back. But that momentary weakness, or logical reaction, call it what you will, passed in a sense of responsibility for the others. Whatever they felt, they were going on. If that was what they wanted I could not dissuade them. Perhaps pride or fear made me shrink from making the attempt. Whatever it was, I determined not to let myself be deflected again.

Hall Brennan, too, must have shared much of the content of my thoughts, for he glanced across at me with a rueful smile.

"Phoebe," he said to me. "She's agreed to go along. We kinda—we kinda fit together, right, like, you know, Bert."

I nodded. "I know."

"I've no living relations; as far as I know, that is," he went on as the aircraft drove hard over the mist eastwards. "And Phoebe has decided to join up with me. But George . . . ?"

Pomfret stopped talking to Lottie to say briefly, "The

same applies to Lottie and me. I decide my own fate. Lottie decides hers, and she's decided to join up with me, like Phoebe and Hall."

"I've an old mother somewhere," Lottie said, holding Pomfret's hand. "But I was the last of seven children. They won't miss me at home. I took my earnings back to the slums for three good years. Then I quit. After that I bought my own clothes and fought my own battles and, well, a secretary to a financial tycoon like Paul Benenson *is* something, after all."

"Hush, Lottie," said Pomfret. "You did well. But now you're with me."

"And if that is the case," Brennan said, with a fresh accession of cheerfulness that I, for one, found stimulating, "we're off to see the Wizard." He laughed. "We're off to shut Khamushkei the Undying back into his Vault."

This was as good a time as any, I decided, to tax Hall Brennan about himself. I asked.

"All you need to know about me, Bert," he said with that taut facial expression and the crow's-feet around his eyes indicating plainly that he was not going to tell me anything vital, "is that I've been hunting the Time Beast for a long time now, that he killed a couple of my pals, that all my personal inherited fortune has been spent on that one object, and that I'm panting to get even with him."

"So," I said to them with what I hoped was not undue levity in my voice, "we're all agreed and more or less happy about what we're doing."

"Yes."

The plane bore on through the midday sunlight. Below us its shadow danced and disappeared, reformed and rebounded from the mist. Nothing could be discerned through that bulky cloud layer.

The map I hauled out of my jacket pocket crackled loudly in the muffled cabin. Everyone craned across to look.

"We'd have been here," I said, putting my finger on a spot nearly halfway from the coast to Baghdad, "if we were still in our own time."

"We're still in that position, I'd guess," said Brennan confidently. "This land area suffered some peculiar ups and downs, seas, sediments, deserts—but my guess is we stay in the same geographic longitude and latitude co-ordinates."

"That seems reasonable," confirmed Pomfret.

Charlie clicked and whirred. We took that for assent.

The girls nodded together. So far, I felt with reasonable confidence and relief, they had behaved remarkably well. What they would do when we landed and took on Khamushkei the Undying at close quarters remained to be seen.

Charlie broke in. "A break in the clouds ahead."

None of us had had the temerity to suggest we dive down through the clouds.

They probably extended right down to ground level.

When Charlie guided the plane down through the bulging cloud-cliffed break we saw that guess had been correct: like piles of candy floss, the clouds rose from the ground. We could see the billowing inner movements and the trailing wisps, creamy and pink from this angle. Then we looked at the ground.

"I've given up saying I don't believe it," said Brennan, with a stifled bark of laughter. "I suppose this time we're in now must have been before the desert swept in and covered everything."

Below us now lay a patchwork quilt of fields and meadows, trees and trickling watercourses. I looked

quickly for a sight of a city or of any human habitation, for the very regularity of the fields indicated human husbandry and agriculture. The different shades of green down there came very restfully to my eyes after the brutal granitic grays and the featureless silver of the clouds.

"You must be right, Hall." Pomfret shifted around to look downward better. "I don't see any people . . ." He finished speaking doubtfully. We all knew what he meant.

Ahead of us the other side of the cloud break moved ponderously forward, this bank of clouds, we could see, not reaching all the way down to the ground. We could just make out the rain pouring down from the cloud base. The sunshine cut a sharp swathe of brilliance between the two cloud masses. A few birds pirouetted in the gulf.

Then, surprising us all, a small airplane drifted from the rain and slanted down to a landing on a narrow field. We stared at the plane. Bright orange in color, with dragonfly wings that blurred with speed, it held for a moment a magical jeweled quality.

"I've never seen a ship like that before," Brennan spoke with the complete authority of the experienced aviator.

The insect-like wings blurred and then slowed and stopped. The plane touched down. Three men and a woman alighted and stood looking up at us. We could just make out the white dots of their faces, upturned to the sun.

"They're as puzzled as we are."

"I don't like the idea of this," said Phoebe, the conviction in her voice making us all look quickly at her before we returned our stares to the ground. "This is

supposed to be back in the past a long way. Yet there is an airplane, of a type we all know perfectly well has never been developed by any aircraft company we can think of."

"Ornithopters have been built," Brennan said harshly.

"But that's not an ornithopter. Not in the strict sense of the word."

Pomfret said slowly, "That's all very true. But what are we to do? That other bank of cloud is coming up fast. We may not hit another break in the overcast. . . ."

The type of decision with which we had to deal and the problems associated with those decisions were not the big tiger-hunt terrors—at least, not for the moment—but the more deadly apparently trivial decisions. Should we land? If we didn't we could fly on into the deck.

"I vote for going down," I said as smoothly as I could.

The plane began a gentle descent. Charlie, too, shared our reading of the situation.

"We'd better be ready for anything from these people; but start out by hoping they'll be friendly." Brennan clearly didn't like this landing. But he, like us all, had to face up to reality. To have flown on into that cloud overcast would have been too reckless to be funny.

Charlie made a perfect normal run-in landing and the engines died. We could see the four people from the brilliant orange insect-plane running across the fields toward us. They wore white short garments and tall feathered headdresses. The men carried something at their waists but the distance was too great to make out weapons or not.

When they came nearer we saw they carried sheath knives. But, then, that could be normal wear. Their faces held a strange, remote, almost mystical look. The girl was very beautiful, in a dark, poised, idolesque way,

with braided blue-black hair and red lips. Her body swayed as she ran, her long naked legs tanned and strong.

Brennan, with a sidelong look at Phoebe said, "She reminds me of what I've always thought an odalisque would look like."

Phoebe, with a snort, interrupted. "If you want to stay in my good books, Hall Brennan, you won't bring in a harem!"

"I'd thought she looked more like an idol," I ventured, amused at the Brennan-Desmond tiff. The four people outside halted about ten yards from our plane and stood, barely panting, hands on hips, regarding us. Their eyes seemed to brood across the sunlight. Their straight black brows, joined over the noses, accused us of crimes of which we knew nothing.

"Better say hello," I said, and opened the door and jumped down.

The Farley Express remained in my pocket. My clothes were tattered and ripped so that the gun was likely to fall out any minute. I held the butt comfortably.

"Hello," I said. "What language do you speak?"

They said something; the oldest of the men, muscular and laconic, spoke in words that meant nothing. I glanced up.

"Mean anything to any of you?"

"Not a thing."

"Nothing."

"Nope."

"Better try all the lingos we know between us."

"I don't think," I said, turning back to the three young men and the girl and staring at them hard, "that will help any."

Then Phoebe came out to join me carrying a silver

something in her hand. For a moment it had me fooled; then I recognized the chocolate bar. With a smile that would have sent Hall Brennan pawing the ground had he not still been climbing down from the plane, Phoebe advanced on the statuesque girl, proffering the candy. She spoke in a soothing way, simple soft vowel sounds as though talking to a child or a nervous horse.

The odalisque took a half-pace back. Then, with an answering smile, she took the chocolate from Phoebe.

I watched, fascinated by this cultural exchange.

Motioning with her fingers, Phoebe persuaded the girl to bite a piece of chocolate. A strange expression swept across the girl's full-featured face, then her sudden grimace of pleasure showed us she had got the flavor of the chocolate. She broke pieces off and handed them to her companions.

In a quarter of an hour, with more candy and lots of gesticulations and slow mouthed-out talk, we knew her name was Ishphru, the three young men were respectively, Ezidru, Haburu and Nabuko, and that they had flown from their city of Borsuppak on a picnic. We had to accept that; they obviously were out enjoying themselves, and yet we felt picnic did not quite explain their liveliness once they had overcome their first fears of us, once they realized we meant them no harm.

The brooding looks remained, however; that set square down-drawn look whose very menace could not be dissipated by lively talk, gesticulating hands and the sharing of candy. Something was on these people's minds and I wanted to know what it was. The language problem would prove insoluble without quick access to a computer; and computers of the type we needed wouldn't be invented for—for how long? Just how many thou-

sands of years were we back in the past? With an *airplane?*

"I suppose we couldn't be in the future, could we?" demanded Phoebe.

"There's no reason why not, I guess."

"Come on, Hall," said Pomfret in his brusque way. "You're the expert. There's a plane and all; and these people—just where are we?"

Before Brennan could reply a dull murmur that we had heard for some time now and scarcely been conscious of in our vexing interchanges with the strangers grew, bellowed into an earth-shaking roar, funneled a black torrent of air and debris and noise in the mother and father of all twisters.

Out from the lowering clouds it spun. Like a tall and swaying flower of evil it scorched across the face of the land toward us.

In its path trees, shrubs, debris, leaves, everything whirled up, spinning. Clearly caught up and swirling in that blasphemous black blossom we could see the smashed masonry of a fractured city, gleaming white, spitting out like stone shrapnel.

Straight for us sped the twister.

We had no cover.

The roaring and the blackness leaped up to tower over us like a cobra about to strike.

IX

THE GIRL TUGGED my arm. Her large dark eyes, heavy and slumberous with those long curled lashes, were wide open in frenzy; her crimson mouth screamed strange

words, her whole straining attitude compelled me to run with her.

The three young men were trying to make my four companions follow them.

Then Charlie appeared from the plane's cockpit, standing at the top of the steps like some misshapen mechanical monster from a nightmare.

The four strangers cowered back, the three young men showing by their faces the fear they felt, and the girl Ishphru, by her sudden painful grip on my arm, the fear and the desire to help us dominating her. I felt in the whirling uproar of the approaching twister, in the dark dankness of its shadow, a sudden great affection for these unknown people of an unknown time.

Charlie was enough to frighten the toughest slum cop; yet these four young people with their mystic reserves of strength forced themselves to accept him and continue to try to help us. Clearly, they wanted us to run with them.

"Where to?" screamed Phoebe, white-faced. "There's no running away from that thing!"

"It'll be right over us in a minute!" shouted Brennan. He made the decision I should have made before. "Grab what you can and run with these people! They live here. They should know the score."

Charlie had already doped that out and now he flung down our food satchels and the duffle bags we had taken from the wrecked jet. With the girl pulling my arm and her companions helping the others, and with Charlie stomping along in the rear, we ran helter-skelter for the corner of the field.

The darkness swooped above us with a palpable blackness, a sickening and choking sensation, as though the air itself were changed and charged with destruction.

Heads bent low, we ran on, not knowing where we ran or why we ran, but blindly following the urgent promptings of the strangers.

In the corner of the field stood a brown stone marker covered with writing which, even in the short glimpse I had of it, I could see was not the hieroglyphic or hieratic one might have expected in the context. One of the young men pressed a hidden spring and the stone swivelled aside like a solid revolving door. We saw a dark opening revealed beneath.

"A storm cellar!" gasped Brennan. "Of course. If these people are infested by twisters they will have taken precautions."

Then we were all bundling down the stone stairs, seeing lights springing up below us into a white pearl glow —electric lights. The last man down returned the stone to its original position and as he did so, looking over his shoulder, I saw the last segment of blue sky vanish into an inferno of rushing blackness. The stone shuddered.

The man said something in his slow voice and I guessed at the content as, automatically, I said, "It must be absolute hell out there now."

At the bottom of the steps lay a fair-sized chamber hewn from the earth, with a flagged floor and rough wooden walls with a bench. We all sat down. The electric lights, four of them, attracted my attention. They were crude, it is true, with their glass apparently not mass-produced so that each lamp was a subtly different size and shape from its neighbor; they illuminated the storm shelter adequately, though.

Some sense of oppression, of a cowering away down here, filled the chamber with a tendril of the darkness and chaos of the outside world. No one seemed anxious

to meet anyone else's eyes. When I coughed Phoebe and Ishphru started.

The shaking of the stone and the half-felt, half-feared vibrations in the earth around us gradually subsided. Charlie, whose metallic bulk scraped the ceiling, sat a little apart from us and now and then one of the strangers would give him a quick look that refused to stay for too long on his metallic alienness. When at last silence returned it was Charlie who rose first.

I viewed the ascent into the world above with little enthusiasm. From the moment we had consciously formulated our plan to re-imprison Khamushkei the Undying he had struck at us as he pleased and when he pleased. And now we must spend valuable time trying to make communication with these people, who, at least, seemed genuinely friendly, and try to obtain from them some form of transport to carry on our crusade.

Then, like a drop of sugar on the tongue, Ishphru in her conversation with her comrades used a word I recognized and that brought my comrades to their feet in excited question.

Ishphru had said: "Khamushkei."

She had followed the name with a word I guessed meant Undying. There could be no mistake: a nodal point of contact had been made.

When we had restored order among ourselves, Hall Brennan received the elected post of spokesman.

Carefully, he said to Ishphru, "Khamushkei?"

She pointed upward, her dark beautiful face suddenly grim.

"Khamushkei! Khamushkei!"

Brennan nodded. He spoke the hated name again and then contorted his face to indicate that he, too, like all of us, had no use for the Time Beast. Ishphru responded

at once. She made an unmistakable motion of striking someone with a dagger held the wrong way, her face twisted into a savage mask. She stamped her foot. "Khamushkeil" she said, and followed that with a string of what I could only believe, in that context, must be expletives.

Brennan faced us, his face showing his excitement.

"I believe," he said in a quick breathy way, "I believe we're back in the time when there was this earlier world civilization—the one destroyed by Khamushkeil"

"That would explain it—" Pomfret said, his red face darker and ruddier than ever.

"But the Time Beast did destroy it!" I pointed out. "And maybe that's what the twister was all about. If that wasn't a personification of Khamushkei the Undying himself, then it was sent by him and was designed not only to kill us but to smash this world to smithereens!"

Not understanding our conversation, although reacting with a start each time the name of the Time Beast was mentioned, and no doubt suffering from claustrophobic feelings I ascribed to them as people loving light and air, Ishphru and her three companions began to move about the storm cellar and to begin the ascent up the rocky steps. We stopped talking to look at them and as though awaiting that signal Ezidru leaped up the steps and pressed the hidden spring.

Slowly the great stone began to revolve.

"They were waiting to go out until we'd finished talking," Phoebe whispered. She looked at the strangers. "How polite can you get?"

Now a ray of sunlight slashed a golden stroke down the steps. The electrics dimmed.

Ishphru cried out joyfully, lifting her arms. She ran up the steps. Caught by a sudden magnetic attraction

for her, I followed, seeing her slim legs flashing against the light. We burst out into a drenched and silent world.

She exclaimed in delight and I guessed she was overjoyed at our deliverance. I took her hand and pressed it. She looked at me with those enormous eyes, half minded, I guessed, to pull away and then, as I smiled at her, letting her hand stay between mine.

When we had all collected at the top of the steps with our baggage, Ezidru, who appeared to be the senior man, pointed toward the east. "Borsuppak!" he said.

We began walking through the wet grass. Ahead the clouds were already lifting and the rain had stopped.

There was no sign of our airplane or the orange jeweled insect plane of the strangers; the twister had taken them, shredded them and deposited them somewhere—somewhere else, certainly nowhere around here.

Although the walk was pleasant—I was careful to station myself beside Ishphru—Charlie very quickly carried all of our baggage. His steel and titanium limbs did not feel the fatigue that assailed and defeated human life.

Pomfret began to wheeze and then to complain.

"How much longer is this going on? I mean—where are we going?"

"To this city of theirs, Borsuppak," Brennan said curtly.

At the sound of the name the four strangers nodded and urged us on. They acted in the most friendly way.

"Well, I don't like it," grumbled good old George.

I didn't want once again to have to revise my opinion of the man, but Lottie said tartly, "Oh, shut up, do, George! Can't you see that if we had transportation we'd use it! These people, whoever they are, are walking like us, aren't they?"

Presently a flickering emerald glow chittered out to-

ward us, appearing like a giant dragonfly from a line of trees barring our view of the horizon. The countryside appeared flat, with rolling hills; nowhere, as yet, could we see any mountains.

This new insect-plane landed with a brilliant burst of color and a dying whine from its wings. Ishphru cast me a wonderful smile and we all increased our pace.

Another moment and we were standing in the shadow of the stranger aircraft and staring up at the middle-aged man who regarded us with that familiar down-drawn lowering look the people of this land all seemed to possess.

