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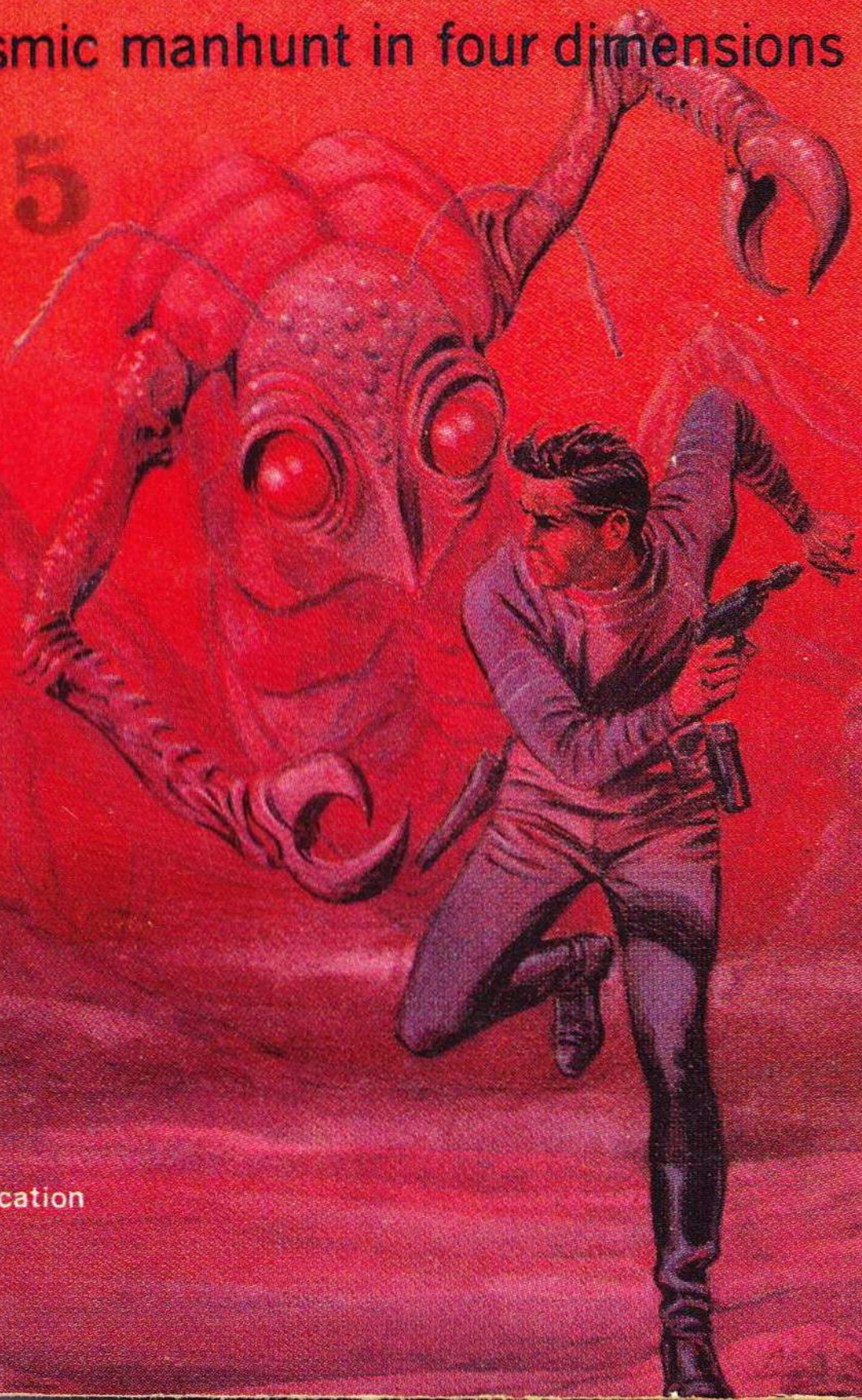
GARDNER F. FOX

THE HUNTER

OUT OF TIME

Cosmic manhunt in four dimensions

25



First Book Publication

♪ There were ~~other~~ worlds around us before we touched down on Earth again. A blue planet where a massive azure ball glowed, sending out white streamers into a midnight sky, puzzled us. The azure ball seemed to be alive. . . .

We saw a planet where only metal robots moved about. The world on which they lived was barren; perhaps the robots had made it that way. . . .

As a scientist, I grieved for the lack of opportunity to enter and explore these visions of infinity. They went on and on, swinging into view and then out of view—glimpses of reality until now shrouded from the eyes of men.

On one world we appeared above a man who battled a scaled monster with a sword. A woman lay crumpled at his feet. . . .

THE HUNTER OUT OF TIME is a pursuit through all the futures and all the worlds as only a master science-fiction adventure-narrator can tell it!



THE HUNTER OUT OF TIME

GARDNER F. FOX

ACE BOOKS, INC.
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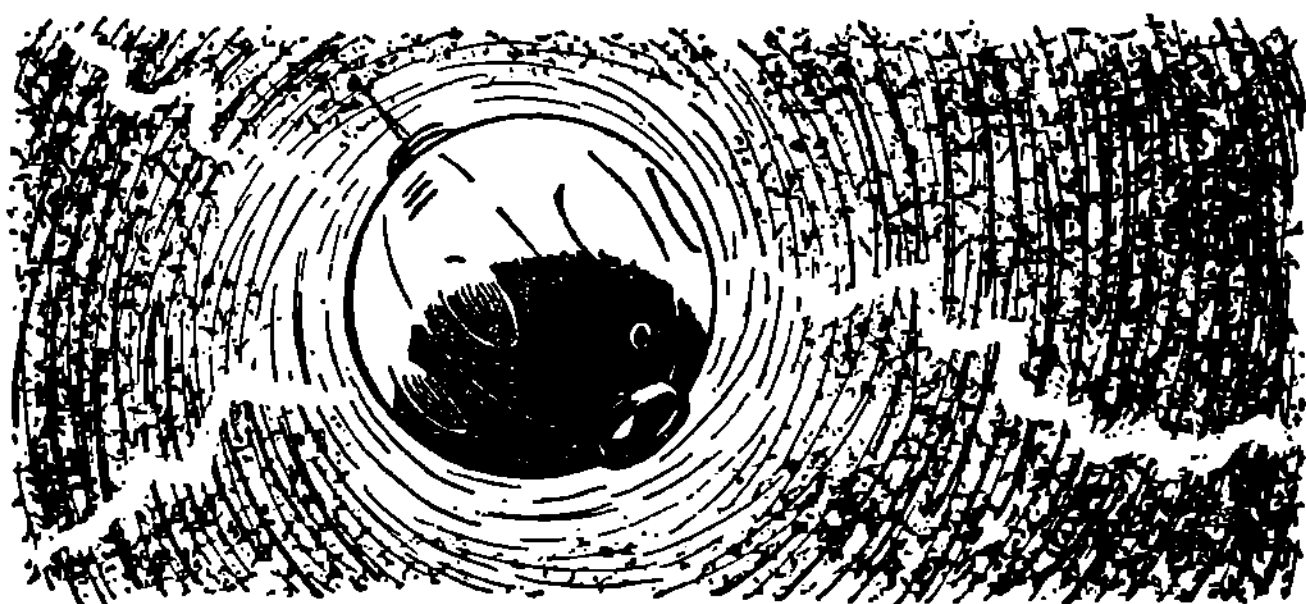
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Gardner Fox is also the author of:

THE ARSENAL OF MIRACLES (F-299)

WARRIOR OF LLARN (F-307)

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I

I SAW MYSELF dying on the other side of the street.

I was leaning against a lamp post with one hand at my middle as blood oozed over my fingers where I held that awesome wound. My head hung down and every once in a while an ominous shudder ran through my frame. My body was wearing tight black breeches and short boots, a black jacket with white piping tight to the chest and shoulders. There was an insignia of some sort on the sleeve. A black belt held half a dozen objects sheathed in black leather holsters.

As I watched, I saw myself sag as my knees bent. I started to topple sideways and downward, to sprawl across the curbing of the little Long Island town where I had come for a summer vacation.

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The street was deserted except for myself and—my strange twin.

I ran across the street and knelt beside this man who looked exactly like me. He was still alive, breathing in shallow gasps.

"I'll get a doctor," I said.

His eyes opened. Faintly he shook his head. His lips moved twice before, by bending an ear close to them, I could hear his words.

"No—time. Dying."

I turned him over, gently. His face was ashen, and so much like my own that I must have cried out, for his lips twisted in a bitter smile and he lifted his eyelids to look at me. Even his eyes were my eyes, deep blue and with short yellow lashes.

"Yes, I—looked for you—just because you are—my exact double. I am—Chan Dahl. I—"

The eyes widened. His teeth bit into his lower lip until they drew blood while a convulsive shiver ran over his big frame. He was in such pain that his body kept quivering constantly.

"I am from—many thousand years in—the future. I am what—my people call a Chronomad, one of those selected ones who—move back and forth in time."

The eyelids lowered. He gasped once and was motionless. My hand went to his heart, felt it faintly beating. I could transfer him to my cottage. There was a doctor vacationing with his family a little way up the beach; I would get him to minister to him, at least to lessen his agony.

I slipped my arms under his back and thighs. Mercifully for him, he remained unconscious. He was heavy, for I myself am a big man and quite muscular; it was an odd sensation carrying him, looking down into my own face, seeing myself I would be, some day, so close to death.

My T-bird was across the way. I had come into Shore-dune for a six-pack of beer. The delicatessen man was a friend of mine who would go down the back way and into the store after hours. I had been on my way to his

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street door when my twin from the future had come staggering out of the shadows on the other side of the street and into my life.

I managed to get him into the car, huddled up on the back seat, and shortly we were speeding south on the bay road that would take me to my cottage. The moon was at its quarter, the night was dark—there are no lights on the side streets this far out—and I made good time. I braked in the shadows of my cottage within hearing distance of the waters of Peconic Bay lapping at the beach.

I have always loved the shore. Its cool waters and level stretches of sand, the twisted masses of pallid driftwood one stumbles on occasionally, the gulls cawing overhead and the little sandpipers running just beyond the fringe of seaweed that shows the high tide mark, all make it a pleasant place to relax.

I have always been a lonely man. Perhaps because of that loneliness I like the empty desolation and the weather-beaten old seafood houses, the mudflats with the bulkhead pilings jutting up like boney fingers, the boats bobbing gently at their anchors to a swell of water where a speedboat passes by. At low tide I can browse for sea urchins and discover little pools left between the gray rocks by the retreating bay. It is like having your own aquarium.

I am an archeologist, attached to a museum staff. Most of my life is spent at the sweltering digs of the Near East or somewhere off in Mexico, or down in the jungles of South America, grubbing about for forgotten Incan remains. The air is dry there, and it is hot, and there is rarely a cool wind for the flushed face and the sweating body. It explains why I always come back to the coast for my vacations.

My hand told me his heart still throbbed, faintly and weakly, that he was still alive. I carried him into the cottage and deposited him on my bed before I turned on a light. The cottage had been mine for years. Lacking a wife, I need move no furniture about. I can walk anywhere in my five rooms blind-folded and never brush against a thing.

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* I drew down the shades, then flipped the light switch. Part of the field kit which I take everywhere with me on an expedition is given over to medical supplies, for on a dig you are cut off for long stretches of time from the niceties of civilization and must learn to be your own physician.

I shook two morphine tablets into my hand and came back to the dying man. I lifted his head. His eyes opened and he smiled. I pressed the tablets between his lips; he seemed to sense what they were, and swallowed them with the water I held to his mouth. He lay back and sighed.

The pain must have left him soon, for he appeared to grow stronger. He turned his head and regarded me.

"We do look alike," he whispered. "I chose well when I chose you." A shadow of guilt crossed his face, and he grimaced. "I was going to kill you, you know—in order to steal your identity. I intended to become Kevin Cord, the young archeologist. I would have disintegrated your body so that it could never be found . . . then I'd have assumed your life."

His eyes never left my face. I sat quietly, knowing I was safe enough; my double would be dead in a little while. His plan had backfired on him in some way. When I said something of this, he nodded.

"Yes, it went all wrong. I thought I was safe from the Mystery but—they caught me. They did this to me."

"Why? Who caught you? What mystery?"

"They thought I knew the most dangerous secret in the universe."

My lips twitched at his melodramatic statement. He frowned, then his eyes gleamed with amusement. He was telling the truth, he murmured. It *was* the most dangerous secret in the universe—but he did not know it. The Alatars had made a mistake. For him it was a most deadly mistake.

"It may be better this way," he said at last. "I could never go back to my own people. I could not go forward. And so I—ran away."

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"To my time?"

His head moved faintly in agreement. "So far back we—are forbidden to come here. It was safe enough, in a sense. I would have lived out my remaining years as you—if the Alatars hadn't caught me."

There was a little silence. His eyes were closed and his face was becoming more pallid by the minute. I put my hand on his chest. His heartbeat was very slow, very weak. When he died, I would have to notify the police at Shoredune, I told myself. I wondered if they would believe my version of what had happened or—would they think I killed him?

We waited. He was far away in some dim borderland to which all men must go in those last few seconds before death. His eyes opened and his lips twitched; then his eyes closed and his mouth was still.

Only just before the end did he rouse himself. He came up on an elbow, staring wildly about him with the stark fear livid on his features.

"When day is dark and night is bright—when Earth slides left and space slides right . . ." He broke off to laugh hysterically, head thrown back, mouth wide open. "Then you'll know you've found the Mystery!"

It was sheer gibberish. It made no sense at all.

As I leaned forward to ask him to explain, this man who called himself Chan Dahl fell backward. His elbow went out from under him and the hand that held his bloody middle slipped sideways and over the edge of the bed where it hung limp and waxen except where the blood dripped down onto the carpet.

The heart that had brought him from far in the future was stilled. I took away my hand. He was dead, no doubt about it, but to make absolutely sure I found a mirror and held it to his lips and nostrils. The mirror remained clean.

I sat back, brooding down at him. Obviously, my next step was to phone Otto Krausner, the Shoredune chief of

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police. Otto was a friend of mine. I hoped he would believe my story of what had happened.

There would be an inquest, of course, a medical autopsy, and a most thorough investigation. Dully, I realized that I might not go on the field trip to Uruguay for work on mammal ectoparasites; I have never been in Uruguay and was most anxious to go. If I were to face a murder charge . . .

I heaved myself to my feet. The sooner done, the sooner over. I turned toward the living room and the phone waiting there for me.

A woman stood in the doorway.

She was staring at me with a bitter, twisted smile on her rather full red mouth, and she was aiming a slender metallic rod straight for my stomach. I remembered how Chan Dahl had looked with most of his insides gone, and I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

The woman said something I could not understand.

At least she was willing to talk. I spread my hands and tried to look friendly. "Look, I'm not the one who killed him. I have nothing to do with him. He says his name is Chan Dahl and—"

"Oh, stop it," she snapped angrily. "I never thought you'd come to this, you fool."

She spoke my language now, so I said, "I found him in town. He was wounded there. I brought him here. There's a doctor down the beach . . ."

My voice trailed off. Her cold eyes told me she did not believe me. She waved the metal rod she held so I retreated a few steps until I had backed against my bureau. I put my hands on its edge and squeezed the wood as hard as I could. The woman stepped from the doorway, walking toward the bed with a feline grace.

With this breathing space from surprise, I had an opportunity to give her more than a worried glance. She wore the same black and white outfit that clothed Chan Dahl. Her jacket was slightly longer than his, reaching to the tops of her thighs. She was all woman, very feminine, and as deadly as a king cobra.

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The belt that held her holstered weapons—the slender rod was one of them, I assumed—spanned what appeared to be about a twenty-two inch waist. Tawny hair framed a face tanned a honey brown. She wore her hair long, swept up on top of her head and fastened there in a sort of topknot.

She sighed and lifted her eyes from the dead man to me. "Why didn't you disintegrate him, at least?" she asked. Her face was puzzled, her manner hesitant.

Suddenly she bent down, touched open his many leather holsters. Half of them were empty, and she nodded, straightening with brisk certainty. "Of course. You lost the disintegrator. You had to use any weapon you had." She lifted out what looked like a toy raygun, only it was heavier and shorter. I did not need to ask to know this was the real thing.

"You turned a stunner on full power and hit him with that. I'll take it with me as evidence."

As she was tucking the stunner into her belt, I said, "Look, lady—you have everything all wrong. I didn't kill Chan Dahl. I found him that way in town."

She heard me out, her face cold and hard. When I was done, she shook her head. "It won't do, Chan Dahl. You killed the past-man, took his clothes, put your own clothes on him, and waited to be found. You knew I was hunting for you."

"Look, I'll prove it to you," I stated desperately. "I'll tell you all about myself, show that I couldn't possibly be this Chan Dahl."

She smiled faintly. "I scanned his mind too, on my way down, just as you did. Let me tell you about this Kevin Cord."

The woman told me all about myself for half an hour. She dredged up facts from my subconscious that I hadn't thought about for years. When she finished I was sweating, because I knew I was beaten. I had absolutely no way of proving I was not—no, wait.

"Fingerprints," I said hoarsely. "My fingerprints won't be

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the same as his. They'll prove I'm Kevin Cord and not—Chan Dahl."

Amusement twitched her lips. "All right, if it pleases you to go on arguing, show me your fingerprints."

I got a stamp pad from my desk and made impressions of my eight fingers and two thumbs. Then I did the same to Chan Dahl. I held them up and squinted in disbelief. Our fingerprints matched exactly.

The woman was at my elbow, faintly perfumed and breathing gently. "You stole a plasticraft set, Chan Dahl. Or do you imagine I wasn't briefed thoroughly when I left Nyallar?"

At my obviously dazed look, she snapped, "A plasticraft set can change anything about human flesh, you know that. Oh, why delay? You don't have a leg to stand on. Go on. Go into the next room. I have to get rid of the body and remove every trace of what you've done here tonight so the past-men won't realize we've been here."

She motioned with the thin metal rod. I walked to the door.

Looking back, I saw her standing over what was left of Chan Dahl, lifting the metal rod, aiming it. A purple flare ran from its muzzle and hit the dead man, running out across his body like lavender ink. In an instant he was coated with that odd flame.

Then—my bed was empty.

The woman glanced at the blood drops on the floor. She made an adjustment of the rod and fired a paler purple flame at them. The bloodstains winked out of existence. Her head lifted as she glanced about the room, at the floor. There were no more bloodstains in the bedroom, but in the living room she found and eliminated three more.

I went into the dark night. She closed and locked my door, then brought out a round glass globe that began to glow in her palm. Back and forth she moved it as she scanned the ground. Every once in awhile she used the disintor on more blood drops.

She took a little longer with my T-bird, because Chan Dahl had been in it all the way from town. I stood back

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and watched her, admiring her efficiency. The thought of jumping her and trying to wrestle away her disintor rod occurred to me, but she kept me at a distance by glancing at me and motioning with the thin metal rod as if telling me she knew I was there.

When she was done she pointed back toward the woods. There were pine barrens there, scrub trees that once stretched from Greenport in as far as Smithtown, and these between the beach property and Shoredune were the last remaining stretch so close to the end of the island. I began my walk toward them.

The woman followed at a little distance, not making the mistake of crowding me so that I would be within distance of her. She was a smart cookie, and suspicious. When I was in between the trees, she called to me to wait for her, to move slowly and to the right.

I walked where she said to walk. Up ahead of me, suddenly, I saw a faint shimmer, as if heat waves were rising from the ground. They were transparent so that I could make out the trees beyond them, but they were in a little open space between the pines, as if some object might be there but hidden from the casual view.

Behind me there was click.

The heat shimmer was gone. In its place was a low glass object out of which rose a slender metal rod tipped with a glowing ball. From above, the glass thing might appear to be oval, for it tapered slightly at its ends; from the ground, it appeared to be no more than a small glass house. Faintly I could make out furniture inside it.

I glanced back at the woman.

She touched her belt again; there was another click, and part of the glass wall opened. I walked in, she followed me, and the glass wall firmed back in place. I could see the pine barrens outside, and the dark sky studded with stars and a quarter moon, and, through the trees, the waters of Peconic Bay. It was like being inside a goldfish bowl and looking out at the world.

A black panel set with buttons of many colors was inset

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into the wall to one side of the door. The woman touched several of the buttons swiftly, with the ease of long familiarity. Instantly a grayish fog gathered beyond the glass walls, the pine barrens vanished behind it. From somewhere underfoot a deep hum sounded, steady, rhythmic.

The woman turned back to me. To my surprise, there were tears in her eyes, and she was biting her lip.

"Chan, you fool! Why did you do it? Nothing could have been that bad—nothing! For any other crime there might be some sort of excuse but—to kill a past-man!"

I said, "Look, lady, *I'm* the past-man."

She shook her head wearily. "You can drop your pose here. The anti-probes are up. Nobody can see or hear us with scanners. Now . . . tell me all about it. What was it that made you—go back?"

I spread my hands. "I don't know how I can convince you. My name is Kevin Cord. I'm an archeologist, lady. I—"

She stamped her foot. "For the love of Karnith, will you stop calling me 'lady'!"

"Gladly. Just tell me your name."

She took one step forward. Her hand came up and slapped me across my face. I stood rigid with surprise, not so much from the sting of the slap as from the emotions that played across her lovely face. There was shocked anger there, and a frightened dismay, and the dawning light of stark terror. Her breath came swiftly as she panted, almost sobbing.

"Stop it, stop it, *stop it!*" she cried.

Her hands balled into fists that lifted as if to drum against my chest. With her hands held up like that, she whispered, "You know what the Council would do to me if you were a past-man, Chan. I'd be—exterminated. Nobody is allowed back beyond the Red Line. Sometimes things that happen back this far change what is to happen in our own time."

"Be prepared for surprise, then," I said dully.

She began to laugh. Her fingers loosed and she put her hands together, rubbing them slowly. The color came back into her cheeks.

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"You just want to tease me—pay me back for having found you! I guess I don't blame you. Another hour and I wouldn't have been able to locate you. You were smart; you destroyed your Timeler."

My blank look made her stare hard. Her hand gestured. "This is a Timeler. A time traveler. You had one just like it. You destroyed it."

"You still haven't told me your name."

"Carla," she smiled, watching me with an odd intentness. Whatever she expected to happen—did not. I simply said, "Glad to know you, Carla."

She shook her head wearily. "I never knew you were such an actor, Chan. Of course my name isn't Carla. You know that, yet you never even blinked."

"Could be I'm really Kevin Cord."

She shivered and turned away, moving toward a lounge chair patterned in green and white stripes. It looked comfortable as it folded about her, to hold her in the utmost comfort, as if it were a living thing. She crossed her legs.

"All right," she said suddenly. "I'll play your little game. If it makes you happy to see me executed for having brought back a past-man, then I'll make you happy." Her voice broke, suddenly, as her control wavered. "Once we were in love. I—I'm still in love with you. But I can't understand you . . . you've changed."

Through a break in the fog outside the Timeler I caught a glimpse of a terrible storm. Lightning flashes streaked the sky, brilliant yellow against dark black. The rain pelted all around us in a torrential downpour. No storm as fierce as that could have sprung up since we stepped inside the time machine.

There was only one answer. We were moving in time.

I stepped to the glass wall and peered out. The storm was awesome in its fury. I watched great waves pounding upward at the beach. When a particularly brilliant lightning bolt exploded overhead, I gasped. My cottage was no longer where it should be.

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There was perfume beside me. The woman said, "The fire destroyed the cottage."

"The fire?"

"The conflagration of 2035."

The storm was gone now, vanished within a few seconds. Now the sun shone down on the black remnants of the pine barrens. There was char and sand and water, no more.

"Soon they will begin building," she said heavily. "The population explosion forced men into cities so they could live upward in space. What was once the New York metropolis extends by this time to the eastern end of Long Island, into Connecticut and New Jersey. Skyscrapers are no longer just office buildings, but dwellings as well."

