

PLANET STORIES



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FASCINATING FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

CITADEL OF THE GREEN DEATH . . . By Emmett McDowell 4

At the coldly gleaming Experimental Station they flung this choice in Outlaw Joel Hakkyt's teeth: "Grinding, endless slavery on Asgard, that Alpha Centauri hell—or a writhing, screaming, guinea-pig's death here?" He chose Asgard, naturally. But what was natural—on Asgard?

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Illustrated by DONEL.

Against the Stone Beasts

By JAMES BLISH

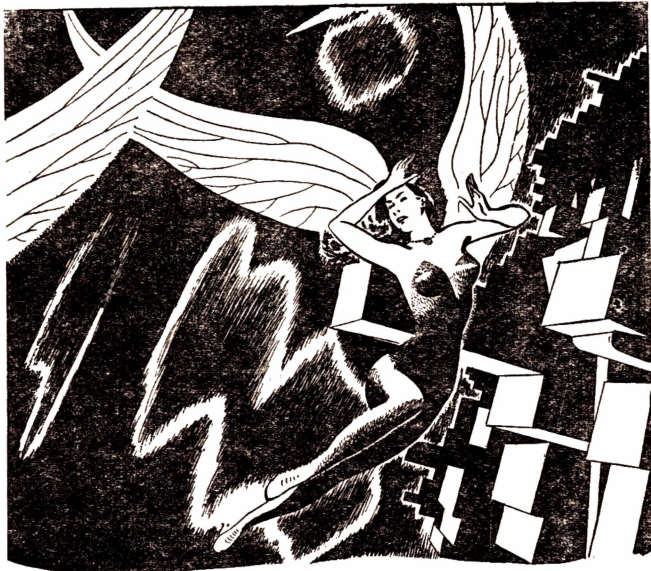
THE LETTERS ON THE FLY-specked glass were simple, almost dogmatic. Anderson eyed them with some amusement. Art agents seldom have any taste, he thought; can't afford to.

The sign repeated, *Special Showing of Surrealist Paintings*, and declined to offer further information. Anderson started to walk on, then hovered indecisively. Modern arts of all kinds were his province in preparation for a doctorate thesis. It wouldn't do to let the smallest example go by without inspection. He went in.

The improvised gallery was musty with the odor of departed vegetables, and very cold. Like the sign, the show had been set up with a braggart simplicity. No pro-

grams, no furniture, no eager guides—there were not even any guards. Anderson wondered what was to stop a thief from stooping under the heavy rayon rope, which kept the frames out of reach of curious or greedy fingers, and making off with the whole collection.

With his first look at the paintings themselves. Anderson was blessing his good daemon fervently for having guided his footsteps. He could not place the works in any specific category; they certainly were *not* surrealist, unless the word had been used in its original meaning of "super-realistic." The artist had used fantasy for his sources, true enough, but the results were not the usual shapelessness.



Wings battered him, and Ate's club thudded against his ribs.

Down the time-track tumbled Anderson, to land in a continuum of ghastly matter-and-space reversal—and find a love that shattered the very laws of life!

He angled his long body over the rope and inspected the nearest one. It was a huge canvas, reaching almost to the floor, and it depicted a building or similar structure like a glistening glass rod, rising from a forest of lesser rods toward a red sun of almost tangible hotness. A single figure, man-like, but borne aloft on taut, delicate wings which suggested a bat rather than a human, floated over the nearest of the towers. A quick glance revealed that all the paintings but one contained several of these shapes; the one exception was a field of stars with a torpedo streaking across it.

His quick glance confirmed another suspicion. The scenes were in deliberate order, as if attempting a pictorial history of the flying people. He felt vaguely disap-

pointed. This stuff was garden-variety fantasy, verging on the conceptions of science-fiction. Still, there was a magnificent technique behind it all—a blending and effacing of brush-strokes which made the Dutch look like billboard-splashes, and a mastery of glaze which made each scene glow like an illuminated transparency.

This last painting by the door, for instance. It showed the translucent city again, with approximately the same details—but with a barely-perceptible dimming of the red sunlight, a single tower jaggedly shattered, a few other tiny touches, the artist had given it an atmosphere of almost unbearable desolation. It was the same fabulous metropolis—but it was tragic, deserted, lost. Peering hopelessly from the

summit of the broken tower was a tiny face, looking directly upward at Anderson.

He allowed himself an appreciative shudder, and methodically went around the gallery, following the history the pictures built up. It seemed commonplace enough: a race of space-travellers who had colonized the Earth, perhaps some time in the dim past, had built a civilization, and had finally succumbed to some undepicted doom. What was amazing was the utterly convincing way the well-worn story was told. It was real—super-real, indeed, for it commanded more belief and sympathy than the everyday human tragedies.

Anderson took out his fountain pen and an unopened letter and walked toward the door. He must get the address of this place and attempt to locate the artist. John Kimball's inscription on the envelope reminded him that Johnny, though a scientist, dabbled in the arts and would be interested. He ripped open the flap, then stopped in mid-stride, ducked under the rayon cord to look at the spaceship scene.

In many ways this was the most wonderful of the lot. Even a night sky or a telescope field has no depth; it is merely a black surface containing spots of light; but the picture surpassed nature. It had a stereoscopic quality, all the more startling because it was impossible to ascertain how it was done. Anderson noted with a chuckle that the agent had placed the paintings in such order that there was a strong draft blowing toward the picture, as if being drained away into that awesome vacuum. A strictly phony trick, but clever nonetheless. Curious in spite of his better instincts, he put out a tentative finger to the surface of the scene—

The fountain pen clattered to the floor.

He gaped idiotically, and stirred with his finger at the nothingness where the picture still seemed to be. In his shock-numbed mind two words burned fiercely:

It's real.

Ridiculous. Tensely he forced himself to move his hand in deeper, against the yelling of his nerves. It struck a slight, tingling resistance, like a curtain of static electricity—and then the blood was pounding in each finger as it trying to burst through the skin. He snatched the hand back. There was a vacuum there; cut off from the room by some unseen force

through which the air was leaking rapidly.

Teetering on the edge of panic, he struggled to make better sense of the facts. The prickly pounding he had felt in his fingers might well have been electrical and only that, and Johnny Kimball had once demonstrated for him the "static jet" which might explain the draft of air. Three-dimensional television, perhaps—

He shook his head. No inventor would set up a demonstration like this, in an abandoned grocery, without any announcement or literature; nor would there be likely to be eighteen screens, each one showing a motionless and quite impossible scene. No; it was insane, but these garish things were—

Windows.