The intricate maneuvering of the wings of this craft and the complex wing-root junctions occupied me most of the flight. We went up smoothly with a faint vibration and the gentlest of swaying motions that, after flying in a conventional airplane, came as peculiar and restful. Every now and then I flicked a quick look around the horizon and across the ground floating past below. If I expected to be attacked by an utukku I wasn't going to tell my comrades—at least, not until the last moment. I thought of Brennan's heli.

Then Borsuppak drifted into view beyond a low ridge of tree-covered hills.

"By all that's holy!" said Brennan. "I didn't expect anything like that!"

Truth to tell, I'd been expecting an ocher colored walled city of flat-topped windowless buildings with ziggurats here and there and guard towers and massive gates. That would have fitted the pattern of cities that would be built here in the future.

The city toward which we now slanted had no tough defensive walls around it. It possessed a multitude of open spaces, of parks and lawns and gay flower beds.

Houses had been sculpted into the slope of hills, so that a whole windowed wall leaned from a slope of greenery. Lightness, delicacy and grace suffused the city with color and gaiety.

We all stared, entranced.

"It's beautiful!" said Phoebe, the sunshine on her face lighting her in an aureole of reciprocal beauty. She had never looked more lovely than at that moment. I recalled our first meeting, so short a time ago, and my judgment of her as a young, not overly beautiful, healthy, attractive girl who fitted her background just right—now she was adapting to another background and, in part, she could thank Hall Brennan for the improvement.

Ishphru saw my eyes on Phoebe and she smiled. I nodded and smiled back and then, gently and with a careful discrimination, slid my eyes at Brennan. Ishphru laughed and nodded delightedly.

The insect plane slanted down toward the city.

We landed in a plaza of warm red brick and cool yellow marble where purple and gold flowers nodded heavily from trellises, where long-tailed firebirds of orange and emerald and blue screamed and rustled their feathers, and from which the odors of flowers reached out a rich fragrance.

Led by the aviator we walked slowly through the city, continually delighted by what we saw, every fresh vista and view a charm. We were conducted into a newly-painted house with a green slanting roof over which the plumes of trees swayed and dappled the sunshine into a restful shade.

Here we settled in for the day, it seemed to me, not anxious to get on, for serving girls, who laughed and giggled and slid sloe eyes at us, provided us with soft towels and bowls of clear water. We were given a fine

feast, sitting at a table in a flower-decked arbor and eating and drinking food and wines that Pomfret, for one, pronounced as good as any he had ever tasted.

Ishphru and her friends joined us with the aviator who had found us and in the course of the next hour or so we discovered that the four were brothers and sister, that the flier was their father, and that they apparently lived an idyllic life, for the idea of work aroused in them an infectious laughter we found difficult to resist.

Ishphru, in a Junoesque pose, reached out to pluck a flower from the arbor. Smiling with her dark eyes she cradled the flower in her palms where its warm yellow reflected like a magic lamp.

She motioned to the flower, and then to herself, then to her brothers and father. Then she swung one rounded arm to encompass the city. She spoke a few words, low and musically.

Phoebe said, "I think she means these people are called the Flower People. That's their name."

We confirmed that and went on trying to find out just where the Time Beast had flung us in the long panorama of Time.

With the coming of night immense cool lamps of pearly radiance lighted up over our heads and with a slithery rustle plaited screens dropped over the arbor openings so that we sat around the table as though suspended in a globe of light. Stretching out in the comfortable cane chairs with plump cushions to soften the angular parts, we drank excellent wine and tried to fathom out not only when in time we were but what we could do.

Later on the Flower People stretched out in cane loungers and, with their eyes focused on the warmth of flowers above their heads, seemed to go off into deep

trance. They were not asleep. A word, a movement, would waken them so that they would turn lazily toward us, smile, and bestow a benediction in their glances, and then return to that withdrawal from the life around them.

"It's as though they're drugged," whispered Phoebe.

Of us all she had best picked up the nuances from these people. She stared on them now with a great affection and longing in her face.

Suddenly the sound of chanting, deep and sonorous, filled the arbor: many voices uplifted in joyous singing came to us through the night.

Haburu rose from his lounger and crossed to the plaited screens, lifting them so that we could all look out into the placid night. Out there myriads of colored torches wound in splendid procession around the bases of the hills, through the gardens and groves, winding like living, pulsing rivers of light. The gay songs poured through the scented night.

Called from their self-induced trances, the Flower People rose and led us out and down flower-strewn pathways to join the laughing, singing processions of people walking unhurriedly through the night. We found flowers garlanding our necks. Torches lighted the scene, flashing from laughing eyes and mouths, reflecting from simple jewelry. Exotic scents wafted sweetness everywhere. Hand in hand we strolled among the bejeweled brilliances of a fairy city.

I don't know how long the throngs of people surged and eddied and laughed and sang, drifting through the soft night from pools of radiance to broad swathes of light, down tiers of stairs and along terraces, past vast urns of flowers and beneath the overflowing abundance of trees. With a charming smile all of a piece with the

courteous way of life of these Flower People, our host indicated that perhaps we were tired and would wish to rest. Reluctantly, for the night's swaying promise held our interest and admiration, we agreed. Walking back to the house through the perfumes and the radiance and the songs, we felt that this way of life was indeed, the only true way.

Before we retired, each to a separate room and a low comfortable bed with silken sheets, we were each given a flower, a glowing golden eye of beauty. Holding the flowers, we said our good nights. I believe, for myself, that I had no hint of embarrassment, no slightest feeling of ridiculousness. I think, too, that my comrades shared my absorbtion with these Flower People and their naïve humility and sense of purpose in life.

Just before I slept I walked out for a last look at the scene.

The night glowed with color and life and songs just as we had left it.

Turning to go back to my room I saw Ishphru lying in her cane lounger, her white robe fallen back, her arms and neck bared, reclining like a marble statue from the genius of a Praxiteles. I thought of the Bernini Aphrodite. But Ishphru was no Aphrodite; rather was she Hera, fuller, rounder, slumberous, a Juno in the golden summer of her beauty.

I could see she was not sleeping. Rather she was once more in that strange trance the Flower People could induce, so like and yet so unlike the chemical-mechanical trance of drugs. I felt she was enjoying her journey and I walked softly past her, not wishing to interrupt.

The next morning we breakfasted from fruit and watered wine and crisp rolls heaped with butter as rich

and yellow as sunshine. Any feeling I had had the night before of urgency seemed to have slipped away during the night. Pomfret and Lottie looked at each other over their fruit juice, and giggled, and looked away.

"Until we smash through the language barrier we won't get anywhere," Brennan said; but he popped a grape into his mouth when he had finished speaking and he didn't seem bothered about an answer.

Phoebe languidly said, "Y'know, Hall, I think it would be lovely to settle down here. This is the sort of life human beings were meant to live."

"Amen," said Pomfret. He was cuddling Lottie now, unashamedly kissing her, both of them laughing and talking soft silliness to each other, unabashed.

I stood up and crossed the breakfast room to look out of the open side—all one wall was window—over the city. Even now, faint but still true, the sound of singing rose into the morning air.

"It all seems very wonderful," I said. "Almost too good to be true, would you say?"

Phoebe rushed to the defense of the Flower People.

What she said confirmed my belief that she would, really and truly and without hesitation, stay here in preference to a return to the world we had known, a world that lay in the remote future. Her passionate face lifted to mine and the vigor of absolute conviction in her voice showed me how much she had developed from the girl I had met in the picture gallery of Gannets.

Hall Brennan shared some of the responsibility for that, of course, and so did our adventures; but the singing city of the Flower People, Borsuppak, had finally molded her. I knew that I must smash that mold.

That morning we toured the city by daylight. Our

host and his three sons attended to the wants of my four compatriots, but Ishphru attached herself to me.

Here, also, was a mold forming that I must smash.

By day the city held as many and varied enchantments as by night. We saw the cascades and the streams and the arcades by brilliant sunshine. Unable to converse with our hosts, we began to develop a sign language which, along with smiles and frowns, rapidly built up into a makeshift communications system. Deliberately I forced myself to think with mechanical orientation and not to allow the medley of flowers and scents and beautiful women to suborn me from the quest—and more than the quest; from our time itself.

Everywhere we were met with smiles and beaming faces as the Flower People of the city welcomed us. Everywhere we met a calm resignation; a gentle acceptance of fate more markedly in evidence when we skirted an area ripped, desecrated and torn.

"A twister went through here, and recently," Brennan said, and the savage note in his voice chimed at odd variance with the softly lilting voices of the Flower People.

"They seem to have come to terms with the twisters," observed Phoebe dreamily. "Perhaps they're like those poor devils of the twentieth century—you know, when they'd first monkeyed around with nuclear weapons."

"How d'you mean?" asked Brennan, interested in anything Phoebe thought.

"You know—how they lived for a long time in that funny century in fear and dread of someone dropping a hydrogen bomb on them. How it affected everything they touched. How it ruined their art for a time. How some far-seeing people said, 'Enough!' and started real life all over again." She gestured to the ruins. "Maybe

these people handled the problem in a different way—"

"They've given in to it!" I said harshly.

Phoebe swung around. Fierce annoyance sparked. "What do you mean, Bert? You've not stopped digging at the Flower People since we arrived! What's the matter—does their innocence make you uncomfortable? Does it make you feel dirty!"

"Here, calm down, old girl," said Brennan, taking her elbow.

She shook him off. She had worked up a fine passion.

"I think these are the finest people I've ever met. I'll thank you not to try to sully them for me."

Lottie and Pomfret had wandered over to inspect a curious statue that had been fancifully distorted by the twister. They had their arms around each other and they kept giggling.

"I suppose," Phoebe demanded scornfully, "you disapprove of Lottie and George?"

"Why no, Phoebe. Nor of you and Hall." They both turned their eyes away as I said this and I chuckled. "You and Hall are okay, fine, wonderful. Have some belief in your own strength, Phoebe: it won't end with Hall when we leave here."

"I never expected—" She stopped. Her face reddened. I heard Hall say, "Let's get after the others, Bert. I wanted to talk to you anyway."

We walked on. Phoebe composed herself and followed. But the problem remained. I had not smashed it, only given it sustenance on which to feed by opposition.

With this insubstantial and yet heavily felt air of strife hovering over us we were escorted into an arched opening in a hillside leading into caverns gouged from the earth. Here an experience awaited me that turned my

thoughts from the petty affairs of a moment ago and made me once again realize the vastness of life.

Every wall and ceiling of the connecting series of chambers had been covered by carved arabesques, rosettes, borders, a whole romantic-rococo of bizarre shapes and decorations. I stood in the center cavern admiring the multitudes of patterns like enormous paper doilies on the ceiling above me, seeing the skill with which each pattern varied subtly from its neighbor and yet remained a balanced component of a greater design. The soft electric illumination threw everything into pearly light and charcoal shadow.

Then Lottie screamed.

Pomfret caught her as she staggered back from the wall.

"A skull!" she screamed. "They're bones! Skeletons! All bones!"

I looked closely. The patterns were indeed composed of bones, human bones: friezes of skulls, curlicues of finger bones, long graceful borders of femurs and tibiae, rosettes of ribs, petals of pelvic girdles. The care and artistry that had gone into this grotto of necrophilic virtuosity had produced a masterwork of the macabre.

George Pomfret, muttering, "Godawful! Godawful!" assisted the half-fainting Lottie out. Phoebe and Brennan, devoted, peered closer, admiring in loud tones the varied patterns.

I smiled. No matter what happened now, they would remain convinced of their vision.

Through archways of piled skulls whose eyeless sockets beamed down in seeming appreciation of this merry jape I walked through to the far end. Estimation of the numbers of dead bodies involved was impossible. Thousands and thousands of people must have been born,

lived and died in Borsuppak and their skeletons brought here for decorative purposes.

"I've heard of the Capuchin Friars' Church and what lies beneath it in Rome," said Brennan. "But this!"

Slowly we walked back. Once the building material had been accepted and related to stucco and brick and marble, the grottoes could be seen as fairylands of beauty. I felt sure that the People of the Flowers saw them in that light.

Just as we reached the exit the sky darkened.

"Another twister!" shouted Pomfret, running wildly toward us, dragging Lottie. She hung back. "You've got to take cover!" he shouted at her. "Even if it is in a cave full of skeletons!"

Then, worse than the twister, far, far worse than the necrophilic cavern, the solid ground shook uncontrollably beneath our feet.

X

ONCE BEFORE I had been embroiled in the insane cauldron of an earthquake. That had been under the sea and merely because of that was of far greater horror and claustrophobic terror than any upheaval on land. Or so I thought as I helped drag Lottie into the haven of the necropolis.

All about us the walls of the cavern shook. Dry bones rattled down, many powdering into dust the moment they struck the ground. Skulls rolled underfoot like a game of bowls in hell.

Ishphru came running through the dust. Her face showed wild alarm. Others of the Flower People crowded in and among them all the terror of the moment stamped a fear and an awareness of imminent death in shocking contrast to their calm demeanor of moments before.

What the twister had failed to do this elemental bowel-shaking of the earth had brought about instantly.

Portions of the roof crashed down, choking us in dust, and the darkness rose like a pall.

"We'll have to get outside and take our chances there!" I yelled at Brennan above the uproar. He nodded, his face grim and purposeful. The dreamy look had been wiped clean away.

We grabbed the girls and hustled them outside. Other people followed us. Just as we cleared the exit it swayed and groaned as stone supports cracked. Then it collapsed inward like a crone's mouth at death.

Everywhere we looked the city was being ripped apart.

Giant cracks opened in the ground, and men and women, screaming, vanished into the maw of the earth.

Already parts of the city were on fire. The flames glared luridly through the dust and smoke, orange and sullen red. The noise was continuous, a groaning bedlam composed of shrieks and cries, of the clashing of rocks and the tumbling destruction of beautiful buildings.

Ishphru put her hands to her head wildly. Her eyes glared at me. Unable to speak words of comfort, I grasped her body and held her close, pushing her head down into my shoulders. Dust stung my eyes. The ground shivered beneath my feet as though I stood on a

patch of quicksand. At any minute I expected the ground to open up and devour us.

"There's nothing we can do now except wait for it to stop!" yelled Brennan.

Pomfret, with Lottie in a death-grip, staggered close to us. We six had formed a knot of people motionless in the crazed running and rushing of the Flower People. All of Ishphru's family had disappeared. I could only hope they were safe.

"This is all Khamushkei's doing!" yelled Pomfret. His teeth shone fiercely in the ruddy light. "If I could get my hands on him, I'd—"

Phoebe cut in. "The city! Borsuppak! It's being destroyed!"

"I'd like to get a rope," I said, my mouth close to Brennan's ear. We kept bashing at our clothes to remove the clinging dust. Already the clothes we wore were gritty and stained.

"Yes!" he shouted back. "But where?"

In the noise and confusion of rushing people and shifting earth it was difficult to think.

"I'll risk going into a house if you'll look after Ishphru," I said.

"All right."

We tried to tell Ishphru what we meant by signs, but she was too dazed to understand. Gently, I disentangled myself and gave her over to Hall Brennan and Phoebe.

"Look after her," I said. I made up my mind again that I mustn't let this complication grow too set and too much taken for granted. She was a lovely girl, but . . .

The nearest house had collapsed in on itself and half of its lower side and second story had slipped away into a chasm. In the rubble I tried to imagine where a rope would be kept. Luckily I stumbled across the remains of

what must have been a garden workshop nestled against the outer wall, still standing, and inside I found a coil of rope among the spades and forks and garden implements.

With the rope slung over my left shoulder I picked my way across the rubble, trying to see through the dust and smoke, anxious to get back to the others.

From the chasm at my feet, clearly visible at that short distance, a gigantic form rose. It scrabbled at the dirt and stones of the cleft, dislodging chunks of rock, rising up like a monster of the netherworld let loose.

I stared in horror.

I recognized the thing at once.

The last time I had seen one like it had been in the picture gallery at Gannets, when it had pursued with its slavering jaws and bloodshot eyes the screaming naked form of Lottie.

Those four iron-booted feet with their sharp steely spikes clawed at the lip of the chasm. Grunting like a revving motorbike it climbed up over the edge. Some Flower People running in the opposite direction saw the thing, screamed, fell away in confusion. It saw them. With a single incredible spring it pounced.

By that time I had the Farley Express unlimbered and I put in a blast that shredded the thing's back. It went mad.

Before it could reverse its savage jump I centered up the gun and blew the thing's backbone out through its stomach.

I wasn't sick. I felt terrible; but life under the sea inures a man to unpleasant sights.

The Flower People, screaming and pushing at one another to get out of the way, scampered like disturbed mice into the dust and smoke.

As fast as was possible through the chaos I blundered

back to the spot outside the collapsed necropolis. How these people regarded the death that comes to everybody must have been a fascinating subject for academic study; right now I had the unwanted opportunity to study it at first hand.