She sighed softly, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You know more about it than I do."

"Please," I said. "Go on."

It may have been my imagination, but the woman seemed to shudder. Perhaps something of what I said was getting through to her, convincing her that I was not Chan Dahl but—Kevin Cord. I knew suddenly the terrible dilemma she faced: if I were not Chan Dahl, she was traveling to her death for having dislodged a past-man; on the other hand, she did not quite dare to turn around and put me back in my own time era, for fear that I might really be Chan Dahl in a consummate acting role.

Outside the glassine walls I was watching buildings rise, swiftly, as if by trick photography. Great glass and metal rectangles stood on end, grouped about a great circle covered with a dome. Inside the dome I could make out little flashes of movement: people, going about their work and play in the scant nano-seconds inside the Timeler that were equal to their years.

"The weather inside the domes and the buildings is controlled," she said. "Underground rails connect distant points of the country. Monorail cars that travel under automation at speeds of better than two hundred miles an hour. Oh, yes—there are planes, too, that work by negative gravity."

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She smiled at my expression. "Cooper found the answer to gravity, back after the year 1996. It let us send spaceships to Mars, to colonize its dry-ways. It helped control the population to some extent. There was little or no danger to space travel, once the gravity units were operating. Gravity fed energy into the motors, controlling the temperature and initial inertia of every space trip. It even allowed the stelastic hulls to repel heat, gathering a small amount of it and feeding it back into the ship, for comfort, through sensitive wires."

My expression was rapt. Glancing upward at my face, she caught her breath. She was half leaning against me, soft and warm. I put my arm around her shoulders, drawing her even closer. She did not pull away, but there were tears in her hazel eyes.

"Tell me the truth," she whispered.

"I'm not Chan Dahl," I said.

I kissed her. And then—she knew.

II

HER LIPS were soft, yielding, as was her body against my own. But only for a brief few seconds. My arms had banded her, holding her close, even as my mind told me this girl had the power to stir me as no other woman ever had. Mine has been a lonely life as an archeologist. I have had no time for romance. This woman of the future had affected me, suddenly, like a blow to the heart. I held her and kissed her.

Then—she was a raging tigress.

She fought me furiously, panting, sobbing a little. Her face was contorted with fear and revulsion. When I let her

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go, she staggered backward a few feet and her hand came up to wipe her lips. Above her hand her eyes were enormous.

"You—*animal!*" she breathed.

There was disgust along with the fear in her eyes. I shrugged and spread my hands. "Look, lady—you're cute and you were leaning against me, asking for a kiss."

Her gasp of indignation was loud. "I was *not!*"

"Maybe you didn't realize it."

"You *are* a past-man! Chan Dahl could never have done that! He was too much of a gentleman." She turned and leaped for the colored buttons on the control panel beside the door. Her hands swept up.

"Not even to save his life?" I asked.

I could not analyze my feelings. I wanted to go back to my own time and to my own life. And yet—I did not want to lose this nameless woman who had come so suddenly into that life. I was not Chan Dahl, but because of him I was being given an opportunity that, as a scientist, I did not want to pass up. An archeologist is concerned only with the past. Now, something deep inside me was even more fascinated by the future.

Her fingers hovered over the colored buttons. She turned her head, slowly, staring back at me with those telltale eyes. She made a lovely picture in her tight jacket and skin-taut breeches that looked so much like black opera stockings. Her tawny hair was a little disheveled from my embrace.

As I watched, her hand made a fist with which she hammered at the black control panel. "My mind tells me you are Chan Dahl. My heart tells me you aren't. Which shall I believe? Which do I dare believe?"

"Which do you want to believe?" I asked.

"It isn't a question of my personal wants. It's a question of duty." She turned more fully toward me, putting her back against the glassine wall. Her cheeks were flushed, and for the first time her eyes would not look at me fully.

"Hasn't Chan Dahl ever kissed you? If you and he

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were engaged"—her glance came up at that, and locked with mine—"he must have made love to you."

She shivered. "Not . . . like that!"

"How, then?"

"The Red Line marks the point in time beyond which we dare not go for fear of upsetting the time-continuum process," she said as if to herself. "Beyond it, in the past, men were governed in their actions by their animal natures. Reason had not yet come into its own. There were wars. Personal slayings. Violence of one sort or another. And—indiscriminate matings."

"In your more enlightened time, there are no such things," I finished for her, rather bitterly. She had the grace to flush, but her chin went high, defiantly.

"When a man and a woman marry, each must pass a physical and psychological test. It is very severe. Each must complement the other; each must fulfill a psychological need in the other. Chan Dahl and I were to be mated when—when he ran away."

"You were sent to bring him back."

"I volunteered. I wanted to know what had frightened him to such an extent that he would dare violate the Red Line. It must have been something very dreadful."

Her eyes asked me a question. I grinned, "Don't ask me; I'm only Kevin Cord. I don't know what scared your boyfriend."

Then I remembered the gibberish Chan Dahl had spouted before he had died. I asked, "Does this mean anything to you? 'When day is dark and night is bright . . . when Earth slides left and space slides right?'"

She stared at me in puzzlement. "Why do you ask?"

"It was something Chan Dahl said before he died."

She shook her head. "I never heard anything like it before. But it may be a warning he gave—oh, stop it! You *must* be Chan Dahl."

"Why?"

"Your—his wound! Only a stunner could have made it. They didn't have stunners back in Kevin Cord's time."

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It was, in her mind at least, the final argument. She flashed me a dazzling smile. "If you want to go on play-acting in an attempt to save your own life, all right. I'll play-act with you."

I moved toward the glassine wall. "Then tell me about the time through which we are moving right now, Carla."

She came to stand beside me, but not as close as before. She said, "You know as well as I do that my name is Glynna."

"Glynna. A pretty name for a pretty girl."

Again her cheeks went crimson. My opinion of Chan Dahl as a lover sank to rock bottom. I was about to say something of this when the scene outside the wall attracted my attention. Through the fog of the Time Flow I saw that beautiful buildings of a few minutes—or centuries—before were fallen into a state of ruin. The ocean surged against them, covering their lower sections. Everywhere I could see through the Time Fog, there was only water, except for the upper portions of the great skyscrapers protruding into the gray sky from what was now part of the ocean bottom.

"The year is 73,956," Glynna said. "The 'Terrible Time'. The temperature on Earth increased just a few degrees—enough to melt the polar ice and submerge much of the continental land masses."

"Did many people perish?"

"Oh, no. Men lived by reason in those days." She threw a triumphant glance at me. "The heat increased was foreseen, the coastal cities were evacuated, whole populations were shifted—to New Earth in the Centauri system and to the three other star planets men were inhabiting by this time."

Excitement sent the blood surging through my veins. "Then man did make it to the stars?"

"From the gravity motor to learning of the existence of hyperspatial gravity was a step that took close to ten thousand years. Comerford was the man who, after a series of frightening experiments—queer and inexplicable things happened on Earth while he was questing into hyperspace—

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finally built an engine that could utilize hyperspatial gravity so man could travel in that null-space. Now man could go a light year in a matter of days."

"Man must be spread out pretty far by—this time."

"My time is—in your chronology, 121,345 years *anno domini*. In my own reckoning, it is 69,556 years above the Red Line."

"And men have gone not only to the stars, but through time itself. Amazing! In my own day, time travel was thought to be a lot of nonsense."

"Time is energy," Glynnna said. "A flow of radiation particles which the instruments of your day were too crude to find, just as electricity was unrecognized until Benjamin Franklin came along. It existed but it was undetected."

"But man can't travel along radiation frequencies," I pointed out.

"Oh yes he can. Chronal radiation permits a motor geared to its frequencies to go up or down it like an elevator. We learned early that any interference back beyond the Red Line—your year 51,789—caused strange shiftings of events in the 'present'. After that time it did not take place because of certain guards that were placed upon the Time Flow. Those guards could not function back beyond the Red Line for a reason our scientists have not discovered."

Outside the glassine walls a gigantic something was moving through the sky above the rolling gray waters. I pressed closer to the wall, staring. It was immense, filling half the horizon. It possessed a flat base and a rounded dome, inside which I could see only vague, massive dark shapes.

"A flying city," Glynnna said. "The motors and working levels are in the black base, the living quarters above it. A million people to each city. There are perhaps two hundred such cities in the skies of Earth at this particular moment."

"The temperature increase has melted all the ice?"

"Yes, and uncovered remnants of what must have been

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a very, very ancient race of men. The ice around them kept their cities intact. They were of stone, and possessed a civilization roughly analagous to that of ancient Babylon. As close as our antiquarians and historians can decide, it was those polar cities—when they existed and were filled with life the polar region was a tropic zone, you understand—that caused the legend of Atlantis.”

My archeological blood was up. “Atlantis? When Plato wrote of it, then, the truth was so distorted as to be almost unrecognizable.”

Outside the windows, the waters were receding faster and faster. Earth was settling back to what I would regard as normal, Glynnna informed me. The heat increase was gradually lessening. Something like a fifth ice age was setting in. It made no difference to the men and women in the air cities, however, since they were immune to surface conditions. Only in the great spaceports, where the star ships landed and took off, was there any reaction to the ice that hemmed them in. Since these cities were domed, here again the race itself was safe. Life went on as usual.

“The star ships land in deep tunnels underground. As they do, the domes retract to let them land and leave, then close in and lock. In this era through which we’re traveling, Earth is a ‘mother’ to its star colonies, though the colonies themselves—on young, fertile planets—are growing stronger and more independent by the hour.”

Glynnna smiled faintly as she looked up at me. “In the old days—before the Red Line, that is—there would have been wars between the star planets. Reason, however, has shown them that by giving up here and there, they can live in peace with one another. Trade agreements are settled over a council table, not on a battlefield. As a result, the Federation will be formed.

“In the next few thousand years—you’ll notice no change outside the Timeler, for a thousand years usually makes only minor changes in the structure of the land—the Federation will become the one solid power in the universe,

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which has taken place by my own time. It has existed for many thousands of years."

I turned again to the wall, seeing the coast recede and expand as the years flew by while the Timeler hurtled along the Time Flow to the year from which Glynna had come. Once in a great while, I sighted another flying city.

Glynna busied herself at the controls. When I tired of staring out the wall, I turned and gave more attention to the interior of the Timeler. It was round inside, so that I felt I was standing within a glassine drum. The walls held instruments of one sort or another; I could understand none of them, probably because the sciences by which they worked had been invented long after what would normally have been my own lifetime. Glynna was familiar with them, however, she worked with a cool efficiency that showed her long experience inside a chronal traveler.

"We'll land shortly," she announced after awhile, turning her head to look at me over a shoulder. "We're some distance from Operations Base, so I'll have to travel in the air. We have a miniature gravity motor encased in our base, of the same sort that moved the flying cities. It will take us to New York."

She gave a little exclamation of annoyance. "I don't know how long you intend to keep up this masquerade, Chan Dahl. I don't even know if you are Chan Dahl. If you aren't, you ought to learn our language. As a Chronomad, I've learned hundreds of past-tongues, but only the Chronomads are so instructed. The people you'll meet won't be so well versed. You'll be helpless unless you can understand them."

"Teach me, then," I told her.

She shrugged. "I haven't the time nor the necessary equipment. Without an encephalometer, it would take months. Ours is a polyglot language taken from half a dozen star civilizations added to an Earth base."

She smiled "It's one of the reasons why there is no war in the star worlds. We all speak the same tongue. It's a Federation law. Our people live by those laws. To disobey one is unthinkable."

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"What about me?" I asked. "If your Council decides I really am Kevin Cord, you'll have displaced a man from beyond the Red Line."

Her face looked worried, but her lips thinned determinedly. "I would turn myself over for punishment."

My face must have shown my surprise. Her lips curved wanly. "Our people are so used to obeying the Federation Law that any opposition to its regulations is unthinkable. From babyhood we've been indoctrinated to its universal good, as have our fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers before us."

Maybe that was why Chan Dahl had cracked up so badly when he'd found whatever it was that had driven him back beyond the Red Line, I thought. His 'discovery' had obeyed no set laws; this was new and unthinkable to the Chronomad. He hadn't been prepared to face such a revolutionary concept, and he'd gone to pieces when faced with it.

It sounded good, but I didn't quite believe it. There was more to this mystery than that. Chan Dahl had been a Chronomad, as was Glynna. He'd been an educated man, physically perfect, and with a keenly inquiring mind. He wouldn't have broken like brittle clay—he'd been of firmer stuff than that. Unless . . .

Unless the enormity of what he'd found had shattered his very pillars of reason! Unless it destroyed his every belief in himself, in man, in his correct universe. But . . . what in the name of God could such a contradiction be?

It made no sense. Or else—

It made sense in such an alien, monstrous way that a human brain could not accept it! Chan Dahl had sought refuge behind the Red Line just as a schizophrenic seeks refuge in another personality. The Red Line was his own personal escape-hatch from reality.

The Timeler bumped, then lifted.

In the brilliant sunshine outside I saw a paradise of trees and curving sand, blue waters and distant wooded areas. It was like a park below us, a gigantic park that stretched

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for miles and miles. I could see men and women walking here and there, and some of them were holding hands.

Glynna said, "My whole world is like this—oh, not all trees and water; there are deserts too, and great mountains and ice and rock. You see, we live underground now instead of on the earth or in the air. Our cities honeycomb the continents and are connected by the old monorail tunnels utilized now by antigravity rods that hurl vehicles safely across a hundred thousand subterranean miles. Since we live below-ground, we've remade the surface into what Earth should be.

"There are rough places, uncultivated, of course. We let nature work by itself there. But this close to a great underground city like Nyallar—New York to you—the surface is a gigantic parkland. A few animals roam here, protected by game laws. There is hunting, but only in the wilderness sections."

"Sounds ideal," I grinned. "Too ideal, almost."

She frowned at me. "Nothing can be too ideal."

"It can when you make everything so easy for a man he loses his fighting instincts, his—animal properties, if you will."

She touched her lips with her fingertips and her eyes were stormy. "There is nothing the Federation has ever met it cannot overcome, if it proves a threat."

"Chan Dahl probably felt the same way," I growled.

Her foot stamped. "*You* are Chan Dahl!"

"Isn't that for the Council to decide?"

She nodded. Her face looked miserable.

I said suddenly, "If it will save your neck, I'll admit I'm Chan Dahl. If I do that, what will they do to me?"

"Find out what you know about the—the Mystery."

"What mystery?"

Glynna gave me a look of cold contempt and turned on her heel to manipulate the colored buttons of the control panel. Underfoot I felt the hum of the gravitic motor lessen, and the gradual reduction of speed in the Timeler. I saw another such time traveler lift upwards some distance away

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and move westward. Then I swung my eyes back to Glynna.

It would be a simple matter to step up behind her, grip her and swing her away from those controls. Her head was bent in concentration, her blonde hair falling about her uniformed shoulders.

Sure! Abduct her and the time machine. Flee away to some remote place on Earth and land—maybe on some Pacific island in the year 101,000—where nobody would ever find us.

All I had to do—

My hands were on her upper arms, gripping them so tightly she cried out. I swung her away from the colored buttons with my arm about her slim body, holding her helpless. I put a hand out to touch the controls.

“No! Chan, you can’t! Have you really gone mad?”

I brushed the buttons with my fingertips. I looked down into her upturned face, so pretty and flushed, with the hazel eyes big and frightened. She was warm and soft against me; she would make a man a good wife, I thought, alone on a Pacific isle.

“Just the two of us,” I whispered. “Somewhere in the Pacific, maybe fifty thousand years before now. How does it sound? We could swim in the surf and eat fish and clams and—”

She just stared. Her mind simply could not fathom the fact that I was capable of doing what I suggested. To me, it made common sense. To her, it was as sacrilege would be to the Holy Father in Rome.

I kissed her for the second time. This time I really meant it. My right arm crushed her up to me and my mouth covered her lips. She was helpless. Once or twice she landed on my shin with the toe of her little boot, but I hardly felt it. I kissed her a long time, until she softened and went limp against me.

My lips on hers whispered, “If I were Chan Dahl, I’d do it. He was a scared man, was your Chan Dahl. Whatever your ‘mystery’ is, it knocked him right off his pinnacle

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of cold reason. He went completely off the deep end in his instinct for self-preservation."

Her eyes stared up at me. Her full red mouth looked swollen where I had kissed it. I said softly, "Now me, I'm an archeologist. I want to see your underground cities and your world of a hundred-thousand-odd years. I want to read your books about what happened after 1965. I'm so anxious to learn all that—I'm even willing to say I'm Chan Dahl to save your pretty neck."

She was not fighting me. Her body was close and soft. "They won't kill you, you know," she whispered. "They only want to learn what the Mystery is, why it's so monstrous it would seduce a man like you from your duty to return and report it. You'd be put in a hospital for recovery. I—I could come and see you."

Her cheeks were red with embarrassment.

"Of course, your Council won't believe me," I added.

"Why not?"

"Because I really am Kevin Cord and if they can search my mind, as I'm sure they'll be able to do in this day and age, they'll learn I have no recollection of any mystery at all."

She made a little sound, deep in her throat, and her eyes closed so that her lashes made tiny yellow fans against her cheeks. She seemed small and helpless to me, despite the fact that her futuristic brain held more knowledge than all of my world of 1965 put together. I stood her on her feet and held her shoulders.

"Go ahead. Take us down."

She quivered, and ran her palm up and down her sleeved arm, staring at me. Indecision was in her face. She knew the truth, knew I was a past-man, knew I was not Chan Dahl, but Kevin Cord. The brilliance of her eyes as they went over me, wondering how I would conduct myself before the Council, told me the truth.

Glynnna drew a deep breath. She touched the colored buttons and the Timeler began to lower.

A great rim of gray metal formed the lip of a mighty

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vertical tunnel. The Timeler motors died out; the little craft was gripped by forces that held it equidistant from the sides of the shaft. We went down into utter blackness, and the walls of our Timeler began to glow, illuminating its interior with soft light.

The wall opened. A lighted platform stood before us, with a uniformed man standing and saluting Glynna. His eyes turned toward me, vaguely surprised to see me out of uniform and wearing such antiquarian clothing.

He said crisply, "The way is ready, Chronomad."

Glynna and I moved out onto the metal platform. The air was clean and fresh, faintly scented with pine. Men and women in the dark Chronomad uniforms strolled along the platform. Other Timelers were sitting in their berths, big glass and metal craft ready to move up or down the Time Flow. Mechanics were working on the motors of one of them.

I sensed the eyes that watched us. Chan Dahl was the most famous person on all Earth, right now. He had deserted, when men were trained for all their lives so that they could *not* desert. He had broken the Red Line Law when his every atom had been conditioned so that the Red Line was one rule that must *not* be disobeyed.

His motivation must have been very great.

No mind could imagine what such a motivation might have been, what awesome terror lurked out there wherever it was that Chan Dahl had been, in what distant future or remote past or even in what lost corner of star-space. I did not know where it was; neither did Glynna Sarn nor anyone else.

We walked between the eyes, Glynna in her military stride, I in my civilian shuffle. As had the girl, everyone who watched me assumed that I was acting.

A glass ball floated on empty air above another shaft. We stepped into it and the ball fell. There was no sensation of movement. Only dimly could I sense the floors past which we dropped. There was sideways momentum, then upward motion. These subterranean levels, I was to learn,

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were joined by shafts and tunnels of the same gray metal that formed the lip of the outside shaftway. Its radiations governed the gravitation that shifted the glass ball along swiftly or slowly, as the controls called on it to do.

An increase of power raised the gravitic pull of the metal just ahead of us, drawing us swiftly. As we reached that particular section, the metal went dead, as metal ahead of *it* activated the proper amount of tug. Friction was reduced to a minimum. The glass balls could attain speeds of two hundred miles an hour, but, since gravity inside the ball was always at the same level, there was no reaction in the body to such swiftness.

The ball stopped. Its wall opened.

A red carpet stretched toward a pale white circular wall. Two great doors inset in the wall and graven with the Federation arms—a sword crossed with a pen and spangled with stars—were opening by automatic control. On either side of the doors, along the base of the walls and almost hiding them, were metal planters filled with lush, tropical blooms. Red flowers, blue flowers, yellow flowers, each with petals a foot wide, made an alien jungle to dazzle the eye sight. Glynnna whispered that these plants had come across ten to a hundred light years to blossom here in an artificial environment.

We were in the doorway, then, walking forward into a vast room, the lower walls of which displayed the works of master artists. I saw planetaramas of worlds whose names I did not know, nor their location in space. The ceiling was a vast yellow sun in two dimensions, flooding the chamber with pale light. Ahead of us was a raised dais and on the dais a single curving desk of dark wood behind which thirty men and women sat.

This was the Federation Council.

I wondered why they were in session. It hadn't occurred to me that they might be sitting as had the Congress of my own time and country, and that our arrival might have caught them between cases. The Timeler could pick and choose its moments to appear. Later I was to learn that

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Glynna Sarn had orders to deliver me to the Council immediately upon her arrival, and that her time of arrival was to be at one hour following midday.

We halted before an old man with a white beard and heavy white hair directly in the middle of the dais. Below him the Federation Arms were carved in solid mahogany. The room was rich, yet simple. It boasted of the wealth of the Federation, but it was genteel about its richness.

The old man spoke in a sonorous voice. I could not understand him. When Glynna made reply, there was a buzz of surprised conversation all along the curving bench. Glynna glanced at me with fright in her eyes.

"We made a mistake. You cannot speak our language. They will never believe you to be Chan Dahl."

"Tell them the knowledge was erased from my mind by—what I met."

Her eyes widened, filled with relief. She turned back to the Council and apparently made some of them believe her, for the men and women put their heads together for a little while, then drew apart so the man with the white hair could order an apparatus brought forward.

Glynna said, "They will teach you the language with an electronic beam."

My upraised eyebrows made her add, with a slight smile, "How do you think we learn what we must know in the short span of our formative years? Machines teach us by playing rays across the memory segments of our brains, impressing the knowledge we must have to fulfill our duties."

The apparatus was all glistening metal and glass, on small wheels. They made me sit in a chair provided for my comfort and electrodes were attached to my skull. A technician came forward, lifting a small lens fitted by many wires to the machine. He pressed a button. The machine whined. An invisible ray came out of the lens which he touched to the back of my head.

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There was no sense of pain or pleasure. It was as if nothing at all were happening to me. Then, suddenly—

I understood phrases and words. The technician was complaining about the machine. It was not working properly; it needed an adjustment. He shut off the machine.

"Can you understand me?" he asked.

"I understand you," I replied in his own tongue. It was not strange to my mind, though my lips and tongue were inclined to stumble over the words here and there. In time, I realized, I would speak them as fluently and with as correct a pronunciation as any native Nyaller.

Glynna smiled radiantly, turning back to the Council.

"His language center has been restored, Highnesses. He can now converse with you himself."

"Speak then, Chan Dahl," ordered the old man. "Tell us why you ran away from the Mystery."

I rose to my feet. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Glynna's tense, frightened face. Would I plead ignorance because I was a past-man? Would I be believed, if I did? Her teeth were biting into her lower lip.

"I don't recall anything before—before I landed in the year 1965." There was a concerted gasp from the men and women on the dais. I had broken a fundamental law: I had violated the Red Line. I said, "Perhaps the same blow that stole my memory prevented me from operating my Timeler. I don't know. I don't remember. I do remember finding my double, an archeologist named Kevin Cord. He put up a fight, and I hit him with a stunner . . . a little too hard. I—killed him."

The old man closed his eyes. When he opened them, he said, "To kill is a crime, Chan Dahl, which is punishable by death."

But they would not kill me, I knew . . . not until I had told them what the Mystery was.

"The same blow that stole my memory must have affected other parts of my brain," I said. "I was in a daze. I acted as if I had no control over my body."