Into what? Clutching at his frayed emotions, he took a step toward the next frame. His foot crunched on the forgotten fountain pen. For a second he flailed in terror at nothing, and then pitched head foremost over the low ledge.

AFTER A MOMENT the sweet piping spoke again. "You are not hurt. The mental shock will pass shortly."

Anderson said nothing and stared fixedly at the crimson glow underneath his eyelids. Physically he was unhurt, but his sanity was precarious. In his mind, behind the closed lids, it happened over and over again: the long twisting fall, with the great city spinning and growing beneath him in a riot of color, and damp hot air gushing past him, the sudden swooping of the dark figure and the thrum of wings. He tried to pass out again and awaken on the floor of the gallery, but the cold, chiming voice jabbed him awake again.

"This is quite real. You are intelligent enough to accept it—stop thinking like an infant."

The motherly reprimand under such circumstances planted a small germ of amusement somewhere in his mind, and he grasped it frantically and began to laugh, still keeping his eyes clenched shut. Even without seeing its face, he could feel the creature's alarm at his hysteria, but he allowed the shaking to exhaust him into a sort of calmness. Only when his breathing had become controlled and even did he allow himself a second look.

Red sunlight played harshly in upon him

through the translucent walls of the small room, and burned sullenly within the crystal bar which crossed above his head. One wall was recessed with what seemed to be bookshelves, and odd articles of furniture stood here and there; but evidently none of them had been designed for humans, for he was lying on the smooth floor, his jacket bunched under his head. The cowed shape still arched over him with Satanic solicitude, black against the glare, and somehow smaller than he had expected it to be. He hoped that that cape would not expand into wings—not yet—for his new calm still stood at the shimmering verge of madness.

"Thank you," he said carefully. "I owe you my life."

The silhouetted head moved as if to dismiss the matter. "Your sudden appearance in mid-air was startling. We were fortunate that I happened to be in flight at the time."

With a whispering sound, like the rustling of heavy cloth, the figure moved out of the direct rays of the sun and settled gracefully against one of the furniture-like things. The light struck it full, and Andreson gasped and sat bolt upright.

She was winged, no doubt about that. But the bat-like impression those wings had given him seemed to have been only a product of distance. Seen in closeup, the wings were tawny and delicate, and traced with intricate veins, their ribs were closest, the webbing like the sheerest silk. They rose from the girl's back where her shoulderblades should have been, and at rest curved around her sides and made a backdrop for her legs and feet.

Except for those gorgeous pinions, which set her off like two great Japanese fans, she might have been human, or close to it. She no more suggested the rodent than the goddess Diana would have suggested a female gorilla. The wings, something about the bony structure underlying her face, a vague *otherness* about her proportions—except for these minute differences she could have passed anywhere for a strikingly lovely human girl. Her clothing was brief and simple, and not weighted with ornaments, for she needed free limbs and no useless baggage for flight.

Andreson realized that he was goggling and rearranged his face as best he could.

She did not seem to take his amazed inspection as anything but normal, however. "Are you a time-traveller?" she asked, tilted her head curiously. "We could think of no other explanation. Are you from our track?"

"I don't know," Andreson confessed. "My trip was accidental, and the mechanism is a mystery to me." He considered asking about the gallery, but the girl's questions had already told him it would be fruitless.

He masked his emotions in the mechanism of locating and lighting a cigarette, while the girl waited with polite patience. It was hard to forget that there was an obscure doom prophesied—or had it been merely narrated, as historical fact?—for this exquisite creature and her whole civilization, and he was determined to say nothing about it until he knew what he was talking about.

"I discovered in my time a sort of gateway to your time, and to seventeen other nearly synchronous moments, set up by a scientist unknown to me. Each of the gates seems to open upon one single specific instant. For instance: before I fell into the one which brought me here, I saw a figure I'm sure was yours. And it was motionless above the city, all the time that I was watching it."

He broke off suddenly. "Wait a minute. If this is another time—well, suppose you tell me: am I speaking your language, or do you know mine? Or are you a telepath?"

SHE laughed, each sound a clear, musical tone, as if she had been struck by a desire to sing the *Bell Song*. "Don't you know your own language when you hear it? No, the Varese are not telepathic—few races are. But a truly telepathic race allied with us has provided our culture with a good stock of equipment for tapping various parts of the mind. We use it for education. We simply tapped your language centers while you were unconscious."

A shadow passed across the glowing wall, and he heard the already-familiar hum of wings. A moment later a newcomer was outlined in the sunlight in a low doorway which seemed to open on empty space. It was a man, this time, a figure almost exactly Andreson's height,

and perhaps a little older, though it was hard to judge. He smiled unpleasantly at the human, revealing two upper incisors which were slightly larger than the rest of his teeth, and demanded, "Well, what time is he?"

"What time are you?" Andreson countered. "We've no record of you in our history. You could have flourished, died, or moved on a dozen times without our knowing it—our records go back only three thousand years."

"Well taken," the Varan said, making himself comfortable on one of the odd "chairs." "We're not native, here, of course. But so far we've found no mammals on this planet, except a few egg-laying ones that aren't even entirely warm-blooded yet; so you *must* be a considerable distance in our future. Furthermore, you're a time-traveller, which means that you know more than we do, for time is a problem we have never broken."

The girl shook her head slowly, all traces of her former laughter vanished. "It's no use, Atel. He's here by accident, and isn't a scientist."

"What's the matter?" Andreson said. Both faces looked so somber that he nearly forgot his own problem. "Are you in trouble?"

"We're at war," the girl said softly. "And we shall probably be exterminated, all of us, before the year is over."

Andreson remembered again the picture of the deserted city, and despite the hot sun he felt the same chill.

"This planet you call Earth," Atel said, "has no life on its surface now with enough intelligence to count up to three. But after we had been here fifty-three of its years, we discovered that Earth has a civilization of its own all the same—*inside*."

A dozen legends chased through Andreson's mind at once. "Cave-dwellers of some sort? It hardly seems credible."

"No, not cave-dwellers. These aren't even solid, and they couldn't live in caves. They live *in* the Earth—in the rock itself, and all the way down to the core. They are—space-beasts. They move through solid matter just as you and I move through space, and are stopped by space as we are stopped by a solid wall. In the air, for instance, we're safe from them. for what is

to us a thin gas is for them a viscous, almost rigid medium. In the oceans, we meet on equal terms; but true solids are their natural medium."

"How did you discover them?"

"They discovered us," the girl said. "They have besieged the city ever since the fifty-third year after our landing. They're invisible, of course, but we can see them as openings in the earth. The openings change shape as they move, and of course no natural pit does that. In their own universe, the hollow Earth bounded by its solid atmosphere, they are flying creatures, and their sense of gravity is the reverse of ours."