Brennan spotted me and roared out through the din. Waving reassuringly I joined them. Ishphru gave me a weak smile. We stood for a moment in an eddy of the smoke and dust with the screams and shrieks of dying people reaching us through the smash of a collapsing city. Anything I could do to make her believe this was going to come out right I would obviously do; but I felt strongly that this was the end of the city.

The earth tremors persisted. Shock succeeded shock in a never-ending giddiness that sickened. This was no normal earthquake. This could only be the work of Khamushkei the Undying.

I told Brennan that danger threatened us from the rents in the earth. I tried not to be too specific. If that had been the only iron-booted monster then there was no need to alarm my comrades further. But they must be warned. Here once again I faced an old dilemma: how much to tell the patient.

The question was solved for me—in the worst way possible.

"Look!" screamed Lottie, cowering back against Pomfret. He swung around and the Farley Express appeared in his hand with a speed that told me he had already drawn it.

The iron-booted thing struggled up out of a cleft. Its fangs showed white slivers from which red runnels of fire or blood splintered. Its iron boots rang against the stone, loud above the surrounding din.

"What on Earth—" gasped Pomfret.

"Don't waste time, George!" I shouted. "They're deadly!"

But Brennan had already blasted his Creighton Eighty and the thing's head vanished in a gout of flame and blood.

Phoebe shouted something and I grasped her arm, dragging her around to face me. I bent to her ear.

"Remember Lottie!" I yelled. "She doesn't know!"

Dust and cinders settled on our heads in a fresh wave of smoke billowing over us. Phoebe nodded to show she understood. Sparks and gushes of fire sprang up from a cleft in the ground. White-hot magma oozed over the lip and began to trickle down toward us.

"Let's move away." I pulled Ishphru. She clung to me, shaking, her red lips open, her face ghastly.

Around us now a city was dying.

And with it died a people.

We moved away from that smoking cleft, not running wildly, not racing away as though the fiends of hell slavered at our heels—as, in a very real sense, they did—but cautiously, staying together, watching for the slightest cracking of the earth's surface. Through the smoke and dust and flame we crept away, keeping in the open and avoiding houses and buildings, which continued to fall and burn.

The rope tied us all together. Brennan, as was his elected right, took the lead. I took the rear, with Ishphru immediately ahead of me. But she clung to me and we struggled along over the ruins side by side, the rope slack between us.

How Ishphru found her way through the collapsed ruins and disintegrating buildings amazed me; yet she held on and, eventually taking over the lead from Brennan, led us through the dissolving metropolis to the

place where her home had once stood. We could find no sign at all of her family.

The confusion clamored on around us, a cacaphonous blasphemy of sound.

"They're not here," Brennan said at last.

"We've never met her mother," I said, holding Ishphru tightly around the waist as smoke belched over us. "Her father and brothers stand the same chance as anyone else."

"I vote," said Pomfret, pantomiming his words for Ishphru's sake, "that we get out of the city. One of these damn buildings is going to fall on our heads before much longer."

"You're right, George," Brennan said.

In the clash and challenge of the earthquake all our old comradeship had returned, strengthened now by a greater understanding of one another.

Ishphru shook her head. She struggled against my arm. Like a gentleman—like a fool—I let her go.

My eyes streamed with smoke-started tears; red-rimmed, they stung and bit. Everyone else's face showed the same painful signs.

Brennan began to lead off, turning with a wry smile as he realized he had no idea of the quickest way out of the falling city into the countryside.

"Ishphru will have to lead us," I said. She stood there, within reach of my hand, her bosom heaving and ashes falling on her ripped gown, her hair loose and straggling, waving like the unbound hair of women beneath the sea.

Then she ran away.

We all shouted and began to scramble over the ruins after her. Seeing was difficult; sweat and soot and dust

mingled into a thick and clinging paste on my face, I fell on rubble as the rope tautened about my waist.

I knew Ishphru was making a last desperate attempt to find her family, yet she must have known as we all knew that they had the same chances we did and that our best opportunity for survival was to leave the city—that they had probably already left. Yet she scrambled wildly among the ruins, scrabbling her way up the littered hillside toward the place where her house had stood.

With fingers stiff and unresponsive I tore at the knot to untie the rope.

Looking up, I heard a terrible scream, saw Ishphru balanced on a precariously balanced stone column. The ground opened at her feet. Smoke and flame gushed up.

Then the rope was free and I was bounding up the slope, slipping and sliding, falling, but going on and up in a cascade of loose slats and bricks and stones and earth.

Unlike a panic-stricken fool, I didn't shout after her: she would not have heard in the hellish din and I needed all my breath for running. Smoke billowed down. I caught a glimpse of a shadow-shape; then an iron-booted monster plunged down the hill. There was absolutely no sign of Ishphru. I tried to keep my balance. Tottering and overbalancing, I was borne away by the flood of debris brought down by the monster. Like a helpless chip in an avalanche I went tumbling down the slope.

Brennan caught me; he pulled me upright. Above our heads the iron boots rang against rock, audible like tiny gongs through the uproar. Pomfret let loose a blast from his Farley and the beast sloughed away.

"Ishphru!" I yelled.

"She's gone, man!" Brennan yelled back. He shook me. "She's gone!"

"And here come more of those beasts." Pomfret leveled his gun. Lottie stood at his side and Phoebe, whose face looked like a spotted jug where she had dabbed the soot away, stood defiantly beside Brennan. For the first time in many years I felt, suddenly and crushingly, alone.

The driving urgency of the next few moments left me no time to brood over the loss of Ishphru. I blamed myself even though I understood that she would have gone in spite of anything I might have done or said. But more feral monsters slithered and leaped down the slope toward us and my mind switched, in agony and remorse, to the deadly predicament of the moment.

Our guns took a toll, but the monsters continued to pour out of the ground. Through choking smoke we pulled back, wary lest we should be too late to hear the clatter of iron boots from the dust. We kept together as the ground shook. Buildings continued to fall, although the deep rumble of their collapse sounded at wider and wider intervals. Of Borsuppak, little remained standing.

"The fire's our biggest danger!" yelled Brennan.

"The fire!" I roared back, determined not to think of the Junoesque girl forever lost to me. "You mean fires!"

All about us now the air and smoke shook and quivered as superheated gusts of air sucked fiery gales across the devastated city. It became difficult to breathe, more even than before when only dust and smoke choked our lungs; now we felt the searing breath of hell itself scorch across our shrinking bodies.

And Ishphru was gone. Nothing—now—could alter that.

Back through the smoke we staggered, flames licking

at us, our arms over our heads in futile protection, our feet slipping and sliding on the loose rubble of a city.

Through the smoke an ungainly figure loomed and my gun switched up, my finger trembling on the trigger. Then a remembered mechanical cheerful voice called: "Don't shoot! It's me—Charlie!"

We crowded up to the robot, a great burst of comradeship toward the mechanical man a reaction against the unknown horrors about us.

"Charlie! Where have you been?"

"I have been searching the city for you—this is not a happy place. We should leave—immediately!"

I wanted to laugh insanely at that. I grabbed Brennan's shoulder.

"We've got to go eastward!" I yelled in his ear, howling like an insane wolf against the fury of the fire.

"Get out of here, anyhow!" he screamed back. "I don't care which way we go!"

The tornadoes that had stricken the Flower People, the earthquake that had thrown down their city, all the horror they were now suffering derived from Khamushkei the Undying.

I dragged Brennan in the direction I thought was east. A flat area extended there, smoke-filled but, blessedly, for the moment empty of the lurid gleam of fire.

Pomfret followed us, coughing, pulling Lottie.

"We've got to go east!" I shouted.

"Just get me outta here!" Phoebe clung to Brennan. We all looked like half-naked, begrimed imps of hell. Tears cut swathes down our filthy cheeks, streaming freely from our red inflamed eyes.

With a stubborn belief that if we moved eastward we would pose a threat to Khamushkei and force him to time-jump us again, I bellowed and pushed and forced

my four comrades on. I felt a cringing desire to drop, shut my eyes and rest, but I knew we must go on. To remain here, city or no city, in this time, would be to be defeated utterly.

Ahead shadows moved.

"Oh, no! More of the things!"

In a fiery eddy of the smoke ahead we could clearly see four of the nameless iron-booted monstrosities clanking toward us. Their eyes shone with reflected fire glow. Pomfret took out the left hand one, his blast shredding gray fur and smoking iron-boots into slag. Brennan shot the right hand one, his Creighton Eighty exploding a shell accurately on the thing's sagging body. About to let fly at the right hand of the two center ones, I halted a fraction of a second, puzzled by a curving violet line like the shell of a bubble that sprang into existence. The violet sphere appeared to envelope us. Then my finger pressed the trigger and the third monster sloughed away. Pomfret took the last. We could have pity for these misshapen things, feel sorry that we had to shoot them, but not even a cretin would believe they were advancing with the object of shaking hands. We had to protect ourselves. The guilt lay with Khamushkei the Undying.

"What is it?" shouted Phoebe.

The heat of the city-wide fire that a moment before had been burning in on us with such fury vanished and we stood insubstantially on a shimmering, wavering violet bubble-shell.

A single distorted moment of vertigo, of movement, of molecule reorientation, and the violet bubble vanished and we stood amazed on a cold and shining, vast steel floor. Above our heads reared a metal ceiling—a metal sky!—so far away the ribbings which spanned fifty feet at their bases seemed like spider-silk. The air

chilled with a spiced-wine sweetness, almost sour, bracing as ozone. All along the wall before us—metal wall, vast, high, broad—a towering tier of steps rose into a metal curtain. That curtain hung solidly down, preventing any view of what lay beyond. We felt like ants in the bottom of a bath. Noises spurted and echoed and died in the vastness.

"Where the hell are we?" said Brennan. He revolved slowly, his gun pointing, boxing the compass with an unbelieving expression on his face. We all looked around, quite at a loss to understand where we were.

"Isn't it funny!" giggled Lottie. She put her hand to her mouth, her eyes large and open with shock.

"Shut up, you silly idiot!" Brennan blazed. He stared about him, trying to see all directions at once.

"Here, Hall!" said Pomfret. "That's no way—"

"She wants to keep silent. Who knows what can happen next—" Brennan had been badly shaken by this experience.

Phoebe put a hand on his arm and pressed it, smiling up at him.

I began to walk slowly toward the nearest wall where the buttresses reached the steel floor like giant squared-off trees. Statues had been carved in a thrice-life-size frieze. There, plainly visible in the all-pervading sourceless light, were lamassu, utukku, gods and beasts and men, carved in grotesque blasphemous attitudes.

Charlie's ugly face, even more battered by falling rocks from the vanished city of Borsuppak, rotated slowly. He sized up the giant cavern, or hangar, or room, checking with patient mechanical skills.

"Well, Charlie?" Pomfret asked, as though his butler had just walked in with a card on a silver tray.

"Not good, boss." Charlie's sensors worked overtime.

"There is life here; but life operating at a level so low, so slow and retarded, it is barely still alive." He pointed at the solid metal curtain. "Up there is other life. Strange. I am trying to determine—" He fell silent.

Brennan, still a little surly after his petty outburst, chuckled with harsh lack of humor. "That fits. If this bum Khamushkei the Undying is sending these fabled beasts after us from here, they'd have to be kept in deep-freeze, suspended animation, so that he can send them off against his enemies." He kicked the metal floor. "And I'm his enemy!"

"Not so loud!" Phoebe whispered in agony.

The echoes hissed and chirruped about that gigantic hall.

At the wall I stopped to study the carvings. The frieze seemed composed of a substance I could not readily identify; not metal, not stone, not plaster. I touched it. More like rubber. Hard but yielding rubber. I walked a little further.

Between a snarling griffin and a beast composed of parts I could not even put a name to, the frieze showed a gap. A rough outline indicated a monster had once been carved here; now the wall showed metal slick and blue-black beyond with the frieze ends jaggedly ripped away in a feathery-edged shape. I began to get ideas; nasty ideas.

An electrical disturbance began around my hair. I felt hot and sticky and the palms of my hands were suddenly wet.

I walked back to the others.

Phoebe said, "My head itches."

Brennan, about to make an allegedly funny remark to show he wasn't such a bad guy after all, paused, then put a hand to his own hair.

"Yes," he said. He put an arm around Phoebe's waist.

Only then I realized I still held the Farley Express.

Just at that moment seemed a poor time to put it away.

The electrical disturbance built up. Charlie hiccoughed, and said, "If I were human now I'd be building up the mother and father of a hangover for tomorrow."

That ought to have been funny; we'd been laughing at sillier things since this adventure began; but here in this remote place, cold and aloof and breathing nameless horrors, the laughter died in our throats.

"Hold onto your pledge, Charlie," said Pomfret.

Now blue sparks and waving lines of force began to spirochete from the walls. Small silvery-blue lightnings began to snap down from the ceiling. A trembling began in the floor.

Charlie said, "I'm damping myself down, boss—I'll try to stay with you—but—"

He sounded just like a run-down spring gramophone.

"He's a fine lot of help just when he's needed!" Pomfret said disgustedly.

Lottie giggled again and Brennan cursed at her.

Phoebe huddled into Brennan.

What could we *do*?

"Can anyone see a door?" I said harshly. I felt the electrical tingles spidering over my body and I didn't like the sensation. "If we can get out of here, maybe—"

I didn't finish the sentence.

With the others I cowered back, staring in open-mouthed disbelief.

A utukku detached itself from the frieze on the wall, stalked across the shining metal floor, its claws scratching and clicking on the metal.

Pomfret lifted his gun.

"No! Wait, George!"

I pointed at the feathered and clawed monstrosity.

"It's still half asleep. That frieze is a kind of time vault itself. Khamushkei the Undying just wakes up the ones he wants—"

"We know!" said Brennan. He dragged in a great gulp of air. "We watch it. See what it does. It's eyes are closed—see! But if it opens them—if it sees us—shoot!"

"We won't need telling twice, Hall," said Pomfret, who had not lowered his gun a millimeter.

The utukku staggered as it drew away from the frieze. A wide turkey-beak opened, crimson and blue, hooked.

A shimmering violet ball formed instantaneously in the air to enclose the utukku in lambent purple light. Its eyes opened. In the instant it saw us and screeched in automatic reflex anger the violet ball disappeared—and with it went the monster.

We sagged back, limp, the electricity draining from the air and ceasing to pringle on our skins.

"That was super-science," Brennan said softly. "There was no mumbo-jumbo magic about that!"

We felt, stupidly enough in the circumstances, free.

Charlie said: "Hic!"

"He's on a real bender!" Pomfret said, with, I saw with some amusement, considerable envy. "Hey! Charlie! Snap out of it! We're still in this confounded hell-hole!"

Charlie struggled up with a clash of metal legs.

"Sure, boss. Life-force dropped down now—but—" His ugly metal face turned again to those somber steps and the ebony curtain hanging in harsh metallic folds above them. "There's something—something I can't understand—"

We all turned as one to stare up the stairs.

Black they were, ebony with a patina of age-old evil. We knew, we all knew, now, that Khamushkei the Undying must be imprisoned behind that curtain.

The very simplicity of the surroundings, when we realized where we were, amazed us.

Lottie's giggle died on the sour-sweet air.

"If this is the place we're trying to reach—" Pomfret began. Then he stopped talking, to look at us with a baffled, tense expression.

Phoebe finished it for him. "Just how do we go about it?"

We presented a scarecrow appearance, standing there on the steel floor of that vast chamber, midgets grimed and tattered in a futuristic cathedral.

Lottie took out her compact from a tear in her dress; how any of us had anything left remained a mystery; our gun holsters were about the only items not so damaged as to be virtually useless. Decency, for what we cared about that in this time and place, was still sketchily preserved.

Down at the far end of the chamber a yellow light glowed into being. Like a still candle flame, taller than a Trafalgar Square Christmas tree, the lambent yellow flame seemed to draw light into itself rather than shed its own yellow radiance upon those dark steel walls.

Our eyes still smarted from the fire, yet this calm yellow flame burned without a flicker and seemed, in some unreal way, to soothe our eyes and reassure us.

A few yards to the side and rear a second rose-colored flame burned as steadily and as still as the yellow.

"They—they weren't there just now," Phoebe said in a quivery voice.

"They're not moving—are they flames?" Brennan's face

showed the strain under which he labored: grim, dirty, unshaven, with purple bruises beneath his eyes.

"I don't know what they are." Truculently, Pomfret aligned his Farley Express. "But a little tickler will serve to open them up for us—"

"Hold it, George!" I once more stopped Pomfret from firing. "They don't alarm you, do they? Not like the beasts? Not like the things with the iron boots?"

"No-o. Well?"

"Maybe we've got friends—"

Lottie cried out in disbelief, a passionate affirmation of a creed: "We've got no friends, no friends at all!"

