

BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

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THE difference between death under the juggernaut treads of a bulldozer, run amok in northern Saskatchewan, and buoyant health was—three nights' sleep. Or was it a hundred years? A thousand? Ten thousand?

Hanson didn't know, couldn't know. All he knew was that he *was*. But where and when? It was the day after the man with the knife, the masked man who, with

two masked companions, had invaded his sickroom shouting insanely, "Death to Dave Hanson! Now the egg breaks! Death to the dead!"

Only to be blocked at his bedside by an invisible wall, a wall woven by the Sather Karf, the elderly senior physician, who had stood in the doorway, like an avenging Moses, and tossed at the intruders invisible garrotes that



more stars

It was the rottenest of tricks—to bring a man back from the dead to do a completely hopeless job—with the same punishment whether he failed or succeeded!

By CHARLES SATTERFIELD

Illustrated by VIDMER

had strangled them where they stood.

It was this element of magic, combined with the most sterile and efficient hospital practices, that caused Hanson to ponder the *when* of his reawakening. White hot salamanders that burned out fever but not flesh — combined with cortisone. Astrological mumbo-jumbo — and antibiotics. And alarmed talk of a falling sky . . .

HE looked up at Nema, the nurse who stood by his bed. If he had been dead — as surely he must have been — he was dead no more. The soft, creamy firmness of her skin, skin that goes so rarely but so perfectly with pale red hair and deep blue eyes—the charm of a lush young female figure that not even a nurse's starched whites could constrain—represented the strongest possible link between Dave Hanson, Chicago computer technician summoned to the knockabout, dangerous life of a highway builder in northern Canada by an engineering genius of an uncle too rich and prominent to be denied — and Dave Hanson, here.

Wherever *here* was.

Nema said softly, with just a suggestion of charming huskiness, "Good morning, Sagittarian. Get out of bed."

Warily, expecting the worst, Hanson swung his feet over the

side and sat up. No dizziness? No weakness? To his amazement, there was neither. Feeling better than he could recall feeling in his life, he touched tentative foot to the floor, slowly tested his balance by half-standing, propped against the high hospital bed.

"Come on," said Nema with an edge of impatience. "You're all right now. We entered your sign an hour ago." She turned her back to take something out of a chest against the wall, added, "Ser Perth will be here in a moment. He'll want you up and dressed."

A little annoyed at this suddenly unsympathetic female, Hanson stood free of the bed and flexed his muscles. He felt like an athlete in peak condition. Glancing down at his body, he noted with amazement that the bulldozer seemed to have left no scars.

He said, "Where in hell am I?"

The girl dumped an armload of clothing on his bed and looked at him with controlled exasperation. "That's the hundredth time you've asked me that, at least. And, for the hundredth time, I'll tell you that you're here. Look around you — see for yourself." She picked up a shirt of heavy-duty khaki from the pile on the bed and handed it to him. "Get into this," she commanded. "Dress first, talk later."

And she rustled starchily out of the room.

Dave Hanson did as she order-

ed. He was wearing something with a vague resemblance to a short hospital nightgown — if you ignored the pentacles woven into it and the fact that the clasp that held it together was a silvery crux ansata. He took it off and hurled it into a corner to relieve his feelings.

He picked up the khaki shirt and put it on — then, with growing curiosity, the rest of the garments, until he came to the shoes. Khaki shirt, khaki breeches, a wide webbed belt, a flat-brimmed hat. And the shoes — they were knee-length leather boots-and-leggings of a type that Hanson had not seen since the silent movies of his youth!

HE looked down at himself curiously when he was dressed. He was costumed as the outrageously unrealistic Hollywood idea of a heroic engineer, ready to drive a canal through an isthmus or throw a dam across a raging river. He was about as far from the appearance of the actual blue-denim and leather-jacketed engineers he had worked with as a Maori was.

Hanson shook his head wonderingly. He spotted a door which looked as if it might lead to a bathroom. Behind a bathroom door might be a full-length mirror. He tried it. He was wrong about its being a bathroom — it was a closet — but it did have a mirror.

What he saw nearly set his recovery back altogether.

When Nema came back into the room, he croaked in fright, "Never mind where I am — *who* am I?"

She stared at him. "You're Dave Hanson."

"The hell I am!" He pointed shakily at the mirror. "I've looked at my face for thirty-one years. *That* isn't it! Oh, there's a resemblance, I admit — change the chin, lengthen the nose, make the eyes brown instead of blue—it might be me. But not the way it is! What was it, plastic surgery?"

The girl's expression softened. "I'm sorry, Dave Hanson," she said gently. "I should have thought to warn you. You were a difficult conjuration — and even the easy ones can go wrong, these days. We did our best. I'm sorry if we didn't get your face just right."

Hanson swallowed, and looked at himself again. "Well," he said, "I guess it could be worse. In fact, I guess it was worse — once I get used to this face, I think I may come to like it. But it was quite a shock for a sick man."

Nema said sharply, "Are you sick?"

"Well . . . no."

"Then, why did you say you were? You shouldn't be. I told you, we're in the sign of Sagittarius now. You can't be sick in your own sign. Don't you even know that much?"

HANSON didn't get a chance to answer. The man called Ser Perth was suddenly in the doorway. It was irritating, Hanson thought, the way these people suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Rubber-soled shoes, no doubt—a silly way for grown people to act.

"Come with me, Dave Hanson," said Ser Perth, without wasting words. He was the physician who had been most in attendance on Hanson, under the supervision of the patriarchal Sather Karf.

And even sillier, Dave thought as he followed the man out the door and along a shadowy corridor, how little they bothered to check the condition of a man fresh off his death bed. In any of the hospitals he had known, there would have been hours or days of X-rays, blood tests, temperature taking and pulse counting. These people took a look at you and said, "Get up."

But, to do them justice, they seemed to be right. He had never felt better. That twaddle about Sagittarius would have to be cleared up sometime — didn't it have something to do with astrology?—but, for the time being, he was in pretty good shape.

He was put in even better shape rather rapidly. At the end of the dim corridor was an unexpectedly ordinary room that could have been nothing but a barber shop. A

man who looked like every barber Hanson had ever known—down to the wavy black hair and rat-tailed comb protruding from his pocket—shaved off Hanson's accumulated stubble, trimmed the shaggy tufts over his ears and at the back of his neck, then snapped the cloth off him with a bow.

The only odd thing Hanson noticed was that the lather containing his beard stubble, along with the hair-clippings that a silent attendant swept from the floor, were carefully locked away in a screw-topped glass jar as Ser Perth led him out. But Hanson quickly reassured himself upon that. This place was some sort of hospital and, undoubtedly, they were taking some sort of precaution against the spread of communicable disease — or something. Or what?

Hanson felt a prickle of something far down in his memory concerning beard stubble and hair clippings — something that seemed to tie in with astrology and salamanders and curious symbols. He tried to dig it out, as one digs a bothersome berry seed from between two teeth, but it resisted being brought to light . . .

AND, of course, he had no time. They were in the corridor again — it *had* to be the same corridor, though this time it was brightly lit and Hanson couldn't remember having seen the

scarlet carpet they were walking on — and it was only a few short steps to the door of the room they were going to. Ser Perth silently opened the door and held it for Hanson to enter.

The room was very large and sparsely furnished. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion near the door was the nurse, Nema, working something in her hands — a cluster of colored threads, partly woven into a rather garish pattern. On a raised bench between two high windows sat the ancient Sather Karf, leaning on a staff and staring at Hanson.

Hanson stepped inside and the door closed behind him. Nema tied a complex knot in the threads and paused, waiting.

The old man looked silently at Hanson for a moment. Then he sighed. "All right," he said, "it's not much, but we must work with what we have. Dave Hanson, come here."

Hanson moved forward—almost without volition, like a clockwork man whose lever is pushed. He stood there before that raised bench bathed in the sunset light from the windows, and listened while the old man talked.

It was very much like the meanderings of a drug addict. Insane as the inverse logic of a psychotic. But, in his heart, Hanson knew one thing—it was true.

True — he had been killed, and

now he was alive. Resurrected?

True—this world was not his world. This culture was linked with the milieu to which he had been born only by the vision of dreamers.

True — he was . . . no longer human.

The old man said softly, "Mandrake man, we have conjured you to perform us a service. In your —place, your body was crushed under a huge engine. We gave you life. Now we exact payment."

Hanson felt a constriction drop away from him and, for the first time, was able to speak. "What do you want?" he managed to ask.

"Your services," said the Sather Karf. "For *your* life, ours. We need help, Dave Hanson. Look out the window."

HANSON looked. The sunset colors were still vivid. He peered through the crystalline glass. Before him was a city, bathed in orange and red, towering like the skyline of a dozen cities he had seen — and yet, not like any. The buildings were huge and many-windowed, but some were straight and tall, some were squat and fairy-colored and some blossomed from thin stalks into impossibly bulbous, minareted domes, like long-stemmed tulips reproduced in stone. Haroun-al-Rashid might have recognized that city. Mayor Wagner, never.

"Look at the sky, Dave Hanson," said the old man.

Hanson obediently looked up at the sky.