Her clear, fluting voice became steadily duller, losing its inflection as the tale went on. "Before we came here," she said, "we had encountered what our scientists call counter-matter—matter of opposite electrical nature to ours. But this complete inversion of space-matter relationships was unknown to us. The space-beasts knew about it. They are bent on driving us from the Earth . . ."

ANDRESON felt his mind reeling into hysteria again. It was difficult enough to accept the spotless, shining glass chamber and the two winged Varese—but this story of an inside-out universe and its air-treading masters—if only John Kimball had been the one to hear it—

"Sometimes," Atel said reflectively, "I think the Varese have earned their defeat. There was a time when we were carrying the fight into the enemy's own cosmos. But it was their cosmos, not ours, and they knew it very well! Our change of state, while it enabled us to see our foes, could not change our mental orientation. We were lost in that hollow darkness. We could not forget that each great gulf was actually a mountain, the sudden chasms were buildings we ourselves had built,—and the things like tiny burrows which kept opening and closing all about our feet were the footfalls of our brothers. And the space-beasts swooped upon us, each of them with six tiers of wings muttering against the solid magma of the Earth, and our weapons were crude and worthless . . ."

Andreson's mind tasted the concept and rejected it with a shudder. "But surely,"

he said as steadily as he could, "you must have better weapons, now."

"Oh, yes, we have the weapons. But we are decadent, and have lost the initiative to be the aggressors. The machines that accomplished the reversal of state for our ancestors have lain idle for a century in the bowels of our city. We no longer understand them. We are dying, first of all, of old age—the space-beasts are the accident that speeds us along the way. Shall I tell you what we use against them now?"

The girl stirred protestingly. Andreson looked at her, but she would not return the glance. Atel went on relentlessly.

"Look." From under his tunic he produced a heavy, long metal rod.

"A club? But—I don't see how—"

"It's hollow," Atel said succinctly. "The metal, of course, is useless, but the vacuum inside is steel-hard to them. Space crushing into space, and goutts of hard radiation bursting like blood from the contact. That's all we have now, that and a feeble energising process which sometimes seals off the foundations of the city. Walls, and clubs! Our last miserable recourse—and then—"

"Then the space-beasts will own the Earth again."

II

BY THE TIME JOHN KIMBALL had finished disconnecting the leads to the multiple screen and rewiring the master converter he was nearly blind with fatigue and his fingertips jerked and danced uncontrollably on the verniers. The sleepless nights of the previous week, and the emotional strain under which he had been working throughout was taking its toll now. After the wave-splitting effect had first suggested it to him, he had spent most of the week erecting the demonstration, and quite probably the triumphant letter he had mailed to Andreson afterwards had been a little crazy.

As soon as he had posted the letter he had managed to get in about twenty hours of deathlike slumber. It was hardly enough, but there was no help for that now. Except for the first, sickening shock—for the discarded, empty envelope on the floor, the splintered fountain pen, and the one screen featureless and flickeringly gray, had told him what had happened in instant detail—

he had wasted no time cursing himself for his grandiose "gallery" stunt. The Colossus in the cellar would need many hours of weary, desperate work before the cauterized scars of Andreson's cannoning fall through the tissues of Time would open enough to permit Kimball to follow.

A tumbler clicked in the pre-dawn silence, and a flood of magnetons sped through the primary coils. The ensuing process was quiet and invisible, but Kimball could feel it—the familiar, nauseating strain which had first led him to the basic principle. It meant that tiny lacunae were being born in the fabric of Time, spreading and merging as the spinning magnetic field tore at them. He slumped on his stool and waited. He was not sure that the last hour's work had been even approximately right, but his gibbering nerves would no longer permit calculation or delicate mechanical correction. The die was cast, and wherever the nascent achronic gateway led, he would have to follow.

After a moment he discovered that the climbing dial needles were hypnotizing him. Getting up from the stool, he proceeded to collect his equipment, moving like a zombie. It was futile to wish he had studied the period more closely, but at least it was clear that the age of the winged colonists had been warfare; best to be armed, though there was a good chance that his pistol would be far outclassed. A flashlight clipped to his belt, and an alcohol compass tuned to the machine's field rather than the Earth's, and he was ready.

He stepped into the heavy torus coil which terminated the series—there had been no time to set up a new frame—and turned out the cellar light.

The machine made no sound, and in the blackness no one could have seen that after a few moments it was alone.

THE light of the red sun ran back and forth along the catwalk in quivering lines, and all around it the city glistened in faery-like beauty. Andreson regarded the bridge dubiously; it was little more than a thread of crystal.

"It will bear your weight," the girl said, mistaking his trepidation. Masking his thoughts, he set out across it.

"They have come through several times, just recently," Atel continued evenly. "In

a sort of borer—I suppose they thought of it as that—whose walls were invisible, its machinery a contorted group of vacancies in a solid interior. But we destroyed the solid part, and they were crushed. It is hard to imagine how empty space could crush. But we have the law that two objects may not exist in the same space at the same time, and this seems to be its converse."

Andreson tried it out: two spaces cannot exist in the same—in the same what? Abruptly his head was whirling and in the vast distance the earth reeled and shuddered; the glassy thread under his feet seemed to swivel back and forth like a tightrope. He was going over—

Behind him, powerful vanes cracked open, and lean hands grappled his shoulders firmly. "Thanks," he gasped, flailing with his feet at the landing of the next building. Atel grinned contemptuously and leaned him against the wall like a manikin.

"Nevertheless," the winged man proceeded as imperturbably as ever, "they learn rapidly. If they ever find out the secret of reversing their condition, we can close the book on Varan history." He jerked open the door to which the platform led, and Andreson and the girl followed him through.

From the level upon which they were standing all the way up to the summit of this new tower there was a vast chamber, domed with a clear roof. Around the base of the dome proper a ledge or platform ran, upon which was more of the furniture-like stuff—evidently a sort of solarium. Extending outside the walls as well as inside, it gave the building the look of a giant in a plastic helmet. At the apex of the dome a gem, like a giant's diamond, was fixed, rotating slowly, catching the sunlight and sending a parade of rainbow hues over the seats banked far below.

"Starstone Chamber," the girl said. "Our council hall."

"It's beautiful. Not a place for stuffy-minded men, I'd say."

They walked down through the tiers of seats toward the bottom of the arena, where what appeared to be the head of a spiral staircase was visible.

"Where are we bound?"