A woman commented, "Possible amnesionalia. Its symp-

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toms are memory loss and an accompanying lack of control over bodily functions. It could be. Possibly."

A young man on the very end of the great bench said querulously, "All this from a simple blow?"

Glynna held her breath. I saw the members of the Council turn their heads to stare at one another in doubt and disbelief.

It was touch and go, here. If they did not believe me, if they ordered some sort of a brain test, they would realize, perhaps, that I was not Chan Dahl at all, but a true past-man. In that event, Glynna Sarn would be executed for what she had done. If they believed me, Glynna would be safe, but . . . I did not know what they might do to me.

One of the Council members made a gesture with a hand. A technician came forward, rolling another kind of machine. Again he placed electrodes to my skull. Again switches were pushed and dials turned. There was a little silence, broken only by the hum of the machine. From time to time the technician lifted out punched cards and thrust others into slots provided for them in a glittering metal panel. His face was sombre with puzzlement.

At length he turned off the machine.

He faced the men and women on the dais. "As near as I can ascertain, Your Honors, this man cannot possibly be Chan Dahl. His brain refuses to disclose information with which we can make a positive identification."

"Could he do this with will power, Technician?"

"No, Your Honorship. At least, not as far as I know."

There was a pause, then a woman leaned forward. "Is it possible for him to do so unwittingly? That is, if a part of him were shocked by some traumatic experience, could his brain, or that subconscious part of it which is not responsive to his will, refuse of itself to conform to the cards? In cases of split personality, the normal part of a man recedes to such a degree that does not consciously realize who he really is."

The technician looked helpless. He flushed, then said slowly, "I cannot say with certainty. It is a facet of the encephala-

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loran machine with which we are not too familiar. A medician must be called, and a proper psychon. They will have to work together with him and with the encephaloron. I myself do not possess the proper training. I am a technician, not a healer."

The man with the white hair looked at Glynna. "Chronomad Sarn!"

Glynna rose to her feet, stood straight and attentive. Only because her arm touched mine could I feel the tremble that ran through her body.

"Yes, Your Honorship," she whispered.

"You know the penalty with interfering with a past-man?"

"I do."

The old man looked less stern as he sighed, "There are extenuating circumstances to this case, I must allow. If a technician with an encephaloron cannot determine whether this man is or is not Chan Dahl, we must take this into consideration before blaming you for violating the Red Line Law. *However*: we must uphold the law, or there is no law.

"I am sending the suspect to the laboratories on Luna, there to be examined and tested under the care of a medician and a psychon, with the use of any or all machines proper to the case, to determine whether or not this man is Chan Dahl or the man he claims to have killed and replaced, Kevin Cord.

"Until then, you yourself will be relieved of duty. This is not a suspension, I wish to make clear—you will receive your payments and your work credits as if you were on duty, since for the record you will be attached to this Tribunal for temporary duty here, and you will hold yourself in readiness to answer any further inquiries this Tribunal may seek to make."

Glynna sighed. Though it might only be delaying the inevitable, it was a lot better than she had expected. It gave her another few days or weeks of life, at the very worst.

"I hear, I obey," she murmured.

The old man looked at me, his features poised between

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a stony hardness and a gentle understanding. "You, Chan Dahl—or Kevin Cord—will be remanded into the custody of the Council troopers, to be taken under guard to Luna. From this moment on, you are under the aegis of the Federation of Star Worlds Council. Only the Council has jurisdiction over you. It will be so ordered over the infovox, so that all citizens will hear and understand."

A gavel fell. The men and women rose to their feet and filed out. As the last one disappeared behind an ornate screen, Glynnna turned to me with a sigh, lifting and spreading her hands.

"It could have been much worse. What happens now depends on what they find out about you on Luna." Her eyes were wide, vaguely frightened. "Do you still insist you're Kevin Cord?"

"What difference does it make what I say, if they have instruments that will tell the truth? If I said I was Kevin Cord, would you run away?"

She shook her head, smiling faintly. "No, I've been too well-trained."

"Maybe that's the trouble."

She looked tired. "Trouble?"

"With what happened to Chan Dahl. He was well-trained, too. He knew what to do in all foreseeable emergencies. When he ran smack into an unorthodox one, he went to pieces. Maybe there wasn't enough 'animal' in him."

"The way there is in you," she said, almost to herself.

I was startled by her frankness, and looked around us. A file of troopers in the gold and white colors of the Council was marching down the chamber toward us, but there was no one else within hearing distance. She smiled wanly at my concern.

"What difference does it make? A few days or weeks and the Tribunal will learn the truth. I'll—be ready for what is to happen to me."

"You could fight it," I said slowly.

"Fight the Council? Impossible!"

"Suppose we escaped, you and I. Suppose we got to a

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Timeler and went back behind the Red Line. Would the Chronomads come after us?"

She gaped at me. "You're mad," she gasped, recoiling a little. What I'd said had shocked her to the core. I had suggested something that was literally unthinkable to her. Yet it only made good sense. It was an out for both of us.

There might not be any other way to stay alive.

III

THE COUNCIL TROOPERS were at my elbow, one of them bowing slightly, asking me to accompany him and his men. I think he would have been horrified had I refused, so accustomed was he to obedience. I nodded, but I was watching Glynna. She was my sole hope. Without her I could never operate a Timeler well enough to escape the pursuit that would come after me.

And Glynna was regarding me with dismay.

Her mind must have told her I was right: only by running away together would we be safe. Yet her reason, however much she boasted about it, would not permit her to offset the rigid training of a lifetime. The Council was supreme on the Federation worlds. No one disobeyed it, for its commands were delivered with the good of the majority in mind. Glynna Sarn would not disobey either.

Her eyes were sad as they told me we must accept the fate which the Tribunal would mete out. I must go and be examined, and she must remain behind to face whatever judgment the Council would inflict on her. There was nothing either of us could do. Accept it as I accept it, her eyes told me.

I shrugged and inclined my head. "Farewell then, Chron-

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omad Sarn," I said. There was no sense in arguing with her, even assuming I could have done so while the Council troopers waited.

The troopers took me with them, out of the council chamber and along a brightly lighted corridor into a shaft filled with a great metal tube. There was a door in the tube. The officer gestured me through it.

I found myself in a circular room, one curving wall of which was of glass that permitted me to observe the men and women who passed by on the shaftway platform. Contour furniture, chairs and couches and tables holding books and magazines, a thick rug on the floor, and radiant light from the walls, made a pleasant harmony.

"These will be your quarters," the officer told me. "Take-off time is in less than an hour."

"Takeoff time?"

His lips twitched angrily and contemptuously, but he conquered whatever feeling was in him. "We are aboard a mooner, Chan Dahl. Five hours from now we will drop down on Luna. You are free to occupy your time as you like."

I asked, "Would it be possible to eat?"

He seemed faintly startled. "Of course! Most certainly. Forgive me, I didn't realize—no one explained . . ."

I grinned, "I haven't eaten in over a thousand centuries."

He did not smile; he merely nodded, and went away to see to it that I was served.

I chose a comfortable lounge chair and sank into it, reaching for a handful of magazines. I expected difficulty when it came to reading the printed word: my tongue was familiar enough with the spoken language, thanks to the treatment by the encephalometer, but the written version might be an entirely different matter. To my delight, I found that I could understand the articles and the captions beneath the vivid tri-dimensional pictures. I did not know what process had been used in the printing, but every picture was as a window opening onto reality.

I saw the vast red deserts of ancient Mars and studied

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the strange ruins which the first explorers had found there; they lay before me in a sprawling wonderland of ruined walls and partially restored city squares and fountains, with here and there a bit of mosaic stonework as a floor. The article spoke of the long work and careful planning that had brought about this miracle. As an archeologist I envied these futuristic brethren of mine the incredibly sensitive instruments with which they measured age and texture and put together dead history from the blips of machines much as a paleontologist reconstructed a dinosaur in my time from a few bones.

Every schoolboy learned the history of Earth and Mars before he was out of the fifth grade. He was fed this knowledge while he slept at night under hypnosis; his mind absorbed it as his body absorbed food, without his own conscious awareness of the fact. What I was reading was a summary, a casual evaluation of the latest bits and scraps of information which would be added to the whole. I lost myself with that article. More than any other thing, it brought home to me the fact that I was worlds away from my own era, that in the year 121,345 I was really no more than the 'animal' Glynna had named me. My ignorance was abysmal.

And—

Only by being accepted as the traitor Chan Dahl would I be permitted—if I were sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment, and not summarily executed—to study this fascinating universe of knowledge the magazine opened before my eyes. As a state prisoner, I would be allowed time for study and relaxation.

But if I were found to be Kevin Cord, I would be taken back to my own time, placed down in front of my cottage at exactly the same moment that the Timeler with Glynna Sarn and myself in it had risen into the Time Flow. After having been granted a taste of this miraculous future, it would be snatched away from me.

I wondered what the machines on Luna would find out about me, and whether I could still maintain I was Chan

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Dahl despite all their punched cards and taped recordings. If I could, I might save Glynna Sarn and remain in the future.

The great metal tube quivered, then quieted. So faintly that it seemed only my imagination, there was the slightest of vibrations, as if the mooner had come alive. There was no sensation of lift, but the great windows along one wall of my room went bright with sunlight. I gave a little cry and rose to my feet, hurrying toward the window.

The glass was fully ten feet high. It was affixed to the metal flooring just under the thick carpeting and it was as if I stood on the rim of emptiness. Below me the Earth fell away into a slanting curve. My eye picked up the continental land mass, all greens and dark purples in the distance, and the deeper hues of the Atlantic Ocean.

The tube and I were moon-bound.

Behind me a door opened and the officer in the gold and white Council-trooper uniform stepped in, a tall, gangling young man at his elbow with a tray in his hands. The officer directed him to put the tray on a small wooden serving table and to set the serving table before the window.

"Since you seem to be so taken with the view," he added in an aside to me, with a wry twist of his mouth. His stare told me I didn't fool him, that my pretense of not being Chan Dahl was so much hogwash; he was on to me, but since it was not his place to advise the Council, he was ready to follow orders.

"I've never seen it before," I said, smiling offhandedly.

Even if I had been Chan Dahl, this might have been the truth. Chan Dahl had been a Chronomad, not a space-man. It might be that my alter ego had never been in space. I was reasonably confident that the officer did not know Chan Dahl personally, as Glynna Sarn had.

They left me to my view and my meal, a sizzling steak and fried vegetables, tossed green salad and iced drink. The steak might have been from an animal born and bred on a star world, but it tasted like the finest filet mignon.

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I was hungry and I ate swiftly, and always my eyes ranged out across the rim of space and the first faint stars shining through the blackness.

Millions upon millions of human beings had seen what I was now seeing, but I doubted whether any of them had felt the sense of triumph that surged through me at the knowledge that man had conquered space, that I was one of them, in a sense. I was the cave man who thought fleetingly of a bow and arrow and was given the opportunity to see a raygun in action. I was the first man who paddled a log out onto flowing water, blessed with the chance to travel in an ocean liner. His eyes would have bulged as mine did now, hearing no sound, knowing no sensation but that of perfect ease and comfort as the gravitic plates lifted the metal tube upward and outward toward the moon. Behind and below me was the Earth. Its horizon disappeared as the great ball that was the planet receded below us into the backdrop of space.

My eyes caught sight of a slender black needle lifting out of the sun-haze on the other side of the world. Another tube Luna-bound? Or was this some star craft headed outward across unguessable gulfs of space by traveling in the hyperspatial universe that bordered it?

The black needle was coming straight for the moon tube.

It was a black ship, with no visible means of propulsion. No rockets flared behind it. It moved easily and silently through these first beginnings of space, a great black bullet headed straight on course for the moon tube. Rushing nearer by the second, nearer. Nearer, until I could make out a glass band on it that was the viewing screen.

And then—

Somewhere in the moon-ship, a gong clanged.

The noise it made half lifted me out of my chair. It made my hair stand up on end and stabbed uneasiness right through my flesh and bones. It was not so much the noise as the special pitch of the clang. No man could have slept through that sound—even to a waking man it was pulse-stabbing.

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A thin shimmer of heat haze leaped from the black ship. It hit the moon tube and spread across the hull. I felt nothing, but—the compartment door burst open and the officer in the gold and white Council uniform staggered in, gasping, shuddering. He took two jerky steps toward me, then fell face-down on the thick carpet.

I dived to my knees beside him.

"Don't know—what it is," he gasped. "No time to sound—alert to the Council. I—"

His eyes widened a little as they stared up at me. "Don't you feel anything?" he whispered. "A paralysis—all over your body?"

I shook my head. His hand fumbled at the white leather holster strapped to his belt. "Rayer. Maybe you can—get a couple of them."

His lips quivered as he fought the sluggish helplessness washing across his body. I bent down and pried the metal and ebony rayer from his fingers. It fitted my hand as if it had been carved especially for my grip.

When he saw me holding the weapon, the officer went rigid, as if his last strength had been expended in seeing to it that I had something with which to protect myself. All over the ship there was silence. Every other man probably lay in this same coma of paralysis. The moon-tube was defenseless, except for myself.

Outside the huge window, the black ship loomed gigantic. From its side a covered tube was protruding to make contact with the hull hatch of the mooner and permit an entry. I had no way of knowing what the attackers might be after; perhaps the tube carried rare medical supplies or even a strongbox filled with gold or whatever else passed for money in this future time.

Common robbers! I showed my teeth in a grin. It mattered not one iota to me whether the Council was stripped of some of its wealth, but this might be the opportunity I needed to free myself. Work out a deal with the pirates, get them to take me back to Earth, try and contact Glynn Sarn . . . it was worth a try.

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I stepped over the officer and walked through the chamber doorway. I found myself on a narrow companionway that went up and down inside the tube amid a complexity of beams and girders. I could see the floor of the next compartment above my own, and the ceiling of the one below. Judging from my position on the catwalk, I was high up in the tube, just beneath the nose.

Obviously, then, the pirate ship would be attaching its walkway to the middle part of the mooner. I ran down the steps of the companionway, gripping my rayer tightly, my heart hammering with excitement.

I heard a clang where the walkway hit the hull, and angled my feet toward it. A door opened to the press of my hand and I found myself in a control room where half a dozen technicians in the gold and white dress of the Federation Council lay slumped over their activation panels. From one of them I yanked a second rayer for my left hand.

Now I could hear footsteps beyond a further door. I swung in that direction and lifted both weapons. I waited.

The door slid open. Five men came through the doorway and were well into the room before they noticed me. My rayers were full on their chests. As they skidded to a halt, their faces were ludicrous in shock and disbelief.

"He's on his feet!"

"But he can't be. The comatibeam would have knocked him out!"

"Well, it didn't! What do we do now?"

I grinned as they stared at me and at the rayers I held leveled on them. "Just stay where you are—and talk. What do you want here?"

One of the men smiled ingratiatingly. "A payroll, no more. You don't want to risk your neck to save a few thousand credicoins, do you?"

They waited on my words. They were big men, clad in tight black and red uniforms and cling-pants, with black leather trappings and matching holsters that held rayers at their sides. They had expected no opposition, but they were fast getting over their surprise. Narrowed eyes watched

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my every move, my every expression. Let my guard go down just a little and they would be all over me.

Something nagged at the back of my mind. They were surprised, yes; but it was only the surprise of confrontation, not—not—

What was it that bothered me about them?

I said, "The hell with the credicoins. I want to make a deal. Take me with you and you can have all the money you can find here."

The man who had spoken before relaxed suddenly, grinning. "Fair enough. We can always use a new recruit."

One of the men behind him laughed harshly, as at a joke. Then it struck me, suddenly, what it was that bothered me so. *They did not seem surprised at my clothing!* I wore the same slacks and sport shirt I had worn into Shore-dune to get my six-pack. Nobody in the year 121,345 wore clothes like this, yet these black raiders never blinked an eyelid at my antique garments.

They had been expecting to see me!

Why?

I drew back a step as realization swept over me. The foremost of the raiders came off his feet at me. My fingers pressed the trigger. A thin red line ran out of the rayer—missing the man who came for me but hitting two of the men behind him. Where the red beam hit, there was nothing. Parts of human beings rained down on the floor.

I was so sickened by the sight that the raider sent me reeling back before I could gather my wits. My back hit the floor and I bounced. The raider was sprawled half on top of me, reaching with both hands for my rayers. I twisted sideways, driving the barrel of the rayer at his face. It slammed home with a dull thud.

The raider went limp, but the other two men were racing toward me. Still on my knees, I dived forward, ramming into their legs a little below their knees. They went down as if poleaxed. I whirled and caught them across their jaws with the metal rayers.

We were a tangle on the floor when I heard more foot-

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steps. I whirled, both weapons up and covering the doorway as a man in a long black robe stepped into the room. His face was hard and white, almost waxen, but his eyes burned red. There was no hair on his skull, so that he seemed almost like a carved stone image. His stare touched the dead men and the three unconscious raiders sprawled behind me.

"You are not Chan Dahl," he said softly.

"How can you be so sure? The Council technicians couldn't say as much, even with all their instruments."

"If you were Chan Dahl, the comatibeam would have worked. It is geared to the physical structure of men of this period. But your body is different."

"And what if I'm not Chan Dahl? What do you intend to do?"

"Take you with me, as I had planned doing if you were Chan Dahl. You're too dangerous to leave behind . . . yet you're too valuable to kill."

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

The red eyes did not waver. The thin, almost bloodless lips said, "Your brain convolutions are those of Chan Dahl. Your every physical property is that of—the traitor. As such, you may be able to serve me."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"You cannot refuse."

The red eyes burned like flames in the waxen skull. Too late, I understood what those eyes were doing to me. My muscles were frozen in my body. I could not stir, even to blink an eye. The rayers in my hands with which I covered the cloaked figure in the doorway were no more than heavy weights that slowly sank downward.

When the rayers pointed at the floor, my fingers opened.

The weapons hit the metal control room floor with sharp clanks. I stood as if paralyzed, staring right into those red hell-flames. They were not eyes, as we know eyes to be. They were . . . something else. Something inhuman. And they held me in their grip as if they were vises around my body.

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Behind me there was sound as one of the raiders pulled himself to his feet. The man in the cloak said no word but the raider came and picked up the rayers, tossing them to one side. His companions stirred, sat up. As they passed in front of me on their way to the door they glared at me, and I saw red welts and blood where I had hit them with the rayer barrels.

IV

I WENT WITH the pirates like a man in a daze. My shoulders brushed against them, my footfalls echoing across the same canopied gangway with their spaceboots. I felt as if were drugged. There was no need to command me: those hell-fire eyes had given me my orders, printed them inside my brain in indelible fashion.

There was a bench in the needle ship, set close against the metal wall. I dropped onto it, sat there like a stone man, only vaguely aware of a quivering impulse running through the ship, denoting movement. I tried to think. Lord, how I tried, yet my mind was numb. My eyes saw the gray metal interior and the darkly flushed metal of the floor, but only dimly, with dream overtones.

Time had no meaning to me.

Straight before me was a glass window. Through it I found myself staring at the stars bright against the backdrop of space. Those stars wheeled and dipped as we moved. For a brief second I saw the great orb of the moon slide across half the glass, its craters and wide plains and seas vast and crystal-clear before me. Then they receded, and I saw the full globe of the moon. As I watched, it became smaller.

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We were speeding back toward Earth.

Once I thought I saw a Timeler wink out of nothingness and hover there in space with the sunlight reflecting off its polished metal surface. It was so far away that it looked like a toy—and then it was gone.

Some Chronomad reporting back from a mission deep in space and time, I told myself. I felt awed at the amounts of knowledge the Federation Council must have amassed in the years of its existence. The scientist in me ached to get at those records, to read the history of my descendants. Or rather, judging by my present situation, the descendants of my friends.

The needle ship was almost silent as it sped back toward Earth. Its motors were only a faint whisper. They knew how to build motors, these men of the future.

The ship rolled slightly. I saw an arc of planet, the high white clouds of the atmosphere, a stretch of water and coastline. From the little glimpse I was afforded, I could not identify the land mass. It made no difference; judging by the swift efficiency of the pirates who had abducted me, there would be no rescue.

The sweat stood out on my forehead.

The ship came to a stop, I rose to my feet and walked toward a metal hatch. It opened. One of the uniformed men was standing in the next compartment. He motioned brusquely, and I allowed him out of the ship onto a landing platform that lay under a high, transparent dome closed against the blue sky.

There was a compound here, a small collection of metallic buildings, all small, with the look of a single vast, connected laboratory about them.

I was brought into the largest of the buildings.

The man in the long black robe was waiting for me in a huge white room whose walls were instrument panels, computing machines, tangles of wires and blinking lights. It was an electronics laboratory far beyond anything foreseeable in my own time. The man stared at me with his hell-red eyes.

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My mind was still numb, unable to contest the power in his eyes.

I lay down on a sheeted table. Men in white smocks came and attached electrodes to my temples, to my wrists and legs. They also tied my wrists and ankles to the table by strong leather straps, I lay spreadeagled, helpless.

Through the haze in my mind only one idea managed to take shape. Torture! They were going to torture me! But I could not even struggle against my bonds.

The black robe swished as the man with the dead, waxen face towered above me. His features did not move; only the red eyes were alive inside that humanoid sheathing.

"I know you are not Chan Dahl," he whispered. "It is immaterial. I am going to make you into Chan Dahl."

My eyes must have told him something, for he added, "Yes, when I am done with you, past-man, you shall be the one I want. The real Chan Dahl was remarkably fortunate to find such an exact duplicate of himself. You are so much like him that the very convolutions of your brain are similar to his. Similar enough, indeed, so that your brain will be able to accept and assimilate all his past experiences, thoughts and emotions when I feed their taped data into your mind."

The hellfire eyes lifted and looked across the room. My skin felt the electrodes jump into electronic life. My lips opened to scream when I realized that I was not suffering at all. On the contrary, there was a pleasant lassitude throughout my body. I lay there and bathed in lethargy where nothing mattered, neither my danger nor those hell-red eyes, nor anything else.

As I lay there, able only to listen, the man in the black robe began to speak, slowly and with care so that every word should impress itself on my temporal lobes, on each side of the brain near the ears, and their neuron circuits, in which are stored all the memories of a man extending back to his childhood beginnings.

"I am the Hierarch.

"I rule a band of men who call themselves the Brother-

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hood. We are the outgrowth of a religious sect which had its formation many centuries ago when the race of man came in contact with the alien beings known as Floranol. There was a terrible space war at that time, which man almost lost. As an aftermath of that war, a burst of religious fervor swept over Earth and its star colonies. Man should stay on the planet of his birth, this was the will of the Almighty, said the fanatics.

"For awhile it was a popular movement and gathered disciples by the millions. Yet when new planets were discovered, heavy with mineral and vegetable wealth, when new inventions came along, each more marvelous than the last, a counter-movement began. These dissenters claimed that it was blasphemy not to go into space, that the Almighty had placed these planets there for our enrichment, that He had touched the brains of man with His wisdom, and that as a result mankind was discovering new sciences, new objects to make his life that much easier.

"In time, the dissenters won. It was to have been expected. Few men can refuse that which makes them richer, happier, and their lives ever so much easier. Today a man need work only one hour a month to earn the necessary credit rating for a life of luxury. It is next to impossible to argue against that.

"Yet we of the Brotherhood do argue. We say it is wrong to invade the mysteries of space—and of time. Yes, of time. Since the foundation of the Brotherhood, mankind has discovered a way to go back and forth in time itself. In our eyes, time travel is more hazardous even than space travel. One never knows what awesome doom may be found in the windings of the Time Flow."

The voice droned on. I was almost asleep, sunk in some forced dream which swept everything from my mind. Yet the Hierarch reached deep into me with his words, stamping them forever on my subconscious.

The Brotherhood was stronger now, thanks to the Hierarch, who was a genius. It was the Hierarch who gifted them with wealth and new weapons by which to carry on their fight.