The sunset colors were not those of any sunset he remembered. The sun was bright and blinding overhead, surrounded by reddish clouds, glaring down on the fairy city.

The sky was — blotchy. It was daylight but, through the clouds, bright stars were shining. A corner of the horizon was winter blue. A whole sweep of it was dead, featureless black.

It was a nightmare sky, an impossible sky.

Hanson's eyes bulged as he looked at it. He said fearfully, "What — what's the matter with it?"

"What, indeed," said the old man as Hanson turned back to face him. In the corner of the room, Nema looked up for a moment, and there was compassion in her eyes before she turned back to her endless weaving of knots. The old man said heavily, "If I knew what had happened to the sky, would I be dredging the muck of the eons for the like of you, Dave Hanson?"

The Sather Karf stood up lightly for his years, looking down on Hanson.

He said, "The sky is falling, mandrake man. We look to you to put it together again."

SER PERTH said, "This will be your office, Dave Hanson. Did the Sather Karf tell you what to do?"

Nema answered for him. "Only that he was to repair the sky, Ser Perth. I've got a copy of the notes for you if you like." She extended the woven cords.

"I'll look at it later. Dave Hanson, you are our best remaining hope. We know this must be so, because the fanatics of the egg have tried so hard to kill you. Three times they failed — though once they came close enough, I know. But they would not have tried at all if they were not convinced through their arts that you can succeed."

Dave began diffidently. "Well, I . . ."

"Knowing that you *can* succeed," Ser Perth went on smoothly, "we know that you will succeed, Dave Hanson. It is my unpleasant duty to point out to you the thing that will happen if you fail. I say nothing of the fact that you owe us your life — it may be a small enough gift and one quickly taken away again. I say only that you have no escape from us.

"We have the cuttings of your hair and your beard — we have the parings of your nails, five cubic centimeters of your spinal fluid and a scraping from your liver,

Dave Hanson. We have your body now and, though you can take it beyond our reach, you can never hope to free your soul." He looked at Hanson piercingly. "Would you like your soul to live on in a mandrake root?"

Hanson said, "I guess not. I—look, Ser Perth, you're just confusing me. I don't know what you're talking about. I swear to God I don't! Start at the beginning, won't you? I was killed — all right, if you say I was, I was. You brought me back to life with a mandrake root and spells — you can do anything you want to with me. I admit it. I'll admit anything you say, because you know what's going on, and I don't. But what's this about the sky falling? If it is falling, what's the difference? If it makes a difference, what has it got to do with *me*?"

Ser Perth sighed heavily. "Ignorance," he murmured to himself. "Always ignorance! Listen, Dave Hanson. Don't bother to take this down, Nema." He sat down on the corner of what was evidently going to be Hanson's desk. He took a cigarette — Hanson *thought* it was a cigarette, though the smoke was bright green — from his pocket and placed it, already lit, between his lips. He said, "In your world, you were versed in the sciences — you, more than most. That you, brilliant as you were among your people, are so ignor-

ant, is a sad commentary on your world. But that is no matter now. Surely, you must have known the composition of the sky?"

HANSON said haltingly, "Well, I suppose so. The atmosphere is oxygen and nitrogen, mostly. The blue color is due to the scattering of light, isn't it? Light rays diffracting in the air?"

"Beyond the air," Ser Perth said impatiently. "The sky itself!"

"Oh! You mean space. Well, that's just vacuum, of course. Emptiness — and the stars are like our sun, but much more distant. The planets . . ."

"Ignorance *and* superstition," said Ser Perth, amazed. "The sky is no such thing, Dave Hanson. The sky is a solid sphere that surrounds Earth. The stars are no more like the sun than fiery Lucifer is like my cigarette. They are lights on the inside of the sphere, moving in the patterns of the Star Art, nearer to us than the hot lands to the south."

"Fort," Hanson said. "Charles Fort said that in a book."

Ser Perth shrugged. "Then why make me say it again? This Fort was right, whoever he may have been. On the dome, the stars—and the dome is cracking."

"What's beyond the dome?"

Ser Perth said somberly, "My greatest wish is that I die before I learn. In your world, had you

discovered that there were such things as elements? That is, basic substances which, in combination, produce—”

“Oh, of course,” Hanson interrupted.

“Good. Well, of the four elements—” Hanson gulped, but kept silent—“of the four elements is composed the universe. Some things are composed of a single element—some of two, some of three. The proportions vary and the humors and spirits change. But all things, living or dead, are composed of the elements. And only the sky is composed of all four elements—of earth, of water, of fire, of air—in equal proportions. One part of each, each lending its own essential quality to the mixture, so that the sky is solid as earth, radiant as fire, formless as water, insubstantial as air.

“And the sky is cracking and falling, Dave Hanson. You have seen it for yourself. Already, the effects are felt. Gamma radiation floods through the gaps. The quick-breeding viruses are mutating through half the world, faster than the Medical Art can control them, so that millions of us are sneezing and choking—and dying, too, for lack of antibiotics and proper care. Air travel is now a perilous thing—just today, a stratosphere-roc crashed head-on into a fragment of the sky and was killed with all his passengers.

“Worst of all, the Magical Art suffers. For, on the dome of the sky, are the stars. And, with the crumbling of the dome, the courses of the stars themselves are corrupted. It’s pitiful magic that can be worked without regard to the conjunctions of the planets—but it is all the magic that is left to us. When Mars trines Neptune, the Medical Art is weak. Even while we were conjuring you up, the trine occurred. It almost cost us your life.”

THERE was silence. Hanson thought furiously, but his mind was a treadmill—he could reach no sane conclusion. Perhaps, he told himself, he was killed by the bulldozer, and these are the last insane thoughts of a dying brain. Perhaps it’s all a dream. Perhaps . . .

He couldn’t doubt the reality of the rather feminine, little thin-mustached man before him. He could never have dreamed that impossible, but certainly real, sky. He finally said weakly, “Could I have something to eat?”

Ser Perth clapped his hands. “Behind you,” he said impatiently. “But wait until I have gone. Is all clear to you, Dave Hanson?”

“All but one thing. What do you want me to do?”

Ser Perth shrugged. “Repair the sky. It should be easy for a man of your talents. You drove a high-

way through the worst, the coldest, the barrenest, meanest country in your world. You are one of the great engineers of history, Dave Hanson, so great that your fame has penetrated even to our world, through the viewing pools of our wisest historians.

"There was a monument to you in your world, inscribed, 'Dave Hanson, to whom nothing was impossible.' Well, we have a nearly impossible task—a task of engineering and building. If our Magical Art could be relied on . . . but it cannot. It never can be, until the task is done. We have the word of history—no task is impossible to Dave Hanson."

Hanson looked at the other man's smug face and a slow grin crept over his own, in spite of himself. "Ser Perth, you've made a little mistake. I'm—"

"You're Dave Hanson," Ser Perth said flatly. "Of all the powers of the Margical Art, the greatest lies in the true name. We evoked you by the name of Dave Hanson. You *are* Dave Hanson. And deceit will earn you only our severest displeasure."

He left.

Hanson stared after him sickly, and then around the office, where he was supposed to begin the impossible. And, perhaps, to David Arnold Hanson, the famed engineer, no task was impossible. But quite a few things were impossible

to David Arnold Hanson's obscure and unimportant nephew, the computer-technician and generally undistinguished man who had been christened after the greater man.

Now, all he had to do was to repair the sky! Move over, Chicken Little!

HE stared up at its crazy patchwork from the window. For all he knew, in such a sky, cracks might appear. In fact, even as he looked, he could make out a rift and, beyond that, a—hole—or at least a small patch where there was no color, yet where the sky was not black. There were no stars there, though points of light were clustered around the edges, apparently in full retreat.

"I suppose you've got a sample of the sky that's fallen?" he asked Nema. "And what the heck are you doing here, anyhow? I thought you were a nurse."

She frowned at him but went to a corner, where a small ball of some clear crystalline substance stood. She muttered into it, while a surly face stared out. Then she nodded. "They are bringing some of the sky. As to being a nurse, of course I am. Surely one so skilled can also be a secretary, even to the great Dave Hanson? As to why I'm here . . ." She dropped her eyes, frowning, while a touch of added color reached her cheeks. "In the sleep spell I used, I in-

voked that you should be well and true, but by a slip I phrased it that I wanted you well and true. Hence, well and truly do I want you."

"Huh?" He stared at her, watching the blush deepen. "You mean . . .?"

"Take care! First you should know that I am proscribed as a duly registered virgin. And in this time of need, the magic of my blood must not be profaned." She twisted sidewise, and then dashed up and to the door, just before it opened to show a dull clod, entirely moronic, holding up a heavy weight of nothing. "Your sample of sky," she said as the clod labored over to his desk and dropped it with a dull clanking sound.

It was, of course, nothing. But if nothing was a vacuum, this was an extremely hard and heavy one. It seemed to be about twelve inches on a side, in its rough shape, and must have weighed two hundred pounds. He tapped it and it rang. But, when he touched it gently, his hand slipped through it easily. Inside, a tiny point of light danced frantically back and forth.