"To Goseq, one of our senior psychologists," Atel said. "We want to see what

we can dredge up about the sciences of your period. Doubtless your observation, being untrained, missed most of the essentials, but there ought to be *some* kind of residuum in your subconscious."

"Why don't you fly me back to where I fell out of?" Andreson suggested stiffly. "I realize that you can't expect to remember the exact spot, but those 'windows' must look both ways, and should be findable. I could send you a more suitable specimen—a friend of mine who's a scientist—"

"We do know the exact spot," Atel interrupted. "We have detectors in operation at all times—naturally! But a thorough search of that area revealed nothing."

Andreson sighed. "I was afraid of that. The apparatus evidently wasn't intended to be used for an airplane; I suppose I blew it out."

The girl, who had been preceding them, stopped at the top of the stairwell and levelled a dainty finger at Atel. "Why don't you stop tormenting him because he's not a scientist?" she demanded angrily. "It isn't his fault! He's doing his best for us!"

Atel's eyebrows would have shot up, had he had any. "Certainly," he purred, with an ironical gesture. "I'm sure you understand my attitude, Mr. Andreson. As a non-scientist, you are more of a curiosity than a gift, and that is a disappointment to us. We shall try to make your stay here as comfortable—and as short—as possible."

Andreson, taken aback at the girl's sudden outburst, hardly knew what to say. He was spared the task of replying, however—

The sun went out!

THE GIRL gave a smothered little cry, and the human clumsily tried to make his way through the blackness toward where he had last seen her. A powerful four-fingered hand grasped his elbow roughly.

"Stand still," Atel growled. "Jina! It may be another attack. Wait for the tower lights."

Andreson was uncertain as to whether "Jina!" was an expletive or the girl's name, which he had never heard before, but he stood still, resisting an impulse to

shake Atel off. After a moment an eerie sound drifted to his ears: a distant, musical keening.

"Ah. It is a raid—there's the alarm."

As he spoke, a dim radiance filtered down over them, bringing the ranked seats of the council chamber into ghostly relief. It was coming down from the dome, but the great jewel no longer scattered rainbows. The light did not seem to have any single source.

"Aloft with him," Atel ordered.

Reluctantly the girl gripped the Earthman's other arm, and two pairs of wings thrummed together in the echoing chamber. He felt himself arrowing dizzily skyward, and tried to hold his body stiff.

A second later they were standing on the high ledge among the deserted couches. Below them, the city, seen here from its highest tower, was presenting a heart stopping new facet of its beauty. Every one of the crystalline shafts were gleaming with blue-white flame along its entire length; though no single one was too bright to be looked at directly, their total effect was of a sea of light almost as brilliant as high noon. Tiny motes drifted back and forth across the pillars of radiance: Varans in flight, evidently going to their posts in answer to the alarm.

BUT when Andreson looked up to see what had happened to the sun, what he saw wiped the miracle of the city from his mind.

The sky had turned to rock. The whole metropolis was trapped in a tremendous hemisphere of some strange substance, a stony bowl, smooth and polished, and veined with dark red lines like bad marble. Here and there the glow of the city struck sullen fire against the lava-like surface.

When Atel finally spoke, his voice had none of its previous arrogance. "They have us now," he husked. "Our sky is granite to them—and they've destroyed cubic miles of it, instantaneously! Our power, our air . . . cut off!"

"They've worked a miracle," the girl said with unwilling respect. "The beasts are scientists—we knew that in the beginning. Don't you see, Atel? They'll use that dome to get above the city! And their borers, too—"

6—Planet—Fall

Indecisively Atel spread his wings half-way. "We can't carry this Earthman about the city now," he said. "Jina, go to your post. I'll take him back to my rooms."

"But—" Andreson and the girl protested simultaneously.

"Need I remind you that I command this sector during emergencies, by Council order?" the Varan snapped. "He'll be no safer with us than alone in the apartments. Take him down again."

Mutely Jina took the human's arm, and the two picked him up again—he was becoming a little tired of being catapulted through the air once every hour—and plunged back to the catwalk door.

"All right," the Varan told the girl, his voice edged with impatience. "You're needed elsewhere, Jina."

She disappeared silently into the cavern of Starstone Chamber. Atel slid the door back and cocked his head, a grotesque silhouette against the faintly hazed oval opening. After a moment, Andreson heard the sound too: a weird, intermittent buzzing noise. It set his teeth on edge, and sent little waves of sheer hatred coursing through his body. The stocky Varan drew him out onto the platform and pointed upward.

"Borers," he grunted. "You can see one from here."

It was quite high, about half-way between the summit of the tower and the surface of the rock sky, and moving very slowly. It reminded Andreson of a legless centipede—a long, joined cylinder, with the same stony, red-veined texture that the great bowl presented. In the feeble light he thought he saw small openings appearing and vanishing: the space-beasts, moving about inside their mechanism! The brief glimpse was somehow the most horrible thing he had ever seen. He could distinguish at least two other tones in the gruesome buzzing, and he knew that the borer was not alone above the city.

"They've learned that hollow things are deadly—learned from us," Atel spat out bitterly. "See the column of light inching out from the borer's nose? They are disintegrating a tunnel for their vacuum torpedoes. It's a slow-motion kind of warfare—but when one side wins constantly, it can't last forever. Feel the radiation?"

Andreson discovered that he was

scratching. His skin felt as if he had a mild sunburn. "The boring mechanism?" he suggested.

"Right," Atel admitted, his tone grudging. "Matter-against-matter generates radiant heat. Space-against-space generates X-rays and worse. Deadly stuff! If our gunners can only—"

Andreson never heard the end of the sentence. Without the slightest warning he was again sprawling through the hot dark air—

Alone!

III

KIMBALL'S RIGHT SHOE caught in a burrow and he fell again. This time the expected shock came late; evidently he had been on the brink of a pit of some sort, for his shoulders slammed against the hard ground with an unexpected impact, and he slewed down a long decline. He lay at the bottom for an indefinite period—neither time nor distance had any meaning in this blackness—and then got up again.

Through the steady, muted roaring which had been in his ears ever since he had dropped from the torus coil, a roaring like the sound in a seashell, multiplied to the point of madness, a leathery muttering sound began to grow. He yanked his flashlight from the belt-clip and shot a cone of light upward.

He was rewarded with a ululating, deafening scream, and something winged and huge sheered off from the beam. The muttering of the wings faded again, and with it went a sticky blubbery, like the crying of an idiot child. Sick at his stomach, he pumped a shot after it, and was surprised to hear it scream again.

That would hold them for a while. They weren't very cautious about the automatic, for they seemed to expect that he would score a hit with it only by rare chance; but they hated the flashlight. They'd not try that dive-bombing stunt on him soon again.