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It was the Hierarch who stiffened their spines and gave them a new reason for existence, as it was the Hierarch who had captured Chan Dahl, before—

“But you shall learn all this. Sleep now . . . sleep.”

I went out of my body.

Elsewhere. . . .

A row of red globes, first of all.

And hands reaching for those globes, touching them, feeling their cool hardness under finger-flesh. The hands came out of black sleeves, very tight to the skin and with white piping in a spiral all around. I had seen such piping somewhere else, long and long ago.

A screen, set in a metal rim. In the screen there was a picture of a dead world, alien. The blackness of space had come close to the surface of this world and hung there, dark and ominous. The stars in its sky were blue and dim, distant with space and years.

I knew this world—knew what it must be, at least. It was Earth. My Earth, the Earth of Chan Dahl the Chronomad, and of that other-self of mine, Kevin Cord. I realized I was two men, although the man who had been Kevin Cord was very weak at this moment, like a faint life-signal too dim to register in my mind.

For I was Chan Dahl the Chronomad, in all truth. My eyes were his eyes, my ears his ears, all my senses his senses. I was here to investigate The Barrier, that mysterious force past which no Timeler had ever gone.

More and more of Chan Dahl was swimming upward into my consciousness; less and less of Kevin Cord remained. Tantalizing bits of memory came to my mind: I was swimming in a lake, under a sky of crimson flashes streaked with yellow, and there was a blue girl beside me, with long golden hair . . . I was walking toward a dais to receive a diploma signifying my graduation from Space Academy . . . I was standing rigid before the huge desk of the Commander of Chronomads, staring down at my open file that was the only thing on his desk. . . .

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The Commander was speaking softly as was his habit.

"Out of eleven thousand Chronomads you have been selected to break The Barrier, Dahl."

I blinked. Every Chronomad knew The Barrier. It was a band of force past which no Timeler could travel.

The Commander heaved to his feet, touching a button on the end of his desk. A thin metal map lifted upward from the floor to one side of his desk, fitting itself into a slot in the ceiling. On it were the graphs that showed the Time Flow, and off to one side in script lettering, a chronological table of events in the history of mankind, and their matching dates.

The Commander tapped the screen with a fingernail. "We can go anywhere in time—except here. This is a layer of protoplanic force that repels our every machine. Why is that, chronomad Dahl?"

"The Barrier grips each Timeler in a pulsation of repelling power, sir. It pushes back the Timeler. I've heard a theory that somehow the people of the future have developed a form of reverse magnetism."

"That's a classbook theory." He smiled at my expression. "It's good to study for the purpose of developing a scientific imagination, but it doesn't really mean anything. Now, then, you must understand that passing The Barrier has been a top priority project of Chronomad Command for several centuries. Quite recently, thanks to tests made by Timelers hovering just below The Barrier, we've been able to isolate and duplicate the energy of which The Barrier is composed. It is called 'protoplanic force' by our scientists."

His hand brushed across the dark wavy lines on the metal map which signified The Barrier. "We intend to wipe The Barrier off all our chonal maps. To do this, we must be able to send a ship with a chronomad through The Barrier and into time beyond the year 829,460.

"That ship is now built, with motors especially geared to draw protoplanic force from The Barrier and feed it into a small but powerful micro-generator that will use the

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power of The Barrier to push—or pull—the Timeler through it.

“You will be in that ship, Chan Dahl!”

I felt a flush of pride come red in my face. I stiffened, and saluted. The Commander eyed me from under his bushy brows. He cleared his throat.

“It may not be a picnic. There’s something out there we don’t understand. We call it ‘the mystery’. We’ve scattered picked teams across those last few years before The Barrier went up. Picked men, special women. They’ve reported back that there is no Project Barrier under way in those years, no faintest suggestion that the people of the year 829,459 contemplated raising such a Barrier.

“You understand the implications, Chronomad Dahl?”

“Yes, sir,” I told him. “The Barrier was created by someone beyond that year. By the future-men.”

“Or—by something else.”

The memory faded. Well, I would know the answer to ‘the mystery’ very soon, now. Within minutes, perhaps seconds. My hands flew over the red globes, pushing and pulling.

I could feel the motors humming, the protoplanic plates pulsing as they drew in that force from The Barrier and began feeding it to the micro-generator lodged atop the Timeler motor. The ship shuddered a moment in the reaction of its fueling.

A corner of my mind kept telling me I might very well blow the Timeler and myself out of existence. The protoplanic plates, the micro-generator, had never been tested. They could not be tested, except at The Barrier itself. I was the guinea pig. Cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

The Timeler seemed steady enough. The initial shudder had subsided, the plates were feeding nicely and passing on that energy to the micro-generator. When it was full, the micro-generator would lift the Timeler upward, through The Barrier.

This was the theory.

In field use, however—

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My eyes never left the viewing screen. On that screen The Barrier was a vast field of pulsating lines of black and gray, moving back and forth and quivering, forming new bands almost like the crystals of a stereopticon. I gazed entranced, frozen with amazement, before I realized that the patterns were darker and lighter, more alive, than I have ever seen them.

The Timeler was traveling through The Barrier!

Now I began to worry again. What would I find beyond it? If the future-men wanted past-men kept from their time, what punishment might they mete out to those who broke The Barrier? I rubbed damp palms on my skin-taut black breeches.

The Timeler burst out of the pulsing bands.

Daylight was everywhere. As I stared, I knew dismay.

Then—wonder. For this was Earth I saw—or was it? The Timeler was not equipped to travel in space. It could not have gone to Centaurian or to Polaris.

And yet—

This was not Earth. The stars were different, for one thing. And my gauges told me I had traveled only fifteen years beyond the point where The Barrier was erected. In fifteen short years, my native planet could not have become this barren desolation.

Or could it?

I drew a deep breath. There was one sure way to find out. I must leave the Timeler, go out there and stand on those rocks and in the gray dust of this dead world and make what tests I could. Oh, I was well equipped for this task. I had been chosen from more than eleven thousand picked Chronomads.

The university years, the endless months of special training as a time traveler, the physical fitness program that had made my body into a weapon of bone and muscle, was my heritage from my race. I was Chan Dahl, the one man who stood a chance of getting through The Barrier and resolving its mystery.

There was a disintor in my hip holster. The gauges said

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the air was breathable, though intensely cold; well, the thermal unit of my uniform would adjust to that, automatically. I moved across the metal floor of the Timeler, saw the hatch open and the rocky outside was before me.

I stepped onto the surface of the planet, feeling the wave of cold hit me seconds before the thermal unit could begin to function. My boots touched solid rock and raised little gray dust puffs from step to step. The rocks were black, jagged, of all sizes. Some towered upward more than a thousand feet; others were only inches tall.

I looked skyward. The stars were different. I have studied many star maps, from Earth and Centaurion, from as far out as Polaris. The stars I looked at now were none of these. How far into the universe had I traveled, or how far through time? There was a coldness in me that was not due to the outer planetary temperature. What madness had I stepped into? How could this world be Earth and not-Earth at the same time? It was more than puzzling: it was faintly terrifying.

I went on, glancing behind me at the Timeler. I did not want it to disappear, leaving me stranded.

Beyond it, the surface stretched bleak and rocky, gray with dust that whipped up into distant clouds where the wind blew strongly. My eyes ran all across the horizon. There was no sign of life, no indication that this was an inhabited planet or even had been inhabited.

Surely nothing could live here, no life as we know life.

I was wrong.

I had walked about half a mile from the Timeler when the ground began to shake. It pulsed in rhythm, steadily, as if giant feet were pounding against it in a mad gallop. After a little while I began to hear other sounds, a steady *thump thump thump* of—what?

The disintor was in my hand as I ran for the Timeler. I had been picked to investigate The Barrier and make a report about it, not to be a hero. If some alien life form was coming to make a meal of me, I decided I would not stay to appease its hunger.

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I stumbled and fell.

A rock had caught my boot-toe. I landed hard but rolled, and came up on my feet again. I glanced back over my shoulder and froze. The thing that was coming for me was a monster out of fairyland. It was scaled and six-legged, with a head the size of an automobile. It towered high. It thundered over those rocks, tail up and jaws opened wide.

I raised the disintor and sent a purple beam straight at the thing. The purple fire should have eaten a hole in its scales; it did not. The thing came on, but now I saw that it was not heading toward me but toward the Timeler. My hand dropped to the belt remote control device with which I could govern the flight pattern of the Timeler. I pressed studs, saw the machine lift upward into the air just out of reach of those awesome jaws that snapped shut inches below it.

The beast skidded on the rocks, trying to stop. I ran toward the Timeler, bringing it down out of the air. Its open hatch was before me. I jumped.

I hung in the air.

All time came to a dead stop.

There is no other way to explain what happened. My body and the Timeler were within inches of each other, yet neither moved. It was as if we had been turned to stone. Below me, out of the corners of my eyes, I saw the surface melt and run together into streaks of black and red and green and blue and white. There was a haze over everything, like smoke.

Then my body hurtled onward into the open hatch. I was off balance, caught by the strangeness of it all. I hit the metal floor and rolled, banging into the steel legs of a small computer unit. I lay there, gasping.

What nightmare had me in its grip?

I had been positive, just before I had fallen into the hatch, that the surface of the planet had changed below me, had run together into a fluid mass of matter. The rocks had disappeared and in their place and instead of the gray dust had been—what? I tried to remember, and could not.

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My hands on the metal leg of the computer pulled me upright. The hatch had closed when my body had entered it, and the Timeler was secure, at least, against whatever was outside.

I moved to the viewing screen.

There was a city before me, a city of thin and elfin buildings, very high, very tall. A winged something moved between the buildings, then flapped out of sight. My palms touched the metal rim of the screen. I had begun to shiver.

I saw more winged beings flying here and there between the buildings of this enormous city. They looked like men and women—humanoid in shape, at least, but small and fragile. In the sky I made out three suns slowly turning one around the other, and the smallest of these was green.

The winged beings could not see me, for the Timeler controls that kept the machine seconds away from the present were functioning with pulsing protonic power. To the people of this world, unless I moved the Timeler forward those few seconds, it did not exist. I was scant moments away from what my eyes could see. Actually, I was looking into the future through those infinitesimal moments of Time.

Was this Earth? Hardly!

Then—what?

My hand touched the chronal cameras that would snap pictures of what my eyes were seeing. At least I would take back to the Federation Council a proper report of my activities. I was sorry that I had not set the cameras in motion before, when I had stepped out onto the rocky, gray dust world. Well, I could describe what had happened in my written report.

But would I be believed?

I waited, not daring to leave the Timeler, afraid even to step from the viewing screen. If there was another change, I wanted to see it properly. Meanwhile, I would learn all I could of this world of winged beings. What it was doing here, where only Earth should be, I did not know. But

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it existed as the rock plain had existed, and I wanted to learn why.

I threw over control levers and pressed studs. In the concentrated interior of the Timeler, micro-circuits hummed to life. Tiny discs lifted outward from the hull and poised quivering, waiting to make myriad tests of the environment in which their heavily overlaid micro-circuits found themselves. Atmosphere, heat, gravity, magnetism: all these would be tested, punched into cards that would come shooting out from the computer mouth as soon as I pressed the activate button.

I pressed it, and like a living thing the Timeler went to work all around me. It worked independently of the pilot, an almost human mechanism that did everything but think.

The pilot had another job.

Slowly I began to send the Timeler in a wide circle with a hundred mile radius from my starting point. This was standard operating procedure over new territory for a Chronomad. It gave him the opportunity to take a reasonable sampling, not merely a localized one.

The circling maneuver brought me away from the city, over grasslands and parks and a rough terrain of partially eroded mountains. There were no flying beings this far out—apparently they were all city dwellers. I circled back toward the city, and touched the rods that would take me out on a two hundred mile sweep.

Then the change came again. The Timeler stood still and the universe reeled around it as eddies rippled about a rock in the middle of a mountain brook. My eyes beheld the potpourrie of colors, the blending of matrixes. I saw a helix of blinding light in the far distance. I heard a faint whisper of space itself, the thundering roar of a sun in nova, the faint tinkling of nature's music.

The world firmed.

I cried out in surprise. *This* was Earth—Earth as it had been a few seconds before I had passed The Barrier!

A giant city lay below me, its spires and massive buildings reaching upward into sunlight. Eagerly I stared down-

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ward, expecting to catch sight of the throngs of men and women I had seen before I had crossed that force which held everything but this one Timeler in the past.

My eyes strained. I peered into the streets, into the windows of the buildings—and saw no one. There was not a single sign of life. Automatically my hands went to the controls. I moved the Timeler sideways in space, across the rooftops of the city. My cameras were clicking furiously, my detect-discs and circuits making tests.

I went all around the city and saw no one.

Faintly, far away on a grassy slope that was parklike in its appearance, I saw movement. There was a white something out there, and figures scurrying all around it. I sent the Timeler dropping toward it.

The white something was as large as a circus tent. There were men and women standing around it like statues, not moving. They seemed to be—waiting. Something in their attitude frightened me, and my hand moved to the butt of the disintor. I turned the knobs of the Timeler.

But the Timeler did not respond. It was out of control. It was moving steadily, groundward, at a slow pace. It would land close to the entrance of the great tent. I fought the controls. I tried to change course, with the fear alive in me and the sweat running down my face. There was something . . . alien . . . in that tent, something monstrous and inhuman.

My heart pounded. My palms were wet; the roof of my mouth was dry. The muscles of my legs went rubbery.

What held me to its call?

The Timeler bumped. A redness filled the interior, spreading inward from the walls. I ran from that redness but there was no place to hide. It caught me, crept over my wrists and ankles and my legs. When it had completely surrounded me, I could not move a muscle.

I felt a probing deep inside my brain, a questing as by furry fingers that sent chills down my spine. The touch was light but firm.

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You are out of the past of this planet. You will come to me in the tent. Now!

I walked. The Timeler hatch opened, and I descended the metal ladder to the ground. Past the men and women standing like statues as if waiting their turn, I moved into the tent and—

I wanted to scream. I could not.

I saw a red thing that was a living man in the process of dissection. He was alive. His mouth was open and he was screaming, though the red mist in which I walked prevented me from hearing him. Metal straps held him down. I saw white bone and blood and strips of flesh laid back for inspection.

Then I saw what was beyond him.

A giant insect towered there, something like a huge praying mantis, with an electronic scalpel in its pincers. Its faceted eyes were red and brilliant as they studied me.

So! The race changes but little, outwardly. And yet there are differences. Minute, terrible little differences that I must learn about. Mount the table!

It spoke to me in thoughts. Never once did it open its mouth. Only its faceted eyes stared and stared, and when it moved after me toward the table I heard the dry clicking of its limbs. I walked as a man in a dream though the fear-sweat was staining my uniform and running down my chest. Onto the table I clambered and lay back so the insect-thing could strap me down. I felt the leather cut into my ankles and legs, wrists and arms.

The faceted eyes peered down at me.

You are from the past. You are different from these people. I have been unable to scan your thoughts as well as I can theirs. So before I take you apart, speak to me. Tell me where you are from, all about yourself.

I said, "Only in—in exchange for the same knowledge about you." The Chronomads are trained to learn. It is a way of life for them, that they may report back to the Federation Council and the knowledge be transferred into the

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Council libraries, to be studied by the logicians, the teachers and the scientists.

You will die. The information I give will be useless.

"All the more reason why you should be unafraid to tell me. The information cannot do you any harm."

It seemed to consider that, standing there. Then it nodded.

I shall tell you, since you are pledged, by my telling, to explain how you were able to pass The Barrier. Know then

...

The insect-being was an Alatar. It came from a galaxy so far away from Earth that it was numbered among the quasi-stellars, those sources of radio energy that had so puzzled astronomers of Kevin Cord's time era. Its civilization was far superior to ours, since it was an old, old race—billions of years old. In their own language, the word "alatar" meant the first ones, the primal beings.

Long ago, the Alatars had learned how to conquer sidereal space. All their efforts had been devoted to this task, once they had accepted the fact that theirs was not the only inhabited planet in the universe. They had built powerful engines fueled by solar light and energy, which could wrench at the gravitational forces which keep all matters in its proper perspective. Instead of building spaceships, they had discovered how to manipulate space itself.

During their billions of years of existence, they had solved the many secrets of this parallel space, encased inside observation cars. Early Earth scientists had regarded sidereal space as a negative universe. To them, this was a theory. The Alatars had made it fact. They could see what went on anywhere in the universe, though they were limited to the sense of sight alone. They could not land on the worlds they saw.

In sidereal space, there were many tangential points lying adjacent to each other. These points could be dislocated, pushed back and forth or out of the way by a force developed by the Alatar scientists called protoplanic power. As a result the Alatars found themselves able to alternate those

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tangential points so that they could travel through sidereal space so as to observe what transpired in normal space.

His people had constructed vessels of intricately woven strands of metals unknown on Earth or any of its star planets. Small but infinitely strong protoplanic motors enabled those vessels to break through the space-time continuum and move diagonally along the tangential points back and forth in sidereal space. In short, they warped space, warped time, and traveled when and where they would.

Their ships went everywhere, to observe and take notes.

Since their worlds were so remote from ours—ten billion light years from Earth—and since there were many planets close to their own home worlds, they had not contacted us until recently.

So many worlds moved back and forth across these tangential points that it was only a question of time until Earth occupied such a tangential point that came to the attention of the Alatars. The Alatars watched, greedily, seeing rich habitable planets—their own were old and barren after so many eons—yet unable to cross over into our dimension.

They could only hover there and watch.

Until—

Thanks to some new discovery, the secrets of which the Alatar did not reveal to me yet which I sensed somehow in its subconscious mind, the Alatars were now able to cross over from sidereal space into normal space. A door had been opened in the space-time continuum; a gateway had been thrown wide—

To all the past and future ages of the Earth!

The Alatar withdrew its telepathic thoughts at that moment. There was a mental silence for a few moments. Then it went on.

Now the Alatars could invade the Earth.

They could occupy Earth not only in the point of time similar to their own but in all past and futures ages of the planet!

It was quite by accident that they made this discovery.

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One of their silvery-stranded ships had been probing far from their home world when a vortex of power had seized it. It had been whirled up and around and then dropped down on Earth, having broken for some unknown reason through the space-time forces which had always prevented their landing on any of the worlds they observed. The Alatar did not try to explain this to me. It mentioned a 'force' which permitted this to happen, and let it go at that. Perhaps the Alatar knew its science was so much greater than my own that it was useless to try and explain it.

However—

The Alatars learned that this protoplanic force was highly complex, not easy to handle. It took time and patience to travel from their space-time into our own. When they first attempted it, they discovered that all the planets and all the tangential points along the many space sectors co-ordinate with them became involved in a pendulum-like swing back and forth.

It was this back and forth swing of space and time the Timeler was caught up in, as I passed the Barrier. The many worlds along the protoplanic matrix were veering wildly, crazily, not yet under the control of the protoplanic power stations of the Alatars.

Slowly, the Alatars were reducing that swing.

But it would take time.

And before it was completed, they were oddly vulnerable. The Alatar did not telepath that thought to me; it was deep in its subconscious, yet I was aware of it. Once the pendulum of space and time came to a halt and matter firmed into place, Earth would belong to the creatures from Alatar, and all that space which Earth called normal.

And now the pendulum *had* come to a halt, and the Alatars had crossed over out of sidereal space into normal space.

The men of this future year in which I lay helpless had fought them, in a short but bloody conflict. At this moment while it telepathed its thoughts to me, the Alatar admitted

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grudgingly, it was still going on, though it was at best a mere guerilla action on the part of the Earthmen.

It was a hopeless struggle. The Alatars were too strong; they had too many weapons in their arsenals—stolen and adapted from the countless worlds on which they had spied in their long lifetime—for mankind to hope to defeat them.

It was an invasion out of nightmare.

There would be no more race of men, except as slaves or dumb brutes to be dissected, to be kept as pets, to be tortured, petted, or otherwise subjected to the whims of their Alatar masters. It was a hideous, terrifying thought.

For a time I went mad, there in those straps. I writhed and twisted, I screamed, I wept. I tried to blot out all the implications of this fate that had come upon mankind—and could not.

There would be no safety anywhere. Not for me, not for Glynn Sarn, not for the Federation Council nor for any man anywhere in time or space. The Alatars with their vastly superior sciences would come, and none of us who called ourselves men would be able to stand against them.

Terror was a constant shivering of my body and a terrible coldness in my middle. My world was being wrenched as was the space-time continuum. My forehead sweated, my teeth chattered, and I could feel the dryness of my mouth as an aching pain.

I was experiencing these emotions as Chan Dahl. Yet since I was Chan Dahl, they were as real to me as if I were undergoing those emotions as Kevin Cord. I was paralyzed with fear. All I had learned, all I had been trained to do, was useless against this threat.

I wanted to run—run without plan, run without end until I was no more, so I could escape the threat of these Alatars.

Faintly, that part of me which was still Kevin Cord was understanding the emotion which had thrown Chan Dahl into such a panic that he had come searching through time for a man he could pretend to be. The Kevin Cord part of

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me did not blame him. I sympathized with him because I experienced the awful fear that held him in its grip.

The Alatar who was communicating with me was named Sallall Kal. He was dissecting men and women here in this big tent so that he might build a pattern card and feed it into a machine he termed a simaltron. This machine would create living intelligences according to its feeder card.

Androids, in a sense.

My skin crawled as it explained that, with enough of these androids, it would penetrate the Barrier, going back into the past, infiltrating the command posts and the high places so that when the moment came to strike in warfare, the entire human race would be paralyzed. Its fighting units, its will to resist, would be destroyed before they could be employed against the Alatars.

It would be a monumental invasion plan. It would take time, but the Alatars had plenty of time. Protected by The Barrier, which they had put in place, they had been safe to operate when and how they wanted—until I had come along.

I was a problem Sallall Kal did not like.

The Alatars were not ready to fight an all-out war should the past-men invade the time strip they occupied, which was only a chronal beachhead from which to launch their own invasion of the past. Now they would have to alter their plan.

I listened as the Alatar fed thoughts into my mind, but a corner of my mind told me there was something more to the truth than what it let me know. Surely if they could overcome the people on *this* side of The Barrier, they had nothing to fear from the past! They were familiar with Earth weapons, and they had not been bothered by them.

There was something else troubling Sallall Kal.

I did not know what it was, but I felt it existed. I worried him, for some reason he did not explain. He hid his real thoughts behind the ones he fed into my brain. And yet

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I gathered that he and the few research workers like him on Earth were oddly vulnerable.

Something about the Timeler and me bothered him.

Sallall Kal began telepathing again.

You Earth creatures are dangerously emotional. You must learn to accept the fate we have in store for you. You are very sly for such a young race. You might be worthy opponents in a billion years, but now you are too young, too young.

Mankind should not have been able to penetrate The Barrier, Sallall Kal told me. If men could do that, they might also find a way to penetrate the protonic curtains. This must be looked into. When he was done with me, he would destroy the Timeler.

A man screamed with the agony of the damned in his voice. I shuddered. The Alatar looked past me at the red thing on the nearby table. The screaming went on and on. Sallall Kal understood that while the screaming did not register with him, it was all but destroying my emotional steadiness. The Alatar lifted a small metal circle from its belt. The metal circle glowed—and the thing that had been a man disappeared.

Now you can tell me about yourself and your machine.

"We men of Nyallar travel in time," I said. "When we went far into the future and found a barrier there past which our Timelers could not go, we did research and came up with a machine that would traverse it. I was selected to occupy it."

Explain how the machine functions.

I tried, but I did not satisfy him. The Alatar wanted to know things only our finest physicists and chronal engineers could tell him. He saw almost instantly that my knowledge was sadly lacking. He probed into my mind with his furry feelers, hurting me so that I screamed myself. When he was satisfied, he took away those mental probes and lifted a scalpel.

The scalpel sliced into my flesh.

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V

I LAY ON a hot red desert under a gigantic sun.