"A star," she said sadly.

Inquiry eventually produced the facts that he had a complete laboratory at his disposal, as well as a staff waiting to do his work. He followed her down endless corridors while she catalogued its

contents, from pedigreed bats and dried unicorn horn to a genuine blind basilisk. "The deepest, darkest and dankest cave of all is your laboratory," she finished.

Then she stopped. "Or would you say construction camp? There, we've conjured up such tools as were used on your world, have we not?"

He'd been considering a plea of inability to work without such things. He was reasonably sure, by now, that they had no spectrosopes, signal generators or bunsen burners here, and a delay might have given him time to find out what went on. But, it seemed, they'd considered everything. He nodded.

"Then why didn't you say so?" she asked sharply. She let out a sudden string of sibilants and dropped into a sitting position on the rug. Behind her, the dull clod carrying the piece of sky fell flat.

THE carpet lifted uncertainly. She made the sounds again and it rose up, curling at the front like a tobaggan. Dave grunted and dropped down beside her. The carpet gathered speed, sailed out of the corridor and began gaining altitude. They went soaring over the city at about thirty miles an hour, heading toward what seemed to be barren land beyond. "Sometimes rugs fall now," she told him. "But, so far, only if the

words are incorrectly pronounced."

He gulped. Of all things, a flying carpet—and he was riding it! He looked gingerly at the city below. As he did so, one of the tall, slender buildings began to smoke. It suddenly blossomed into a huge cloud of pink gas that drifted away, to show people and objects dropping like stones to the ground below. Nema sighed and looked up at the sky. As she did so, there was a great tearing sound of thunder. Something invisible went zipping downward in front of them, stirring up the air and bouncing the carpet savagely.

"It grows worse," she muttered. Then she gasped. "The *signs!* That break has disturbed the planets. We're moving in retrograde, back from Sagittarius! Now, we'll go back to the characters we had before—and just when I was getting used to the change."

He jerked his eyes off the new patch of nothing in the sky, in which a few stars seemed to be churning aimlessly. "Your character? Isn't anything stable here?"

"Of course not. Naturally, in each house, we have a differing of character, as does the earth itself. Why else should astrology be the greatest of the sciences?"

Why else? This was a strange world. And yet, it explained some things. He'd been vaguely worried about the apparent change in

Ser Perth, who had changed from a serious and helpful doctor into a supercilious, high-handed fop. But—what about his own recovery, if that was supposed to be determined by the signs of the zodiac?

He had no time to ask. The carpet bucked and the girl began speaking to it urgently. It wavered, then righted itself, to begin sliding downward.

Below appeared a camp such as he might have seen in the same movie from which his clothes had been copied. There were well-laid-out rows of sheds, beautiful lines of construction equipment—such as tractors, designed for work in mud flats, and haulers, with the thin wheels used on rocky ground. He spotted a big generator humming busily—and then saw a work gang of some fifty men turning a big capstan that kept it going. And all around were neat racks of miscellaneous tools.

They landed in the middle of the camp, just as a parrot flew down and yelled something at Nema. She scowled and nodded. "I'm wanted back," she said. "Most of the men here . . ."

She pointed to the gangs that moved about, busily doing nothing, all in costumes similar to his. "They're mandrakes, conjured like you, but without souls, of course. The short man there is Sersa Garm. He's to be your foreman and he's real."

She sprang back on the carpet, then turned. "The Sather Karf says you have ten days to fix the sky," she said. Her hand came out to touch his. "You can do it, Dave Hanson. I have faith in you."

Then the carpet was sailing back toward the city.

Ten days to fix a sky that was falling!

DAVE HANSON could fix anything that contained electrical circuits or ran on tiny, jeweled bearings. He could repair almost nothing else. It wasn't stupidity or inability to learn—he simply had never been subjected to the discipline of construction engineering. Even on a project with his uncle, he'd seen only a little of the actual technique involved. He had merely run the computer that predicted what would be needed, directed the charges of the blasters and anticipated some of their problems. But, when he'd tried to build a closet in his Chicago apartment, he'd only succeeded in ruining the plastering job and had to call in an expert.

But he had no choice now—and, judging by the evidence he'd seen himself, his try had better be successful if he wanted to enjoy his magic-given life here.

Sersa Garm proved to be a glum, fat young man, in training for serhood, whatever that was. But he could tell nothing about the

trouble with the sky, beyond a rumor that one of the Satheri had made the sun stand still too long in some experiment, with the resulting heat starting the crack. They'd tried everything since, including the bleeding of eleven certified virgins for seven days.

But, when the blood was mixed with dragontooth and frogsdown and melded with a genuine philosopher's stone, they had used it as ink to scribe the right path of the planets in vain. The sky had cracked and a piece had fallen into the vat of blood, killing a Sather who was less than two thousand years old. Nor could they revive him, though bringing the dead back to life when the body was intact was routine magic for a mere Ser. It was then they'd conjured from Dave's world all the other experts.

"All?" Dave asked.

"All, or all they could find by name," Sersa Garm said. "The Egyptian pyramid builder, Cagliostro—and what a time we had finding *his* true name—some man with the name of a squash, who discovered your greatest science, dianetics. I helped one who was supposed to have solved all the secrets of the universe — gravity and something called relativity. But, when he was persuaded to help us, he gave up after one week, declaring your knowledge valueless. They were going to turn him

mandrake again, but he found some new formula in one of the magics and disappeared."

It was nice to know even Einstein had given up, Dave thought wryly. As comforting as the knowledge that there was no fuel for the equipment here, that all local electricity was d.c., conjured by commanding the electrons in a wire to move in one direction—and completely useless with the a.c. motors. It might have worked in a welding torch, but he had no such torch. He had to depend on an old-style blowtorch filled with a dozen live salamanders.

HE had made some progress, though, when three days were up. He had found that the piece of sky could be melted with some difficulty, when it turned solid black until it cooled. Also, that it was completely without weight when liquid. Now, if he could get a gang up the approximate thousand miles to the sky with enough torches to melt it completely, it might congeal again as a perfect sphere. Then, he'd have only the problem of getting the stars and planets back on their proper paths!

"The mathematician thought of that," Sersa Garm said sourly. "But it won't work. Even with such heat, the upper air is too filled with phlogiston, and no man can breathe it. Also, since phlogiston has negative weight, the liquid sky

would sink through it, while nothing else could rise into it. And phlogiston will quench the flame of a rocket. Your Einstein discovered that, too."

The man was a gold mine of information—all bad. The only remaining solution, apparently, was to raise a scaffolding over the whole planet to the sky, and send up mandrakes to weld back the broken pieces. With material of infinite strength—an infinite supply of it, at that—and with infinite time, it might have been worth considering.

Nema came back on the fourth day with no more cheering information. Her multi-times great-grandfather, the Sather Karf, regretted it but he must have good news at once for the populace. They were starving because the food multipliers could no longer produce reliable supplies. Otherwise, Dave would find venom being transported into his blood in increasing amounts until the pain drove him mad. And, just incidentally, the Sons of the Egg, those fanatics who'd attacked him in the hospital, had tried to reach the camp twice already, once by interpenetrating into a flying carpet. They meant to kill him somehow, and his defense was growing too costly to be carried on longer, unless he produced results.

Dave groaned as she took off. By nightfall, when she came back

from the city for his report, he was groaning steadily. The venom had arrived on schedule, ahead of her, and his blood seemed to be on fire.

SHE laid a cool hand on his forehead. "Poor Dave," she said. "If I were not registered and certified, sometimes I feel that I might . . . but no more of that. Ser Perth sends you this unguent, which will hold back the venom for a time, cautioning you not to reveal his kindness. And the Sather Karf wants the full plans at once."

He began rubbing on the ointment, which helped slightly. She peeled back his shirt to help him, apparently delighted with the hair which had sprouted on his chest since his reincarnation. The unguent helped, but it wasn't enough.

"What the hell does he expect me to do?" Dave asked hotly. "Snap my fingers thus, yell *abracadabra*, and have the whole sky . . ."

He stared at his fingers, where an egg had suddenly materialized.

Nema squealed delightedly. "What a novel way to conjure, Dave. Teach me the word!"

Then she squealed again, this time in warning. The egg was growing. It swelled to the size of a football, then was man-sized, then like a huge globe. Suddenly, one side split open and a group of masked men in dull colored robes

came spilling out of it.

"Die!" the one in front yelled. He lifted a double-bladed knife, charged for Dave and brought the knife down.

The blade went through clothing, skin, flesh and bones, straight for Dave's heart.

III

THE knife was in his chest. Hanson stared down at it stupidly. Incredibly, he was still alive!

Then the slow pain-nerves carried their message to the brain. He was alive, but in his chest was agony. Coughing and choking on what must be his own blood, he scabbled at the knife and ripped it out. Blood jetted from the gaping rent in his clothing — jetted and slowed. Trickled—and stopped entirely.

But the pain didn't stop.

He heard shouting, quarreling voices, but nothing made sense through the painful haze. He felt someone clutch at him—more than one person—and then they were dragging him, willy-nilly, across the ground.