He could hear them settling around the rim of the pit. Deliberately he lit a cigarette. For a second he could see the bulky, pasty bodies and the blinded heads arching above him; then they all whispered with agony and drew away out of sight.

Even the dim coal of the burning *fat* was too much for them.

But before long the batteries of the flashlight would be drained, the cigarettes gone, the matches exhausted. When that time came, Kimball knew, he would be torn to tatters, but it didn't bother him much now. He had been almost unconscious with fatigue when the badly-adjusted master machine had dumped him into this nightmare; but the beasts, savage though they were, had been curious. For a while they had questioned him with very little hostility, and had aroused his interest enough to give him second — or had it been twenty-second? — wind. Their upsetting version of telepathy, which projected subtly different emotional states instead of ideas, had awakened him thoroughly.

He had just realized that he had arrived *inside* the Earth, probably in a space-negative state to boot, when he had felt the urge for a cigarette . . .

He sighed and stood up. There was no way to tell how long he had been in this midnight universe, but if he could only stick it out until a full twenty-four hours were up, the master machine would act on him again. The faulty windings of its coils would prevent it from returning him to the abandoned grocery as it was supposed to do—but at least it would throw him out of *this* black, demon-haunted universe.

At his movement, the beasts rustled eagerly back to the rim of the pit, scarcely audible in the mass echo which was as natural to the hollow world as air. He turned on the flashlight, pointing it at the ground—he did not care to hear them all scream at once. There was a thundering flurry of wings above him; then silence.

Doggedly, he began to climb. *Keep moving*, he thought, *you can sleep in your next universe—wherever that'll be.*

The beasts wheeled patiently.

ANDRESON lay tasting the sensation of being dead for several minutes before he realized that he was hardly even jarred. His eyes were open, but nothing he could see made sense to him. There was no sign of Atel. Lying flat on his back, he looked stupidly upward at a column of soft light that seemed to reach miles into the air, ending in glowing haze. The rock dome had vanished, and in its place was a

pattern of gigantic, garish stalactites.

Wait a minute. There *was* something familiar here—

He rolled over cautiously and found an edge to the mysterious surface he had fallen to. He thrust his head over it and peered downward.

The rock dome was below him, not above! The space beasts, who reacted to gravity in reverse, had imposed their environment upon the city. Only the solarium platform, which had been directly above where he had been standing on the catwalk, had saved him from mashing against the dome. He wondered if the Varan gunners had been able to hit any of the borers under these conditions. He couldn't hear the buzzing sound—no, wait, there was a single buzzing tone, seemingly far away. Well, two down, anyhow.

A winged figure sailed by below him, its pinions tensely outspread, gulling the air. He shouted at it, but there was no response. He wondered what had happened to Atel. He must have fallen from the catwalk, too, but certainly he couldn't have been hurt—he didn't look like the type to pass out in mid-air. Andreson called again. After a pause, an infinitely remote response came back to him: *Atelatleltellelellll . . .*

The echo of his first shout! The Varan must have forgotten about him in the shock of the reversal, and flown off to his post, leaving the Earthman stranded. Andreson knew it was quite possible that he had been deliberately abandoned, but he forced himself not to think about it.

Right now, he had to get off this ledge, and back inside a building. A preferable spot would be Atel's rooms; they were close, and there would be only a short, harmless distance to fall either way, no matter what the warring factions did with the city's gravity. Yet Atel's doorway, so mockingly close, was in reality as good as miles away unless he could figure out something nearly as good as flying!

Suppose he should wait where he was, and fall back to the catwalk when the Varans succeeded in neutralizing the effect? He shuddered. The catwalk was narrow and he might easily miss it. In any case, it might take a long time—the space-beasts seemed to have the edge on the Varans so far, and if they won, he'd starve here. He

eyed the wall of the building above him. It was about twenty feet "up" to the catwalk, and no handholds were visible. The top side—now the "under" side—of the solarium platform was no better; all the furniture had long since fallen away, and even had it been still there, bolted to the surface, he'd have thought twice before trying to crawl from couch to couch toward Starstone Chamber's roof. It was a long way to the rock sky.

He risked standing up, hoping that the Varese would not choose this instant to change things around again—if they did, he'd be dumped on his head. The illusion of *downness* was quite perfect, but it was hard to forget that it was an illusion. His knees wobbled as if he were standing on a pile of telephone books.

After steadying himself against the wall, he made a slow circuit of the tower, stepping over the structural members of the platform cautiously. No doorways here—even a flying people usually enter floors from the top side. Returning, he eyed the upper edge of the catwalk doorway. It was an eight-foot opening, and he was exactly six feet tall; that left a margin of about six feet, which he might be able to jump. He wasn't in very good shape, and the platform didn't offer much of a starting run, but he'd have to chance it.

He backed gingerly to the edge of the platform, hunched, ran, leaped. He struck the glassy wall at full length, and clawed frantically at it—

Missed. The drop back to the deck knocked the wind out of him again, but he got up stubbornly. Crouch . . . run . . . leap—

HIS hands latched over the edge of the lintel and closed on it. Drawing his knees up into his waist, he planted his toes and heaved. The first push got his elbows over the edge, and after a long struggle he managed to bend his body over it at the belt. Suspended, he looked dizzily "down" at the inside of the Chamber, his feet dangling in thin air.

It was only an equivalent distance to the bottom side of the inner solarium platform, but he didn't want to go that way. There'd be no sense in rattling aimlessly about the roof of the hall, waiting for his back to be broken across the seats. Some-

how, he had to work himself down to the catwalk.

There was no other way but to shinny along the side of the lintel. He swapped ends, so that his legs were now in the Chamber, and took off his shoes and socks with a good deal of difficulty. His feet were sweating—indeed, he was wet all over—so he wiped them with the tops of the socks; then he began precariously to inch himself upward.

By the time he made the bottom side of the catwalk, he was weak with fear, and his clothes were soaked; but he couldn't allow himself any time to recover, for there was now nothing "above" him but the chasm of the city street. He worked his way across on his hands and knees—no matter which way "down" was, this was a thin bridge for an earthbound man, a bridge much more decorative than it was useful—and lowered himself over the edge until he could curl his body around Atel's doorway.

A moment later he was sprawled on Atel's ceiling, amid a litter of the surly Varan's personal effects. He had hardly come to rest when he fainted with a small sigh.

THE second slipover of the city's gravity barely jounced him, but it seemed to cause a lot of damage elsewhere. He had just gotten to his feet when a terrific crash rang from the street below, and was followed at once by others in other parts of the metropolis. He went to the catwalk and looked over it—very tentatively, for he was warier than ever of open spaces—but the distance was too great. He guessed that something which hadn't been fastened down when the original reversal took place had just made the return trip.