The fear-sweat that had been oozing from my pores dried almost instantly in contact with that dry heat. I lay there and I baked, slowly and painfully, before I could summon up the strength to roll over and climb to my feet.

Thank God! The pendulum effect of the protoplanic force had occurred—just in time to save me. Eventually, I knew, I would be drawn back into the Earth of the Alatars. If I waited for that to happen!

My head ached where the electrodes had gripped my skin. I was bleeding just under my rib case where the scalpel had slashed me. My hands were shaking badly, and my knees were so weak that I almost collapsed back onto the red sands.

Self-preservation is the most important of all human instincts, stronger than hunger, stronger than sex, stronger than anything but—perhaps—love.

I could see the Timeler a little distance away.

My feet ran toward it, scuffing red dust puffs at every stride. Mine was a shuffling run, such as a badly wounded man would make. I heard noises, then realized that I was sobbing, whimpering, moaning and gibbering to myself. I was paralyzed with fear and horror.

There was no escape! The Alatars could go anywhere in space and time. Every man and woman ever born on Earth would be subject to them. I could run away but how far could I go before they would catch up to me?

The Timeler glinted redly in the sunlight. It alone was my salvation. In it I could hide myself in some time-point of the far past. It would take them a long time to find me

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there. I would not go back to the Federation Council; the Alatars would expect me to do that, and they would be waiting for me.

I was weeping when my hands clawed at the metal hatch. It opened slowly—God, how slowly!—before my feverish eyes. I fell inside and the hatch closed. The floor was cold to my flesh. I huddled against it as a child might cling to its mother.

I slept for a little while, out of exhaustion.

I woke to a terrible moaning sound. Under me, the Timeler was shuddering uncontrollably. Had the Alatar spied me? Did he have me in his grip? I got to my knees, to my feet, and stumbled to the viewing screen.

I stared out at a world in torment, a world of dull yellow skies across which black clouds scudded. A wind—a gale, a tornado, a hurricane raised to the nth degree—was hurtling across this planet. I saw rocks wrenched from their beds and sailing like balloons across that strip of troposphere.

Even the Timeler in its time fog was affected.

I could do nothing but hang on. I had to wait for Earth to swing back into place before I could penetrate The Barrier and move back along the Time Flow. As I stared out the screen, I felt my head and body burning.

With shaking fingers, I doctored myself. The medicinal powders I scattered on my head and bleeding flesh healed them quickly enough. In a matter of moments I was a well man.

All I could do now was wait.

Ah, and then—after passing through the worlds of black rock and gray dust, the world of the flying creatures—I was on Earth again. My hands had been resting on the controls. I yanked them down. I shot backward in time.

I was not fast enough. Not quite.

I see you, man of the past. You cannot escape!

The Barrier was around me. It went away and the years and the centuries were like blurred seconds at the pace I was traveling. Yet the Alatar kept pace.

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Foolish man! Did I not convince you that we of Alatar have marvelous powers developed over the billions of years of our existence? Observe, then!

A gray metal rod reached for my neck. It lengthened and came outward from the Timeler slot that held it and twisted about my neck—or tried to. I darted aside, clutching for my disintor, raising and aiming it. I fired. The control rod exploded in a shower of dust motes.

The floor writhed under me. I stared down at it, shivering.

In the name of everything sacred to man, was there no fleeing from this monster? My disintor steadied. I touched the trigger and blasted a section of the floor. I might have ripped a hole in the hull itself, if the floor had not firmed.

Then as I watched, the floor became as it had been before I had fired, and in the control slot I saw the dust motes of the rod solidify. Everything was returning to normal.

Fool! I want you alive, not dead. With the kinetic powers of my mind I can control matter, yet I cannot quite get a grasp on your mind. You are a little—too far—away. However . . .

The disintor shattered in my hand as had the rod in its slot. I gaped at the fine blackish powder that drifted downward from my fingers onto the floor. At the same moment the wall itself leaned outward, extending metal arms. Those thin bands caught my wrists, my legs, locked about me and held me. Then they extended my fingers toward the control gears of the Timeler.

You are close to your own time era, Chan Dahl. You shall move the controls as I direct. There will be someone waiting when you land. To him you shall deliver yourself.

I did not fight any more. There was no use.

As Sallall Kal directed, I brought the Timeler down into that transparent domed section of the planet Earth which I remembered dimly as Kevin Cord. The dome opened and closed around me, and the Timeler settled to the ground.

I waited, still held by the tin bands of metal. The hatch

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opened and the Hierarch stepped in. It was odd, seeing him, for while as Kevin Cord I knew him, as Chan Dahl I had never seen him before. His red eyes burned at me. The metal strips fell away, the Timeler wall went back to normal and I drew a deep breath.

"Come," said the Hierarch.

I went with him into one of the laboratories. I lay down while he attached electrodes and made a recording of my brain patterns, draining my memory banks, my temporal lobes. Then I lay there until blackness closed in around me.

Only blackness. . . .

A hand was shaking me. I groaned and tried to open my eyes. I tried to tell the person to go away . . . it had been so pleasant to lie there in blackness and know nothing but its peace. I was afraid to wake up. I was afraid to . . .

"Chan Dahl—it's me! Glynnna! Wake up, wake up!"

My eyelids lifted. Yes, it was Glynnna Sam there above me in the antiseptically clean metallic laboratory of the Hierarch. Her tawny yellow hair dangled down almost into my face. Her eyes were wet—had she been crying?

I said, "Where did you come from?"

She whispered fiercely, "There's no time to explain now! Are you all right? What have they done to you?" As she spoke her nimble fingers were unfastening electrodes, releasing my wrists and ankles from the straps.

It took me a few seconds to come back to reality. I was Chan Dahl no longer, though the memories that had been fed into my mind were his memories. I was Kevin Cord again. I wondered how Chan Dahl had escaped from the Hierarch and fled into my own time, and realized I might never know.

Glynnna helped me off the table. She wore her Chronomad uniform, with a disintor holstered at her belt. She said, "I have a Timeler inside the dome. It's invisible because its automatic controls keep it a minute in the past. It will come into the present in about five more minutes, so we've got to hurry."

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Her hand caught mine, and drew me with her into a corridor. She whispered, "The Hierarch and his men are at dinner. The Federation has had them under surveillance for some time. They are harmless enough and—"

"*Harmless?*" I cried.

"Ssssh!" Her free hand motioned at me frantically.

I was still. I understood that our sole chance for survival depended on our getting out of the Hierarch's domed citadel. We ran side by side down the corridor, to a door that opened automatically to our body heat, then we fled across the domed compound.

As we came up to the dome, I began to worry. "How can we get out? Surely we'll set off some sort of an alarm!"

She smiled at me, turning her head slightly. "We don't have to leave the compound. The Timeler is inside it. It's right about—here."

We came to a stop, waiting. My heart was slamming in my ribcase. There were so many questions to be answered! How had she gained admittance? How had she found me? How had she escaped detection? Even if we got away—I was remembering Chan Dahl in his Timeler and how it had turned on him under the kinetic impulses of the Alatar.

A voice cried out.

Glynna whirled. A man in a white uniform with black spiralings along his arms and legs, just the opposite of the Chronomad uniform, was running toward us. At the same moment the very air whooped in a series of shrill, high-pitched sounds. The alarm was pounding itself apart.

The disintor was in her hands. Glynna aimed and fired it. Its purple beam cut down the Brother. I caught a glimpse of her face. It was hard, merciless, not at all like the warm, feminine features I had come to know.

Glynna Sarn was a Chronomad. She was trained to kill without pity when it was her duty, as a soldier is trained. The part of me which was Chan Dahl found nothing unusual about it: it was his own way of life.

I told myself to let Chan Dahl take over.

I tried to thrust the Kevin Cord in me deep in my sub-

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conscious. Come out, Chan Dahl! Fight, man! Fight as you've been trained to fight.

I found myself racing across the compound toward the open door through which the Brother had come. I skidded into the long corridor, saw half a dozen more white-uniformed men racing at me. I raised the disintor and fired. The men vanished.

I turned the disintor on the corridor. I melted metal. I fused wall to wall and floor to ceiling in long, solidified strands of glistening metal. Then I turned and ran.

As I came out of the doorway, I saw Glynna struggling with two Brothers. There was no chance to use the disintor here. I leaped and came down hard on one man, rammed a fist into the side of his jaw. He fell away, grunting.

I caught the other man, slammed a left into his mouth. Blood and teeth spurted. He went down and rolled, both hands to his lips.

Other men were running toward us. The alarm was still whooping in a rising, falling band of noise. I looked around for the Timeler. Glynna had said it would appear in five minutes! Where was it? Surely we had been fighting for that length of time!

Glynna was calmly firing the disintor.

The purple shafts cut down men as fast as they appeared. The Brothers made no attempt to reach their own weapons. Apparently the Hierarch had ordered us taken alive. From another corridor they were wheeling what looked like a small cannon, but instead of a barrel it possessed an intricate network of metal wires.

The Chan Dahl part of me recognized it as a nerve-gun. It sent out beams that scratched the nerve-ends raw, that inflicted the tortures of a Tantalus on any human being it hit. A man could go mad quite easily under its effects, yet not show a single mark on all his body.

Glynna said, "*Get it!*"

We fired together. The men with the nerve-gun hurried it toward a stone wall. Already its coils were heating, glowing cherry-red. When they turned white, the nerve-beam

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would hunt us down, and there would be no escape from it. Its beam fanned out in a wide arc, not narrow and thin like that of the disintor.

There was only one thing to do. I ran straight for the nerve-gun and its crew. They came to meet me, hands down and fists clenched. I left my feet in a body block. I rammed into their knees and sent them sprawling.

I took one of them across the temple with the barrel of the disintor. Another I caught on the jaw with a left hook. The third was on top of me, fists pumping at my face.

We rolled over and over. My antagonist was a big man, heavily muscled. I am no weakling but he had me by more than thirty pounds and none of it was flab. I hit his stomach. I hit his jaw. He only grunted.

Then he hit me, and I felt it down to my toes. I heaved upward, trying to shake him loose. He had tangled the fingers of his left hand in my uniform and he went right on pumping that hamlike fist that was his right hand into my face.

Out of some remembrance of my rough and tumble days as Chan Dahl, I brought up my knee. The man slumped, groaning.

I staggered toward the nerve-gun.

Up this close, I could not miss. The purple flame ran all over it and there was no more nerve-gun. I ran back toward Glynna.

So far we had been fighting the Brothers. The Hierarch had not taken a hand in the battle. The thought came to me that he might not be here in this present, but somewhere beyond The Barrier, laying plans with Sallall Kal as to what to do with me after he questioned me about Chan Dahl's memories.

The real Chan Dahl must have escaped before the Hierarch could question him. Otherwise his feeding me his taped memories made no sense. If it had not been for Glynna Sam, I would be lying strapped down on the laboratory table, ready for interrogation by the Hierarch on his return from wherever it was he had gone.

The Hierarch, by taping Chan Dahl's memories into my

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mind, would learn from Kevin Cord what Chan Dahl could not or had not told him. He could still question me—unless Glynna and I could get away.

"Where's the Timeler?" I yelled.

"Still several seconds off," she said grimly.

We waited side by side, disintors up and ready. The Brothers would attack again, if there were any more of them. Glynna said there were hundreds of the Brothers. We had faced only a few.

Movement on a rooftop caught our eyes.

The Brothers were up there, readying a second nerve-gun. They would heat it up out of sight and when it was ready they would push it to the edge and fire down at us. Our disintors had to hit it first thing or its widely angled beam would catch us full the first time.

"Come on, come on," I groaned at the invisible Timeler.

There was a dark object at the edge of the roof. The nerve-gun. It grew in size as its coilwork tilted down toward us.

We lifted our disintors.

And then—

The Timeler shimmered into view not half a dozen feet from where we stood. Its hatch slid back invitingly. Glynna gasped and yelped in relief.

"Let's go! Let's go! Hurry!" she cried.

We leaped together, bumping one another and laughing hysterically, falling into the Timeler and rolling across its tiled floor. An electric-eye beam closed the hatch, and the Timeler motors hummed to life. We were safe. The nerve-gun could not penetrate the Timeler hull.

"It's taking us into the past," Glynna said.

She was lying on her front, propped on her elbows, hazel eyes glinting with merriment. She was quite pleased with herself. Well, I was pleased with her, too. My arm hooked her neck, brought her lips to mine. I kissed her hungrily, half because I was grateful to her, half because I loved her. For the first time, she kissed me with enthusiasm, but all too soon her hands came up and pushed me away.

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"We haven't any time for—for . . ." She smiled, flushing.

"For such foolishness?" I asked.

"I didn't say that," she protested, rolling over and standing up. She looked quite enchanting with her cheeks so red. I told her so, which made her all the more embarrassed.

"We Chronomads have been trained not to show emotion, and you're a bad influence. We have things to do. Now tell me what they did to you."

I told her as she busied herself in the galley, preparing hot soup from water and food concentrates. There was a small steak for each of us, buttered rolls and some beverage that was like perfect coffee. We ate slowly, for I had much to tell. As I spoke, her face grew white with shock.

"Poor Chan Dahl," she breathed. "I can understand how he broke under that experience. His safe and sane world no longer existed. No matter where he looked, there was only the threat of the Alatars."

"It's a real threat," I told her soberly.

Her eyes studied me. "Yet you didn't crack up the way he did."

"Because I was two men. In my subconscious mind I must have known that I was really lying strapped on a table and that none of what I saw was happening to me. Chan Dahl knew it was reality he faced. It makes a difference."

"What I can't understand is why the Brotherhood bothered to feed you those memory patterns at all. Or why they took them from Chan Dahl."

"You know what I think? I think the Hierarch is one of them, an Alatar. His eyes are red, as red as that those of the insect creature who captured me."

Her mouth dropped open as she sat up straighter. "But that's ridiculous! I mean—he couldn't be. He's a human being."

"Is he? Have you ever seen him?"

"Well, no. Not even a picture, come to think of it, or only a picture from the back or the side. The Hierarch keeps much to himself. The papers print only the visual-graphs sent them by the Brotherhood."

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"And those could be doctored to show humanity."

She gathered the dishes, the cups and saucers, and slipped them into the steam-bath slot. She moved about the little Timeler as if it were her home.

Then she turned and asked, "But why? Why did they take Chan Dahl's memory patterns in the first place? And again, why did they feed them to you?"

"It was the only way the Hierarch could learn what happened to Chan Dahl, what things he had seen and—had not seen—in those crazy mixed-up worlds beyond The Barrier."

"But why? Why? Surely the Hierarch knows what Chan Dahl saw, if he is an Alatar."

"You'd think so," I admitted.

A thought occurred to me. I asked, "What about you? How'd you ever find me? I should have imagined that the Hierarch would have been quite secretive about his needle ship and his destination."

Glynnna smiled. "Oh, he was. But I was worried about you. The Council was kind enough to suggest that there were extenuating circumstances where you were concerned. If the technician couldn't tell whether you were Chan Dahl or a past-man, how could they blame me?"

"But I was worried.

"I decided to follow you on my own initiative. I had been relieved of all duties. I was to hold myself in readiness for a call from the Federation Council, but I wasn't restricted to quarters. I took out my Timeler and followed the Council ship to Luna. I saw the needle ship attack. I figured the only thing the Brotherhood wanted on that ship was—you. I kept out of sight as best I could, though I had to appear momentarily from time to time to make sure I was following the Hierarch."

I remembered the Timeler I had seen through the window of the needle ship. It had seemed like a toy, I recalled.

Glynnna spread her hands. "I came inside the dome by going back before the time it was built and updating myself to the present. The Brotherhood did not suspect my

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presence. Its alarms are geared only to the penetration of the dome surrounding their compound. I was able to slip in, find you and free you."

Glynna moved away from the cook unit, crossing to the metal wall that held the Timeler controls. She touched rods and dials. With that part of my mind that was my inheritance from Chan Dahl, I now understood her every move. She was slowing our fall in time, bringing us out of the central flow into a present.

I got up and went over to stand beside her, putting a hand on her shoulder. She flashed a smile at me, glancing up from the control heads.

"I want to get away from the Hierarch. If he can do what the Alatar did—use his brain to control matter itself, like when he attacked you in Chan Dahl's Timeler—we want to put plenty of distance between us. Just listening to you tell about it sent cold chills down my spine."

My eyes scanned the gauges. We had come far, far back in the short time it had taken us to eat and talk. We were close to the Red Line of the year 51,789. The Hierarch could reach farther back than that, I was positive. I put out a hand, threw over a dial, and then another.

Glynna looked at me. "Can he reach so far back?"

"The Alatar went back more than half a million years with his mind-power, remember—from his time era beyond The Barrier to your own birth-time."

For the first time, Glynna seemed frightened. Her hand quivered as it joined mine in punching the cruise-speed studs. The Timeler motors throbbed an instant, then settled to a steady pulsing.

"How far back must we go?" she whispered.

A thought touched my mind. "Suppose it wasn't the Alatar who fought my spaceship against me—but the Hierarch himself? He was much closer. Very close in time. Maybe he did it, after some sort of telepathic warning from the Alatar in the far future."

Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "We ought to test that

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theory. The only trouble is, our first test might be the last."

We were not sure even that the Hierarch knew where we were, or that he would—or could—come after us. All we could do was run away.

But *why* were we running?

If the Alatars were so all-powerful, they had nothing to fear from Chan Dahl! And certainly even less to fear from Kevin Cord! Unless they were utterly insane, there had to be something they were afraid of, some danger which I could not guess at, that made them vulnerable.

I said something of this to Glynna.

She bit her lip, thinking. "They overcame the people beyond The Barrier with ease," she pointed out. "Surely their weapons must be very powerful, far better than anything we have."

"I know, I know. It doesn't make sense."

The Timeler was quiet for a little while. I was thinking, brooding at the complicated control panels. Glynna was standing with her head down, staring at the metallic floor, her shoulders rounded in despair. I put an arm around her, pulled her in against me.

She clung to me with strong young arms, burying her face against my chest. "Let's run away, Kevin. Let's go far back—far, far back, where the Alatars can never find us. We can live out our lives together—we could have that much, at least."

She damn near made my heart break. I knew what it cost her to say those things. Her every word went against the grain of her entire lifetime, against her knowledge and her training. She offered everything up to me for a few years of happiness.

"I have a better plan," I said.

Her eyes lifted. Hope was dawning in them, and I told myself that if there were a way out, if there were an Achilles' heel to the Alatars, I would find it or die.

"The Federation Council" I said.

"What?"

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"They must be told. Maybe they can help us. They've *got* to help us!" She slumped wearily against me.

"There would be panic. Chaos."

"I don't think so. They're men, and men have always found something inside themselves on which to draw in time of danger. The trouble is, we don't know enough about the Alatars. We've got to find out by going past The Barrier again; carefully, making recordings of everything we see or hear. We must learn their weapons, what they do and how they work so we can counter them, if possible."

The Federation Council convened in special session to hear my story. Behind locked doors I told them of my abduction from the lunar ship and of my experience as Chan Dahl. Glynn explained how she had seen the attack of the black needle ship, how she had followed it and used her Timeler to rescue me.

"It is a crime to use a Timeler for personal reasons," one of the members droned, looking up from the notes he had been making.

Another said wryly, "Under the circumstances, it can be condoned."

When we finished, the Council members looked at one another. On every face there was gray fear and recognition of the fact that, if their descendants of the future who were so far advanced scientifically could not cope with these Alatars, still less could they. The silence in the chamber hurt my eardrums.

I stood up. I asked, "Don't you understand?"

The old man with the white hair said heavily, "We understand that the race of men is finished."

And the others nodded.

I did what no other man in all history had done, then. I sneered at them. I let my contempt come out in cold, flat tones that bathed them in scorn.

"You fools! And you call yourselves rulers of the people! God help us! Is this what mankind has come to? A band

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of sniveling cowards unwilling to fight back, unwilling to lift a hand to help themselves?"

Glynnna gasped. Half of the members came to their feet, pointing at me, demanding my arrest for contempt of Council, for public insult, for half a dozen other reasons I did not hear.

My anger was more powerful than their fear or their resentment. I shouted them down. I banged my fist on the table beside which I stood.

"Quiet! Damn you all, listen to me! I say we can fight the Alatars—and that we can win!"

The old man sighed and banged with his gavel on the gavel-board. "Let him speak. I will clutch at straws, right now."

I pointed out to the Federation Council that the Alatar beyond the Barrier had not been content to let me go, carrying word of what he and his kind were planning. If the race of men had not posed a threat, he would not have cared if there were a million of me running back through the corridors of time. His kind with their weapons would have swept all mankind from their path.

But if mankind *did* present a danger, then the actions of the Alatar and the Hierarch would make sense. The Hierarch was fighting for his very existence. This was why he had captured Chan Dahl, why he had also captured me, to superimpose Chan Dahl's memory patterns in my temporal lobes: to discover how much I knew, and whether I realized the one thing that spelled danger to the Alatars.

"We must find that danger," I told them.

The grey ashen fear was gone from their faces. A few of them leaned forward eagerly. Voices cried out encouragement.

"Where can we search?" asked a young man.

"I don't know," I admitted. "If the Council will give me a Timeler like Chan Dahl's, able to go back beyond The Barrier, Chronomad Sam and I will undertake to learn what we can about their weapons."

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The old man growled, "We shall order the immediate arrest of the Hierarch and all his Brotherhood."

I doubted that the Hierarch and his Brotherhood would be waiting for arrest. The birds would have flown their nest, because to stay any longer might be disastrous. They were somewhere out there in time, waiting. For me.

We talked a little longer. The Council was agreed that no word of what had taken place in the chamber would leak to the outside world. Chronomad Glynna Sarn and I would be given a duplicate Timeler to the one Chan Dahl had destroyed in my own era. There was to be no time wasted. We should sleep, we should eat, and the Timeler would be ready.

While we slept, the finest surgeons on Earth would implant a metallic plate the size of a half-dollar in each of our skulls. This plate was a miracle of micro-circuitry, a tracking unit containing a complexity of relay circuits which could transfer back chroniradio signals to duplicate the sounds either Glynna or I heard.

The signals would flow back and forth in the time stream in which a pick-up device was floated. This device, so close to the Chronomad present, would relay on to the Federation Council scientists those impulses as they came to them. It was a spy device only recently perfected, and one which showed, to my mind at least, intriguing possibilities.

We slept for twelve hours under a somni-ray machine. I awoke feeling better than ever before in my life. My descendants certainly knew how to get things done, even to an uninterrupted sleep. Glynna and I feasted at a little table in the Council commissary, face to face, on roast fowl and dumplings.

I was given the rank of Chronomad Initiate and a black uniform resembling that of Glynna Sarn, except that it had no white pipings on it. A black leather belt with a holstered disintor was part of my equipment. In all respects, even to the Chan Dahl part of my memory banks, I was a future-man.

We stepped into the Timeler seventeen hours after we

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faced the Federation Council for the second time. My hands went to the controls, set the time-locks and adjusted gears. Then I switched on the alert-rods that would signal us when we were near The Barrier. After that, all we could do was wait.

Glynnna stood before the gauges, reading them with haunted eyes, silently and to herself. I activated the visual screen and watched time run its race against mankind.

I saw odd religions rise, and a few centuries later saw them topple. I watched the people of the future worship a strange intelligence men brought back from one of the Sirian planets, that glowed and rippled and possessed the odd power of making men and women into beautiful humans. There was no ugliness on Earth while Ugolla was worshipped.

I saw the ships of Jan Felstrop's battle fleet take off for Axanikann, saw a fraction of the original number return, battered but victorious against a foe three times their number, having made the Horsehead stars safe for colonization. There was a global celebration for those battle-hardened veterans that lasted more than a month.