The outlines of the huge egg were closing around him.

The pain began to abate. But there was still the burning of the venom in his blood, along with a new torture—a wracking, squeezing feeling that Hanson couldn't account for.



He lurched to his feet and stared around him. He was within the egg. From the inside it was partly transparent, and he could see what must be the ground sweeping away beneath him. A man was standing outside the egg vainly grasping at it. The man shot up like a fountain, growing huge. He towered over them, until he was miles high and the giant structures Hanson was gaping at were the turned-up toes of shoes.

The egg was growing smaller.

A voice said tightly, "We're small enough, Bork. Can you raise the wind for us now?"

"Hold on!"

The egg tilted and soared. Hanson staggered, staring unbelievably through the crystal shell. They rose like a Banshee jet and, in the cloudy distance, was a shaggy, monstrous colossus, taller than the Himalayas—the man who had been beside them.

Bork grunted, "Got it! We're all right now." He chanted something in a rapid undertone. Then, "All right, relax. That'll teach them to work resonance-magic inside a ring. Heaven knows how we would have got through otherwise. The Satheri must be going crazy. Wait a minute—this business tires the fingers."

The man called Bork halted the series of rapid passes he had been making, flexing his fingers with a grimace. Then he began, purpose-

fully, to go through a ritual gesture. The egg drifted, spun and darted off. There was a feeling of expansion, then they were drifting again.

Through the crystal, Hanson saw a hulking giant with a scarred face, grinning down at them. He was waving a feather fan gently, as though by it he was moving the egg along. The giant stopped waving and bellowed, his voice deep and rolling. "*There's the roc! Get along!*" He pointed with a finger like a redwood.

THE egg drifted gently, while the giant dragged things out of his pockets and used them in a complicated assembly. The tree-trunk fingers did a dance.

There was the feeling of growing once more.

It lasted only a second. Then they were falling swiftly. But a huge bird cruised beside them, drawing closer. It looked like a cross between a condor and a hawk, but its wing span must have been over a hundred feet. It slipped under the egg, catching the falling object on a cushionlike attachment between its wings. Then it struck off briskly toward the east.

Bork opened the side of the egg with a snap and stepped out, dragging Dave behind, and the others followed. He tapped the egg-shaped object and caught it as it

shrank. When it was small enough, he pocketed it.

Dave sat up. The wound in his chest was gone, though there was blood on his torn clothing. From the side, an incredulous cry broke out, and Nema was suddenly shaking him, staring at him, burying her face in his shoulder. "*Dave! You're alive!*"

Dave hadn't figured that out yet himself. But Bork snorted. "Of course he is. Why'd we take him along with you hanging on if he was dead? When the setha-knife kills them, they stay dead—or they don't die. Sagittarian?"

She nodded and the big man calculated. "Yeah. It would be. There was one second there when all the signs were at their absolute maximum favorableness. Must have said the spells then."

The bird dipped toward the ground. Going at a hundred miles an hour, it landed against a small entrance to a cave in the hillside. Except for the one clear patch where the bird had lighted, they were in the midst of a forest.

Dave and Nema were hustled into the cave, while the others melted into the woods, studying the skies. Nema clung to Dave, crying something about how the Sons of the Egg would torture them.

"All right," he said finally. "Who are these sons of eggs?"

"Monsters," she told him. "They used to be the anti-magic party.

They hated the Satheri. While magic produced their food and made a world for them, they hated it because they couldn't do it for themselves. And a few renegade priests like my brother joined them."

"Your brother?"

"She means me," Bork said. He came in and dropped to his haunches quietly. "I used to be a stooge for Sather Karf, before I got sick of it. How do you feel, Dave Hanson?"

DAVE considered it in growing surprise. "I feel good. Even the venom the Sather Karf was putting in my blood doesn't hurt." Crazy or not, he decided, this scared new world had its points.

"Good. Means he believes we killed you—must have the report by now. And he won't give chase, that being so. He's not so bad, Dave, but some of these Satheri . . . Well, you figure how you'd like to have your wife magicked away from you by the first priest who wanted her—and then sent back with enough magic to be a witch and make life hell for you because she'd been kicked out by the priest. Or anything else you wanted and couldn't keep against magic. Sure, they fed us—they had to, after they took away our fields and our kine, and made it useless for us to earn our living in the old way. And they made us slaves. It's a fine world

for them, if they can keep the egg from breaking.”

“What is all this egg nonsense?”

Bork shrugged. “Common sense. Why should there be a sky shell around the planet? Look, there’s a legend here. Long ago, or perhaps far away—anyway, there was once a world called Thera and another called Erath. Two worlds, separate and distinct, on their own branching time-paths. One was a world of rule and law—I think it must have been something like your world, Dave Hanson. The other was—chaos. A world of anarchy, you understand. Terrible place to live, I guess.”

He hesitated somberly. “As terrible as this one is getting to be,” he added. “Anyway, there were the two worlds in their own time-lines. You know, I suppose, how worlds of probability separate and diverge as time goes on? Well—these worlds reversed the process. They *coalesced*.”

He looked searchingly at Hanson. “Do you see it—the two time-lines coming together? Don’t ask me to explain it. It was long ago and all I know for sure is that it happened. The two worlds met, fused and, out of the two, came *this* world, in what the books call ‘The Dawnstruggle.’ When it was over, our world was as it has been for thousands of centuries.”

He scratched his head. “There is doubt in my mind,” he admitted,

“whether or not all worlds have a shell around them. I don’t know. But our world does and the shell is cracking. The Satheri don’t like it—they want to stop it. We want it to happen. For the two lines, you see, met and fused and made one. Doesn’t that tell you anything, Dave Hanson? Don’t you see it, the male principle and the female, the egg that is fertile? When the egg hatches, you don’t try to put it back together!”

HE looked like a fanatic, Hanson told himself. Crazy or not, he took this business of the hatching egg seriously. Hanson said, “What is it going to hatch into?”

The big man shrugged. “Does a chick know it is going to become a hen? How can we tell?”

Hanson considered it. “Don’t you even have a guess?”

Bork said shortly, “No.”

He looked worried, Hanson thought, and guessed that even the fanatics were not quite sure they *wanted* to be hatched.

Bork added, “An egg has got to hatch, that’s all there is to it. We prophesied this, oh, two hundred years ago. The Satheri laughed. Now they don’t laugh, but they want to stop it. What happens when a bird is stopped from hatching? Does it die? Of course—and we don’t want to die. No, Dave Hanson, we don’t know what hap-

pens next—but we do know that we must find out. Nothing against you personally, of course, but you can't stop us. We can't let you. That's why we tried to kill you. If we could do it, we'd kill you now."

Hanson said reasonably, "You can't expect me to like it, you know. The Satheri, at least, saved my life—" He stopped in confusion.

Bork was laughing at him. "You mean . . . ? Dave Hanson, don't you know that the Satheri arranged to *kill* you first? They needed a favorable death conjunction to bring you back to life. They got it—by arranging an accident!"

Nema said hotly, "That's a lie!"

Bork shrugged. "Sure, you'd think so," he said mildly. "You're on *their* side."

Hanson considered this. It seemed as likely as anything else. He asked, "Why me?"

"Because you can put back the sky and restore the egg. At least, the Satheri think so and I must admit that, in some ways, they're smarter than we."

Hanson said, "But—"

"I know, I know," Bork went on wearily. "You're not the engineer. We know that—our pools are cleaner than those in the cities. But there is a cycle of confirmation. If the Satheri say a thing will happen, it *will* happen—though, perhaps, not in the way they expect. Unless, of course, it is stop-

ped. There was the monument. Not your monument, no. It was intended for your uncle. But the inscription bore your name, not his. Now prophecy is always strongest when based on coincidence—a prime rule. And those words prophesy that *you*—not your uncle—can do the impossible. So, what are we going to do with you?"

BORK'S directness was reassuring, somehow—it was nearer his own than any Dave had heard on this world. And the kidnapping was beginning to look like a relief. They'd gotten him off the hook. He grinned and stretched, tossing an arm around Nema. "If I'm unkillable, Bork, what can you do?"

The big man grinned back. "Flow rock around you up to your nose and toss you into a lake. You'd live there—but you wouldn't like it—for the next few thousand years! It's not as bad as being a mangrove with a soul—but it lasts longer. And don't think the Satheri can't still pull that trick. They have your name and your hair."

The conversation was suddenly less pleasant. Dave thought it over. "I could stay here and join you quietly—don't interrupt, Nema! The other alternatives won't help the sky, either!"

"They'd spot your aura. They'll be checking around here for a

while. Never mind, I'll think of something." Bork got up. "We might as well eat some food."

Bork fell to work with some scraps of food, then, abruptly, the scraps became a mass of sour smelling stuff. Bork shuddered, but ate it in silence, as did the others who came in to get their share. Nema and Dave scorned it.

Dave considered, then snapped his fingers. "*Abracadabra*," he said. He swore as a suddenly conjured candle burned his finger. He dropped it and tried again. The fourth time, he managed to get a bunch of bananas that weren't quite ripe. He kicked the conjured boxing glove and rusty knife aside and began eating, offering the others some.