As he peered, four or five of the winged people stepped from a platform far below his eyrie, and began to mount. Since they were between him and the glowing side of the next building, he did not recognize Atel and Jina among them until they were almost upon him.

As they settled gracefully on the catwalk, he noted with some surprise that they were all armed with a glass-muzzled, pistol-like weapon instead of the usual metal bar; and judging from their expressions, they anticipated trouble.

"I see you weren't killed," Atel said grimly. He seemed a bit disappointed.

"No. But I did a lot of dropping back and forth," Andreson returned acidly. "Why the artillery?"

"These men are members of the Council Guard. They think you're a spy of some sort. They suspect me, too, for forgetting about you during the fighting."

"That's ridiculous!" Jina burst in, her breast pulsing hotly. "They never thought of it until you suggested it!"

"We can't afford to run any risks."

"Who am I spying for?" Andreson demanded. "The beasts? Jina's right—it is ridiculous."

"Yes, the beasts," one of the Guardsmen said flatly. "You're a native of Earth, no matter what your Time, and so are they. You could easily be the vanguard of a raid."

Andreson's temper was already short from the buffeting he had taken. "There's not a shred of evidence for such a theory," he snapped.

"Unfortunately, there is," Atel purred. "We noticed a beast travelling through the foundations of the city, just below the energy barrier, and managed to trap it. We let it get up into a pillar and then energized both ends. We were just about to kill it with hollow slugs when it materialized—the first time the beasts have ever succeeded in doing it, and it's an evil augury."

"Well? I still don't see..."

"It was an Earthman."

Andreson's mind nibbled around the edges of the fact. It was startling enough in itself, but he could make little sense of it. How would an Earthman have gotten into the reverse universe? And how at this Time in the dim past?

"Perhaps it's another victim of the gallery," he suggested, frowning. "It never occurred to me before, but that infernal place might have been set up deliberately as a time-trap—perhaps by the beasts!"

"Perhaps," the Guardsman said. "But we can see no purpose behind such time-trapping, and Atel's interpretation makes better sense. Come along with us."

Andreson shrugged. "Where to?"

"Starstone Chamber. The Council has been called to vote on what dispensation to make of both of you. Atel—hold his other arm. If the beasts wear down our shield

we will all be thrown on our heads again."

The Earthman allowed the Varans to take his elbows without any protest. He had a very vivid picture of himself but-tered crimsonly over the inner surface of the rock arching above. *Save the heroics for later*, he thought.

He had imagined a Council meeting as a huge affair, with all the banked chairs filled; but actually there were only about twenty of the Varese present, plus the lone, mysterious Earthman. Anderson scanned the stranger's features eagerly as they approached.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Ken," Kimball said calmly. "I hardly know myself. Read my letter yet?"

"No. Say—are you responsible for that Surrealist trickery back in our own time? I should have guessed it. I ought to push your face in."

"I wouldn't blame you," the scientist agreed. "But I never dreamed you'd hit upon it by accident, before you'd read my note explaining what it was. In the letter I made a date to meet you there, and I arrived a little early. I went out to pick up some supplies, and while I was gone—well—"

"I'll have to let you off this time. You already look a bit damaged, Johnny."

DAMAGED was hardly the word. Kimball looked as if he had been caught in a cement mixer. His clothes were filthy and cut to ribbons; bloody knees showed through holes in his trousers, he had a long, raw cut across his forehead, and his voice was husky with weariness.

The Varans had listened to the conversation with polite impatience, mixed with suspicion. The Councilman who wore the gem on his forehead, a replica of the giant diamond above them, broke in with an authoritative gesture, waving the group to seats.

"Mr. Kimball has offered us certain explanations," he said. "They seem adequate; it appears that he is the agency of Mr. Anderson's misfortune. But we are losing one battle, and can't afford to take on another. Our major question must be—How can we believe you?"

"One problem at a time," Kimball said. "About your present battle. I've watched

your whole history, and I know you're doomed to lose it. This city will be deserted in another century. But it will be an orderly retreat, and will result in the complete extermination of the space-beasts."

Atel's mouth drew down at the corners. "Obviously a fabrication. If we wiped out the beasts, why should we leave?"

"Because you'll wipe them out with matter-bombs, set to fall into their universe in their state, and then explode into yours. The process will cause violent earthquakes on Earth's surface—it'll change the whole climate of the planet, wipe out the giant reptiles, start the tiny mammals on their long upward climb toward the species Ken and I represent. Your civilization wouldn't survive such an upheaval. By the time things have quieted down, you'll be more comfortable on Venus."

There was a small stir of surprise among the Varans. "We already have a small colony on Venus," the Council head admitted in a somewhat friendly voice. "But as things stand now, I cannot see how we can hold them off for the rest of a century!"

"I can help you there. You work on sun-power, right?"

"Yes. The mining of atomic fuels on this savage planet would not be fruitful. But that rock dome over our heads has cut us off, and our stored power will give out shortly. We've already had to cut down on the city's lighting, and we're trying to drill the dome."

"You'll never drill that dome in a thousand years. It's maintained by atomics—it might just as well be pure neutronium for all the dent you'll make in it. I can show you how to build a time-coil. We'll just open a window onto Tomorrow Noon and let the sunlight stream in on your main converter. It's really quite simple once you know the principle."

"By the Jewel! Have you repealed the law of the conservation of energy?"

"Not at all. Just doesn't apply. Energy taken from one Time doesn't alter the total available in the continuum. Here, I'll show you." He pulled out a pencil. "Got any paper? No? Ken, do you still have that letter on you?"

"Here you are," said Anderson, handing it over. "I'm glad it's going to be good for something, anyhow."

THE BESIEGED CITY was dark, except for a few furtive gleams far below. On the solarium platform they could see little but the dim shapes of the nearby pinnacles, and the tiny rivers of light quivering on the glassy flanks. Above, the stone cap pressed down heavily. Despite Kimball's time-window into Tomorrow Noon, the confined air was hot, motionless, enervating.

"It's a bad age, Jina," Anderson said. "Full of warfare and misery. I don't think you'd like it."

Jina stirred protestingly beside him. "You paint it in very dark colors, Ken. We have our own war here, and the jungle, the storms, the great reptiles..."

She broke off as a dark figure swooped silently from the depths, passed them, and began to rise more slowly toward the dome. A tiny glow at its head made a red trail in the dimness, and it did not seem to have any wings.