There was a time far in the future when mankind gave itself over to the cult of art. Everywhere men painted or sculpted, giving free rein to all the hidden, creative instincts in their souls. Every home, every street, even the meadows of the countryside were adorned with stonework made lovely by hammer and chisel. There was peace on all the star worlds when this took place, and the only weapons men possessed were in their museums.

This changed, as everything changes.

A threat came out of the Acrux worlds where a man named Ephram Eben thought himself a conqueror of planets. The paint brushes and the chisels were put away, the disintegrating rods and space-warpers were taken from their wrappings and duplicated a billion times over and given to men unaccustomed to wearing war uniforms. But their hearts were as those of their ancestors. They fought, they died, they suffered pain and thirst and bleeding wounds, those dis-

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tant descendants of my people, but they drove Ephram Eben back onto his little planet and there they blasted him and his last remaining army to bits of powder drifting in the wind.

There were other things I would have given much to study: The black nebula that entered the solar system in the year 384,604. The plague that turned men and women into monsters of a sort and the cure that all but destroyed the race of men. The slow growth back to the status of super-civilization. The battle with the invaders from the Amber Galaxy. But there was no time for this.

The Timeler drove on toward The Barrier.

The red alert rods began to glow. Soon now we would be in that band of unknown energy that had kept out all time travelers but Chan Dahl. Glynna was nervous; she paced back and forth looking at the controls, rubbing her hands against her skin-tight uniform leggings.

The view screen showed those pulsating bands so peculiar to the energies of The Barrier. They pulsated steadily, flowing back and forth with liquid grace, forming into tiny pools that rippled slowly or spun madly, and at their fringes crawled along the outer perimeter before merging with the more hectic interior. It was an art abstraction come to life, its colors blending, clashing, harmonizing until it was almost hypnotic in its eerie appeal.

The protoplanic plates were pulsing rhythmically as they picked up this energy and fed it to the specially adapted micro-generator that whined at first, then slipped into a new rhythm. The dark bands disappeared, replaced by a world that was not Earth.

Glynna was staring up at the screen, mouth a little open. There was surprise and a deep amazement in her face, for all that she had heard the story of Chan Dahl.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"The world of winged men," I told her, pointing. It was night outside, and we could see the stars—alien, strange stars—and tiny pinpoints of light where the men and women of this planet flew through the air. In the distance we

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made out the myriad lights of a great city, its towers rising upward toward the clouds.

We watched, entranced, as this world became the Earth we knew. There was the moment of colors running together, of gray fog and protoplanic force, and then we hovered above a great rolling plain where grass blew in the wind. Automatically I sent the Timeler backward in time.

There was not far to go. On the rim of The Barrier we slowed to a halt. My hope was that we were back beyond whatever force it was that caused the pendulum-like shifting of the many planets through the space-time continuum. I sent the Timeler sideways in space, moving through the air on the power of its gravitic motor.

Somewhere, there must be someone who could tell us what we needed to know. It took seven hours, actually. Once in the distance we saw a terrible battle, with the sky aflame and black bands of some unknown power stabbing downward like lightning bolts. There was no sound—it could not penetrate through our hull—but the ship shuddered and Glynna said that shock waves from the battle field were causing it.

Eventually we sighted the Alatar. He was leaping across the grasslands lazily and without haste. At first we did not see the men he chased—he was too small from our height, and he darted and dodged back and forth in animal terror. But he was a human being, and he wore a uniform of sorts. It was all we needed to know.

Glynna handled the controls that shot us back a full day and downward close to a thousand yards. When she brought us up to the present, the Timeler would be very close to the Alatar.

I watched the chronometer sweep hand. "Now!" I yelled.

We appeared out of empty space less than a hundred yards from the insect creature, and moving fast. It sensed us. It turned its head. In that moment we were on top of it, ramming into it with the full five thousand tons of metal that was our time-ship. The Alatar went down in the grass crushed and broken, quivering feebly.

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The fleeing man saw us, too. He came to a stop, staring. Glynnna slowed the Timeler, brought it toward him. I opened the hatch and leaped out.

He had a thin metal disc in his hand. I supposed it to be some sort of weapon, so I said, "We're friends. We've come from the past to help you."

He said some words, but I did not understand them. He smiled and I felt a thought touch my mind. *Language is only one means of communication to mankind, now. We have mastered the art of telepathy. Not that it does us much good against the Alatars.*

I asked, "When did they first appear?"

Two years ago, out of a black oval that appeared suddenly in what used to be South Africa. They sent three ships first; they attacked and wrecked half a continent before we could destroy them. After that—they sent a bigger fleet.

"And now?"

They've taken over our world, except for a few spots here and there that are remote and somewhat primitive.

We walked back to the Timeler, side by side.

The man—his name was Olan Prenz—explained that mankind, for all its mastery of science and the war arts, was no match for the Alatars. The insect creatures possessed an ability to disrupt and alter matter. Their minds, when they could get close enough, were able to prevent Earth weapons from firing. And they were able to come close because they altered the matter around them to disguise themselves as rocks, trees . . . or anything else.

It was a losing battle, all the way.

The Alatars had weapons no man had ever imagined. They could warp space, and they could drive men insane with subsonic beams that affected the globus pallidus and the thalamus portions of the human brain, which govern automatic movements like walking and sitting, so that men could not control their bodies. And they had other fantastic and bizarre war innovations against which the people of Earth were helpless.

We were inside the Timeler now, moving it upward and

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into the time fog so that we should not be detected. Olan Prenz had never seen a Timeler, though records told of their existence. The Barrier had prevented anyone from coming from the past into his era.

Glynna and I sat entranced as he telepathed the history of the fall of man. He was a handsome man, over six feet tall, strongly muscled and highly intelligent. He had been fleeing from the shattered city of Ilxenor to form guerrilla bands for some sort of warfare against the Alatars, when he had been discovered. He was grateful to us, but he wanted out, since he had a job to do.

I explained, "We want to help. We have reason to suspect that the Alatars have invaded our time period, too." I told him about the threat Chan Dahl had overheard, that the insect beings intended to invade every moment in time from this future-present to the beginnings of time.

There is no escape from them. If my people cannot stop them, no one can. It is hopeless!

"Yet you go on fighting," Glynna pointed out.

His smile was weary. *I can do nothing else. I will fight until death comes to me.*

"And so will we," I answered. "I have a theory that the Alatars fear us—fear something they think I know, which I do not—or are worried that we shall discover their one weakness."

Olan Prenz shook his head. *There is no weakness. You only waste your time. The Alatars are invincible.*

I leaned forward, saying, "This black oval through which they came. Have you tried to destroy it?"

We have. We have used every weapon in our arsenal against it, from disintegration beams to nuclear bombs. It remains always the same, black and empty like a hole in space. It is protected by some power against which we are helpless.

There was little more Glynna or I could say. The despair in Olan Prenz was too tangible to fight. It was a sickness that reached out to envelope us as well.

I could hear Glynna sobbing softly as my hands went

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over the controls that would take the Timeler where the future-man wanted to go.

He thanked us profusely as the Timeler bumped to a landing on the mountain slope where his guerrilla fighters hid. Olan Prenz assured us that he and those others like him would go on fighting. They expected to be wiped out, but they would go down battling for survival.

He was a lonely figure as we rose up into the Time Flow.

VI

THERE WAS NO help this side of The Barrier.

And so we went back beyond it into the past. Our spirits were very low. Glynnna sat with her head bent so her chin rested on her chest and her legs in their skintight leggings were stretched out before her. I could see tear-stains on her cheeks. Nor was I in much better shape, despair being a heaviness pressing down upon me.

I roused myself to glance at the chronal gauges. We were traveling through the time era when man had brought the god Ugolla from the star worlds. I thought of the conqueror Ephram Eben and the space admiral, Jan Felstrop, and the thought touched my mind that perhaps the danger from the Alatars lay, not in the future as I had supposed, but in this past.

It seemed incredible, on the face of it.

Glynnna roused herself to mock me. "In the past? You're clutching at straws now, Kevin Cord."

I said, "You're as bad as poor Chan Dahl. Don't you Chronomads have any fight left in you?"

Ah, that seared her pride. She was on her feet and there was anger in every inch of her body. Her fists were clenched and her nostrils flared where they sucked at air.

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"We fight where there's an enemy to fight!"

"Good. Sooner or later we'll find him. Just be ready to back up your words."

The glance she shot at me was filled with contempt. In her eyes, for the moment, I was still the barbarian out of 1965. Well, maybe I was—but I had an idea.

I had a hunch that the Hierarch, perhaps even the Alatar who had been about to dissect me, knew where I was. The Hierarch knew I had escaped him. He and the Alatar must fear me, in some manner, and for some reason I did not know, to concern themselves so much with me. Otherwise, there was no sense in all the world.

They had allowed me to go into the future—because they knew I was no threat to them beyond The Barrier. Ah, but now that I was coming back into the past, toward some focal point on which their entire scheme of conquest was based, they would strike at me, to destroy me.

I must test that theory. I must!

My hands went to the lever controls as Glynnna watched me curiously through tear-wet eyes. My hands slowed the Timeler, finally brought it to a stop. It bumped when I brought it to the ground. The hatch opened soundlessly.

I walked out into the charred and blackened ruin of a city whose towers, though broken off and jagged, or sheared straight across with a frightening exactitude, still remained impressively tall and massive. I walked through the black dust of disintegration on the fire-darkened stone of what had been a street.

I waited. I made myself a target and hoped that—

"Kevin!"

Her scream was shrill in the utter stillness of the dead city. I whirled, my hand dipped to the butt of my disintor rod and I half-drew it from the holster. My eyes caught a blurry glimpse of a long black something hurtling through the air at me. It slammed into me. I went back off my feet.

At the touch of its black-fur body, my own body stiffened in sudden agony, as if a billion volts of electricity were playing up and down my spine. I screamed, but even

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through the pain, something in me kept a grip on the disintor. I felt its barrel nudge into that eerie body, and I pressed the stud.

The black thing fell away. It lay writhing on the stone pavement, half its middle blown away. I gave it one glance, then turned as a high stone tower leaned its shadow over me.

I looked up, and the hairs prickled on the back of my neck. One of the charred buildings was hurling itself through the air in my direction.

I leaped. I ran, turning to fire back at that oncoming stone goliath. The the Timeler was above me, over my head, hovering there and taking the full force of the toppling building.

I crouched down under the thunder of its impact on the hull. It sounded like a thousand big guns booming on a battlefield. I was deafened by it, and my body shook to the concussions. Rock bits and rubble rained down all around the perimeter of the Timeler, but not a single grain touched me.

The hatchway opened, and I dived for it. Glynna knelt there, extending her hand. I just made it. My knee was on the metal sill, my head and shoulders were inside—then I heard Glynna gasp.

I risked a glance back over my shoulder as I fell inside. There was a shadow, a gigantic shadow on the ground. Glynna sobbed and leaped and the hatch shut behind me as she worked the controls.

Something gripped the Timeler, lifted and shook it, knocking Glynna away from its controls. She banged against the far wall and fell on her side. I dragged myself up and, gripping stationary things, like a table riveted to the floor and the power bar of a protonic generator, I reached out and yanked the chronal activator.

The Timeler slid out of the grip that held it, into the time fog. It rode steadily once again and I went to Glynna and knelt to take her in my arms. She had saved my life—

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twice, perhaps. Once by her scream, again by sheltering me under the Timeler.

I kissed her tenderly. She stirred and smiled.

Her eyes opened and her arms went around my neck. "Are we safe?" she whispered. When I nodded, she snuggled closer. "Just hold me," she murmured. "Just hold me tight a little while."

The Timeler ran back through the centuries while I kissed away her tears and then her fears. Flushed and laughing, she pushed me away and sat straightening her hair. I told her what I thought about the Hierarch, and how he would fight us to prevent our going back into the past.

She paused with her hands in her hair, staring at me. "Those things that happened weren't caused by the Hierarch!"

"How can you be so sure? A black furry animal jumped me. Its body was alive with electricity. It—"

"It could have been a mutant," she explained.

"What's it called? What sort of animal is it?"

She shook her head. "The city itself is named Arkrow. It was destroyed in the nuclear war of 351,820 when the Acrux worlds under the warlord Ephram Eben slipped an attack-fleet through the outer defenses of Earth for one brief, awful bombardment. The black beast could be a mutant developed in the radioactive ruins."

Well, of course, it *could* have been. It was impossible to argue the point. And the building *could* have fallen along an old crack when my disintor blasted, and the shadow that was so large it could lift and shake the Timeler *could* have been another form of nuclear life.

"You Chronomads visit all the time eras from the Red Line to The Barrier. Your records must say something about such beasts and such shadows."

"N-no," she murmured dubiously. "They say nothing."

It was no proof, but at least it still left open the possibility that it had been the Hierarch who had attacked us. I decided to give him another opportunity. Glynnna was

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frightened, but she nodded when I explained my plan to her.

"We must find out. We have to know—if only to have a thread of hope to cling to."

"I suppose so," she agreed, the fear deep in her eyes.

My brain still held the memories of Chan Dahl, memories I could dredge up out of my subconscious when I put my mind to it. Usually I deferred to Glynna's knowledge to save time, but now I sat deep in thought, hunting for an era where there would be no nuclear war to explain odd creatures and eerie happenings.

There was such a time, called the Peace of Ten Thousand Years, when there had been no war anywhere on Earth or in the star worlds. Glynna nodded when I explained what I intended doing.

"I know just the place," she laughed.

During the Peace of Ten Thousand Years, Earth had been turned into a playground for its peoples. Lacking danger to spice their lives, they had manufactured danger, and needing something akin to paradise they had set up oases of pleasure in which there was no threat, no peril, nothing but pleasure to fill the senses. Glynna knew of one such place—she had visited it before, she explained, always in disguise and after hiding the Timeler—where she had spent some hours stolen from her Chronomad tasks. She laughed and punched the gear-studs and watched the Timeler change course on the graph-map.

We came in on Elysia by way of the sea, like a submarine, drifting through the time fog until Glynna set us down in a bed of branch coral. We were in water shallow enough to swim to the surface, yet the curving coral tendrils would hide the Timeler.

We used the escape hatch to leap upward into clear blue water that was faintly warm and tingling. It was crystal in its clarity so that one did not need goggles to admire the coral growths, the colorful fish swimming lazily back and forth, or the ancient wrecks planted there to allow the

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diver the thrills of exploration. The wrecks were changed monthly so that they should not pall.

Glynna was a water sprite before me. She had changed into a swimsuit of somewhat negligible proportions resembling the bikinis of my own day, and she carried, as did I, a disintor in a waterproof bag. The disintors could not be used underwater—their force would turn the water into scalding steam—but on land we might have a need for them, if what I believed about the Hierarch were true.

I followed her slim white legs upward through the blue water, telling myself that when and if this danger with the Alatars were ever done with, I would come back here with this girl for a honeymoon.

And then—

It came out of the rotting brown plankings of an ancient Spanish galleon, long and lean and green, with smoke for eyes and glistening white fangs. It came fast, flashing for my legs, mouth gaping. Glynna saw or sensed it; she doubled up and flashed downward. I had a glimpse of her horrified, disbelieving eyes.

The green sea-beast was not natural to these waters. Therefore, it had been summoned here or created by the Hierarch. This was the proof I sought—and the proof was likely to finish me off.

All this swirled through my mind in a brief instant. Then it was on me, jaw gaping. I had a terrified moment when I saw all the fangs in its maw. I doubled up my legs and flipped over in the water. The sea-beast missed me, but not by much. As it slipped by, its teeth scraped along my calf, slicing the flesh like a razor edge. I saw blood ooze out.

I dived straight for its back, hands outstretched.

I missed my grip and the thing eased off into the coral growths with a few flips of its tail. I went after it, sucking in air through the filters Glynna had inserted in my nostrils. Without them, I wouldn't have had a chance; my lungs would never have held enough air to enable me to go into this coral forest after the sea-beast.

In the coral, the odds against me were lessened. The sea-

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beast could not rush me as it had done before. It needed room to get up speed, and there was little room among these reef growths. I could move about by clinging to a smooth branch of elkhorn coral or the upward jut of a tree-stump coral. I slithered down into that wonderland of color, hunting for my attacker.

It came as I expected, in a headlong rush from a cavity between two red fire sponges. My hands were on a stalk of black rock. I swung upward out of its path and dropped down onto its scaled back. I wrapped my legs around it and my hands fumbled just behind its great jaw. The scales cut into my thighs and they stung, but I had to hold on if I wanted to live.

The sea-thing swept upward as might a sailfish with a hook in its jaw. It sensed what I was doing and fear gave it added impetus. My hands were over its gills, holding them shut. I clamped them there and hung on, knowing that I must maintain my grip.

A fish can drown in water—if its gills are closed.

It was that simple. My legs and my hands were clamped in a deadly, vise-like grip. The sea-beast needed air, and so it went straight up to the surface and beyond, leaping high out of the water and falling on its back with a loud plop. I felt the jar of that crash from toes to head. The scales dug into me and I bit my lip against the pain. But I was a human leech at that moment.

The sea creature sounded, going deep. The filters let me breathe so that I was almost as much at home in these blue depths as was the beast. More so, now, for it was laboring for the needed oxygen.

Glynnna went by, swimming smoothly, making a reassuring gesture. I wanted to tell her to get out for fear the Hierarch might send one of these things after her, but I could not speak and I didn't dare remove a hand to gesture.

She followed me down to the bottom where the sea-beast came to rest. It was wriggling convulsively now, without thought, only its animal nerve system functioning. Even

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so, it almost threw me, for it bumped me up against a rusting anchor of the sunken galleon.

Those were rough, those few seconds with the beast grinding its scales into my legs and the rusting iron lacerating my back. Then Glynna was behind me, pushing against me, getting me away from the anchor.

With a last shudder, the sea-beast died.

I went upward toward the surface with Glynna pacing me, putting out a hand to touch my shoulder as if to let me know I had her sympathy and admiration. When we broke the surface, she called, "I would never have thought of doing what you did. If it had attacked me, it would have killed me."

We swam toward the sandy beach. I lay for a little while on the pebbles where the water ran into frothy foam, breathing deeply of the salt air. Glynna murmured softly, touching my back where it was bleeding. Then she was seeking in her waterproof bag for ointment that she rubbed into my skin gently.

There was no pain. She told me the salve was a universal medicine against surface wounds and skin burns. Every Chronomad kept it always with him in his first aid kit. It would work swiftly, though I'd be sore for a few hours. As she said this her voice tightened and she stared around her like a tigress crouched over its young. If there was to be another battle with the Hierarch, she meant to play a part.

"Then I've convinced you?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. As soon as I saw that—that fish, I knew it wasn't from our universe. My father was a marine biologist. He had picture books of every known form of sea life in his study. I grew up with those pictures; I know them all by heart. Whatever it was, it never was placed in those waters except by an Alatar or the Hierarch."

I said, "He won't be content with one attack. He'll keep on fighting harder and more desperately the nearer we get to what he considers the danger zone—if I'm right in my guess."

Her thin eyebrows drew together thoughtfully. "And

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that puzzles me. There is no danger zone, to my way of thinking. There can't be! I'd know about it."

"You can't know everything. I'm just hoping the Federation Council scientists can tip us off. We'll have to contact them in the Timeler."

We both knew we ought to get back into the ship. The safety of the human race depended on us. Yet the fragrant breezes of this paradise island, this Elysia, were a temptation it was difficult to put aside. Above our heads palm fronds nodded, there was music from some hidden source, and, in the distance, laughter from a girl and boy.

Also, I smelled food.

I moved my body, testing it against pain. There was none. The salve Glynna had rubbed into my flesh had worked a miracle. The cuts on my legs were scarring over, leaving only a faint redness which Glynna assured me would disappear in a little while. The sun felt warm on my body, which was naked except for my swim briefs and the bag attached to a belt which held the disintor.

My hand went into the bag and brought out that weapon. "Come on, I'm hungry," I told Glynna. "If the Hierarch wants to spoil our little picnic, let him try."

The disintor would blast anything made of matter that attacked us. Its smooth walnut grip was a solid, friendly weight in my palm. I put my other arm about the girl and drew her against me. Like that, we walked along the beach.

The nature engineers who had fashioned Elysia had worked a miracle. The rocks were streaked with veins of splashing color, each a feast for the eyes, the sand was white and fine, and the pale blue water stretched as far as I could see. Overhead there were little clouds and a sky only slightly less blue than the water itself.

Up ahead there was a beach fire blazing and fish roasting in seaweed wrappings, vegetables baking in foil, clams and shrimp and lobsters. Two empty seats flanked the fire, beside little serving tables. Glynna giggled at my expression.

"There are lots of these picnic areas waiting for the visi-

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tors to find them. The food cooks slowly, then when you put your weight on the seats, automatic beams activate the cooking mechanisms to hurry the meal to its finish."

For a little while, as we sat there and let the sea breezes blow across us, we could forget the threat of the Alatars. Then there was the food to sample, to enjoy. Never have I relished a meal such as that luau for two on the island of Elysia. Glynna was a naiad in her grace and laughter.

When we were finished, we kissed each other and I held her in my arms. It was our last moment of peace, we knew—only danger and possibly death lay ahead of us. I had been lucky with the sea-beast, but I might not be so fortunate with the next terror the Hierarch would throw at us.

The sun was setting when we got to our feet. We held hands all the way back down the beach, gathering comfort from the contact. Glynna clung to me just before we stepped into the sea, letting me know her fear. If men like Olan Prenz could not stop the Alatars, she asked, what chance had we? I could not tell her. All I could say was that we must continue fighting.

We swam side by side down to the Timeler. There were no more attacks. Inside, while Glynna climbed into her Chronomad uniform, I worked the controls. We had to pick another battleground. This time, I told myself, I would let the Hierarch himself select it for us.

"How?" Glynna wanted to know, emerging from her dressing cubicle, tightening her uniform belt about her slim waist.

"By traveling slowly, as far back as we can before he gets panicky."

She looked blank, so I explained. "I'm hoping that as we draw near the danger zone—if there is one—the Hierarch won't dare wait and see if we go past it. He'll hit us with everything he has."

"Mmmm, maybe. And maybe not. He isn't a fool. He'll think you're bluffing. He won't tip his hand."

"I'm betting he will." My fingers went out to the com-

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munication device that sent a k-laser beam back through time to the Federation Council Headquarters, calling its command post. I blipped the contact signal.

"Council command, here."

"Chronomad Initiate Cord reporting. I need help. The Hierarch has attacked us twice. I'm betting he's saving his big guns until we get to where he wants desperately for us not to go. I'm stabbing blind right now. I need to know if there are any focal points back beyond"—I read the gauges—"the year 211,654. I'm after some turning point, a crisis factor beyond this period, even beyond the Red Line."

"Hold on, Cord."

The wall instrument made a faint hissing sound as the communications coils kept the k-laser open. Glynna was beside me, her hand resting on my arm, hope alive in her hazel eyes.

The grille began to talk.

"Research has come up with three possibles, based on what your imbedded brain-plates have told us. In the year 131,841 there was a shift in the radial magnetic lines around Earth due to the passage of a radioactive comet through the solar system."

"Radioactive comet. Got it. Go on."

"In 39,864 a man named Comerford found some odd effects when he began experimenting with the Time Flow. He's the August Comerford whose discoveries enabled us to build the Timelers."

"Right. Go ahead."

"Last, there's the Red Line itself. When we set it up we caused eruptions all along the chronal median. There were disasters on Earth, on Centaurian, and on Achinnes. The theory was that we had disrupted some sort of spatial-warp matrix that touched all these places by activating the Red Line. Nobody knows for sure."

"Well, we'll try and find out. Over—and thanks."

The k-laser went dead.

Glynna said, "Three dates, with close to ninety thousand years between them. Which do we tackle first?"

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"I vote for the nearest. That means the time of the comet." I scowled, trying to recall what Chan Dahl might know about that era.