Bork was thoughtful as he ate. Then he grimaced. "Magic!" he said. "Maybe *that's* the prophecy's meaning. I thought you knew no magic."

"I didn't," Dave told him. He was still tingling inwardly at the confirmation of his earlier discovery. It was unpredictable magic, but it apparently bore some vague relationship to what he was thinking.

"So, the lake's out," Bork decided. "With unknown powers at your command, you might escape. Well, that settles it. There's one place where nobody will look at you or listen to you. Even if you tried to turn yourself back to the

Satheri, it wouldn't work. And I'm fool enough to think you don't want them to find you."

HE suddenly plucked a hair from Nema's head. She screamed and darted for him. His fingers danced in the air and he spoke what seemed to be a name, though it bore no resemblance to Nema. She quieted, trembling. "One of the men has made a broom for you, little sister. Go back and forget that Dave Hanson lives. You saw him die and were dragged off with us and his body. You escaped before we reached our hideaway. By the knot I tie in your hair, and by your secret name, this is so."

She blinked slowly and looked around as Bork burned the knotted hair. Her eyes swept past Bork and Dave without seeing them and centered on a broom one man was holding. She seized it. A sob came to her throat. "The devil! The renegade devil! He didn't have to kill Dave! He didn't . . ."

Her voice died away as she raced toward the clearing.

Bork turned back to Dave. "Better strip and put this on." The thing he held out was a dirty, coarse, ragged scrap of cloth, apparently what was left of a pair of wide-legged pants. "The planets are fairly good for teleporting now. Be quick, before I change my mind and try the lake!"

Dave didn't see what he did, but there was a puff of flame in front of his eyes.

The next second, he stood manacled in a long line of men who were loaded with heavy stones. Over their backs fell the cutting lashes of a whip. And, far ahead, was a partially finished pyramid. He was obviously one of the slaves.

IV

SUNRISE. Hanson awakened under the bite of the lash. The overseers were shouting and kicking the slaves awake. Overhead, the marred sky shone in patch-quilt patterns.

Hanson stood up lightly, with the boundless strength that seemed to be built into his new body. But not all the slaves got up. The two beside him didn't move at all. Sleeping through that brutal awakening? Hanson looked closer and he knew. They weren't asleep—they were dead.

The overseer raged back along the line and saw them. "*Bastards!*" he yelled. "Lazy, worthless, work-dodging bastards!" He knelt furiously and thumbed down the eyelids of the corpses, though there was little need for the test—they were too limp, too waxen to be pretending.

The overseer cut them out of the chain and kicked at Hanson. "Move along!" he bellowed.

"Menes himself is here, and he's not as gentle as me!"

Hanson joined the long line. He was hungry. How the devil did they expect the slaves to put in a day's work without some kind of food? There had been nothing the night before but a skin of water—not even that much this morning. No wonder the two beside him had died, on a diet of overwork, beatings and plain starvation . . .

Menes was there, all right. Hanson saw him in the distance, a skinny giant of a man in breechclout, cape and golden headdress. He bore a whip, like everyone else who seemed to have any authority at all, but wasn't using it. He was standing, hawklike, on a slight rise in the sandy earth, motionless and silent. Beside him was a shorter figure—a pudgy little man with a thin mustache, on whom the Egyptian headdress looked strangely out of place. *Ser Perth!*

Hanson's gaping came to an end as the lash came down again. He stumbled forward, heedless of the overseer's shouting. What was Ser Perth doing here? Had Bork slipped up—did Ser Perth know that Hanson was still alive? It seemed unlikely. The pudgy little man was paying no attention to the lines of slaves. More probably, Hanson thought, Ser Perth was supervising the supervisors, making an inspection tour of . . .

Of what?

Was this another of their frenzied efforts to put back the sky?

HANSON looked around approvingly. The long lines of slaves that had been carrying rock and rubble the day before were now being formed into hauling teams. Long ropes were looped around enormous slabs of quarried rock. There were rollers underneath them and slaves tugging and pushing at them. The huge stones moved slowly, remorselessly, forward onto the prepared beds of rubble. Hanson could not recall seeing the rock the night before. They had appeared as if by magic . . .

Why, certainly—by magic. But then, Hanson asked himself, why the slaves, why the whips? Why not simply use magic on the entire construction, whatever it was to be . . .

Once again the whip. The overseer ranted, "Get on, you blundering fool! Menes himself is looking at you. He—what the devil?"

The overseer's hand spun Hanson around. The man's eyes, large and opaque, stared at Hanson as he said unbelievably, "You're the one! Didn't I take the hide off your back twice already? And not a scar, not a drop of blood!"

Hanson said feebly, "I—I heal quick." It was no more than the truth. As Ser Perth had reconstructed his body, he healed almost

before a blow was struck.

"*Magic!*" the overseer snorted and gave Hanson a shove that sent him sprawling. "Blithering magic again! Magical stones that melt when you get them in place—magical slaves that the whip won't touch! And they expect us to do a job! First, they magic every tool so that the man who made it wouldn't recognize it. Then, they come snooping and conjuring and interfering.

"Wheels on the rollers! Tools of steel and the-gods-know-what instead of honest stone! Tools to lift things instead of ropes to shrink or wood to swell—tools and magic and rush-rush-rush until I'm half—ah, you *would*, would you!" His voice trailed off into a fresh roar of rage as he caught sight of another slave on his knees, clutching at his throat, and raced off with the whip.

Hanson tried to make himself inconspicuous after that. The wounds would heal and the beatings would never kill. But there had been no provision in his reconstituted frame for the suppression of pain.

AT the expense of a hundred slaves and considerable deterioration of the whips, one block of stone was in place before the sun was high overhead in the mottled sky. Then there was—blessedly!—a moment's pause. Men

were coming down the long lines, handing something to the slaves. Food, thought Hanson gratefully . . .

He was wrong. When the slave with the wicker basket came closer, he could see that the contents were not food but some powdery substance that the bearers dipped out with carved spoons into the eager hands of the slaves. Hanson smelled his portion dubiously. Cloying, sickly sweet . . .

Hashish! Or opium, heroin, hemp — Hanson was no expert. But it certainly was some sort of drug. And, judging by the avid way the other slaves were gulping it down, each one of them had been exposed to it before. Hanson cautiously made a pretense of swallowing his before he allowed it to slip to the sands. Drug addiction—obviously, a convenient way to make the slaves forget their aches and fears, to keep them everlastingly anxious to please and do whatever was necessary to make sure the precious, deadly ration never stopped.

But still no food. And the pause in the labor was only for the length of time it took the drug-bearing slaves to complete their task. Ten minutes, perhaps fifteen—and then the overseers were back.

The slaves regrouped on new jobs, and Hanson found himself in a crew of a dozen or so. They

were lashing the hauling ropes around a twelve-foot block of stone. The rollers were already in place, the crudely plaited ropes dangling loose. Hanson found himself being lifted by a couple of slaves to the shoulders of a third. His clawing hands caught the top of the stone and the slaves below heaved him upward. He scrambled, knees and elbows flying, to the top and there caught the ropes that were flung up to him.

From his vantage point, he saw what he had not seen before—the size of the construction project. This was no Gizeh pyramid, no simple tomb for a king. Its base was measured in kilometers, not yards. Its top would be—how high? He could only wonder. As far as he could see, over the level sand, the ground was black with teeming thousands of slave gangs.

Were the idiots trying to reach the *sky*? They were.

LIKE the pride-maddened men of Babel, they were building a sky-high structure of stone. It was obviously impossible, Hanson knew—just about as impossible as all of this strange world, and all the things in it.

The falling sky was a problem that the warlocks below could not solve. They had looked for help. They had sought through the worlds and the ages for builders, engineers, constructors, anyone

who might have an answer, however improbable. Certainly, they were bound to call back the builders of the Pharaohs' tombs—as, with meticulous thoroughness, they had tried Hanson and Einstein and Cagliostro and, for all Hanson knew, a thousand more. They had tried everyone their seers could find who might bear a hand or try a technique, however faint the chance of success.

But a *pyramid*, Hanson objected to himself. Until he realized the essential fact of the world he was in. For an impossible task, perhaps, impossible means can best do the accomplishing.

"*Hey!*" One of the slaves below was waving at him. While Hanson looked down, puzzled, the slave called another, got a shoulder to lean on and walked his way up the side of the stone block, with Hanson tugging at his hands, the other slave pushing from below. "Look," the slave panted earnestly, "it's your hide, but I thought I better warn you—watch out for that guy. Don't just stand around when *he's* here." He picked up a loop of rope, passed it to Hanson and made a great show of hard work.

Hanson said, "What guy?"

"*Him.*" The slave jerked a thumb at a dour, slow-moving overseer, who was walking stiffly toward them. "I'm warning you, he's a mandrake. You don't want

to mess around with *him.*"

Hanson looked at the ancient, weathered face of the approaching mandrake. He passed ropes around the corners until the mandrake turned and rigidly marched away, the blows of his whip falling with metronome regularity on the backs of the slaves he passed. "Thanks," said Hanson. "Is it so bad, being a mandrake?"