The strangeness of our position and the hollowness of feeling I sensed all about us, the very proportions of this place and the lowering threat of the iron curtain all contrived to unsettle us—and I wondered then if this might not be part of the Time Beast's means of destroying us. I moved toward the wall and the frieze, drawn by a desire to feel once again the texture of the frieze and to try to connect the Time Beast's beasts and our own time's artificial-body industry. All the time two unwavering flames, one yellow, one rose, stood tall and glowing at the end of the chamber.

A feeling, not so much of friendship but of a lack of animosity, reached me from the flames. I received an understanding of detached aloofness, of disinterest beyond and above mortal humanity.

Perhaps the life-force Charlie had sensed flickering low came not so much from the quasi-alive beings of the frieze but from these two flames, so tall and unwavering and pure. I touched the frieze, feeling the feathers of a wing sweeping powerfully down from bull-like shoulders.

The flames wavered. Like wind-tossed rush-lights they quivered with a ripple of color and radiance.

A wind soughed through the long steel room.

Lottie screamed and dropped her compact.

Phoebe pushed her as she sought to run, and, deftly, Pomfret caught her around the waist. "Easy, old girl," he said. "Easy does it."

They were about twelve feet from me. I turned to watch the flames, to see what they would do next. My hand, touching the wall, felt the feathers stir and move. A claw scraped the steel floor at my back.

Phoebe shouted in panic-stricken falsetto. "Bert! *Bert!*"

Around the group of four humans and Charlie, like a mistily insubstantial bubble, a violet sphere began to form.

I put my head down and ran.

Real terror clawed at me. I had never felt more frightened in my life. If that violet shell whisked my friends away—they could be flung into any period of time—I would be left here, here in this steel room with the beasts of Khamushkei the Undying—alone.

There would be no future for me—no past—only a present of eternal torture.

In that single lunging outpouring of effort I plunged toward my friends.

I could hear the awakening beast from the frieze—by the super-science of Khamushkei the Undying prised from an aeons-long sleep to rend and tear me. The soft obscene sounds drove me on in terror. In sheerly frenzied panic I leaped for the thickening violet shell; I thrust with my feet and jumped—headlong I smashed into a violet haze where up and down, backward and forward jumbled and diminished and vanished in time. . . .

XI

THE LIGHTS OF home beckoned.

With a gentle thrust my finned feet propelled me through the greenly translucent water whose warmth and welcome reached out to me. Friendly fish finned amiably by. The light and warmth spread around me. Over my head, rippling, bubbling, mosaically moving, never still, my own silver sky reassured me that all was well in the aquasphere of my world.

There had been some problem of administration—or had it been that rogue bunch of killer whales again? Something had taken me away from my home out into the deeper depths. But now I was coming home. Freely flying with leisurely fanning motions of my fins I swept down to rest and refreshment, peace and quietude again —but strangely the soft yellow glow of my home lights changed, deepened, darkened, became a more ominous violet . . . the violet hue spread and grew and rose and engulfed me. . . .

"You all right, Bert?"

A familiar voice—and yet a voice that could never sound in my undersea home.

If I opened my eyes I should see the entrance way with the statues and the waving undersea fronds, the guard-fishes and the row of friendly lights from the terraces. In that disturbing violet light I opened my eyes and saw Hall Brennan bending over me, his face concerned.

Over his shoulder George Pomfret and Phoebe and Lottie stared down at me, and Charlie poised his ugly ungainly bulk above them, his eye crystals glittering purple.

"What the hell?" I gasped.

"He's all right," said Pomfret with decision. "He can still swear."

"I can still cuss you out, George," I said with a wonderful gush of irritation. "Lemme up, will you?"

Brennan moved back and I staggered up. My forehead hurt and stung. I lifted my hand to touch it and Brennan quickly said, "Don't, Bert. It's all bloody. We've some of Phoebe's slip wrapped around your head."

We stood on the steel floor with the curving wall of the violet bubble surrounding us; even as I stood up, the bubble moved and canted and we braced ourselves.

The violet shell shifted in that subtly disturbing molecular rearrangement we had experienced before. Then it vanished. We stood on a flagged pavement, the paving stones quite unremarkable, with a brick wall at our backs and a perfectly ordinary evening street scene before us.

Helis and cars passed and repassed. Men and women pushed by, some turning to stare at us in shocked disbelief. The evening smelled warm and fragrant. Huge stars burned in a deepening blue sky. Most of the people wore modern-day Middle-East dress—there was even an occasional burnoose.

"What's Khamushkei the Undying done now?"

"My clothes!"

"Those people looking at us—we must look a sight!"

The comments my friends made were predictable.

I pointed at a heli just rising from a rooftop across the road.

"That's a B.M.C. Californian. Model came into use last year. So."

"Last year," Brennan said. He laughed. "That dates us, doesn't it."

"You mean . . . ?" Phoebe's face suddenly lost all its color so that the mud where she had failed to clean showed like patches of corrosion. "You mean we're *back?*"

"Back home—in our own time?" echoed Lottie.

"Damn near to it," said Pomfret, cheerfully.

"And," I suggested, "this is Baghdad."

"Check," nodded Brennan. He'd been staring across at a hotel. "I have that feeling, too. Should know the bigger sections well enough, but this must be a back-street suburb." He indicated the hotel. "That's for us."

All manner of strange thoughts crowded my mind as we went across the road to the hotel. Middle-Eastern hospitality went into action the moment we stepped through the swinging doors, despite our bedraggled and tramp-like appearance. Red fezzes bobbed, their robot owners ushering us up to five separate but connected rooms. A quick telephone call by Hall Brennan to a branch of his bank in Baghdad confirmed not only that his credit was still good in the city, but also, and much more importantly, that we were back exactly in our own time. Only yesterday we had taken off from Standstead. Our intervening adventures had occupied no time at all in this time-stream but had occurred in a loop of time.

That, also, made me suspect the present.

Somewhere Arabic pipes plaintively made atonal music. The smell of the city rose about us, fragrant with spices, aromatic, very different from the abominations such cities made of themselves not so very long ago. I

remembered with pleasure the restored replica of the gates of Nineveh, built to full scale as the entrance to the national museum. The bulls there, too, now meant a lot more to me than they had.

Despite the ease of our present position, the slavish attentions of the robots, the steaming and scented baths, the food and wines, the air-conditioning, all the pleasures and luxuries to which we, as civilized modern men and women, were accustomed, despite all this molly-coddling I still felt the itch of disbelief and the nagging unease of uncertainty.

Surely, Khamushkei the Undying had not given up?

There, probably, lay the answer. He credited us with normal human desires.

I said to Brennan as, rested and freshened, with new clean clothes from the autovend, my forehead mended, we sat on the balcony overlooking a distant prospect of the city with its minarets and domes, its mosques and office blocks with the greater dome of the sky above: "This is very peaceful. We've not even exchanged a cross word since we arrived. But—"

Phoebe chuckled. "Are you stirring again, Bert?"

"He can't leave well enough alone," Pomfret said, looking up from a private conversation with Lottie. "If such things weren't anachronisms I'd say he suffered from an ulcer."

"Thank you, too, George," I said, keeping up the air of light banter. This might be better considered that way. "Why do you think Khamushkei the Undying flung us back to our own time?"

"I've been thinking about that," said Brennan. He looked at Phoebe and smiled. "When we shifted in time only—as we did in the airplane—we experienced a whirling sensation, so brief as to be missed if we were asleep.

Then we'd arrived. But when the violet globes formed about us, we moved not only in time but also in space."

"That's true, by jove!" said Pomfret, with a blink of surprise.

"That being so, it's no surprise we're here in Baghdad."

I smiled and sighed. "I didn't mean that. Accepting that the Time Beast can fling us about in time, I still believe he didn't mean to take us back to his vault. He thought he'd got us beat—he had, really. When he brought some of his creatures back, the iron boots, we came along for the ride." I looked around at my comrades on the balcony, to Charlie standing quietly and humming below the threshold of audibility in the background. They listened to me talk in the softness of the evening.

"We spent some time in that chamber—I don't pretend to understand that—and then, it seems to me, Khamushkei the Undying panicked. He realized he'd brought aliens into his own domain and he reacted instinctively. He flung us out."

"But why here?"

"We must have been some time in the violet sphere?" I checked across with Brennan. "I was knocked out getting back into the thing. Only after I came around were we dumped here, in our own time. I'd say Khamushkei the Undying did a hurried spot of thinking in that interlude."

"And?"

"And he dumped us here for a purpose. Think a minute. We're after him and he knows it. He's tried to knock us out and so far he's failed. But we've had a rough time of it. He could be saying to us, 'Look. I've dropped you back into your own time. Now lay off.' "

"You mean," said Lottie with indignant fury, "he's trying to bribe us?"

"Yes."

"We-ell," said Brennan slowly.

"It makes sense," said Phoebe practically. "It sure as hell makes sense."

"He could have dumped us back into Borsuppak. But he was ferrying his monsters out. He couldn't be sure what we'd do. This way, he feels we'll pack it up and leave him alone."

Well aware as I was of the missing link in this argument, the truth, I felt sure, lay near enough to this theory as to make it a practical proposition to work on that assumption. Big flashy words, really, to describe what was essentially simple: we now had a chance to duck out.

As though on cue, we all looked at Hall Brennan.

This was his baby. He was the man who had burst into our lives with the big words and the determination and the get-up-and-go after Khamushkei the Undying.

If it weren't for Hall Brennan none of us would be here.

"We-ell," he said again. He looked down at the balcony carpeting. I felt a shriveling inside me, knowing what he was thinking, guessing what he would say.

"We-ell, we've had it rough. We're lucky to be here, really, at all."

"Yes?" Pomfret said. He glanced at me. I gave him no sign or guidance. This was for each one of us alone.

I was wrong there; I saw that in the next thing that Hall Brennan said. "Phoebe," he said, taking her hand. Then, "I guess, Bert, I'll take a rain check on Khamushkei the Undy—"

"What the hell!" exploded Pomfret. He looked incensed. "You chickening out Hall?"

Brennan did not rise to it. He looked very different from the tough outdoor he-man who had burst into our lives demanding the globe, telling us of his adventures, browbeating us into believing in the Time Beast locked —locked so precariously—in his Time Vault. Now he looked smoother, more worn, slicker. The tiredness in him, shared by us all, had fined off that essential roughness. He looked more civilized now.

"I'm not scared of Khamushkei the Undying, George. You should know that—"

"Well, hell, Hall! Of course I know that—"

"—but I am tired. And I'm not happy about—anyway, the Time Beast won't get out of that vault. At least, not for a long time." He didn't look at us but his hands tightened on Phoebe's. "Anyway, I'm not sure my calculations were right over the seven thousand years. That city we found couldn't have been as old as we figured. Sumer came before Akkad. Maybe we—"

"Maybe nothing, Hall!" Phoebe flashed at him. She withdrew her hand. "If you're thinking of me, well, that's not a compliment. If we don't see about this beastly thing in its tomb someone will suffer." She glared at Brennan, almost crying with her passionate conviction.

"Now look here, Phoebe," Brennan said uncomfortably.

"Someone will suffer. And I'll tell you who that will be! It'll be our kids, that's who! Our kids who'll just be growing up when—wham! Khamushkei will come rampaging out of his Time Vault and smash everything up. Blooey! All the whole boiling! Gone! And our kids as well." She waved a hand out into the star-spattered night. "So it's no good your sitting there and saying

you're not going to do anything about it. Think of our kids!"

"Well, Phoebe—" Brennan was completely taken aback.

Then Lottie giggled.

Brennan swung on her to storm abuse, when Pomfret, his arm around Lottie, said in his dignified Board Room voice, "Phoebe's quite right, Hall. This meeting, as far as I can see, accepts the validity of her case. The sense of the meeting is: we go on."

"But not with the girls?" I said, tentatively. I had long lost any nonsensical ideas about girls being fragile Dresden china figurines in undersea life, but I hated to see them dragged unnecessarily into danger. Mainly, I guess I was thinking about that horrific fragment from time glimpsed by Phoebe and myself: Lottie fleeing screaming down the picture gallery at Gannets pursued by an iron-booted monster.

That, if possible, should be avoided.

"Not," said Brennan in his hard voice. "Not with the girls."

Phoebe opened her mouth to object, then saw me staring at her with my lopsided smile, shut her mouth, pouted, then, a little petulantly, as though losing the serve at tennis, said, "Well, I think Lottie shouldn't go."

What?" said Lottie. Her figure had been set off admirably in a low-cut blue evening gown, the richness of the blue bringing out all the soft beauty of her red-gold hair. "Why me? What did I do?" She said it so plaintively that we all had to chuckle.

But neither Phoebe nor I could explain.

The other two men, once Phoebe had announced her intention of carrying on, couldn't see why Lottie should be excluded. I thought Brennan should know, and decided to tell Phoebe, as soon as possible, to inform him.

That was all I could do. If Lottie didn't do anything at all, we could not protect her from what had already happened—or could we? *Had* it already happened?

The City of Harun al-Rashid stretched around us, beneath the same stars that twinkled down on him as he sought adventures disguised and in company with his vizier; those same stars now shone down on us and on an adventure that even the magic of Scheherazade would be sore put to bring out successfully. We five human beings and our robot, Charlie, could badly do with some scientific magic for our own use.

Lottie made her point.

"If Phoebe's going," Pomfret said with a gravity I felt to be a genuine expression of his feeling for Lottie, "then I suppose we can't stop Lottie."

"That's right," said Lottie, truculently, her battle won.

Then a thing happened that in any other context would have raised goose-pimples of fear and sent me screaming like a baby for the illusory safety of the bedroom.

For from out of the night, impalpably, an emanation brooded toward us sitting there on the balcony, a force malefic, implacable, insatiable. We all felt it. Pomfret started back and his chair crashed over. Phoebe put a hand to her lips, Lottie a hand to her breast. Brennan cursed thickly, half-rising, one hand outspread before him.

Like a ghost of evil the sensation washed over us as though we wallowed in mire. Haunting, defacing, overpowering, the feeling passed and left us shaken and sick and knowing.

"Khamushkei the Undying!" whispered Brennan, staring.

"The Time Beast stirs from his Time Vault," breathed Phoebe, shuddering.

We rose then and entered the hotel, leaving our chairs and our drinks on the balcony, leaving the openness of the balcony to the night and the stars and to whatever forces prowl the dark windy spaces when men sleep.

Lights blazed up reassuringly as the automatics sensed our presence and adjusted the light intensity.

With a fresh drink in my hand and the immediately preceding one warming my stomach I tried to look as though I were not in the grip of abject fear. There seemed to me now to be no question that Khamushkei the Undying could watch and hear us. Once Hall Brennan had joined us the Time Beast had locked onto us like a radar fix; the only time he had been bamboozled had been when inadvertently he had drawn us back to his own Time Vault's bestiary chamber. For that, awkwardly, was how I conceived of the steel immensity in which we had been flung. So. We were under observation.

I said, "I suggest we all get our heads down in the same room."

Four pairs of eyes locked glances.

I said, "There happen to be two beds in my room. I can sleep on the floor with a mattress. I shan't see or hear a thing. I'm so fagged out I could sleep on a clothes line."

"You poor old buffer," said good old George, chuckling with his red face aglow, "you probably will have to, one day."

"Well," I answered him in kind. "This busted up aviator is for shut-eye. But *muy pronto!*" I hauled a mattress and a couple of sheets in from the next room. "Good night!"

The light went out.

What my comrades got up to in the darkness on the two beds was no concern of mine. I just wanted to catch up on my sack-time.

The telephone on the side table rang like all the clappers of hell going off at once.

A startled yell, smothered curses, heaving and thrashings on the beds, heralded a return to order. I waited until decorum prevailed. All the time the phone rang. Uncovering an eye I saw a long white naked arm reach out and Phoebe said grumpily: "Hullo?"

I listened quietly.

"All right—yes, I will tell him—no. No! No, of course not!" She slammed the phone down, its vid screen having remained mercifully dead throughout, and said to the four pairs of listening ears: "Confounded salacious-minded decadent twerp! Wanted to know if I was your wife or mistress, Bert."

I let that pass. Trifles over other people's thoughts about me had long since ceased to be important. I said, "What was it, Phoebe?"

"Police are waiting to speak to us. They've had a call from Interpol. All of us—they rang your room first, Hall, and got around to Bert's before they found anyone."

Lottie said, with primness most amusing, "They must think we are a peculiar lot."

"Probably we can get away with it if we claim to be a way-out mixed-marriage sect," I advised her. "You know—multi-marriages within the group. Great fun—or so I'm told."

Lottie sucked it all up. Then she reached down and threw her slipper at me. "Beast!" she yelped.

The reactions of my comrades reassured me. In normal circumstances, for us to be awakened in the middle of

the night by police would have been sufficient for a severe attack of nerves, of apprehension, of fear. But now, instead, we joked casually about other matters. Clearly, once one became involved with Khamushkei the Undying other problems receded with remarkable ease from the forefront of the brain.