There was no panic, at first, when the comet was first sighted off Beta Centauri by a battle cruiser limping home from a fight with the rebel colony of Dray. There was fear, naturally, since it was calculated that the comet would collide with Earth or pass so near it the unknown radioactivity from its nucleus would destroy all life.

A call went out to the warships scattered everywhere in space with a command to destroy the thing, if possible. Across four light years the star cruisers hit it with everything in their arsenals. It was like shooting bullets at a will-o'-the-wisp. A comet is flaming gas, no more. How could they destroy that? The space battlewagons could not.

But some genius thought of towing a chunk of dwarf-star matter with magnetic grapples behind and reasonably close to the comet, so that its tremendous gravitational attraction would deflect the comet from its course. It worked, up to a point. At least, they got the comet off its collision course and far enough from Earth's orbit so that its radioactivity didn't do anything worse than fill the ionosphere with fallout. Of course, Earth's magnetic tail swung like a leaf in a windstorm, and the magnetic radials were never quite the same thereafter. It was theorized by Council Command Quarters that this *might* have opened up some sort of gap in the cosmos.

It was our job to find out.

We came down out of the time fog above a great mountain range. It was here that the new magnetic tail was strongest. By following the fault which was the result of the shifting of that magnetic trail, across the top of our planet with our detectors, we might possibly stumble onto the danger point we hunted.

Glynna slid a stool in front of the operational gears. She would drive the Timeler. I would station myself at the detect devices. The screen with the viewing lens was between us so each of us could keep an eye on it at all times.

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We rode above the jagged peaks of those mountains and valleys, none of which had even existed back in 1965. The fault showed itself as a thin streak of red rock striped with yellow, and looked from the air like a wound on the surface of the planet.

My hands moved the detect rods . . . slowly, slowly.

"Kevin," said Glynna suddenly. "There's movement down below."

I turned to stare at the view-screen. As I did so, something gripped my wrists. I cried out in surprise, felt myself tugged forward and against the glass and metal face of the detect panel.

Glynna screamed. She came to help me, seeing the detect rods twisted about my wrists, pulling me against the wall tighter and tighter. The rods had sunk deep inside the paneling and were like powerful hands gripping me. My knee felt softness where only hard metal should be.

I jerked my head back, straining against that inexorable tug. The metal of the detect panel was turning fluid, like thick mud! If I didn't break free soon, my whole body would be drawn into it and when it solidified again I would be entombed alive.

I had no breath to speak. My every last ounce of energy was needed to hold back from that living death. I could hear Glynna sobbing, could hear her fumbling at her holstered disintor.

She warned, "This may blister you!"

Then she was firing low power charges at the detect panel, eating it away, getting inside to the mechanisms, laying bare the metal rods that held my wrists. The metal was scorching hot; it hurt. But it had to be this way or I died.

Then the purple beam was eating into the gear rods and I fainted as red-hot heat whipped around my wrists. The Timeler went black and my knees buckled under me.

I opened my eyes to Glynna bending over me, cradling my head in her lap. She laughed through her tears, and

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bent to kiss my lips. The pain in my wrists was gone. I wondered, *Have I any wrists left?* and then I looked.

The panaceatic salve on them was a quarter-inch thick. Glynnna whispered between a laugh and a sob, "I pulled you free, and smeared every last bit of the ointment on you."

Later, when my wounds had healed sufficiently, we went all over the fault, without any result, nor was there any movement or any living thing where Glynnna had glimpsed it. If the danger point was here, we could not find it. Perhaps it did not exist, I thought glumly.

VII

WE DRIFTED back through time.

Quite honestly, I was in no hurry to let the Hierarch get at me again with another demonstration of his kinetic powers. My wrists still showed red when I looked at them, despite all the salve Glynnna had used. And my mind remembered the pain of those burns and that suffocating feeling as the detect panel liquified to let me into it.

And besides, I wanted time to think.

This hit-or-miss business was all right, but a nagging something in the back of my mind told me there was something else, some little thing I should remember if I put my mind to it.

Sitting on a metal stool, letting Glynnna handle the Timeler, I scowled at my feet. Something, some action or combination of words, held a clue to my problem. I had to remember. I searched my own mind, and I went deep into Chan Dahl's memories—both without success.

I hit my knee with a fist.

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Glynna smiled understandingly, pushing a fallen lock of honey blonde hair out of her eyes. She made a pleasing picture in her black and white Chronomad uniform. I thought that only girls with figures like hers should be allowed in a Timeler. I wished I had a snapshot of her.

Funny how the mind wanders when you try to concentrate. As clear as day, I could see the digs where I had worked in Guatemala before I had become mixed up in this nightmare future, and the great stela we had uncovered. I saw Chan Dahl once again, across the street from me, clinging to the gaping wound in his middle. . . .

How had he taken that death wound? His recorded memories did not tell me. He had fled from the Hierarch after those memories had been taped. He had fled back into Time—far, far back, according to his lights—until he had come to the year 1965 and his twin in time, Kevin Cord.

How had he escaped? I would never know, but I assumed that the terror in him had given him supernormal abilities. He had fought his way out of the compound, had slipped into this captured Timeler, had set its controls for full speed through the Time Flow. Chan Dahl had wanted out of his world into the haven of an oblivious past.

On the way into past-time, the Hierarch or the Alatar had struck him. With the very ship in which he had fled? Had a part of it stabbed out like a lance to make his gaping death wound? Or had the Hierarch and his Brotherhood cornered him on a segment of Earth in some time between the Red Line and 1965? It made no difference, really. He was dead.

But his problem lived on, and I was stuck with it.

The Hierarch or the Alatar had killed him.

But why? *Why?*

Chan Dahl had been a frightened man. I knew just how frightened he had been, because I had been a part of him. A man as terrified as Chan Dahl does not fight back. He runs. The Hierarch would have been smart to let him go, to let him live out his life in 1965 as Kevin Cord.

If he had, I would have been dead.

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The ball called fate takes many bounces. Chan Dahl was dead instead of me. I had taken his place and I was doing his fighting. But without his weapons. I was a blind man in a quicksand bed, swinging wildly at an invisible enemy who had powers I had never heard of.

I had nothing going for me.

Now, wait. I had Glynna, and an insane desire to stay alive so I could enjoy the pleasure of her company as long as we lived. This was something to fight for.

"Don't you have a picture of yourself?" I asked.

She giggled. We were some pair! Lord help the human race if it had to depend on us, which it did. She fumbled in her belt pouch and brought out a color print and carried it over to me.

"Being what you are, you'll probably like this," she smiled.

It was as lifelike as the artistry and science of her era could make it. It was no picture I looked at, but a real Glynna shrunk in size and trapped forever on a bit of plastipaper. It showed her in that same bikini suit she had worn on Elysia when we had had our private luau. Her skin was tanned, her hair was a paler gold than normal, and she was giving me a sultry look. At least, I told myself she was looking at me. Her picture was, anyhow.

"I'd like a copy, honey," I told her.

"I don't have the negative."

"All right then, I'll keep—hey!"

I was off the stool, staring dead ahead. She gripped my wrist, asking what was wrong, but I shushed her to silence. There was a thought in the back of my mind. Negative. The negative of a photograph. Black and white. The same colors as the chronomad uniform she was wearing.

Faintly. Oh, so faintly it came swimming up from my subconscious memories. Words. Yes, there had been words. Spoken faintly like the memory, in a whisper.

"Chan Dahl!" I yelled. "Chan Dahl spoke them. What were they again? Oh, lord, I can't think!"

I hammered the heels of my hands on either side of my

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temples, standing there with my head bent. Black. Night. Ebony. Darkness. Night.

"Night," I whispered. "That's it!"

" 'When day is dark, when night is bright! When Earth slides left and space slides right' !"

Glynna was staring at me with wide round eyes. She must have thought I was crazy. Then her own brows crinkled up and she nodded, saying, "Chan Dahl said that to you. You told me about it."

"He also said that if I ever encountered any conditions like those I'd know I'd found the mystery."

Excitement touched the girl. "But how . . . where . . . ?"

The reaction set in. I dropped back onto the stool. Glumly I admitted, "He must have found those conditions after he escaped the Hierarch—or I'd know about them. Let's see. He was running away into the past. Beyond the Red Line, first of all. He felt he'd be safe there."

Glynna added, "He was looking for you. For a duplicate of himself, actually! He went as far back as 1965. Well, that limits it a little."

Sure. We were sliding back through the year 92,656 right now. All we had to hunt through was nine hundred centuries until we hit Shoredune on the night I'd set out to buy a six-pack of beer. I groaned. Finding a needle in a haystack was a lead pipe cinch compared to what we had to do.

Glynna groaned, "He didn't steer a straight course, I'll bet. He was looking for someone just like him, so he would zigzag around in space as well as in time. He might drop over Nyallar, then swing off into the corn belt, then move south and west to the coast."

All space—and ninety thousand years!

Some haystack!

"It can't be done," I muttered.

And yet I knew it had to be done, even if we had to spend the rest of our lives trying. Everything on Earth, in all its ages, in all its climes, was counting on us.

We had to narrow it down. Chan Dahl would have fol-

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lowed a pattern. We had to go beyond the Red Line, first of all. If I knew Chan Dahl as well as I thought I did—and I knew him better than anyone else could, because I'd been him for a little while—he would run for a time beyond that Red Line before he felt safe enough to use his scanners.

"What's their range? The scanners—the personality probes with which Chan Dahl hunted for me? He didn't land in 1965 until he was confident he had found a man who was his exact twin. How did he find out?"

"Oh! The scanners are effective at a hundred miles, give or take a couple."

"Mmmmm. Let's say he went back thirty thousand years beyond the Red Line, using those years as a safety margin against pursuit. Then he slowed and turned on the scanners. What would he do then?"

"He would—oh, how do I know what he'd do?"

She was close to hysteria. The danger point we hunted was so close, almost within arm-reach of the gear panel, yet it might be fifty thousand years and half a planet away.

"He'd travel a straight line back through the time fog," I told her, feeling exultation build along my muscles. "Sure he would. Look! He isn't in any special hurry. Oh, I know he's running from the Hierarch, but he's reasonably safe by now. Or so he thinks. He has no special interest in the era where he finds his twin. It can be anywhere. He can live in the year fifty thousand or in one thousand and sixty-six, when Halley's comet made everybody think it was the end of the world. The dark ages, when men wore mail-shirts and used swords and shields."

Glynna nodded, biting her lip.

"So why should he go traveling around in space?" I asked. "Why go south or north or west?"

"Because I didn't see any 'black' day or 'bright' night when I came hunting for you, nor when I brought you back with me. I would have, I think."

I snapped my fingers. "Got it!"

Glynna looked hopeful, moving a step closer to me. I

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said, "When I was Chan Dahl in his Timeler beyond the Barrier. Remember I told you? When he was about to investigate the city of winged men? He began to fly the Timeler along a perimeter of a circle with a radius—from the spot of his entry into the world beyond The Barrier—of a hundred miles."

She nodded. "Yes. It would give him a vastly increased range of operation. You think he'd do the same thing here? Go in a hundred mile spiral from his point of entry beyond the Red Line, always moving into the past?"

"It would be his most efficient method, wouldn't it?"

She nodded after a few seconds. "Yes. It's standard operational procedure, that spiral." She added ruefully, "I should have thought of it myself."

"No reason why you should have. It might not work here because of the unusual circumstances. But I think we'd better give it a try."

We made the trip to the Red Line in utter silence. I was thinking that I was no hero. I was Kevin Cord, an archeologist. What was I doing here? I should have been back in my Shoredune cottage, sleeping off a binge. I was a man, sure. And to keep mankind safe was my duty as a man, I supposed. Like it or not, I was in the fight to stay. Then I glanced at Glynna and somehow, everything made sense all of a sudden.

I was fighting for her and for my own happiness.

It all came down to that. With renewed courage I put my eyes to the chronal gauges. The year 51,789 was dead ahead. The Red Line. Where it all began. I called out the years to Glynna and heard gears clicking as the spiral relays picked up their impulses. We would begin our spiral as soon as we hit the Red Line, no matter whether Chan Dahl had or not.

Then the Red Line was behind us and we just about stopped breathing. We were falling steadily through the time fog in long, sweeping curves, ranging out to one hundred miles on either side of our plotted course toward my

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Shoredune cabin. The viewing screen was on; I don't think my eyes ever left it.

We went more slowly, so as not to miss a thing. I had time now to study the panorama of history unraveling before my eyes as it might on a movie screen, though I must confess my mind was more on what trouble I was approaching than on the path bringing me to it.

If I was right in my theory, the Hierarch would hit us soon, with all he had. If we were caught off-guard, it might be our finish. Instinctively my hand went to the disintor in its holster and loosened it.

Back, back, back into time. . . .

Through the fifth ice age, through the Terrible Time, through the time of flying cities we ran easily. We had no idea of when we would see the bright night and black day, or even if we would. It was there, I felt confident; I only hoped we could locate it.

It went so easily, I began to have my doubts. We were on the wrong time-track. The Hierarch would never have let us get so far. If we were right, he would have turned the Timeler inside out by this time, as he or the Alatar beyond the Barrier had done to Chan Dahl.

Unless time or distance lessened their mental powers. Or it might be that a machine in the far future had given that Alatar extra powers, and the Hierarch had no such machine with which to increase his wild talents. Still, he was deadly enough without it.

I reminded Glynnna not to look him in his red eyes if she faced him. His eyes, with which he had hypnotized me off the Lunar ship, were still vivid before me. Maybe that was why he let us come so far; he could always confront us and mesmerize us into surrendering.

Glynnna cried out. Her quivering finger pointed at the viewing screen as her lips worked but formed no words. She was shivering.

I glanced upward.

The sun hung in a monstrous sky. It was a yellow orb but with it gleamed bright stars in a dark, dark night. It

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was not-day and not-night. It was nightmare. Lights were on in the buildings over which we were passing, a great metropolis stretching eastward from what was New York of the year 39,864.

39,864? This was the year August Comerford discovered hyperspatial gravity! What was it Glynna had said about him? He had caused 'queer and inexplicable things' to happen on Earth while he had been sending probing beams into hyperspace.

"This is it," I croaked. My mouth was very dry.

She stared at me, then looked back at the screen.

The whole panorama was sliding sideways like a panning shot on a television camera. The Earth was there but it was slipping away to one side and cold space was in its place, so that the Timeler seemed to hang suspended among the stars.

Seemed to? We were in space!

The heating coils were humming with power, seeking to maintain the temperature of the Timeler's interior against the heat-draining properties of outer space. Glynna and I could feel that cold underfoot, through the metal floor. It added to our discomfort.

When Earth slides left and space slides right. . . .

It was not only space sliding into view, but another planet, another world, in a crazy saraband of light and color and a huge green sun. It was a planet covered over with massive vegetation. As far as the viewing screen could probe, there was only that single massive plant, all green and with thin feelers and thick tendrils lifting upward into the atmosphere. Something thumped the Timeler. It was lifted, shaken. In the viewing screen a thick green tentacle slid into view, fastening with a bright red sucker-disc.

We fought it. We raised the ports over the disintegrating lenses and let the lenses glow with purple fire. The tentacle went away and the Timeler lifted upward into clean air. No matter where we sent the probes—powerful rays akin to radar but which sent back signals which could be

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changed into picture form—all we saw was this monstrous plant.

Then the scene changed and we were deep in the murky waters of a vast ocean. Not of Earth; the creatures we saw swimming looked like men but they had gills and fins and curving tails. They were the closest thing to living mermen and mermaids I have ever seen.

Glynna breathed, "This is what happens beyond The Barrier!"

"Yes, only the worlds we see are different. This must be the other end of the warp."

She bent her head, biting her lower lip. The diffused lighting in the Timeler caught her honey hair and tinted it with little streaks of red. She was the loveliest woman I had ever seen.

For her, I could work a miracle. For her, I could find and destroy the Hierarch. How, I did not know, only that I could. It was like a raging tide of fury in my veins, seeming to lift scales from my eyes, and flood me with strength.

I caught her to me and kissed her.

"Well!" she said when I let her catch her breath. "What was all that for?"

"For being my inspiration, honey. Where was Comerford's laboratory?"

She looked blank. "Comerford?"

"August Comerford—the discoverer of hyperspatial gravity."

"Oh!" Her eyes lighted up and she almost danced. "I understand, now! The people of the future couldn't do anything against the black oval in *their* time because it was only the reverse side of the real one—which exists here, in this present of 39,864!"

It was her turn to kiss me. She threw her arms about my neck and really let herself go.

I let Glynna handle the Timeler. Her knowledge of this period was first-hand, whereas I would have had to take time to dredge out the memories of Chan Dahl which were so faint in me. Her quick, sure hands lifted us westward

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toward where the Atlantic Ocean would be if we were over Earth.

The Timeler was unaffected by the warp-swings of Earth into the—other dimensions? other space times?—because it was not an integral part of Earth-present. The same forces that affected everyone of the year 39,864 did not touch us. We were remote, untouched by those forces as a piece of plastic is unaffected by an electro-magnet.

There were other worlds around us before we touched down on Earth again. A blue planet where a massive azure ball glowed, sending out white streamers into a midnight sky, puzzled us. The azure ball seemed to be alive. Or was it? Perhaps intelligences lived inside it, as men might live inside a domed city.

We saw a planet where only metal robots moved about. They may have been the survivors of a nuclear war, they may have been the servants of a race of living brains, or they may have been intelligent themselves, evolving from some rare combination of circumstances. The world on which they lived was barren, seemingly lifeless; perhaps the robots had made it that way.

As a scientist, I grieved for the lack of opportunity to enter and explore these momentary visions of infinity. They went on and on, swinging into view and then out of view after little while, glimpses of reality until now shrouded from the eyes of men.

There was no time to explore.

And yet—

On one world we appeared above a man battling a scaled monster with a sword. A woman lay crumpled at his feet. The woman was beautiful, the man handsome and intelligent. It was an uneven battle; the man's thighs were cut and bleeding from the claws of the scaled beast off which his sword-edge rang with little sparks.

Glynna cried out angrily. Her hands touched a stud.

One of the Timler lenses flared. A purple beam ran down and ate the monster, leaving nothing but dust. The man stared up at us, panting in exhaustion. Maybe he thought we

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were gods of some sort. I never did know, for next moment his world was gone and we were high among some yellow clouds drifting endlessly, aimlessly above a planet we could not see.

"I couldn't help it," Glynna said. "I had to help him. It just wasn't fair."

I nodded, and wondered briefly if some super-Timeler might appear to help us when we came face to face with the Hierarch. It was a comforting thought, but like all daydreams it was merely wishful thinking.

As the worlds spun wildly around us, we were moving steadily through sidereal space toward what would be South Africa in this year 39,864. Glynna was forced to play it by ear because none of our gauges or indicators were any help in this wild phantasmagoria that surrounded us. We clung to one another and to the Timeler itself as anchors against hallucination and mirage. Somewhere there was an Earth in all this potpourri of warp-space.

It appeared, after a little while.

And Glynna pushed us back in time, out of the space-stream that had caught us in its grip, back to before the experiment which had led to that awesome intermingling of so many realities.

She sagged against the control panels when she saw we were safe from the space-pendulum. Over her shoulder she threw me a faint, wry grin.

"Here we are. If the Hierarch is going to hit us, it will be now. Or even sooner."

I lifted my disintor and turned toward the hatch. Its metal bulk slid back soundlessly and I looked out over a yellow plain dotted with acacia trees. The African veldt, a vast sea of rippling grass in a sultry sunlight, stretched to distant gray mountains. It was a peaceful scene, all golden and green and brown.

Off to the right, I could see low buildings. This was the home and workshop of that native African, August Comerford, the man who had given humankind the ability to

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travel in time, whose discoveries had led to the invention of the very Timeler out of which we were stepping.

If we could catch him, give him such information as we possessed, if we could destroy that black oval out of which the Alatars poured in those years beyond The Barrier, we could save the human race. The Hierarch would try to stop us from doing so. It was that simple.

We began our walk.

There was a tangle of euphorbia trees ahead of us, and matted vines that formed twisted nettings dangling from the branches to the ground. In some places it was impenetrable but there were open glades where sunlight danced, that spread out before us as if in welcome.

Glynna was a few steps ahead of me. Suddenly she whirled, her disintor lifted, aiming straight for my face.

I had one horrified glimpse of her dead eyes where only the whites showed. Then I was crying out, falling, hurling myself sideways as the purple flame blasted where I had been. Had I been a nanosecond slower, that beam would have turned me into powder.

"Glynna," I breathed.

She did not hear me. The Hierarch had taken over her body. I crawled behind a matting of dangling vine, tried to hide myself behind it. I could not shoot back at her.

The Hierarch had struck, and struck hard.

He had selected as my executioner the one person I could not harm. Even if it meant the destruction of mankind, I could not kill Glynna Sam. The disintor was a dead weight in my hand. I could only stare at her while she kept turning her head this way and that, hunting for me.

I remembered the way her eyes had shown white when she fired. Her pupils were retracted inside her head. She could not see me. Perhaps she could not hear either, but I would take no chances. I slid back though the vines slowly, an inch at a time.

"Where are you, Kevin?" she asked.

The voice was hers and yet not hers. It was deep, overlaid with the tones of a man. It was eerie. I slipped the

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disintor back into my holster. I did not need it for what I intended doing.

"You must help me," she went on. "I—I think the Hierarch has me in its grip. Help me, Kevin!"

I reached out and at arm's length I gripped a dangling creeper. I shook it. High above my head a branch rustled into life. Glynnna whirled, stared blindly upward and fired. The branch and the vine rained down on me as blackened dust. I was right. The Hierarch could hear through her ears, but her eyes were useless to him, perhaps because the very power he used to grip her will and her body caused the retraction of her pupils.

I inched forward.

VIII

HER BACK WAS toward me. She had a pretty back and gently sloping hips with shapely legs. In the past I had admired this sight often enough, but right now she was death standing there. The grasses bent underfoot as I rose upward.

I leaped. My hands went out and my arms wrapped about her.

Under that impact, Glynnna fell face-down on the ground. She cried out harshly with the voice of the Hierarch and fought savagely to turn, to bring the disintor around toward me. I realized the Hierarch would have no compunction about burning Glynnna to nothingness to get at me. He would attempt to turn her wrist, to aim the barrel of the weapon at her middle and trigger it.

One of my hands held her wrist, keeping the barrel of the disintor pointed straight out, away from us. With the other I hunted for a grip to make her helpless. But Glynnna

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was strong and like a snake in the manner of her writhings. She slithered; she bucked like a wild horse; she sought with her teeth to bite me.

I let her go so suddenly she fell flat on her face.

With the edge of my hand I chopped at her neck. She slumped inert and I wrenched the disintor from her lax fingers. I knelt beside her, feeling wretched. Still, she was only unconscious. The blow had been swift and sure. She had felt no pain.

With some of the thinner vines, I bound her wrists behind her back and laced her ankles together. I turned her on her back. Her eyelids quivered, then opened. A spasm of fright contorted her lips.

"I tried to kill you," she whispered.

"You didn't—it was the Hierarch. But I can't take any more chances, honey. I have to keep you tied up."

She asked, "Suppose the Hierarch takes control of your mind?"

"I don't think he can or he'd have done it by now. Maybe I'm so much the barbarian his mind can't slide into the convolutions of my brain. I'm from way back behind the Red Line, remember your people have evolved far beyond what I am."

"But he could feed Chan Dahl's taped knowledge into your brain," she pointed out.

I shrugged. "He used a machine to do that. Maybe that's the difference. Anyhow, if he does get control of me, it's all over. I've got to assume he can't, and take it from there."

I picked her up in a fireman's carry. It was undignified, I suppose, with her head hanging down my back and her legs down my front, but it was better than leaving her behind. She was not heavy.

"Suppose the Hierarch takes over August Comerford?" she asked.

Mmmmm. That was a risk I had to take. "I don't think he'd dare, not really. If he does and if I kill Comerford, bloppo goes his entryway into our space-time, because Comerford will never discover hyperspatial energy."