"Depends," the slave answered. "Some mandrake men are real, you know? I mean, they want somebody that they can't just call back, maybe because, with the sky collapsing and all, the spells aren't working just right. So they rebuild him around a mandrake. That's not so bad. If they'd done that with me, I'd have come out a lot better than I did—you know, they straighten you out a little when they do it. But this kind, like *him*—they never were human. Bad business."

"Um," said Hanson. He worked silently for a minute. Then he worked closer to the slave and said, "You been here long?"

"Long enough," the man said sourly. "Name's Ricci—from Pittsburgh, U. S. A. Twentieth Century, Earth. You?"

"Same place!" said Hanson fervently. "But I'm from Chicago! I—I kind of thought all the slaves were Egyptian."

"Nah. A lot of them are, sure, but—hey, what's with you?"

HANSON was staring at him in bewilderment. He shook his head. All of a sudden Ricci's face rang a bell in his mind. He said wonderingly, "Didn't—aren't you the one I saw dead on his back, right next to me this morning?"

"Guess so," Ricci said bitterly. "I'm getting damn sick and tired of it, too. Fifth time I died this month. I don't like it." He tied a swift knot in the ropes and stood up, staring searchingly at the net of cording around the stone. "Um, looks all right now," he said. "These damn overseers, they won't feed you because it takes time and wastes food. They let you die and, just about when you're getting comfortable, *zing*, they drag you back. It ain't fair."

Hanson swallowed. Some things were still a little hard to take. "You were dead, back in Pittsburgh, I mean?"

"Sure. They got fifteen of us in a batch—me and five more in my outfit, and nine from the South Side. Wish I had one of those sawed-off shotguns now," he said reminiscently. "I'd sure take a—Well, I ain't got one. They like to drag us back in bunches, you know. That's why you see so many Injuns. They got a batch of them, twenty thousand or so, from a place called Tenochtitlan. Aztecs they were—all twenty thousand of them got sacrificed in a bunch for some reason or other."

He tested a rope, then sat on the edge of the rock. "Watch it," he warned. "That overseer has his eyes on you. You stay up here and keep the ropes tight, while we see if this thing moves." He slipped over the side, hung by his fingertips and dropped, rolling over as he landed.

Hanson swallowed and tried to act busy. The mandrake overseer had moved ponderously toward him again. But, in a moment, he turned away again.

Hanson sighed and braced himself as the lines of slaves beneath him settled themselves to the rope. They strained and tugged and the stone began ever so slowly to move.

Hanson checked the rigging with half his mind, while the other half raced in a crazy circle of speculation.

Mandrakes and mandrake men—corpses, plurally dead, many times revived. What a place to live!

THERE was a sudden, coruscating flare from above.

Hanson instinctively flung his forearm over his eyes. He squinted fearfully. For a crazed second he thought that the sun had gone nova, that the end of the world had come.

Something had happened to the sun. It was flickering and flaming, shooting enormous jets of fire from

its rim. It seemed to be moving, wobbling, careening, drawing near.

There was a massive shriek of fear and panic from the horde of slaves, a bellow like the collective death-agony of a world. The slaves dropped their ropes and ran in panicked, random directions, the human overseers with them. Only the mandrakes stood stolidly in place, precisely flicking with their whips each running man who passed them.

Hanson flung himself face down on the stone. There was a roaring, rushing, thundering noise from overhead.

Then the thunderbolt of Thor himself blasted in Hanson's ear.

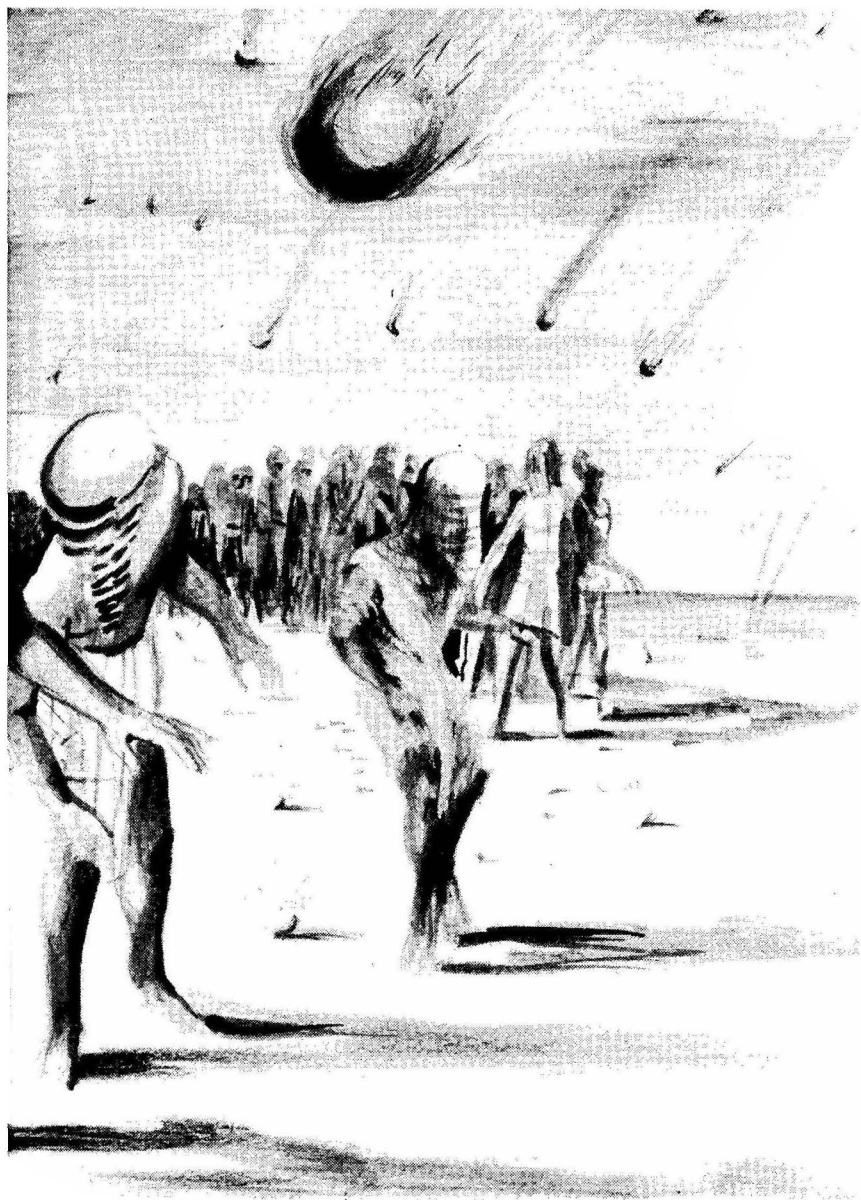
The sun had fallen!

V

HANSON escaped—Hanson and a few more.

The giant *something* that, within itself, floated the flaming sun like a fly trapped in amber, crashed to the ground on the horizon, scant miles away. The heat was searing. Hanson felt as if he were being baked alive. He could feel the blood in his veins bubble and surge as it evaporated into steam. He could see giant blisters forming and bursting on his forearm stretched out on the rock. He could see the flesh beneath the blisters stirring, healing and blistering again.





In his exposed position, he faced sure death—

If he could be killed at all.

It lasted for only a few moments, but a few moments were enough. Of all that fabulous host of slaves and overseers, only the scant handful who happened to be protected by rock, by magic or by the huddled bodies of their fellows still lived.

When the thundering sound of the falling piece of sky died away, leaving only the vicious, far-off crackle of flames, a few figures crawled and moved. Hanson stood up shakily, staring fearfully at the radiant halo over the hills between him and the horizon.

The thing to do was to get out of there. Never mind the dead or the dying, never mind anything.

He plunged through the desert, under a curious helter-skelter canopy of stars, the world bright around him from the glow on the horizon, the sky black above.

He walked for hours.

He rested briefly, then he walked again.

By and by, the tongues of flame no longer flared in the sky behind him, although the brilliant radiance continued. And Hanson found that, while his body was strong and almost indestructible, it was not utterly unhuman. He was tired.

Curled up in the sand, he slept. He never knew how long. When

he woke, the sky was as mad and featureless as before—without the sun, with stars and planets spinning in random orbits. There was no night, there was no day.

He woke to a roaring wind that drove cutting sand-knives into him. He forced himself to get up and stagger against it, away from the place where the sun had fallen.

EVEN through the lashing sand, he could see its glow behind him. Now a pillar of something—steam or the vapor of molten, evaporated rocks?—rose above it, like the poisonous mushroom of the old atom-bombs. It was spreading under the phlogiston layer, reflecting the glare. And the heat of it, sucking up the air for hundreds of square miles, made this fearful wind.

He stumbled on. Finally, the sand gave way to tufts of something like crabgrass, then to thin sod, then to knee-high undergrowth.

With the sun gone and the sky in shreds, this world was almost certainly done for. He spared a wry smile for the Sather Karf and the other sorcerers, working their spells against the handicap of impossible conjunctions and unknown signs.