"They'll be knocking on the door any minute, now they've found which room we're in." Brennan spoke with decision. "I don't think we want to talk to them like this, do we?"

"You lot creep off to your rooms," I said. "I'll stall them until you're ready."

By the time a heavy knock rattled the door—no using the robot annunciator for policemen—I was able to tell them come in and sit up in bed looking ruffled and annoyed.

The interview was painfully short.

I was under arrest so fast my feet didn't touch the ground between my bed and the hotel lobby. I insisted that no woman had been in my room. The burden of proof being with the other side, they let it go. But I saw a nasty triumphant glint in the inspector's eye as my friends were escorted downstairs one at a time, all fully dressed and all under arrest.

The paddy wagon whined up and we waited our turn to enter. "Imagine this is an old-time raid on a strip-joint," said Lottie with practical sympathy to Phoebe. "That'll help you to bear the disgrace, dear."

To Phoebe, who had been showing signs of a very proper horror at being under arrest and involved with the police, Lottie's generous advice came as a stiffening bolt of spine-juice. She snapped her back straight.

"Thank you, Lottie, dear," she said tartly; "I'm afraid I have no knowledge of the circles you frequent."

Lottie giggled wickedly. "Don't be afraid, dear."

Brennan and Pomfret, in the paddy wagon, moved in to sort it out and separate the combatants.

The police officers in their smart uniforms had been impeccably polite. They had treated us as though visiting royalty from old Baghdad had inadvertently mislaid the royal checkbook. No reason for our arrest had been given; I felt pretty sure that if we had challenged them they would have backed down, but one does not antagonize policemen unnecessarily, not until one knows the score. We had not been searched and so still carried our guns.

"They must be laughing back at Gannets," said Pomfret, stretching his legs. He yawned. "Now they've found us I'd like to know what they're going to charge us with." He pushed his arm more comfortably around Lottie, who leaned her head down against his shoulder with a contented little sigh. "And as for you, Charlie, did you secret any whisky about your mechanical person like I asked you?"

"Sure, boss." Charlie's ugly face slanted down as he turned from an inspection of the outside of the truck to look at his employer. "The best, just as you asked."

"Good old iron-man," said Pomfret drowsily. "Always rely on old Charlie . . ."

"Find anything, Charlie?" I asked.

"Ordinary truck, sir, converted for use as a police van. What you call a paddy wagon. If it is required I can overturn it, stop it, easily enough halt its continued progress."

"Uh, no thanks, Charlie, not yet, at any rate," I said.

There was one thing sure about a robot servant: once you inaugerated him on a course of action he was like a tornado over Borsuppak for difficulty in stopping.

The police van lurched as we turned out of the main street into one of those still-existing areas of old Baghdad. During the day, when the sun lay its hammer strokes of heat across the mud-walled buildings and arcades and domes, endowing everything with the color of mustard, the whole area looked leveled and flat, with the eyeless walls and flat roofs assuming the appearance of ant burrows in the sand. A languor swayed the city in wreaths of heat and yellow air. Now, at night, the scents persisted, the thin twanging of magical oriental instruments, rising against a bruised sky, entwined music and perfumes.

The paddy wagon lurched again.

"Shift over," mumbled Phoebe. She nestled closer to Brennan.

Sitting across from them I wondered how on this earth I had got myself into this situation. A nice quiet holiday on dryland, I'd thought, a gentle visit with old friends, savoring fresh air and sunshine, up on the dry crust of the land. Well. The paddy wagon squealed around another corner and we all swayed back as it straightened up.

Out of the blue, Charlie said, "We're heading southwest now."

At once I realized what he meant. The problem would be, of course, just how much Khamushkei the Undying made of this direction.

Speaking with a seriousness that made the others look across at me with renewed attention, I said, "Are we all agreed that we go on after Khamushkei the Undying? Do we resolve to continue, well knowing what troubles may lie ahead?" I stared about at them. "Well, do we?"

"Yes," said Phoebe at once. "I'm thinking of my children."

"That goes for me, too." Hall Brennan nodded.

"And George and I have a stake in this, too, you know," said Lottie with spirit.

"And," I finished, "Charlie will tag along because he's Charlie."

The police van skidded. We hung on as it squealed to a wheel-locked halt. The engine stalled.

For a moment there was absolute quiet. Then we heard a babble of frightened voices outside. The door bolts shook.

"Wherever it is," said Brennan dryly, "we've arrived."

The doors of the van began to open.

XII

THE DOORS OF the van opened.

I surged up, ready for any number of crazy unlikely events; but Charlie, with a strength that made of me a wet-paper image, pushed past and bulked out of the doors, his metal body shining in the glancing golden rays of the morning sun.

"It's night time!" whispered Phoebe.

The police inspector's face appeared around Charlie's bent knees. He looked as though he had been forced unwillingly into an old-time madhouse. His face was the color of moldy cheese.

"It's—" He tried to speak. My Arabic was just as good as his English, and he tried to speak in both, plus French and Italian—all at the same time.

"Let's get out, for God's sake!" yelled Brennan.

Outside the confusion of voices continued.

We all jumped down to the sand.

Baghdad had gone. All around stretched unbroken dunes of sand. The Tigris had gone, also. Of the city of the Abbasid caliphs nothing remained.

Brennan chuckled a short, snorty sort of chuckle.

"Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols in twelve fifty-eight and again in fourteen-one. But they never did *that* to it!"

Some of the policemen were down on their knees, heads to Mecca, bottoms in the air, praying hard. I felt for them, I felt guilty as all hell. Poor devils, why did they have to be dragged into this private war between us and the Time Beast?

Then the stupidity of that line of thought made me say roughly to Brennan, "Looks as though we have some recruits in the battle. Humanity, after all, is about to join in and help save itself."

"It's ironic, when you consider it," pointed out Phoebe, joining us, with an amused glance at the praying policemen. "We couldn't go to the police because they wouldn't have believed us. Now they're here, willy-nilly. And," she finished darkly, "they'll damn well help us now!"

"Still and all," said Pomfret, worried. "How are we to press on? The Black Maria won't travel over this loose sand."

"We'll have to walk," Brennan was saying when he paused and shaded his eyes against the early sun. "No. No, indeed we won't. Look there!"

Coming over the sand toward us at a fair speed were spread out half a dozen or so chariots, their high unsprung wheels, their lavishly embellished small horses clear indication of the importance of the charioteers. These were no rank and file chariots of the army. Nod-

ding plumes, the tinkle of bells, squeal of greased wood axletrees, the cracking flicking of whips blended into a song of majesty and power in the desert kingdoms of which we were now a part.

The chariots swung around us in a spattering cloud of sand and dust as though they were American Indians encircling a wagon train. But that comparison was far from apt, as a moment's thought showed. The chariots stopped as a shrill command knifed the din of wheels and harness. Then a single arrow sprang from the bow of the charioteer to the right of the king, and smacked solidly into the police van. The arrow struck the metal paneling, glanced off, and hissed into the sand.

I laughed.

"They didn't expect that. Look at them! They expected the arrow to penetrate and stick in. That way it would have presented a stirring warning. But now!"

The warriors with their massive square beards, their coned and rounded helmets, low over their brows, their compound reflex bows all strung and with arrows quiveringly awaiting the command to loose, and with their long heavy robes of brilliantly dyed colors—all these warriors together with their chariots and their horses and their king could have— "Stepped straight down from the gates of Shalmaneser Three!" as Hall Brennan exclaimed.

"That dates us, anyway," I said. "But I'd be happier if we knew if there'd been a violet shell about the Black Maria. Shalmaneser made Nimrud his capital, didn't he? And that was a long way north of here."

"The Assyrians were spreading out then," Brennan said, not taking his eyes off the chariots. "I mean, the Assyrians were always on the warpath, rampaging about, seiging and looting and impaling, but they could have

gone anywhere, really, in this area. We could still be on track for Khamushkei the Undying."

"Like coming down as the wolf on the fold, is that it?" said Phoebe, staring at the Assyrian soldiery and their poised bows with genuine excited wonder.

"I say!" exclaimed George Pomfret. The tone of his high-pitched complaint made us all look at him. He looked excited. "I say, you chaps! These jolly old cut-throats are going to have a good go at doing us in, of raping the girls and impaling us—and you go off into an academic name-dropping exercise!" He pulled out his Farley Express.

"Isn't that unfair, George?" Brennan asked.

"What, old boy?"

"Unfair. Your positronic incoherer. Against a primitive bunch of bow-and-arrow chariot boys?"

"Don't you believe it!" Pomfret knew what he was talking about. "These little blighters would have your insides hanging out quicker than you could offer to shake hands."

"It still doesn't seem right," I said. "Look at them. They don't know what to make of us. The king doesn't know. If it is the king. Anyway. They could decide we're gods and worship us, or they could decide we're devils and try to do us in. They've seen the girls, and that'll incline 'em to the latter theory."

The police inspector made his decision around then.

He had been listening to us; and now, from a source of pride in race and religion, he had regained his courage. He was, truth to tell, a very brave man.

He began to walk toward the Assyrians, with one hand held up before him in the universal sign of peace.

The Assyrians shot him, anyway.

The police sergeant, lunging up, dragged out his serv-

ice gun and blew the center chariot into charred wreckage and bloody rags. His men finished off the rest.

"I see they're issued with Karlsruhe One point ones," observed Pomfret. "A nice little gun, if liable to feed choke at critical moments."

Lottie was gripping his arm, her face whiter than ever against the red of her hair. "Horrible!" she said. "Horrible!"

"What a beastly affair!" said Phoebe, disgusted.

The policemen, shaken, were moving cautiously forward to inspect what was left.

"That's the price you pay for progress," I said, not particularly cleverly. I, too, felt nauseated by what had happened. Violence is universally evil unless the evil it ousts is more violent; that's rule of thumb but it's practical and nearly always right.

We had been landed by the Time Beast in an era of Mesopotamia's past of exceptional cruelty and violence. Despite the treasures uncovered from the sands by devoted archaeologists, despite the great statues, the wall-carvings, the literature, despite these evidences of civilization, the Assyrians had been among the most bloody-minded of any peoples. Every year demanded its campaigns, its sieges, its looting and impaling. Life—even though the ordinary peasant went on, indestructibly—life was not pleasant.

The policemen were picking up bits of chariot, shreds of gaily colored cloth, fused weapons. They all looked dazed. A dozen or so, they acted like leaderless sheep now their inspector lay dead, the arrow still feathered in his breast.

"I feel responsible for them, dammit all!" Brennan said, disgustedly.

"Missing your analyst already, Hall?" Pomfret said with unusual black perception.

"Well, we can't just leave them lying about here," Phoebe said expressively. "Can we?"

The policemen kept up their aimless wandering, their fingering of fragments of the carnage, their occasional abandoned prostrations to Mecca, their jerkily disjointed attempts at conversation.

Was this a foretaste of the reactions of the rest of the world when Khamushkei the Undying struck?

Recalling Paul Benenson's reactions to what had been a nightmarish situation strengthened my unwilling belief that I, despite my own fears and reluctance, had to do all I, personally, could to avert this world tragedy.

So that was a bombastically egoistic point of view. I didn't welcome that, either. But, apart from the few saintly exceptions, most of the trouble-shooters for the world over the centuries have been egotistical bastards.

"We'll have to push on toward As Samaiya somehow," I said roughly. "I've been forming an interesting theory about the Time Beast. I figure he's half idiot—probably after you'd been walled-up for seven thousand years you'd be an imbecile, too—and he reacts to the slightest threat. If we make an attempt to reach him, however feeble, he is going to make some movement in opposition."

"In his case, that means time-jumping us," said Brennan.

"Yes."

"A madman, walled up for seven thousand years," breathed Phoebe. Her face showed her appalled feelings.

"A man, did you say?" said Pomfret, wiping sweat from his forehead. "A devil, more likely."

"Or a god," added Brennan, somberly.

"Now don't start handing me out all that mystic mish-mash about the idiot-god on his time-throne; talking about him with one eye hanging over your shoulder, all occult and primitive." I spoke quickly and energetically, for if Khamushkei the Undying could not only see us but hear us also, then we must not feed him information that would finish us. "We all know what Khamushkei the Undying is."

"Yes," said Pomfret, and described him accurately, if obscenely. We all chuckled at good old George and that lowered the tone of the conversation satisfactorily.

For—for I suddenly understood, just as I myself spoke, why we had not so far failed. All we needed for death had been there in Borsuppak. Had, in fact, been there in that unnamed wilderness of stone knife-edges. Only the intervention of Khamushkei the Undying had dragged us away from death—admittedly, he had put us into another death-oriented situation—and he had done that because he was old and lonely and mad and very, very frightened.

Now, here in this very moment of time, we were as good as dead. I couldn't say this out loud, for fear of the Time Beast's prying eyes and ears; but he alone, ironically, could save us from the desert death into which he had consigned us.

"Grab everything useful," I said. "Charlie, you'd better strip the van. Hall—you're in charge, you'll have to tell us what to do. Desert drill, I mean, and all that stuff." I glanced at the aimless policemen. "They'll have to be looked out for, too."

Hall Brennan had been regarding me, his head cocked a little on one side, like a sparrow deciding about a starling.

Now he said, "We march light, Bert. Charlie can bring the big canvas cover from the van. That'll be useful to shield us from the direct sun at noon. Water—well—we'll take what there is here, in the rad, what anyone has. I'm damn thirsty now; but as leader I now formally forbid anyone to mention how thirsty they are. Check?"

"Check," we said in unison.

Explaining to the Baghdad policemen why they should begin to march into the desert on a southwesterly course would have been the sort of problem best left unimagined. They still possessed their weapons. Any attempt to overawe them with ours would provoke a blood bath. Surprising us, and yet with a predictable obedience, they simply joined up with us and began to march in our tracks.

No sooner had we begun this semi-comical Foreign Legion desert march than the blazing sunshine deepened and exploded into a series of pinwheels of fire. The desert rocked. A vast wind soughed over our heads. The policemen threw themselves to the ground, screaming their panic. We veteran time-travelers huddled around the comfortingly husky metal form of Charlie.

When everything quietened down we lifted our heads and took stock of our new situation.

Superficially, the scene to the north appeared the same: a yellow and brown wasteland of sand. The odd thought crossed my mind that the Time Beast might have used up all his powers to hurl us about in time and that his last attempt had failed. Then I looked south.

From a slight elevation we looked over a garden-land irrigated by sparkling narrow channels, broken by small fields and whitely dusty roads and by the brooding ocher bulks of square-towered and battlemented cities.

Each city was probably less than half a mile on a side, cramped and buttressed, with ziggurats rising here and there in pitiful expansion of political and religious muscles. I could see five cities within easy reach and contained in the field of vision directly ahead. To look to right and left would bring in as many more.

"Well, Hall," said Phoebe practically. "When are we now?"

"When are we—" echoed Pomfret. Then he chuckled. "That's good!"

Brennan considered. I looked at the policemen. Once more, dazed, baffled, not really believing what was happening to them, they had upended themselves toward Mecca. The direction of Mecca from Baghdad was roughly approximating the direction we wished to follow for As Samaiya. I regarded this as a capital ironic joke.

"Look," I said, interrupting Brennan. "The policemen are praying toward Mecca, and also toward Khamushkei the Undying. I wonder if he's getting a kick out of it?"

"I am," said Phoebe. Little though I knew Phoebe Desmond's feelings on life, her liberal university background with its unfettered permissiveness would almost inevitably give her a self-righteous tolerant contempt for religions of revealed godhead. She'd not taken the policemen seriously all along.

Lottie fished out her compact—a new one she'd got through the autovend and not the one she'd dropped back on that ebony steel floor—and began to do things to her face to protect its particularly susceptible coloring from the sun. Pomfret glanced at her for a moment with a fond smile and then joined the men to stare ahead into this fresh landscape.

For a moment I wondered if we were all staggeringly

unaware of how cretinous we all were. Here, on the brink of a hideous death, we carried on with trivialties and personalities as though back home with the Sunday supplements.

Then Hall Brennan said laconically: "Seems old K the U has done it for us this time."

Below the eminence on which we stood, an outpost of the cultivated land against the encroaching sand, a water course wended its way. Strange shapes moved in the water and on the banks, where palm trees leaned dustily.

"How so?" demanded Pomfret, peering about.

"I mean," said Brennan cheerfully, "we can walk on the line without trouble. Water, food, what else do you want?"

"Transport," suggested Pomfret, feelingly.

We all laughed.

Comradeship, excitement, adventure, they had all worked on us insidiously over the last few days. I detected even a faint hope that when we reached Khamushkei the Undying this time—as I was absolutely confident we would—this time we'd know what to do.

We began again to trek toward that spot where we believed lay the Time Vault of Khamushkei the Undying. We were very much like moths, stubbornly battering their heads against the screens to get at the light, whose very beckoning radiance would destroy them. In a line we wended our way down toward the watercourse —whose regular banks and masonry and mud confinements indicated its artificial canal origin, walking proudly, little people though we were—walking steadily and undeviatingly toward our self-chosen future.