"That must be your friend," the girl murmured, pointing. "See—he has one of those things called cigarettes, that he smokes all the time."

"Yes," said Anderson, not much interested. Since Kimball had arrived, he had been the center of interest among most of the Varans, and Anderson had been allowed to shift for himself. It had taken some persuasion on Johnny's part to get Anderson a copy of the anti-gravity "wings" with which they had equipped the Earth physicist. For a while the neglect had nettled Anderson, and at the moment he definitely did not want to talk to Kimball. Jina interested him a good deal more.

But Jina was still dreaming of her picture of Earth, as it would be millions of years hence. Before Anderson could protest, she leapt into the air and soared after the trailing cigarette glow. He watched, grousing, while the little red spark halted in mid-air and did a short minuet. Finally he stood up, picked up the heavy torpedo of his own levitator, clipped the control box to his belt, climbed into the parachute-harness. A touch of his finger sent him skyward.

"Hello, Ken," Kimball said cheerfully.

"Hello."

"I was just on my way to test the apex of the dome. Seems like we might make a break-through there."

"Soon, I hope."

Kimball dropped his cigarette and watched it fall regretfully toward the distant, almost invisible city. "Not many of those left—I'll be glad to get out of here myself." He lit another. In the brief match-flare, Jina's graceful, wheeling figure became visible like some angelic dream. "Why don't you go back now, Ken? I've already built a gate back to our own time. The Varese don't use much radioactive material, so I had to go back for supplies. You could go through just as simply."

"Yes," said Jina's voice from the blackness. "Why not, Ken?"

"This guy Atel seems to be after your pelt, and you're no match for him in his own environment," Johnny Kimball added. "It isn't as if the Varese needed you. I know the technical aspects of the situation, and I can hold my end up. But you could leave any time."

"Why are you staying?"

"Two reasons. First, I'm not inhuman, and I got handled roughly by the beasts. I'd like to see them smashed. Second, I can't market my time-coil—you can imagine what chaos it'd cause in our world!—but the Varese have promised me this anti-gravity-pack, and that's worth a lot." He waited for an answer, but Anderson didn't see any sense in making one. After a moment his friend sighed. "Well, got to get aloft." The glowing cigarette arced upwards dimming gradually.

Wings pulsed softly past Anderson's cheek. "Why are you staying?" Jina whispered.

He tried to answer, but the moment's hesitation was fatal. The girl arrowed downward, a slim, lovely shadow in the artificial dusk. Her sweet, chiming voice drifted back tauntingly.

"Explain to the beasts!"

For a moment Anderson hung motionless in his harness, keenly aware that he was perhaps the loneliest man since Adam. The city looked like a tinsel toy below him, and all around him was darkness and silence; the nearest human being was the only one within millenia of him, and among the Varese he had just one friend—*maybe*.

Out of the murk a voice called mockingly. "What are you dreaming, Earthman? Or should we say—plotting?"

Andreson recognized the voice for Atel's, but could not place its direction. "I'm on my way to join my friend at the apex of the dome," he said shortly. "I'm not plotting anything, except getting home as soon as possible."

"Oh? That's odd." The Varan's voice roughened, then regained its first silkiness with obvious effort. "I passed Jina on the way up. I thought you two might have been having a talk."

"Suppose we were?" Andreson demanded. "What's that to you?"

The voice was closer now, and its tone was cold and hard. Andreson rested his fingers lightly on the levitator controls, still looking about him in the blackness.

"A great deal to me. When the Council Council voted to let your scientist accomplice have a free hand, I had to go along. But I still think you're both spies, and up to something dangerous." He paused, and at the same moment Andreson spotted him—circling with silent, outspread wings, about twenty-five feet up from where the Earthman hung. He went right on looking, as if he had seen nothing, turning his head from side to side in apparent bewilderment.

"Follow us around, then, if you have the time to waste," he said. "Two men against a city—you can afford to be brave. The odds are all on your side."

"You ground-grubber," the Varan gritted. "Follow you around—while you corrupt a Varan girl with your lies about the future, and plot to let the beasts in! Do you think I'm such a fool? The Council is blind with sitting so long under the Starstone—but there are still a few of us who can see!"

"What with?" Andreson taunted. "You seem to be all mouth."

With a low snarl of rage, Atel plunged. His powerful wings furled tightly around his body, he dropped straight for the Earthman. In the dim light, Andreson saw his massive right arm reach back to his belt—he was drawing his vacuum club—

ANDRESON jammed the button home and shot skyward. Inexperience told against him almost at once, for he had drawn the line too fine. His shoulder slammed hard against Atel's, and the bat-winged creature tumbled away from him.

The harness continued to haul Andreson blindly upwards. His collar-bone sent out sharp pains with every movement. It seemed to be broken, or cracked at least. Was Atel — no — there he was, wings thrashing the air as he arrested, his fall. The Earthman poked the belt-control again, hovered over his fluttering opponent—two could play at this power-dive game—

Feet first, he arrowed downward, the hot air roaring in his ears. Somehow Atel saw him coming, furled his wings again—

For what seemed an eternity the two fell, the city swelling beneath them from a hazy splotch to a bright quilt, and from that to a glowing cloudy mass. A jabbing finger reversed Andreson's belt, and slowly he began to gain. In the growing light he could see Atel's face, turned up toward him, smiling sardonically.

Then the bat-wings boomed out and Atel was gone, sailing easily around the nearest tower. Andreson saw the thin, transparent thread of a bridge almost upon him, and tried to brake, but it was too late—if he stopped at this speed he'd black out—

The bridge burst under his plummeting feet with the sound of a waterfall of plate glass, and something snapped in his left foot, sending fresh waves of pain through his body. The harness cut into him, yanking against his momentum, and he tried to pull out. At the bottom of his immense plunge he could clearly see figures in the oncedistant streets. Then he began to rise again—

Instantly sharp-ribbed wings battered at him, an open hand struck him a terrific blow behind the ear, and a second later something long and steel-hard thudded into his ribs. He was flung forcibly against the side of the nearby building. Only the mechanical obedience of the levitator saved him—it had been set for "up," and it dragged him on up, willy-nilly. A hot liquid oozed down his side from the blow of the vacuum-rod. In a fog of pain he saw Atel banking purposefully for another assault, and clutched at the "Up" control again.

The levitator could climb faster than the Varan could, and Andreson had a moment's respite. Grimly he kept on going, until a growing sense of pressure and heat warned him that the rock dome was near. Should he try to lose himself among the

city towers, or yell to Johnny Kimball for help?