If the sun had been embedded in the shell of "sky" material, why hadn't the sky melted? It had been easy enough to melt in his own

laboratory and, certainly, the sun's heat was far greater than anything his salamanders could produce. He could find no real answer. Perhaps, the sun was moving *through* the shell, solid though it seemed—the sorcerers had said something about its being both liquid and solid. And, perhaps, the motion was fast enough so that no single spot became hot enough to melt. Or, perhaps, the phlogiston dissipated the heat.

The cloud of glowing stuff was spreading. He was many miles, surely, from the pyramid, yet he could see curling filaments of glowing vapor almost overhead. At least, it would mean light and heat for one hemisphere of the world, he thought.

Assuming, that is, that this world was round.

He walked on briskly, abandoning speculation. Ahead was a cluster of lights—a village, perhaps. He headed for it.

THE lights were fluorescents, from a low, shedlike building that was nearly a quarter of a mile long.

Hanson stared at it. The sign over the door read, *Project Five*. Nothing else.

In the half-light from the sky, he saw that the well-kept lawn around the shed was covered with idling human beings in clusters. Most of them wore white coveralls

—a few, simple business suits of the mid-twentieth century.

Hanson looked at the remnants of his Egyptian slave costume and ducked into the shelter of a clump of bushes. He needed something less conspicuous. He tried the abracadabra, rather dubiously. The first try produced a Bikini bathing suit—the second, a swallowtail coat. Eventually, though, he had a suitable outfit—if you didn't object to the parakeet brilliance of his tropical-print sport shirt.

He moved closer to the loungers on the grass, taking his time, carefully paying no particular attention to individuals.

If he had stopped at the fringes of the scattered groups to speak to someone, there might have been questions. Hanson didn't want to answer questions — he wanted questions answered. It seemed that his choice, in the long run, lay between Bork and the Satheri. But, for the moment, he was free of both and, having such freedom, he wanted to be sure of making the right choice.

So he walked casually across the grass, almost to the shed, drifted along its perimeter and sank to the ground with a yawn, next to a small group of men.

They seemed to be reminiscing over old times. “. . . two thirty-eight an hour *with* overtime, and double overtime for the swing shift. Boy, we really had it made!

And every Saturday, without fail, the general would come out from Muroc and tell us we were the heroes of the home front—with overtime pay while we listened to him!”

“Yeah, but what if you wanted to quit? Suppose you didn’t like your shift boss or somebody. You went down to get your time, and they handed you your draft notice. No, I liked it better in ’46. Not so much pay, but . . .”

Hanson pricked up his ears. The conversation told him more than he needed to know. He stood up and peered through the windows of the shed. There, unattended under powerful banks of fluorescents, stood rows of half-finished aircraft shapes.

Hanson shook his head dazedly. He walked over to a man who lay on the ground, staring at the sky with his hands clasped under the back of his neck. He said, “Beg pardon, but I just got here. What the hell kind of place is this?”

The man looked up at Hanson disinterestedly. “You hit it, buddy,” he said and turned away.

Hanson persisted. “What’s the score?”

The man sat up and made a disgusted noise. “Who knows?” he said aggrievedly. “We’re dead. We’re dead and we’re here and they tell us, ‘Make helicopters.’ So we make them. So, about the time the first one comes off the

line—boom!—the power fails. No juice—nothing to run the torches, nothing to make the machines go, nothing. So we sit.” He spat on the ground.

HANSON kept after him, though the pattern was clear enough. Neither he himself nor Menes had been alone. The sorcerers had brought back engineers of all descriptions—including, it appeared, aeronautical engineers.

The man said, “Maybe they got confused—this shop is the one that made those big cargo copters they called ‘Sky Hooks’ and, I dunno, maybe they thought they were the real thing. All I know is, I was tack-welding fuel tanks for five solid weeks when the power went off. I knew it was going to happen—they had the craziest damn generating plant you ever saw, the boilers sizzling and the safety-valves popping with no fire in the box! Just one little old man sitting in a corner, practicing the Masonic grip or something over a smudgepot.”

Hanson frowned. “If there’s no power, what are those lights?”

“Witch-lights,” the man explained. “They came on when the power failed. They—hey, what’s that?”

He stared up. Hanson had seen it too—something whizzing overhead at jet-plane speed. Hanson said, “A piece of the sky, maybe?”

The man glared at him. "Falling sidewise? Not that that would be any crazier than anything else that's happened around here. I tell you, pal, I don't like this place. It wasn't so bad when I first got here. But it's been going to pieces ever since. Second day I was here, I went to the water-cooler for a drink and bat's blood came out. Ever drink bat's blood, Mac? Don't do it.

"And that's not the half of it. After the power went off, they give me something they called a salamander to weld with. Man, that's an *experience*. I was never gladder of anything in my life when the machine shops ran out of components and—*hey*, there it is again!"

The something whizzed by again, in the other direction, but lower and slower. It circled around the shed and swooped back.

It looked like—Hallowe'en. It was a woman on a broomstick, flying erratically. She turned over like an Eskimo in his kayak, righted herself, dipped to the earth, then straightened out in a flat glide.

She came to a three-point landing a couple of yards away.

It was Nema, her face masklike, her eyes tortured. She was staring searchingly at every man.

"*Nema!*" Hanson cried.

She spun to face him and her face went alternately red and gray. She took a tottering step toward

him. She said clearly, "*Illusion!*"—and slumped to the ground in a faint.

HANSON got her away from there somehow, half-carried her through the curious crowd, out to the rim of the wild growth. There, well away from the helicopter plant, he set her on her feet and tried to take her in his arms. It was not premeditated, but his lips reached for hers—as did hers for his.

There was, maddeningly, an invisible barrier between them. Nema uttered a despairing little cry and said, "You forgot—I'm a registered and certified virgin."

With a growl of frustration, Hanson let his arms fall away from her. He said, "They sure don't take chances with their vestals in *this* world."

She shook her head sorrowfully. "Dave," she said tenderly. "Dave Hanson! Then it was mere illusion."

"What was mere illusion?" he asked.

Nema grew angry. "My brother—and the aneshta-knife!" she exclaimed. "I *knew* you were dead. From the aneshta-knife, there is no revival. But you *are* alive and so— it was illusion. Dave Hanson, I thank the gods for your life! And, if it hadn't been for my own spell—" her smile was intimate, tender—"if it hadn't driven me to

follow you everywhere, even through the jaws of death, I might never have known it was illusion."

She shuddered, added, "It was terrible—more terrible than you know. Everything's wrong now. I could hardly control my broom. More than once, I almost crashed. Nothing works now for the sorcerers, Dave—the world is close to its end."

Hanson shrugged. "Let it end," he said wearily. He tried again to embrace her—but to no avail. "Let it end!" he exclaimed furiously.

She shook her head, said, "No, darling, it is well we can't forget that I am a registered and certified virgin. For, if the Satheri ever needed pure blood, they—"

"The hell with the Satheri!" Hanson cried. "You said yourself that the world is coming to an end. What's the difference if—good God!"

He stared over her shoulder. The lights in the plane factory had flared whitely and gone out. In the half-light from the sky, he saw that the plant was gone. There was only barren earth, with a tiny, limp sapling in the middle of empty acres.

"What *happened?*"

SHE glanced briefly and sighed. "Those poor men! It's happening all over, Dave, not just here. The plane plant was magicked into a plane plant—that is, by the law of identities, the sapling of the

plane tree was transformed into a factory for producing aircraft. And the spell has failed. All our spells are failing, now."

"But those men!" Hanson exploded. "I was just *talking* to one of them!"

"He'll talk no more, poor zombie. Back to the grave—the spell is over."

Sanson stared and swallowed. "I see," he managed. "Mandrake men, like me."

"Oh, no, Dave Hanson. Mandrake root is scarce and expensive—only the leaders are mandrakes. The others are—merely revived corpses. They would not have lasted long anyhow. Truly, they were lucky. They lived for weeks. The Toltec project vanished a month ago, Isambard Brunel's skyschooner turned into a pumpkin, some of the others have fared even worse. The world has gone mad—even magic isn't trustworthy any more."

Hanson said, "Not my magic, Nema. I conjured up these clothes just a little while ago."

She looked at him, frowning, "I don't know, Dave Hanson," she said hopelessly. "All I know is even the oldest, surest spells are failing us now. The Rainbow Bridge across The River—it faded away like mist before my eyes while I flew over it, an hour ago. Perhaps Bork was right—perhaps the egg must hatch."

She sat down and began silently to weep.

Hanson bent to comfort her. But, just then, there was a thump behind them and something like pounding hoofbeats. They both looked up in surprise.

It was a roc in its long landing-run, heading straight for them.

The Sather Karf got off, one hand held in the air in a throwing position, twelve dead-eyed mandrakes behind him, each carrying a steel-lashed whip.

"I greet Dave Hanson," the Sather said formally. "I thank the Virgin Nema for—however witlessly—leading us to him!"

VI

THERE was no conversation on the way back. The great roc's hard-drumming wings created a constant sound like thunder, and the air whipped past them viciously, threatening to dislodge them. They passed closer to the sun now. It was sinking slowly into the earth, lying in a great fused hole. For miles around, smaller drops of the 15,000-foot sun had spattered and were etching deeper holes in the pitted landscape.