"The old blighter's slow in reacting this time," observed George Pomfret jovially.

We all agreed. "Unless," said Lottie with her usual

capacity to spread alarm and despondency by a simple word or two, "he's sending off some more horrible beasts."

"And thank you, Mrs. Lottie Pomfret to be!" said Phoebe feelingly.

Again I was forced to remark to myself the rock-like conviction of personal immortality we shared in common with the personal beliefs of everyone else. So the Time Beast was sending outrageous monsters of nightmare to kill us; but we still talked about tomorrow as though tomorrow would come as surely as yesterday had been.

Hesitatingly, the policemen began to follow us down to the canal. We walked cautiously, alert, ready to take whatever action might seem appropriate in whatever circumstances Khamushkei the Undying might next put us.

But we kept on a straight course for his lair.

At the canal bank we stopped. Logs floated on the still water and other logs encumbered the far bank.

"'Ware crocs," pointed out Pomfret.

"So I see." Brennan judged the width of the canal. "A good thirty yards. I'd say the sand is blowing over this civilization. They're losing the battle for cultivable land. Another collapsing order of world history."

"This was once a main arterial canal, I'd say," Phoebe picked a handful of sand and tossed it into the water.

Miniscule intermingling ripples spread.

"We can't jump it." Brennan shook his head. "It doesn't bear thinking of—that Khamushkei the Undying is going to stop us by a canal and a large number of crocodiles!"

"We can swim it by numbers and the others on the

banks can shoot the crocs as they attack," Pomfret suggested.

I started an immediate protest. Then I halted. No trees grew on this sandy side of the canal. It stretched in a curving line both ways as far as we could see without a single bridge over it. The crocodiles existed. They were no figments of the imagination—equally, I judged, they were not agents of Khamushkei the Undying. We had to cross the canal in order to get on with our self-imposed mission. Well. What other way was there?

"You figure it out, then," said Lottie, truculent when her lover was challenged.

In the end we agreed. We explained what we were going to do to the police sergeant and he, terrified lest he be left alone in the desert, agreed to cooperate. Then we stripped down for swimming. Charlie collected up all the discarded gear—the police made their own arrangements—and eyed the water balefully with his quartz lenses aglitter in the sun.

"Charlie!" I exclaimed. "Well, old son, you'll just have to walk across the bottom. We'll oil you out on the other side."

Charlie clanked an arm. "I'm worried." He indicated the clothes. "If the water is deeper than I can reach up, then your clothes will get wet."

Of course, in the mood that had taken possession of us, we laughed.

We arranged the system, and Brennan, as leader, waded out first. The logs stirred.

I stood right down by the water's edge. I felt a strange mixture of comfort and alarm at dealing once more with water, if only the tiny amounts in this wet trench.

As for the crocs, I could deal with one or two of them easily enough waterborne, but en masse I wouldn't stand

a chance. Everything would depend on the quick shooting of the guards on the banks.

Brennan smiled up. "Okay!" he shouted. "Into the deep end on Christmas Day!" He dived in with hardly a splash.

With strong overarm motions and a strong trudging of his feet, he knifed through the water. To me, the very actions of swimming like that, half in and half out of water, smacked of the quaint and unscientific. Brennan reached halfway, then the nearest crocodile nosed in with a sudden flick of tail, and Pomfret steamed the water around him into a broiling bath. The croc disappeared.

But the trouble started then; the damage had been done.

The Farley Express boiled off vast quantities of steam. We couldn't see Brennan as Pomfret and I, forced now to fire at anything, set up a barrier against the reptiles.

Then over the frying-pan hiss and the squeals and the bubbling boiling sounds, Brennan's strong hail reached us: "Okay! Cease fire! I'm across."

We waited five minutes for the water to cool down.

Then, in a similar though better managed way, Phoebe went across.

Then Pomfret went across with his gun and Brennan could join in from the far side with the Creighton Eighty Phoebe'd brought. I'd forseen the problem of that; how to get the gun across without taking the chance of not being able to hurl it thirty yards. The tricky business would come when I took my Farley across. The Creightons just didn't pack the same all-inclusive punch—though they didn't heat up the water in the same way.

Lottie and I were left on the bank, with the policemen fiercely arguing among themselves. Some wanted

to cross as we had, one or two even had joined in with the guarding guns; others, it was quite clear, wished to walk around the canal. I believe that some of them now thought if they went far enough around they'd come across Baghdad, miraculously appearing from the horizon, just as they had left it.

Charlie said, "I'll wait for you, sir."

I nodded. "Good man. With you running interference I feel much happier."

Lottie looked enchanting, ready to plunge in. I smiled reassuringly at her. "Just start swimming and keep on swimming in a straight line, across to George. Don't let anything distract you, got it?"

She looked doubtful. Then she said, "I'm not a very good swimmer. I'm a strictly non-wet swimsuit gal. Pin-ups, not piscean, I've been told."

"Can you swim as far as the other bank, for God's sake?"

"I—I think so."

"Now she tells me!"

"Well, you needn't be so unpleasant, Bert."

"Well, you needn't be—oh, go on! Get in there and swim!"

She jumped in and started off, her white limbs splashing a great deal. The crocs, their numbers not appreciably diminished, started their attack at once. Those who attacked now did so under their habitual urge to eat whatever morsel happened along; they didn't learn from what had happened before. Those who had learned were dead.

Then Lottie's white limbs started to thrash in a very familiar and ugly way and she ceased to make progress forward. Her frightened shout reached me over the hiss and roiling of super-heated steam.

"Help! Bert—I'm drowning!"

Poor swimmers in trouble always assume the worst. I snapped at Charlie: "Keep the crocs off, Charlie," hurled him my gun and took a running leap into the canal.

Even in that moment of terror with a beautiful girl screaming wildly and drowning, with crocodiles swirling in with hungry eyes and greedy jaws, with the stunning crash of gunfire in my ears, even then I felt the water close around me like a mother's embrace.

Without my fins I couldn't hope to match the speeds attainable at home, but I made the short distance to Lottie in no time at all. I came up from beneath her, grabbed her around the waist and shoved her head up out of the water.

She went limp in my arm. I ducked my head down again into the element in which it belonged and looked around. The silver sky here was broken and boiling off, shards and shafts of blistering heat lashing through to destroy the segmented bodies of crocodiles. I drew the knife I had thoughtfully carried since the Baghdad hotel.

Whether Charlie was not a very good shot, or whether the crocs were at last learning, I didn't know. But they began to slide in deep and fast.

I saw the first come paddling up with lashing tail, his jaws agape, skimming over the bottom of the canal. He jerked up with that savage sideways-twisting motion of crocs that is so disconcerting to those who have never experienced it.

We new aquamen have grown accustomed on our farms and factories in the oceans to look after ourselves against far more fearsome monsters than mere crocodiles; but I confess that, burdened as I was with a helpless girl, I did not relish this as a fair fight.

My underwater breathing kept nice and steady as,

with my left hand still supporting Lottie, I turned about to meet the croc's rush. He came in confidently. At the last minute I lunged sideways, dragging Lottie with me, and drawing the knife deeply down the croc's belly, released a gouting flood of blood into the water. Without a pause I kicked hard and pushed us both away from the cloying mess. We had to clear that area fast. Otherwise, blinded and unable to see, we'd be easy prey for the next crocodile.

Through the water the steady detonations of shell-bursts reached me as a pattering drumming. I hoped the policemen had reinforced the guard. The second croc, more wary than the first, incensed by the blood, tried to pounce from the other side.

I gave Lottie a shove, stuck my head out of the water close to her ear, and yelled, "Float on your back! I'll not be long!"

Then I kicked downward hard and at the last moment avoided the gaping jaws with their rows of crunching teeth and hooked my left arm around the beast's foreleg and neck. Half astride him upside down I could plunge the knife in deeply in a frenzied repetition. Then I vaulted free and kicked the loggy body down. The croc rolled and eddied in a mass of blood. I avoided breathing the muck in and shot for the sky again.

Lottie was barely awash, her body looping down and her feet and hands paddling doglike, pathetically.

When I grabbed her up and started to swim in earnest she relaxed and seemed to understand that I knew what I was doing.

Personally, I felt far from satisfied in my own element. Aquamen are naturally proud of their prowess underwater and as the new men, harbingers of good living to the worlds of the system, we fancy ourselves as a cut

above ordinary men. Aquamen are the élite of the human beings of the system. Or so we believe. Yet I could imagine the derisive grins that would greet me if I ever told the story of this little shambles.

When we reached the far bank Pomfret, agonized for Lottie, helped us out. He grabbed her and held her in his arms, patting her back, smoothing her soaked golden red hair, mumbling about the terrible time he'd had waiting for her. I laughed at him. I felt it to be a mean action, but my annoyance with myself had to be assauged somehow.

Brennan was still gaping at me with a foolish stare.

Pomfret looked up to say, "Thanks, Bert. Thanks a lot– Oh, Hall! You didn't know Bert was an aquaman? Oh, well, they're almost human."

"Churl!" I growled at him.

Our reactions, although childish, were quite normal. When Charlie came stumping up out of the water with our sopping wet clothes and the tail of a croc which he had used as a flail to lay about him as he crossed, we laughed at that, too. The nearness of Khamushkei the Undying unnerved us all. We sought refuge from our fears in flippancy and idiotic repartee.

Neither Pomfret nor Brennan could break down in front of their women, and the two girls had obviously a personal feud in chin-up-womanship going on. As for me, well, simply put, an aquaman, being a cut above drylanders, just couldn't be seen not to be superior.

Well, I mean to say–aquamen *are* superior, aren't they?

On the far bank the policemen still had not decided what to do. I could sympathize well enough.

"Come on, troops." Brennan, dressed once more in his khaki shirt and trousers, motioned us forward. We all

began to march away from the canal. The authority of the policemen had vanished the moment we had time-jumped and now they viewed the departure of their prisoners without the faintest interest. They had the problems of the crocodiles to face. I promised myself not to forget them.

In a little band we marched on southwest, bedraggled and weary, but determined. Somewhere ahead of us over the horizon lay the Time Vault of Khamushkei the Undying.

One time or another, we'd get there.

XIII

THEN FOLLOWED an odd, mixed-up interlude when we seemed to be time-jumping never-endingly. The Time Beast reacted with frantic sensitiveness to our dogged determination to march forward on the line that would bring us to his Time Vault. Nothing mattered now but the slogging onward march, over cultivated fields, over deserts, through glacier-sliding mountains, through the shrilling war-trumpets' sound skirling over gory battle-fields. Only my aquaman's cunning enabled us to survive during a watery period when the Flood covered the land.

During this phase Charlie, sinking to the bottom, regained our company on the next transition.

Then, even after these breathtaking gyrations through time, we unexpectedly recovered from the slashing din of a time transference to see all about us the steel and

plastic, the glass and concrete monoliths of a giant and futuristic city.

We stood on an overhead boulevard, clinging to the rails as strange shining vehicles swept past us in a transparent tube. The air smelled of freshly laundered linen. The sky's blueness came down to us filtered through a geometrically designed globe.

"This is obviously the future!" shouted Phoebe, holding her hair which blew tendrils about her cheeks.

"How exciting!"

"Look at those buildings! Poised on nothing!"

The rushing, blowing sense of purpose and smoothly-oiled machinery entranced us as we stared out on the future of this dusty corner of the world.

"I vote we use the future to help us against the Time Beast," said Brennan, eagerly inspecting a small kiosk with a button-covered panel.

"If this is the future," Phoebe said, "it means we've won. Khamushkei the Undying can't have destroyed the world!"

"That's right!" said Lottie, delighted.

I pointed to one of the shining cars flashing past.

"Look in there."

They looked. The beings sitting in the cars had not been born on this Earth, or, if they had, then they were no spawn of Homo sapiens.

"My God!" said Pomfret. "What the hell are they?"

"They're either visitors from some other planet," I said with cold comfort, "or they're the next life-form along who took over from us. Let's get on, for Pete's sake!"

Somehow Brennan stopped a car. We climbed in. The sense of being trapped made me hold myself rigid. The car started off—going southwest.

In the moment of starting we saw familiar shapes, iron-booted, swarming up a moving stairway. They plunged over into the transparent tube. Our car hissed past them. Looking back through the rear window I saw the iron-booted monsters, denizens of this place, perhaps, summon a second car and board it. They set off in pursuit.

"Can't you make this thing go any faster, Hall?" begged Phoebe, clasping her hands.

"I'll tickle them up with the old Farley," said Pomfret, grimly. He pushed the gun muzzle through the window, holding it steady against the slipstream, and pressed the trigger.

The frying-pan hiss of the positronic incoherer sizzled out. We saw the beam hit the following car.

But—the car remained within the transparent tube. It bore on after us. Steadily, undamaged, shrugging off all the awful power of the weapon, the car sped silently on.

"It doesn't work!" yelled Pomfret, shattered.

"These future boys build in good materials," I said.

"Our only hope is going southwest. . . ."

The following car, unquestionably driven by remote intelligences and not the iron-booted monsters within it, increased speed. Somehow, I knew that unless we made some overtly more hostile move against Khamushkei the Undying, this time keeping on course would not be enough.

Out of the tenseness of the moment, the apparently undramatic sight of two futuristic cars hurtling down a transparent tube through a dream-city of the future, I glimpsed part of the answer.

"Hall!" I shouted. The others' faces swung toward me like flowers to the sun. They expected I knew not what.

"Hand over the translation of the seven curses on the tablet we found in the globe. Quick!"

Brennan complied without an instant's hesitation.

The still-damp paper retained its wet-strength characteristics. I started at the top and, reading in a high, shrill, incanting voice, I began to read. I have no doubts at all that the others thought I had at last thrown my switch. What I read, I had no idea; the words meant nothing, mere processions of sounds. I felt the full roundness of vowels and the splintering of consonants. I read loudly, shouting, defiantly hopeful.

Within the space of three lines the car seemed to somersault. I caught an upside-down view of the following car with its iron-boots, now touching the rear of our car, circling around us. I knew the car had not turned upside down, for the transparent tube remained intact; so the seeming somersault was that, seeming only. Yet the vertiginous sensations persisted.

Joined together, the two cars traveled in a phantom universe of their own. Around us, clearly visible, at first cutting through the road and the tube and the passing buildings, the globular shell of violet radiance encompassed; then, gradually, taking over the outside, so that the two cars rested within that purple bubble.

"A time bubble's got us!" yelled Phoebe.

"And the iron-boots!" seconded Pomfret, fiddling with his gun as though it had bitten him.

In my wrought up state I considered both statements to prove the fatuousness of drynecks. I stopped reading and shoved the paper into the pocket of my gray slacks. If the art of living is not to grow bored then we were living life to the full. When next?

Colors, streaks, swirls of radiance, lances of fire, pinwheels of coruscations exploded all about and, it seemed

to me, imploded into the inside of my skull. My head rang.

All forward movement of the two cars had ceased the moment they left the transparent tube.

We clung to each other, using Charlie as the center prop again. His oily body smelt familiarly comforting.

"This is a big one," said Brennan.

"Khamushkei the Undying must have panicked again!" Pomfret hallooed in my ear. "What d'you stop reading for, Bert? It has the old blighter worried!"

"Wait until we see where and when we land at."

Although unaware of motion since the tube had been left, we knew because we were encircled by a violet time bubble that we were also moving in space. When the car jolted a little, as though adjusting to a fresh ground surface and the purple sphere disappeared, we waited, limply for this fresh shock.

In that tiny fraction of timelessness before I appreciated where we were I hardened my opinion about the Time Beast's panic. So easily could I be wrong, so trustfully could I fall into the trap; but I now felt absolutely confident that Khamushkei the Undying was so badly shaken by our puny efforts that he reacted without thought, without sense, as an idiot, smashing out at the slightest sign of opposition.

The violet shell vanished. The two cars, released from the magnetic hold on them, rolled over, tipping both us and the iron boots into two heaps. Struggling out onto crisp green grass I saw a familiar although recently encountered sight.

We were on the lawns outside Gannets.

At once the iron boots, without a sign that we existed, began to run in their clumping fashion toward the house.

"Gannets!" yelled Brennan. His face looked flushed. "It is, isn't it?"

"Yes," confirmed Pomfret. He squinted up at the old house leaning its yellow-gray walls into a soft breeze, the blue roofs afloat on the evening.

"Although," he sounded doubtful, "although half the north wing is missing. And the heli carpark doesn't seem to be where I recall."

We began to walk up toward the house, our feet crisp on the raked gravel.

An elaborately carved coach drawn by two magnificent gray horses swept with a rattle and a jingle out from the main porch of the house. The coachmen wore wigs. As we jumped into the shrubbery I looked back. In the coach, like an exhibition in a waxworks, sat a man and woman, gorgeous in late eighteenth century clothes, all red and gold and ivory. Their powdered hair shone silver. Elegance, a grandness, breathed from them.