His whole heart turned from the thought. His earthly life had not kept him in very good physical shape, but he'd always fought his own battles. It made no difference that his life was the stake of this one. *I'll get him yet*, he thought intensely. *Get him without help—if it kills me.*

"Well, Earthman," Atel's voice rang out below. The rock dome sent back a huge echo. "Running already? If Jina could see her hero now!"

For a moment Anderson was about to dive furiously after the Varan again, but he thought better of it. He remembered Johnny's words; "You're no match for him in his own environment." But—

Atel was not fighting another winged man. He was fighting an Earthman with a levitator. That scrap between the buildings—had Atel given such a buffeting to a Varan he would have knocked him and that would have been the end of it. But the levitator couldn't be knocked out, no matter what happened to the man operating it. It wouldn't fall unless it was set to fall.

There was something else, too. Birds fly because they're built for it—among other things they have a huge keel-like breastbone to which their flying muscles are anchored. But bats don't, and Anderson bet that the Varans didn't either. Rodents are ancestrally ground-animals, just like Earthmen, and have to adapt for flying in some other way. . .

Anderson smiled crookedly. There was only one way to test the idea. He touched the belt again, and the city began to swell beneath him—

Atel glided cautiously out of the way of his fall, then closed in. The Earthman shot off laterally, turned, began a tail-chase. For a few seconds the absurd circling continued, each combatant trying to gain on the other. Then Atel realized that the levitator could drive Anderson faster than he could fly, and spun to face him with a single sweep of his wings.

Anderson made no attempt to stop. He shot directly into the Varan's arms. The vacuum rod crashed into his injured side again. Gritting his teeth, he grasped Atel around the chest, trying for a half-Nelson.

The wings fluttered—the bar thudded home once more—

Then Atel broke free. "Monster!" he gasped.

"What's the matter, Atel?" Anderson shouted raggedly. "Met your match?"

For an answer the Varan shot at him head first, like a gull-winged rocket. Anderson flung himself lengthwise and grappled once more. Atel's body, as he had suspected, was remarkably light, probably hollow boned—and his arms were not nearly as strong as his wings. They simply couldn't be!

This was the death struggle. Fiercely the two strove against each other. Anderson locked one of the flailing legs, steadily forced the great body back. He had one hand free for a split second, and he grasped the belt-control—

The garish glow of the city began to brighten at an alarming rate. Atel's hands fastened upon the Earthman's throat; Anderson pried weakly at them, but he had already lost too much blood to be able to free himself with one hand. He clung doggedly to the belt-control with the other. The city grew and grew—the blood pounded in his head, and his lungs burned like twin sacs of acid—the pillars of cold fire that were the city's towers flowed past him, blurring rapidly—

At the last instant Atel realized what was happening. A scream of terror was whipped from his mouth into the slipstream, and he released Anderson's throat to claw frantically at the hand on the belt-control—

But it had been too late seconds ago. Anderson let go of him entirely, kicked himself free, began to brake. The Varan spread his wings—and lost his life. The right pinion snapped back and broke at once. The vanes on the left somehow withstood the blast, but the membrane between them could not—in a split second the living fabric was bloody tatters. Atel's body slammed itself to jelly against the bright Earth.

Dizzy and sick, Anderson concentrated on cutting down the terrific velocity the levitator had built up. He succeeded fairly well, though he broke the other foot when he struck.

The levitator held him upright, swaying. A cloud of winged creatures gathered

around him. One of them he thought he recognized.

"Jina—"

"Yes—Ken—we saw most of the fighting—how—"

"I outflow him," he said proudly, and then passed out for the third time.

JOHNNY KIMBALL peered out the door of the chamber the Varans had assigned as his laboratory, and grinned. "Quite a formal farewell committee coming across the bridge," he said. "Looks like the whole Council's in it."

He looked Anderson over critically. "For a while I was afraid they'd turn out to be Indian-givers on the levitator deal," he added, "but I must say you threw yourself into the job of protecting our interests. Look at you! Both feet bandaged, chest bound, right shoulder strapped up—if ever a man needed a levitator, you do!"

"Ah, dry up," Anderson growled. "How near through are you?"

"Almost. I'm not trying to hit the gallery, though it might be easier that way." Suddenly he became serious. "I'll tell you what, Ken. It's a new life we're going back to—a life where you and I can look back into the past whenever we want, and visit it, too, if we keep quiet about it. And it's a new world we're going back to, a world which is going to be given the levitator. That means free flight—not just flight in machines, but real flight, where one man can fly whenever, wherever he wants, without having to board a plane or pay a fare. And space-travel, and no heavy lifting for the housewife, and—"

"Get to the point."

Kimball looked a bit crestfallen. "I thought you'd understand how I felt. Well, I couldn't see going back to the old world at the same spot we left it. I had a new apartment rented when I left, that I'd never been in—hasn't even got any furniture in it. I want to put the Time-window through into there. A fresh start."

Anderson nodded. "A good idea, Johnny. But—make it quick."

Along the sunlit bridge the delegation of Varans walked ceremoniously. In the vanguard was a lovely shape, like an exquisite

butterfly. Kimball looked out the door again and saw her. With a slight smile he left the room; Anderson didn't notice.

"Farewell, Ken."

"Farewell, Jina, I'm sorry to go."

There was a brief, stiff silence, and then she was in his arms, sobbing bitterly.

"Ken—why, why?"

He swallowed. "Do you remember, up there on the solarium ledge before the rock dome was destroyed—remember I said I had a question I had to answer?"

"Yes... what—was it?"

"Just this: *Can Earth and Air mix?* There's a legend in my time that few people understand, but I think I understand it. It's the story of Lilith, queen of Air and Darkness. She fought with Satan and God alike for the Earth, but she lost, because she was not part of their universe. It's the same with me. What part could I play in a time not my own, among people who live in the air?"

The girl did not move or answer. Steadily he went on: "Besides—there's a gap between us greater than parsecs or centuries. Look." He took her hand in his, held it up. The delicate, four-fingered limb made his own five stubby fingers look lumpy and misshapen. "We have no future together, Jina. We seem alike, but we're not. The apes are my cousins; the bats are yours. You should stay with your own race, and have the children I could never give you. We have no real happiness to give each other."

She drew back and squared her shoulders proudly, though her eyes still brimmed with tears. "You are right," she said. "Go back, then! But I extract one promise before you go."

He inclined his head. "Whatever I can do."

"You have the time-coil, and can visit any age you wish. Promise me—that you'll never come to this one again."

He said softly, "I promise, Jina."

Her first soft kiss was her last. The next instant, it was as if she had never been.

"Ready, Ken?"

The time-coil throbbed once, and then the glass-walled chamber was empty in the red sunlight.