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The buildings grew larger by the moment as I strode across the veldt grass. Their walls were of brick with brown tilework for roofs, and from the walls a metal maze-work of pipes and tubes and odd glass domes projected. I walked toward the largest of the buildings.

And then I stood stock still.

There was something wrong. *Those buildings cast no shadow!*

My own shadow lay black before me. "Oh brother," I breathed.

I flung myself into the deeper grasses, hearing Glynn cry out in protest. I dragged her with me while the fear ran out in sweat beads all over my body. If the Hierarch had made those buildings by some mental imagery, I had almost walked into a death trap. Had my hand touched any part of them, it would have been like pulling the pin of a super-hand-grenade. There wouldn't have been anything left of Glynn or myself.

I peered above the grass. There were no buildings there.

I held my disintor in a hand and gave a long slow look around the veldt. Off to one side of the trees through which we had come, I saw other buildings. I nudged Glynn, seeking for a handhold by which to lift her up.

I told her what had happened and asked her if she'd know Comerford's laboratories if she saw them. She frowned and shook her head.

"I think I saw a snapshot once in a museum long ago, but I don't remember any details. Kevin, I'm sorry."

I grinned. "Hell, I couldn't really expect you to. It would be too much. How about Comerford himself? Would you know him if you saw him?"

She shook her head, looking miserable. "I'm no help at all. I'm a burden, instead."

I hugged her. "On the contrary, you'll be a big help—if what I suspect is true. Look. The Hierarch has used his kinetic powers twice on us: once to overpower you, next to make the real laboratories invisible and put up false ones in their place. We don't know how long he can keep up this

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kind of warfare, but I'm hoping his brain is getting tired just the way our muscles get tired when we overexert them.

"This is my idea. I'll leave you here and travel on toward that compound we both see. We'll divide the Hierarch's attention. Maybe he'll concentrate on me and ignore you. In that case, you won't see what I see—if it isn't really there."

She was eager. "All right. I'll watch the building too. But hadn't you better untie me in case the Hierarch appears and attacks you?" My face told her what I was thinking, and she flushed. In a small voice she added, "Maybe you'd better not. I might—try and kill you again."

I kissed her and walked away.

The closer the lab buildings came, the nearer the Hierarch had to be. He would never let me reach them alive. He had to stop me! Twice I turned and looked back at Glynna; twice she nodded at me. Apparently she still saw the buildings too.

When I was a hundred yards away, the shadow touched me.

I looked up. The metal bulk of a Timeler was high above my head and dropping rapidly. My eyes went to Glynna. She too was staring upward, mouth a little open. Then she jerked spasmodically, as if some force had taken over her body. She jumped and writhed and twisted as best she could with bonds at her wrists and ankles. Then she flopped over and lay on her side without stirring.

The Hierarch had tried to turn her against me again. I thanked my lucky stars I hadn't untied her. Now the Timeler sank noiselessly to the veldt grasses. Its glittering blue-metal hatch slid open.

Uniformed men came out, clad in skintight uniforms of a dull, grayish yellow. They wore glassine visors that covered half their heads in front, through which they peered. There were five of them and each one held a glittering metal rifle.

Those five rifles lifted at me.

The disintor was in my hand. I fired. The first man vanished. The second one was cut in half. I almost retched

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at the sight of those severed legs and part of a torso writhing lifelessly above emptiness before it collapsed. Now the rifle fire converged on me in pulsing green beams that made the air crackle.

I dodged it, crawling into the deeper grasses, but the green beams came after me, moving slowly. I got one break, at least. I could see where they came from and where they were going. Maybe the creatures against whom they were originally intended to be used could not see that pulsing green for some reason like color blindness. But I could; it came straight from the barrels of their guns and it begged me to fire a foot behind where it ended. It was a straight green line pointing to the man who caused it.

I fired. One of the green beams rose upward and died out as the man behind it disintegrated. Two beams were left. I crawled on into denser undergrowth, in among the euphorbia and the acacia trees.

The two remaining rifles were silent. They were hunting me just as I hunted them. If we met in these veldt grasses, the man with the fastest reflexes would stay alive. I held the disintor out in front of me as I searched on all sides with eyes that smarted from the strain.

I had forgotten what it was like to lead a normal, quiet life. Ever since I had first laid eyes on Chan Dahl, I had been swept up in this vortex of intrigue and death. I told myself I was just an ordinary Joe. I had no business being here, and as soon as—

There! Beyond the vines forming a netting—a glint of metal! The disintor came up and purple fire ran from it. The nettings went away and I got a good look at the man in the gray-yellow uniform before he disappeared. Off to my right, a voice called out.

I slithered behind an acacia trunk.

I waited, sweating it out. The woods were quiet. My eyes touched the laboratory buildings. Odd that August Comerford had not come out to see what all the fuss was about.

I turned my head.

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I froze.

The fifth man was less than twenty feet away, grinning behind his glassine helmet. The metal rifle was aimed right at my chest. I had a split second to notice that the interior of its barrel was lined with gold. Maybe the green pulsation affected every other metal but that one. Funny how a man's thoughts worked before he died.

I *was* going to die.

I had wrenched my hand around to use the disintor, but I'd hooked its barrel in a tough vine. It was caught. I tugged but I could not get it free.

I was a dead man waiting for that death to hit.

And then—

The soldier in the gray-yellow uniform flared purple and became a little pile of drifting powder. Beyond him and to one side I saw Glynnna without the ropes I'd tied around her wrists and ankles.

I tried to speak, and could not. It is a terrible experience to be dead and then find yourself alive. Using her elbows, she wriggled toward me.

She whispered, "The Hierarch tried to take control of me again, but he sensed that I was bound and he let me go. I was of no further use to him. I thought that maybe he wouldn't bother me again, so I used my disintor to free myself and crawled in here after you."

She kissed me. Her lips were cool and moist.

"Bless you," I said, and meant it.

After a moment, she asked, "Now what?"

"We go after the Hierarch. We can't do anything as long as he's alive. He's all that stands between us and what we want to do."

She looked frightened but she was game. "All right. I'll lead the way." Her smile was gamin as she added, "—Just in case I get the urge to shoot you again, so you'll have some warning."

She frowned. "I don't believe the Hierarch will try to control me again—unless he senses I'm free. Maybe I shouldn't let it see me. I'll be your trump card."

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We crawled on our bellies through the vines and the underbrush. Between the acacia and the euphorbia boles we could see the gray bulk of the Alatar ship. At least, I assumed it was an Alatar ship, since it was unfamiliar to that part of me which was Chan Dahl.

The voice came out of the air.

"You humans! Listen to me.

"I am Valnol Trol, lord of Nollan, lord of Elallor. I am, as you know, an Alatar. In our own world, we rule supreme. None can stand against us. We intend taking over your world as well. Or we did, until you began to fight us so bitterly. Now we own all time and all space beyond what you term The Barrier. However—

"I shall bargain with you."

The voice died out, and the silence hurt the ears.

"What's your offer?" I yelled back.

"We Alatars shall remain beyond The Barrier. To you humans, we yield everything behind it. If you agree, so shall it be. If you decline the offer, we are prepared to wipe you out."

They would wipe us out in any event. They were not yet strong enough to do it, but in time, they would be that strong.

I knew it. I had seen enough of the Alatar's work beyond The Barrier to understand this. I was remembering Olan Prenz.

"No dice," I shouted. "We fight it out right here and now."

I sent a stream of purple fire at the Alatar vessel. It hit that gray metal and ran all over it but the time-ship was unharmed.

"Fool! We have weapons unimaginable to your finite minds! The gray metal of this hull is—"

I fired again, while he was still talking. This time the purple flame ate into a bit of that hull, leaving a gaping wound. His speech broke off, and now the purple flame ate no more into the hull.

My elbow nudged Glynnna, who laughed softly. "So, then.

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The protective aura around the ship is mental. And while we keep his mind busy protecting himself, he can't use it to fight us!"

Firing at intervals, so that the Hierarch could not safely withdraw his protection from the metal hull, we ran forward out of the forest to the ship. We had two disintors now to fight with and test the lasting power of the Hierarchal mind.

"Keep shooting," I said. "Every time we do, we drain a little of his kinetic energy. Let's see which lasts the longest, the power units in our disintors or his Alatar brain."

We took turns: fire and pause a few seconds; fire again, and pause awhile. The Hierarch did not dare loose the grip of the hull, either to lash back at us or to try and gain control of Glynna once again.

Yet we were wasting time, time in which more Alatars might come down on us. One Alatar—the Hierarch—was bad enough. Another one or two would spell our doom. A mad desperation seethed in my veins. We were so near to the 'most dangerous secret' of which Chan Dahl had spoken! Yet we were held in check by the Hierarch.

Why only by the Hierarch?

I fired the disintor, but my mind was winging its way across the centuries to beyond The Barrier. The Alatars were there, waiting—but why there? Why were they not here, at this focal point for all their hopes and endeavors?

They could not come!

For some reason, perhaps because of their very nature, their bodily structure, they were unable to come back behind the Red Line. Only the Hierarch was able to do that, to travel freely in the time stream. Why? Why?

I remembered the poor red thing that had been a living man in the process of dissection. The Alatar had been taking him apart, bone for bone, gland by gland, to duplicate his body in the machine it called a simulator.

Ah, but suppose there were another reason!

Suppose also that the Hierarch was the first crude attempt of the Alatars to send one of their own kind back

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into time, to the present of Glynna Sarn and even beyond the Red Line, to safeguard it. Right now, the Alatars would be working madly to create android bodies such as that of the Hierarch, to hurl them at us, to use them to smash us and to protect this one single weakness which they possessed.

Standing here, firing at the gray hull behind which the Hierarch crouched, we wasted time in all truth. The Alatars would be making armies of androids, making more Hierarchs, all this time. Soon now they would come, soon they would drop down on us out of the time fog and—destroy us!

When that happened, the race of man would be finished.

"Keep him busy," I rasped at Glynna.

I turned my back on her and ran straight for the laboratory compound. Behind its walls lay the answer to all this terror. I crashed into the big wood door, found it locked, began hammering a fist on its boards.

After a time, it opened.

A man with the dark skin and proud bearing of a Zulu chieftain opened the door. He wore a laboratory smock over slacks and a loose white shirt. His eyes touched me, then went beyond me to Glynna and the Timeler. His hand lifted to brush across his eyes. There was a chronometer on his wrist. The time, according to its hands, was ten minutes past two.

"So many illusions, so many mirages," he whispered.

"We're no mirage," I told him. "This is for real, Comerford, and if you love your fellow man, you'll tell me what I want to know. Where is it, the black oval? The gateway into other dimensions?"

He gasped in surprise, but something in my face kept him from asking questions. He turned, gesturing me after him, and began to run. We went through narrow corridors off which doors shut out the sight of machinery throbbing behind them. The entire compound was a gigantic laboratory that tugged at unknown, cosmic forces so as to wrench at space and time.

He tossed words at me as we ran. "Lately as my power

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has built up, I've seen strange things. The black oval came just recently. I can look through it into other worlds. They frighten me. But it does no harm."

"No harm?" I cried, tightening my fingers about the disintor. "You've discovered a gate into sidereal space. This black oval is the beam that controls that pathway. The door itself is half a million years or more in the future."

Shock made him look grotesque, but he gestured fiercely. "This way," he said, and led me up an intersecting tunnel. We must have been underground here; perhaps August Comerford built his main laboratories deep so they should not harm his fellow man by an accident.

His hand threw open a door.

He cried out harshly. Three men stood in his laboratory with thin, slim rifles in their hands. They wore the dull yellow uniform of those androids I had fought in the acacia and euphorbia grove, outside the compound. They were soulless, empty creations that knew only one thing—how to kill.

The slim rifles came up.

But slowly! The androids could not react as swiftly as a man. Perhaps it was a fault in their nature the Alatars were seeking to overcome with their many dissections. In time they might have done so, but Glynna Sarn and I had given them no time.

My disintor flared. Purple fire ran at the men and ate them. They fell as grains of powder. Beside me, August Comerford was so silent I could hear the faint hum of his chronometer.

"Who were they?" he asked hoarsely.

I answered him in quick sentences. I tried to give him some idea of what had happened since first I had seen Chan Dahl across the street from me in Shoredune. I spoke in short sentences as I advanced on the black oval. I do not remember what I said to him; at the time my mind was not on my tongue but on my eyes and what I was seeing.

The oval hung between floor and ceiling like a great

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horse collar. Its edges were shining jet, like polished obsidian. This darkness faded into gray toward its middle, so that it seemed like smoke frozen in movement. The oval pulsed like a living thing.

I lifted the disintor to destroy it.

I could not. The purple flame ran over the blackness and the gray and burned there with tongues of fire. There was no other effect, none whatsoever.

I came close to collapsing.

I had been so confident, so positive that this was all the answer, that this oval, when I found it, would destroy the Alatars and their plan for time conquest of my universe.

Then August Comerford said, "You can never destroy it that way. The power that forms it must be shut off."

I whipped around on him. "Then do it, man! Or Earth and all mankind will be the slaves of those—things."

He leaped. His great black hands went out and shut down on dials and levers. He played that wall panel as though it were a musical instrument. Faintly and from far away, there was a cessation of the hum that filled the room as one by one the many generators and the turbines slowed and died.

And yet—

Still the oval hung there!

IX

I ALMOST wept in my frustration.

I had been so sure, so sure! This black thing that pulsed before me was the key to all the danger which faced the human race. It had to be. All my reasoning could not be at fault. The Hierarch had defended it bitterly. The

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Alatars had sent their androids across the centuries to protect it.

What, then, was I doing wrong?

August Comerford was standing quietly at my elbow. His head was bent, his forehead wrinkled in deep thought. The only sound in the room was the very faint hum of his chronometer. He sighed heavily and beat his fist into a palm.

"There must be an answer," he said softly.

It was then we heard the running feet along the corridor and a voice crying out. I wheeled and shouted, "This way, Glynna."

She burst into the room, skidding a little on the floor, casting a glance at Comerford before flinging herself into my arms. Against my chest I felt her heart thumping wildly in fright.

"He's gone! One minute he was there and then his ship disappeared. Have they given up? Have they—"

Her eyes went past me to the black oval. I felt the bite of her fingernails as they dug into my arms where she held them.

"It's still here! You haven't smashed it."

"We can't," I told her.

August Comerford said softly, "There may be a way. I remember some things I've seen through that smokey part of the oval. I never gave them any thought until now."

He had lived with the oval when it had first formed, Comerford explained. It had taken him weeks to form it, for he would see it faintly as his motors revved to their full power, like a shimmering darkness in the room. He had been trying to form a gateway into the vast expanses of space which were sidereal to our own. His mind had become obsessed with the task. He had lived in this room, except when he had been forced to build more generators.

"I needed power, power such as no man had ever had at his fingertips before. Power to penetrate the space-time continuum and the barriers between sidereal space and normal space."

He had erected giant solar cells that drew on the ener-

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gy of the sun, and built small but mighty generators that could hurl that energy into the vortex of power that was the black oval. It had taken time, but slowly it had become reality.

"For the first day it hung there, I just sat and stared at it. The smokey middle section opened at times, so that I could see into—sidereal space."

Almost mesmerized by what he saw, he had sat and watched the oval peep onto other worlds and once he had seen the many-stranded vessel of an Alatar explorer as it had passed slowly through the byways of that sidereal space, searching for more worlds to investigate.

"It was then I realized, that, while I could look into that other universe, these beings you call Alatars could actually travel in it. However, they were prevented from landing on those worlds, by the same barrier it took me so long to penetrate. They were like ghosts—or invisible beings—as they swarmed everywhere in their delicate little vessels, looking, watching, observing."

He had seen their invasion of the far future, though naturally he had not recognized it as the Earth. He had seen them approach the black oval and pause, and go away. Later they had returned and in sidereal space they had set up a metal platform on which they had built a duplicate of his own power station.

"You understand, now?" he asked. "Not just my generators but theirs also hold the oval in place."

"Then we have to destroy them!"

He smiled ruefully. His hand went out, closed on a metal bar. Using it as he might a sword, he thrust it into that cloudy gray matrix. When he withdrew it, there was a sharp break across its end, and the rod was half its former size.

"Anything I push into sidereal space is destroyed. We have no way of going in there and smashing their installation. They are as safe from us as if they were on the other side of the universe."

Glynna shuddered but her eyes stared up at me hope-

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fully, like a child who still retains her faith in miracles. Mute-ly she begged me to do what could not be done, to attempt the impossible.

I shook my head, stubbornly. "There's got to be another answer. If the Alatars were that safe, they wouldn't have bothered to defend the oval. They have a weakness. We just have to find it."

August Comerford flung out his hands in desperation, in an agony of helplessness. I could see his chronometer and the hands that read 2:10. "We can't go into sidereal space, as the Alatars can. We don't have one of their vessels."

"Then why have they bothered fighting us?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

I leaped to the very rim of the oval and stood there, lifting my disintor. "Maybe energy can penetrate it," I said softly. I pressed the firing pin of the disintor.

The smokey gray center of the oval disappeared. I was staring into sidereal space and the purple fury of the disintor flame was leaping outward, into sidereal space and—

I cried out in dismay!

On the other side of the smokey oval was a thin-stranded vessel, just such a one as the Alatars used to travel in sidereal space. It hung there as if moored to the black oval rim. And the purple flame of the disintor beam was turning it to powder.

I was destroying our one chance at victory!

Fool that I was! Fool! Fool! I should have realized that the three androids had come here through sidereal space itself! The three androids I had destroyed as soon as I entered this room had approached the oval in this vessel, had stepped safely through the smokey middle gateway.

What they had done, I could do, had I not just destroyed the thin-stranded sidereal spaceship. In that ship I might have ventured out to where the Alatar controls lay glittering on their metal platform, keeping the oval in place.

Now that hope was gone, together with the Alatar vessel.

I whirled around. There was something else—one little

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fact that did not fit with reality. Until now, I had not seen it.

I still held my disintor in my hand but my thoughts were far away. August Comerford was staring up at me, as was Glynna. They sensed that I was on the verge of the truth.

Oh, the truth was so simple.

The Alatars had put the oval controls in the one safe spot in all my world! Except for a tiny, almost insignificant mistake, I would never have guessed that truth and I would have gone down in defeat.

August Comerford knew I had guessed.

He gave a little cry and whirled.

His hands went out toward Glynna, but the disintor flamed in my hand and a thin beam of purple energy stabbed him as he jumped. With that beam I caught him in the middle of his body and ripped half of it away.

Cogs and gears and wheels erupted outward, bouncing on the floor. Glynna screamed, shrinking back. The android-robot that had been August Comerford fell forward, rolling. It made a metallic sound, threshing on the tiles. After a moment, it lay still.

I turned.

There was empty space behind me. The oval was gone.

My legs were rubbery with reaction. I half laughed, half sobbed in that instant of our victory. I had been a fool not to have guessed the truth before, but I had made up for it.

"He—he wasn't human," Glynna whispered.

"The August Comerford we came to find is real. He must be somewhere around here—so let's go find him."

Glynna was bubbling with excitement. She asked, "How did you know? How could you have known?"

"His chronometer gave him away. When I first came in, it read ten minutes after two. From time to time, during our little silences, I could hear it humming. Or—I heard a humming I thought came from the chronometer. Then just a few seconds ago, I got another look at it. The time was the

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same. The hands had not moved—and so I realized it wasn't the chronometer making that hum. What else could it be? Then the truth dawned on me!

"August Comerford—at least the thing which claimed to be August Comerford—was not a living human. It was a machine of some sort, a combination android and robot. And—where else but in its body would the machine that controlled the black oval be safest from our discovery? It was the one hiding place where the Alatars felt it would be perfectly safe.

"They counted heavily on it. Oh, they sent the Hierarch and the fighting androids to stop us, but I think basically they felt secure enough. And they would have been secure—so secure!—if it hadn't been for the chronometer."

Glynna nodded excitedly. "Every android, every robot, is created with an inbuilt sense of time, as it is with an inbuilt homing instinct. They have no need for clocks or compasses. It was a detail the Alatars didn't take into consideration. They gave 'August Comerford' a wristwatch—but they didn't tell him that it must be wound."

Glynna clung to me, quivering from the reaction. When she lifted her face, I saw her eyes were wet. I kissed them dry, then told her we had to look for the real August Comerford.

Hand in hand, we began our search.

We found the real August Comerford in a coma behind the locked doors of his bedchamber. It was Glynna who revived him, fed him medicines and helped walk him up and down until he had recovered his strength. He was pathetically grateful for what we had done.

"I was caught by surprise, attacked while I was working in my laboratory," he told us. "They took me into the future, created a robot-android to resemble me, then brought me back here and kept me unconscious."

Glynna puzzled over that. "But why? Forgive me, but—wouldn't it have been easier to kill you?"

I explained, "Of course, but we're back behind the Red Line. If they had killed August Comerford, he would have

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been unable to invent his hyperspatial gravity engine. And since the radiation frequencies on which all time travel is based depend on those discoveries about hyperspace, there would have been no Timelers, and no past, present and future for the Alatars to conquer.

"There would have been an entirely different future, perhaps even one in which the Alatars might have met defeat in the far future. Who knows? At any rate, they didn't dare interfere with the possibility coordinates."

"At all costs, they had to let me live," Comerford smiled. "Though they made certain I could do nothing to stop them by a few electronic charges in my brain. When you two were out of the way, they would have allowed me to go back to my laboratory—but I would have been unable to interfere with the existence of the black oval."

Glynna shook her head.

Her face crumpled into tears and she began to laugh through her sobs, saying, "It's over. It's all over. No more Alatars. No more Barrier."

And perhaps—no more Glynna Sarn.

She had forgotten that a sentence of death hung over her head for having brought a past-man beyond the Red Line into her present. I did not remind her of it. I just drew her into my arms and kissed her.

The Federation of Star Worlds Council was in full session.

Once again Glynna Sarn and I stood before them. Now there was a difference in our status, however. The Barrier was down, for one thing. Communication had been established with the far future. Olan Prenz had been brought before the Council to testify how Glynna and I had saved his life, how we had given him and his guerrilla army hope.

Even more—

At the moment when the black oval had faded out of existence in August Comerford's laboratory, the Alatars in the far future had disappeared. Fierce implosions had destroyed them all. It was theorized—no one could be certain of the fact—that some ray or energy beam shining out of the

THE HUNTER OUT OF TIME

oval in the far future had enabled them to exist in our universe, that the matter of which their bodies composed would otherwise implode.

The black oval and their own energy beams had kept them alive in our space. Without them, they simply ceased to exist.

And now—

“Chronomad Initiate Kevin Cord, you have performed a service, not only for the Federation of Star Worlds Council, but for mankind itself. It is a deed unparalleled in history, because there has never been such a threat before.”

Applause rippled through the crowd attending the Council session, which built into a thunderous ovation. Beside me, Glynnna smiled dubiously, as if unsure that any of this applause was meant for her.

It was, as the Council speaker assured her. “You have fought beside this man from the past whom you brought into our present”—she quivered a little at that, wondering if she were to be punished for her deed—“and like him, you deserve all the rewards a grateful people can press on you.”

The speeches went on, seemingly into infinity. Yet they came to an end at last, and Glynnna and I learned we were to be given the rank of Chronomad Superiors, a rating office especially created by the Star Council to honor us. We were to be allowed to visit any and all time eras above the Red Line, to receive a top credit for our lifetimes, and we would be independent of any authority save that of the Council itself.

Naturally I was to be permitted to remain in their present. The fact that “Kevin Cord” had disappeared in 1965 apparently had caused no ill effects to the future. My pride was hurt—the thought touched me that I must be quite a nonentity for absolutely nothing in the world to change when I ceased to exist—but on the whole I was very pleased.

Glynnna and I could be married. We could go away on that honeymoon to Elysia.

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