"We'd best get up to the house sharpish," I said. "Rapiers and duelling pistols won't be much good against our iron-booted chums."

As we neared the house strains of music beat out into the evening air. We crept up to peer through the long windows of the ballroom.

At once I thought of my reactions on first seeing the ballroom at Gannets.

Great ball-gowns, flower sprigged, satins and silks, dazzling colors, powder and patches, fans and feathers, tiny shoes lost amid a profusion of swaying skirts.

Many buttoned coats, long and elegantly brocaded, enormous pockets, huge cuffs, lace handkerchiefs displayed by elegant turns of wrists, perukes and powder, square buckled shoes, a beefiness of face.

A string orchestra, scraping and bowing.

A minuet—a gavotte; even, bowing to the wishes of the elders, a coranto.

"Charming, charming," breathed Phoebe, staring in through the windows, lost in admiration.

"Another age, and yet a part of our age," said Brennan. "It's not like a film set, not at all. There's life there, animation, and everything on so small a scale!"

"Enchanting," said good old George. He meant it, too. No one, the French Revolution apart, could fail to feel a quickened heartbeat, a response of great affection and pity for that gay, silvery, laughing world follying toward its destiny.

The ground shook, the evening sky darkened and blazed again with sunlight.

Through the windows of the ballroom the dancers had gone, vanished along with the Assyrian's chariots, the crumbled Akkadian cities, the gentle civilization of the Flower People. Now we looked on a scene of apparent confusion. Bed after bed occupied the whole floor. Nurses in white caps and blue or gray dresses brushing the floor moved about carrying white enamel basins, blue rimmed.

A man stood close beside us. His young face showed the ravages of great fear and terrible strain. His eyes looked like bruised plums. He wore a khaki tunic, the buttons in a wedge-shape to his shoulders, open. On his breast were embroidered wings, the letters: R.F.C.

"So Gannets was a hospital—" Phoebe had time to murmur before the ground shook once more and the detritus of the Kaiser's war vanished.

This time, still in the same spot, we looked into a meeting in progress in Gannets' ballroom. Decorative changes had made of the austerely elegant eighteenth century room a pine-paneled monstrosity. Men at a table

set on a dais hammered the table, argued, hurled abuse at the rows of doggedly-determined countrymen and women sitting before them.

"This must be the World Federation Great Debate of the twenty-first century!" said Pomfret. "Men argued like this all over the world. Nowadays you can't imagine what on earth they had to argue about, the world couldn't have gone on split up into stupid warring little nations for much longer."

"I'm more interested in what Khamushkei the Undying is up to," grunted Brennan. "What's he doing, shunting us through time like this?"

About to answer, I paused to let Phoebe say, "That's obvious, darling! He's looking for the tablet!"

"Or his iron-boots are," I added.

"Yes, but!" protested Brennan. Then he, too, saw the logic of it. "Of course! If he can smash up that tablet then we won't have the words to put him back in his vault." He chuckled. "It'll form a time-paradox, which we've been spared so far, but it would work!"

"It would work," Phoebe said grimly.

"Here we go again!" said Lottie, gripping Pomfret's arm.

The sensation of peering in through the windows and watching the time-changes within the room beyond resembled that of trick film, where a room is furnished and changed by stopping the film while the alterations are made.

Apart from the orderliness of the room and the absence of effects brought down for the auction and those rows of gilded chairs and their gilded occupants, the room as I now saw it resembled exactly the room as I had first seen it with George Pomfret as we had walked in for the auction. I had no time to dwell on all the

things that had happened since then as Brennan grasped my arm.

"Coming up the drive!" he said, hard and edgily. I turned to look.

A chauffeur driven, old-fashioned model heli had landed and while the chauffeur took the machine to the garage the owner of this place walked toward his front door. He carried a leather briefcase. He look tanned and fit, a younger edition of the strangely brooding man who glowered down from the portrait I had seen.

"That's Vasil Stannard!" said Pomfret. "But younger than his portrait—"

"And," said Brennan viciously, "the tablet is in that briefcase! It's got to be!"

From the bushes to Stannard's rear burst a single iron-booted monster. He pounced in a lethal near-silent dash of fur and fury. Before his boots crunched the gravel Pomfret's bacon-and-eggs hissing Farley snuffed the thing out of existence.

The pounce, the shot, happened in a twinkling.

Stannard turned, half-puzzled, his left hand gripping the brief case, his right still fumbling for a key.

"Oh, good shooting, George!" Brennan was saying as the world swayed, blackened, spun dizzily into another time sequence.

Once again evening lay across the countryside. Orange light glowed from the long windows of Gannets. Sounds of an orchestra bloomed into the evening air; tunes popular thirty years ago. Through the windows we could see a ball in progress; men and women in gay costumes paraded, danced, drank and lounged. The feeling of happiness, of leisure, pervaded us with a longing for a life that belonged to an age of innocence—the age before we had known of Khamushkei the Undying.

"It's a fancy dress ball!" said Phoebe.

"How dishy!" said Lottie, staring eagerly.

"And look at that Assyrian king! That's Vasil Stannard—he must be wearing some of the finds he dug up!" Brennan's eyes repected the light. "He's lording it in there as he imagines Assurbanipal might! What colossal effrontery!"

"He's having a good time," said Pomfret. "From all I've heard he didn't have a happy life."

"Well, he's living it up now." Phoebe indicated a figure nearer to us. "And lookit that one! If I didn't know any better I'd guess he was a—"

Brennan cut her off sharply. "You don't know any better, darling!" He motioned to me, saying to Phoebe, "He is! Bert—we've got to get in there!"

The man about whom they were talking moved then, a stiff-legged gait hampered by the heavy ankle-length garments he wore, their tassels brushing the floor. Clad in brightly colored woollen wrap-around clothes, he carried on his back many-feathered wings, fan-shaped, moving. His head was covered by an eagle's mask, all cruel hooked beak and glittering eye, extraordinarily life-like on a mammoth scale. He represented, clearly, a winged genie with an eagle's head, complete with the pointed cone and the so-called lustral water, in reality the agent for tree-fertilization. His fancy dress costume, in keeping with the Assyrian motif of his host, was very fine indeed—

"He's not wearing fancy dress!" Pomfret, too, fell in.

"Oh, no!" Phoebe breathed. "He's *real!*"

"Around the back, fast!" snapped Brennan. We all began to run around to the rear of the house. The feeling we should stick together motivated our gregarious fear.

At a back door Charlie went straight through. His sleek

metal anonymity would carry him through the best dressed costume party in the system. Only his ugly face told us he was our Charlie.

Inside the lobby I was all for pushing straight on through. A man and woman sitting on the floor indulging in the preliminaries to full-scale sex later on looked at us as though we'd crawled out of the sewer. Brennan did not share my viewpoint.

Quite calmly he hit the man on the head, knocking him out. The fellow wore a Samson costume and the girl a Delilah. With the speed of dream Brennan donned the leopard skin, Phoebe the diamonds and feathers. The girl's astonished face stared at us.

"Dont worry, doll," said Brennan. "Stay here and you won't get hurt. This is for real."

They were about to leave when the door opened and a man wearing a blue and yellow checkerboard-painted helmet staggered in, waving a bottle, hiccoughing.

"Grab him, Bert!" snapped Brennan. "He's yours. Follow as soon as you can. George—you and Lottie look enough in fancy dress. You can be a pair of big-game hunters who were mauled. Come on."

I knew the urgency of the moment, but I let out a feeble protest as they raced through the far door into the interior of Gannets. The man wearing the helmet goggled at me. I took his helmet off—the classical Corinthian shape smooth beneath my hands—and knocked him out. He was happy to relapse into unconsciousness. Taking his blue cloak and fastening the golden chains I reflected that although we were jumping about in time what had to be done could only be done by Khamushkei the Undying in moments when we were not there to stop him. Every time he moved one of his agents to attack he moved us along with him.

That ironic thought made me clap the helmet on my head and dash through the door. If our party was split now one half would be left in this time, and the other would be forced to tackle the Time Beast alone. I ran.

Many people wandered the spacious halls and rooms of Gannets. The sound of laughter and music, the exotic tingles of expensive perfumes, the rustle of rich dresses and the electric atmosphere of party excitement uplifted the imagination. I could feel at home in a strange xenophobic way here, consciously aware that this atmosphere was a fraud and sham and yet relishing it for its lift.

At the entrance to the ballroom where a fanfare of music struck me on the final wild posturings of some local dance, Phoebe pushed toward me. She looked tense.

"They went toward the library. Hall couldn't shoot in there." She nodded her head at the ballroom's crowd. The orchestra struck up the Gay Gordons. She took my hand and with a reciprocal movement from the floor we went away down the corridor. "The library's down here, I think—" She looked at me and I saw how her lips trembled. "Oh, Bert! I keep thinking of that doll's house and—and—"

"Did you tell Hall?"

"Yes. He couldn't believe it was Lottie. But we know!"

"Let's deal with this one as it comes up, Phoebe. We're not dead yet."

In the library Brennan and Pomfret were looking at the globe we had last seen in Pomfret's own villa. Lottie stood by the door, nervously gnawing a thumb until she saw us. Of the winged genie there was no sign. There was a smell of charring on the air.

"We got him, Bert. But I can't get over this globe, here, with the tablet in it—when all the time—"

"I know." I cut Pomfret off. "Khamushkei the Undying must try again. He's got to."

The door opened again, catching us all unawares, and Assurbanipal strode in. He checked at once, looking at us with first a surprised air and then, as the gun appeared in his fist, with a hard cold look of hatred.

"Caught you at it, have I? At last! Good. We'll just have the police in on this." He went toward the phone.

Brennan took the initiative.

"Just a moment, Stannard!" I admired the amount of sheer authority Hall Brennan injected into his voice. "Don't go off half-cocked. You don't know what this is all about. We do." He put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a package. "Look at this. Then look at your globe. Then start to think."

Brennan unwrapped the parcel and showed the tablet to Stannard. The man lost his composure. Tough-faced, a disciplinarian, master of many men and much money, the ruler of a vast industrial empire, Vasil Stannard shook his head in disbelief.

"I only put it in there a week ago—and the globe is untouched. That's obvious. It's an old one—you couldn't have got the tablet out—"

"Don't babble man!" Brennan handled himself with fire and iron. "We know what this tablet is all about." Then he explained, briefly, what had been going on. I was not surprised at the reaction of Stannard. He came alert. Like a shark sensing the dying struggles of its prey, he quivered into action.

"Then if we don't shut this alien monster back into his Time Vault—"

"Yes."

"Well, you can count on me." Stannard's rugged face showed now just how he had won success in life. "I

haven't had a good fight in years. But to have the luck to go up against an alien Time Beast! Oh, ho—"

Just then the floor shook, and the lights flared through a chiaroscuro of brilliance; although we still stood in Stannard's library we knew we had time-jumped.

Stannard did not; but he guessed at once.

"The library! It's—it's changed! It's as it was, oh, twenty years ago— We've gone back through time!"

The idea struck me that we were the ones who showed the wrong reactions; of course anyone should be amazed that they had traveled in time and only our familiarity with Khamushkei the Undying's time-jumping prodigies made us so matter-of-fact. Stannard, although shaken, was much intrigued, running about and remembering various joys of twenty years ago.

"This means the ould divil's having another go," pointed out Phoebe. Her face lacked the animation that had so warmly attracted me and I felt an unwelcome fear that she was growing weary of this continual pressure of fear and action and suspense. If we lost this fight with Khamushkei's agents, and the tablet was destroyed, all hope of restraining the Time Beast would be gone—and we, ourselves, would be marooned in time.

The library doorknob turned. At once we sprang into the shadows of the far end, half-concealed by a projecting bookcase. Charlie clanked and Pomfret cursed him: "Get some oil, Charlie!"

"Yes, boss—"

The door opened and Vasil Stannard walked in—twenty years younger than the man who stood open-mouthed and utterly smashed beside us. His jaw quivered. Then he managed to say in a frog-croak: "That's me!"

Following this younger Stannard came the expected

agent of destruction motivated by the distant Time Beast in his Vault of Time buried beneath the sands.

The young Stannard turned, falling back with upflung arms, a cry of horror bursting from him. At once Brennan stepped forward and slogged a quick burst from his Creighton Eighty into the iron-booted monster. Before, almost at the same time, so quick was the transition, the room quivered and lights flickered in a time transition.

"I—" gulped Stannard. "I remember that!"

We stood in his library with the knowledge that Khamushkei the Undying was even now trying once more with another agent to smash the tablet. We tensed.

"He can't slip a killer in, now, without dragging us along with it," said Brennan. "My God! This could go on for—"

"For a damn long time!" I said. "Knock it off, Hall! We've got to think of a way to break the stalemate."

Perhaps, I was thinking, looking covertly at Lottie and her red-gold hair and the white beauty of her, perhaps we could time-loop in some way, so that she would never be pursued down the picture gallery—perhaps there would never be discovered a headless girl's body in a Bennet commode. . . .

The iron-boots Brennan had shot lay disgustingly on the carpet having been dragged with us through the time-jump and now, with a single clean flare, Farley-power disposed of it. Only a charring hung in the air and a blackening of the carpet. "My housekeeper never did figure out what that was," said Stannard. "We're on about five years. If I'm right—"

Before he finished speaking we heard the hoarse panting of a man and the frenzied scrabbling at the door and then, the door opening with a bang, Stannard burst

in to go at once to a drawer of his desk. The drawer was only half open and the gun within only half out, when an eagle-headed winged genie flapped heavily in.

Just whose gun vaporized the thing I couldn't be sure. A cone of lethal radiations focused on it—and then it was gone.

"I never thought I was going to get to that gun in time," Stannard said, looking at himself. The floor shook. "I suppose we're off again!"

As we time-jumped I found the riddle growing more urgent. There just had to be a way to halt this, to crack through to Khamushkei. As Brennan had said, this attempt on the Time Beast's part to smash the tablet and our automatic accompaniment could go on for a long time. . . .

We had had enough of Khamushkei the Undying's time-jumping. As the library once more steadied about us and Vasil Stannard began to exclaim about the date, I made for the door.

"Where away, Bert?" Brennan followed. "We know the tablet's here. K the U has got to send his thing here—"

"Keep Lottie here. I think the whole house will carry me along in a time-change; the things are obviously outside somewhere, probably hanging around the smashed car from the future city." I opened the door. "I'll be quite all right if I stick to an iron-boots!"

Pomfret, quickly, said, "If that's so I don't think we ought to keep Lottie—or Phoebe—here!"

"Yes, yes, George." I said with a flashing return to my normal irritability. "I just meant keep her out of the way of the iron-boots."

"I'm inclined to agree they're coming in from those who came with us in those futuristic cars," said Brennan. "So you'll stick with us in time fluctuations, Bert. But—"

"There's no time for buts!" The floor shook and the lights flared. "See!"

I ran outside. A monster came at me along the corridor and I blasted it in a reflex action. The time had long since passed when qualms of killing these time-spawned agents of destruction had slowed my hand. Outside in the grounds a brilliant yellow moon cast warm light everywhere and I could see the smashed cars with the occupants of the second climbing out. For them—for us—this experience was a simple time-sequence, a linearly developed action. But for the real time of Gannets, we jumped in and out of the chronological flow like a shuttle in a loom.

The solution had become obvious. I ran over the grass toward the cars. The Farley Express blazed positronic incoherence before me. When that unpleasant task had been finished I turned back to the house.

Clearly against the lights in an upper room I saw framed the silhouette of a girl—a girl screaming in terror as an iron-booted monster lunged for her.

XIV

THAT GIRL COULD BE Lottie, she could be Phoebe, she could be a guest in the house, and unknown to me. Already I had lost Ishphru through my own stupidity; for the sake of George Pomfret and Hall Brennan I would not make the same mistake again.

Hardly aware of running I found myself shaken and blinded as a time-change deluged the area with dis-

torted images. I went up a drainpipe like a professional burglar. A window had been smashed in, clear indication I was on the trail of a monster. I jumped to the floor of the room beyond, seeing the tumbled suits of armor, the piles and halberds fallen like mown corn, the muskets and Lee Enfields strewn like a spilled box of matches. Beyond the far door, I thought, lay the picture gallery, and beyond that the long gallery. I ran through both seeing not a soul. The pictures hung all in place where last I had seen only empty spaces; the chests and commodes stood beneath their windows. The sensation was eerie.

A flickering insubstantiality took possession of the rooms and furnishings. A man appeared at the foot of the stairs and rushed up and past me with the speed of a demented satellite. I stopped to look back, astonished, and a woman and a robot carrying linen hurtled down the stairs to vanish into the serving quarters below.

A chair against which I halted, with one hand on the back to support myself, suddenly vanished and was replaced with a mahogany table. The lights flickered on and off so rapidly that a half-light glow was maintained. Pictures changed. Chandeliers fell and were replaced. Wallpaper and furnishings altered.

The most frightening impression of all, like the earthquake at Borsuppak, remained the very insubstantial quality of experience. Nothing I saw remained itself.

More people rushed past me. I saw Vasil Stannard himself, often, and another man whose authoritative movements and the style of furnishings he adopted convinced me must be Lester Northrop, the last occupant of Gannets.

I realized what was happening, although understanding scarcely lessened my apprehension. Khamushkei the

Undying, balked in his attempts to smash the tablet by always finding one of us between the tablet and his agent, had now resorted to a blinding whirlwind chiaroscuro. Frenzied and panicked, he clashed his timelines. By the very speed and multiplicity of time-jumps, he would get a monster past us and smash the tablet.

I went down the stairs and toward the ballroom, understanding now that my comrades and I, and the remaining monsters, would travel through time in a straight line together. Around us chronological time corkscrewed into loops and knots. We went on. I crashed through the door and half stumbled over a table that disappeared even as I fell. I clawed up and scuttled to the side.

The iron-booted monster's slashing spike missed my stomach by a boot-sole.

It bore in, its red eyes piggy with hate.

I jerked up the Farley and a cunningly slashing spike knocked it from my hand. It fell to slide across the polished floor and disappear into the grille of an air-conditioning output set in the oak wainscoting.

The iron-boots had me at its mercy now!

I scrabbled away. I could taste the fear sickening in my mouth. Around us the ballroom changed, great occasions were held, routs and balls, funerals took place, ceremonies of all kinds. Then, as I danced away from another spiked rush, wondering how long I could hold out, with no chance of getting back to that tantalizing grille, the ballroom abruptly filled with all the objects brought in from other rooms of the house.

Rushing away from the beast I could understand how no one here could see us; for them we existed for only a heartbeat, then we would be gone along the vistas of time.

I stood behind an extended scroll of the stairway and panted for breath, seeing the iron-boots stalking toward me. It looked like a confident fat cat torturing a mouse.

About to break away to the side I was roughly thrown back by an abruptly appearing cavalry group. I whirled. On my other side a suit of Milanese armor hemmed me in. I could not escape. I backed up, seeing the monster advancing, feeling the blood bursting in my head.

I stared—and I stared at myself staring at myself!

Then the image of myself as I had been, carefree, casually visiting an auction with a friend, vanished.

I remembered—and I remembered what was to come!

The statues and the suit vanished. I ran, panting like a wounded stag. Up the stairs, four at a time, through the long gallery with the thing pounding at my heels. I had to get past it and back to my friends with their weapons.

Four times I did a quick duck back and four times the thing shot out a boot or a talon and nearly disconnected me.

In the armory room beyond the picture gallery the armor and weapons had been taken away. I slammed the door. The monster could break that down with ease, but at least I had respite to gulp a few lungfuls of air. The door shook. Then, instead of the beast's continued attack, I heard its iron boots padding away, clanging dully on the old wooden floor. Cautiously I eased the door ajar.

This—this I had expected and winced from; this had haunted me.

Lottie screamed. She ran towards me, away from the long gallery and away from the iron-boots. I jumped out, knowing that I must help. Her mouth opened, gasping. Then the monster caught her, his talons and spiked boots slashing and ripping. Her clothes tore. Naked, yell-

ing, she ducked under a raking claw and ran shrieking down the picture gallery.

I started after them, running fast.

At the third window I could see Phoebe and myself, staring with faces frozen in shock. As I urged myself to run more fleetly, Phoebe and I disappeared, leaving me to pursue the beast and Lottie out through the long gallery.

No time, now, to think back to that other moment of horror.

Tackling those crocodiles had scared me silly; and they would be small fry beside that iron-boots ahead. The knife that had dispatched the crocs felt slick with sweat in my hand. I ran desperately, gulping air.

Click, click, click, went our progression through time. In moments agonizedly drawn-out for us, the people living in this house passed whole months, years. We would settle down for a heartbeat, seen as ghostly apparitions by the Gannets people, and then vanish. No wonder this house had drawn legends and horrible stories about itself!

Lottie ran out onto the landing atop the stairs. The beast followed, slavering. To me, with thoughts of that headless torso rolling from the chest, every moment held the torturing impact of a white-hot iron.

Somewhere in this house on our time-line Brennan and Pomfret, Phoebe and Charlie, must be searching for Lottie. Why, I cursed luridly, why the hell hadn't they found her?

Then I hurled myself on the iron-booted monster's back.

The thing stank.

I grasped knotted greasy hair in my left fist and plunged the knife again and again into the beast's side,

feeling the point scrape on bone, trying to strike deeply enough to finish this ghastly episode quickly. I felt no pride, no battle-joy, only disgust and nausea.

The thing screeched like a ruptured high-pressure steam boiler.

With enormous strength it twisted around, trying to claw at me. I felt white-hot pincers claw down my side. I hung on, sweat and blood clogging my grip, my eyes stinging, throat dry, a roaring from inside my head deafening me. The thing thrashed about. My grasp slipped, a great knot of furred hide ripped away. I was flung heavily to the floor.

A yard or so to the side of the head of the stairs lay a small, low door, paneled in rich mahogany the color of old blood. Sprawled on the floor, the knife lost, embedded in the monster's side, I glared up at the thing as it lurched toward me. Blood clotted everything. Lottie fled screaming down the stairs, her hands clutching her hair. The beast struck.

Jerking back, I managed to ride some of the force of that iron-booted blow. The low mahogany doors opened and I fell through. My head hit rails. My helmet, forgotten until now, slipped off to roll in a mad amalgam of blue and yellow checks and crimson blood. Face twisted down, limp and breathless, I looked down on myself looking up.

From the musicians' gallery I looked down on myself looking up at myself looking down.

I tried to speak, to answer the questions I put myself; but I could not. Any second the monster would rake in like a fireman scraping out a boiler—like a lump of kebab meat I would be spiked out.

The flashing glitter, the pains, the lights, the supersonic booms and rocket exhaust roar clangored in my

head. Everything shook and I, myself, shook as a central part of this transformation.

Something different about this time-change warned me not to expect what I might have expected.

Violet incrustations of light like writhing cornices of fire confirmed that guess. Enclosed in a distorted time bubble I felt myself toppling helplessly over and over into oblivion.

The steel floor beneath my hands and knees struck cold.

As the violet intrusions of light dimmed and vanished I moved. My hand knocked against an object and I looked down to see a compact—a compact old and tarnished and caked with the hard rime of vanished powder.

Then I knew that I had at last reached the Time Vault of Khamushkei the Undying in the here and now.

I pushed up to stand, swaying, staring around in that colossal room. Everything looked exactly as it had done when I had visited here before—visited here—the stark metal, the brooding silence, the sensation of awful pent-up energies confined beyond that metal curtain.

The aged ruin of the compact spoke eleoquently of the passage of time since Lottie had dropped it—so short a time ago. I turned around, slowly, to look for the two enigmatical flames, one yellow, one pink, that had glowed with such reassurance.

Shock took me. And I think that then I understood, even before final comprehension made me fully aware—the two flames, the rose and the yellow, had shrunk. Small, they moved as though painfully, undulating in an unfelt wind whose chill breath blew over the horizon of time itself.

From the union of Khamushkei the Undying and Anklo

the Desired had sprung the twins Mummusu and Shoshusu, the most beautiful girl and boy the world had ever seen. Now, reduced by their seven thousand year vigil, worn and tired, exhausted by the continuing effort to maintain bonds upon their father, the Time Beast, they had reached almost the end of their strength.

The flames sighed.

Words I could not understand soughed like bending boughs in autumn's gales. I stared at the two flames, their light low and pallid, with nothing left of that deep glow of serenity I had before found so comforting amid terrors.

A deep pity welled up in me. A feeling of profound indebtedness, of admiration and of guilt welded my own personal fate to that of the flame-twins. For I saw clearly now that if the twins failed, if the lights of Shoshusu and Mummusu were extinguished, then Khamushkei the Undying would have won and the world would have lost its identity and its life.

Like the rustling from inconceivably distant quasars across the womb of space and time the voices reached me, haunting, demanding, despairing.

The voices reached to me and into me without words; with the raw material of conceptual thought, a kind of empathic computer-code, I listened to the flame-twins.

Limited were their powers. They keened, fragile and easily thwarted, but they had tried, casting their nets of intrigue wide, subtly disturbing the time flows and in miniscule ways arranging the ticking of the universe contained within this world line. I was to understand much of our good fortune had been encompassed through their careful intervention. Now, when Khamushkei the Undying, their father, had in the present time dragged a time bubble back to this Time Vault to transfer more of his

agents to Gannets, they had successfully and secretly arranged for me to become a stowaway.

For, I was to understand, a human being's sacrifice and energy alone could restore their powers whose mystic fires could reforge the bonds chaining the Time Beast. I had sacrificed much, I caught the tendrils of conceptual thought entwining like art nouveau borders in my brain, much and much had my comrades suffered; but only through sacrifice and suffering could the great and enduring strengths of the world be created.

"What more do you wish to take from me?" I cried aloud. "My life?"

My words rang emptily in the great chamber and I became aware of the childish rhetoric of my words; my life would not weigh in the scales that had balanced for seven thousand years.

I thought—a trick of light, a change of angle—that the vast sheet of metal curtain hanging above the steps had moved. I turned to look. The curtain *had* moved!

Millimeter by millimeter it began to rise.

I knew, without question, without doubt, what lay beyond that curtain. The metal mass rose with a smooth and barely perceptible motion and the manner of its rising conveyed stealth and furtiveness and a hideous desire of the thing beyond to spring out in surprise.

Irrational though my thoughts were, dominated as they must be by the impact of the thought patterns of the ancient flame-twins, nevertheless a stubbornness held me erect. A sheerly bloody obstinacy prized my chin up and in remembering the Flower People and the fall of their world I resolved with all the stupidity and boneheadedness in me—I was quite beyond fear by now—that this world would treat Khamushkei the Undying in a different and less acquiescent fashion.

Full squarely I faced the rising curtain. The flames, one pink, the other yellow, rose higher, thinning, waving in short panicky vibrations. Just how those flames represented Shoshusu and Mummusu I could not say, nor could I say what mortal shape those ancient beings possessed. The sensation of a vast weight oppressing me suffocated my senses in that cavernous chamber.

The thoughts traced concepts in my mind: all the locks placed on the Time Beast had gone down and now only this last metal curtain containing within itself the seventh and incomplete curse remained. Steadily the mass rose. Another voice, another mind, another heart—the thoughts roiled in my head. *We are old and feeble, we have played our part and given our strength to check this evil which spawned us—old, tired—we need fresh life, fresh energy, fresh enthusiasm. . . .*

Fumbling I took the paper from my pocket, uncreasing it, smoothing it from the crumplings it had suffered when I had thrust it away so hastily in that futuristic car from that alien futuristic dream city. Man or alien? Perhaps that city's destiny would be decided now.

I began to read.

Even in English the curses rang rounded and full-bodied.

A shimmering seized the air. A clarion of gong-notes, diminishing, rippled the fabric of space about me. A mass of beast-shapes detached from the frieze, blindly began lumbering about, awakening, ready to rend and tear.

I read on, shaking, my hands trembling, and as I read I knew that it was not what I read that locked Khamush-kei the Undying back into his Time Vault. No mere words of mine could do that. But by my very presence, as another life-force, representing all those other life-

forces of my world, reading the words of power, Shoshusu and Mummusu, the true Guardians of the Vault, could once again perform their preordained function.

The tall solemn columns of flame, one yellow and one rose, grew and strengthened and took into themselves the sustenance of power with every syllable. Confidence grew in me, also. I read more boldly.

The metal moving mass halted.

The beasts, the lamassu and utukku, the griffins and the iron-boots from deepest inferno where Nergal and Ereshkigal reign in unholy deity, the slowly awakening mass of monsters from the frieze began to retrace their halting steps and once more to form part of a carved wall.

Strength and confidence returned once more to the world.

The metal curtain struck the topmost step with a dull and sullen clang like the lowermost gates of hell grinding shut on the devil himself.

The sour-sweet ozone-tasting air gushed back into the chamber. Emptied of reading, I let the paper fall to flutter and drop beside the corroded compact.

Like a fool, I thought we had won.

Then the thoughts of the flame-twins rode in again to my brain, strong now and wise with their acceptance of reality. The curse had not been completed by me, for had not the corner of the last curse been broken from the baked clay tablet? Had not the computer thus been unable to translate the ending of the final curse? And therefore was not Khamushkei the Undying once more only partially penned up?

As though in sarcastic confirmation the metal curtain shook, once, like a colossal gong reverberating through the chamber.

The thoughts from the flame-twins hurried on, telling me that they could return me to my own time, at the moment of time at which Khamushkei the Undying had first erupted into our lives—for my comrades too, could be reunited. Asking about those unfortunate Baghdad policemen I understood they, too, would be returned to their own accustomed time and place.

I made a small adjustment, asking that we be transferred not to the airplane over the middle east but to the safe familiarity of George Pomfret's room.

A last look around the Time Vault, a quick glance up those ebony steel steps to the metal curtain hanging in menacing folds over the secrets and horrors beyond, and I was ready. I nodded my head, and I understood the flame-twins, Shoshusu and Mummusu, offspring of Khamushkei the Undying and Anklo the Desired, to say thank you—and then the violet shell enveloped me and the world swayed and—

"It's Bert! Bert! Where the hell have you been?"

"I haven't quite been there," I said, looking about at Pomfret's room, where my globe still showed just split open. "But almost."

Pomfret seized my hand. Lottie, whose ravishing face showed the red-eyed and lumpy ugliness of fair-skinned women who have been crying, ran over to kiss me. They had been back some time, dispatched by the flame-twins, not understanding why they were here back in their own familiar time. Hall Brennan sat at the table, one hand supporting his head, sunk low, his other hand gripped into a fist and hanging stiffly at the end of his arm, just above the carpet.

Lottie burst into tears again.

Charlie, as ugly as ever, rattled across with a fresh box of tissues.

Pomfret shook his head. I looked about the comfortable room—and I understood.

"Oh, no!" I groped for a chair and sat down.

Remembrance of all I had been through dimmed. So we had saved the world. So we had shut an insatiable monster back in its tomb. But the sacrifice had been demanded and taken. We had paid our price.

Stiffly I stood up and walked across to Brennan. I put a hand on his shoulder. Then I took it away. Presumption in grief nauseates me.

But Brennan looked up. His face was stone.

"You know, Bert?"

I nodded. "We managed to shut Khamushkei the Undying back into his Time Vault," I told him. "But—"

"That's good." He spoke with careful articulation as though a second's lack of attention would release a gush of words he could not control. "That's very good. That's what I wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Hall. You wanted it—for everybody."

"Is the Time Beast shut up safely this time?" asked George Pomfret.

I shook my head as the phone rang and Charlie answered, to return and say, "There will be an inquest on the body of the girl found in the chest. We are all asked to be there."

"I'll be there," said Hall Brennan. "I want to see her again."

Somewhere beneath the sands Khamushkei the Undying waits until the strength of the curses fails. Then once more he will try to burst free to ravish the world.

But that will be the problem of the people living here in seven thousand years' time.

It will, won't it?

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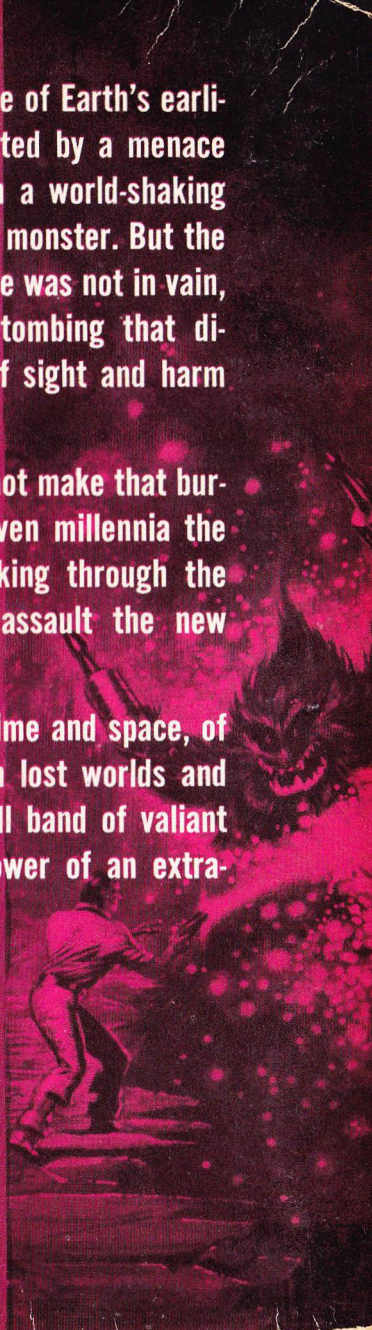

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