The rest of the trip was across desolate country—country scoured by winds—gloomy with the half-light from the angry, glaring clouds above. Half a mile of the shell cracked off above them. The roc

squawked harshly in fright, but it missed them. They ducked low, a few miles further on, to escape the fringe of clouds that seemed to be sucked downward by the varying winds.

There they passed above a village. The sights below were out of a ghoulish bacchanalia. As the roc swept over them, the villagers dropped their frenzied pursuits and ran for weapons. A cloud of arrows hissed upward, but too late. However, it indicated that the populace was blaming its troubles on the magicians.

When they finally reached the great capital city, things were somewhat more orderly. Here, the sun was far away, the light dimmer. The semi-darkness seemed to have driven people off the streets. There was no sign of electric power. Apparently, the spell that maintained it was no longer operating.

But many of the buildings that had sparkled so bravely before were wrecks. Only the older edifices appeared still sound, probably because they were built out of normal stone and metal, by older techniques. One of the largest of these had been turned into a hospital of sorts, and the whole square in front of it was crammed with people. More than half of them were already dead, with the squat mandrakes carrying off the bodies to a great pyre already burning

nearby. Plague and pestilence appeared to be growing completely out of hand.

They landed at the construction camp. One section of it had been shredded by the lash of wind caused by the fall of a huge piece of sky, studded with a few stars, that lay nearby. But most of it was unharmed. Around the edges, basilisks were posted on top of stones, chained to face outward so that they could prevent any invasion by the mob.

He caught one glimpse of a crowd at the other end of the park. They had a fire going and were apparently preparing to cook one of the mandrakes, while others swarmed up to fight for the prize. Food, it seemed, was no longer being made. But it was being eaten.

AT the camp, a new building—made of trees and rocks without magic, obviously—had been thrown up to one side. It was here that a few of the priests had taken shelter. Sersa Garm and Ser Perth waited there, though Dave had thought that the latter must have died under the sun's descent.

The mandrakes prodded them into the new building, then left at a wave of the Sather Karf's hand. The old man turned toward Dave, his eyes cold and flinty. He lifted his hand, dropped it, then sighed, sinking slowly to a seat. His face seemed to collapse, with the iron

running out of it, to leave a beaten, sick old man. His voice was pleading, rather than angry. "Fix the sky, Dave Hanson," he said.

There was an angry mutter from another priest in the background but the Sather Karf shook his head slowly, still facing Dave. "No—what good to threaten return to the mandrake swamp when another day or week will see the end of everything? What good to demand your reasons when time is so short? Fix the sky, and any reward we can offer is yours.

"We have few powers, now that astrology is ruined. But repair the sky, and the near-immortality we have given you will remain. We'll give you rubies and emeralds to buy an empire. Take Nema for your own, if you want her. If you're angry, I'll tell you my secret name and that of every priest here. Do what you will to us then. *But fix the sky!*"

It shook him. He'd been prepared to assuage their anger with a story of studying Menes' work, but he had no defense against this. Slowly, Dave nodded. It was hopeless, impossible. He could do nothing. Before the picture of the world dying and the decay of the old man's pride, even his own imminent death with the dying world seemed unimportant. He might at least give them something to hope for until the end came.

"Could I ever be returned to my

own world? As I was before my accident?"

The men looked around and Ser Perth answered sadly, "No."

"Maybe," Dave said slowly, after a long thoughtful silence, "if all of the men you brought here to work on the problem were to pool their knowledge, we might find an answer. Can you bring them together for a council?"

Ser Perth shook his head. The fat was fading from his face, and his mustache was untrimmed. "Some are mandrakes again," he said. "Two escaped. Menes is dead. You're all we have left. And we can't even supply labor beyond the mandrake men here, except for our own ranks of the priesthood. The others will never obey. We have no food to give them."

"You're our only hope," Sersa Garm seconded.

DAVE stared at them, then around at the bric-a-brac of machinery they had assembled for him. He opened his mouth and his own laughter mocked him. Dave Hanson, world-saver!

"You have the right name but the wrong man, Sather Karf," he said bitterly. "I couldn't even build a doghouse. You wanted my uncle, but you got me, because the name his friends used for him was given to me—and cut on that monument. Even he'd have been helpless. I wasn't even an engineer—just a

computer repairman and operator."

He regretted ruining their hopes even as he said it. But he saw no change in their expressions. The old face of the Sather Karf seemed merely to stiffen, becoming more thoughtful.

"Your name was on the monument and we drew you back by its use. Therefore, under the laws of the soundest magic, it *is* you to whom nothing is impossible. Perhaps we were wrong in trying to force you to be an engineer. But, nonetheless, it is *you* who must fix the sky. What is this computer you mention? Some magic greater than engineering?"

Dave shook his head. "Just a tool used by engineers and others. It's a little hard to explain. And it couldn't help."

A touch of shrewdness came into the Sather Karf's eyes. "At least humor me that much! I want to know."

Nema's hand rested on his pleadingly. Dave shrugged. He groped for an answer, letting his mind flicker from the old-time tide-predictor to the modern electronic gadgets. "An analogue computer is a machine that—that sets up conditions mathematically similar to the conditions of some problem and then lets all the conditions operate, drawing a graph—a prediction—of how the real thing will work.

"If the tides change with the position of heavenly bodies, then we can build cams that have shapes like the effect-changes, and gear them together in the right order. A cam for each factor, shaped like the periodic rise and fall of that factor—geared to let the various factors operate at the same relative rate. And we can run off a graph of the tides for the next fifty years. Oh, hell—it's a lot more complicated than that. A computer takes the basic facts and draws a graph—an analogue—of the results. Only we use electronic ones now . . ."

"I understand," the Sather Karf said. Dave doubted it, but he was happy to swim out of the fix into which he'd been getting himself with his muddled pictures. The old man pondered and nodded. "A fine scientific instrument obeying natural law. We have applied the same methods, though less elaborately. The basic magical principle of similarity."

Dave snorted. And then he stopped, frowning. In a way, it was exactly that. Perhaps, there was some relation between science and magic—the natural laws of the two worlds he knew. Computers set up similar situations with the idea that the results would apply to the original. Magic used a bit of a man, or an image of him, to control all of the original. Or was that getting contagion mixed in?

He'd heard about magic being based mostly on the two principles.

"So the fault is ours," the Sather Karf said finally. "We should have brought a computer from your world. Then you could have simulated our sky as it should be within your computer and forced it to be repaired long ago. But there's no time for regret now. Build us a computer!"

"But . . ."

SUDDEN rage burned on the old man's face and he rose to his feet. His arm jerked back and snapped forward. Nothing happened. He grimaced. "Dave Hanson," he said sharply, "by the unfailing power of your name, which is all of you, I hold your name in my mind, your throat in my hands . . ."

His old hands squeezed suddenly and Dave felt a vise clamp around his throat. He tried to break free, but there was nothing there. The old man mumbled and the vise was gone, but something clawed at Dave's liver. Something else rasped across his sciatic nerve. His kidneys seemed to be wrenched out of him . . .

"You will build your computer," the Sather Karf said. "And you *will* save our world!"

Dave staggered back, panting from the shock of the pain. He'd had enough agony to last for the

full length of his potential life, but he hadn't learned to bear it any more easily. "All right," he gasped finally. "I'll build your damned computer. And, when I'm finished, I'll wait for *your* name!"

"You'll have it," the Sather Karf promised. "Also whatever rewards our failing art can give. Ser Perth! Bring food for Dave Hanson."

Ser Perth shook his head sadly. "There is none—none at all. We hope that the remaining planets will find a favorable conjunction, but . . ."

Dave studied his helpers with more bitterness. "Oh, hell!" he said at last. "Abracadabra!"

Either luck was with him or his skill was improving. A full side of beef materialized as he snapped his fingers, almost breaking his arm before his hand snapped out of the way. The others swarmed toward it hungrily. And, for a second, Dave felt more confidence at their expressions. Perhaps, he was becoming a magician himself, with a new art that could do the impossible.

The Sather Karf smiled approvingly. "The theory of resonance. Unreliable, but you show promise, Dave Hanson."

"You know it?" Dave had gathered that it was outside their procedures.

"We *knew* it. But, when more advanced techniques took over, most of us forgot it. The syllable resonates in a sound pattern with

your world, to which you also still resonate. It won't work for you here, nor for us in your world. We have a different syllable, of course." The Sather Karf considered it. "But, if you can control it and bring in one of your computers—a part at a time . . ."

Sixteen tries later, Dave found he couldn't. He'd tried for transistors. He got a pile of old-style 201-A triodes, a crystal vase, a transit and a bunch of assorted junk. He gave up at last, when he finally realized there was no electricity with which to power a machine, even if he could build one out of its basic parts—which he couldn't, within the time left.

Overhead, the sky shattered with a roar and another piece fell, tearing into the city. Ser Perth stared upward in horror.

"*Mars!*" he croaked. "*Mars* has fallen! Now there can be no conjunction—*ever!*"

VII

IN the hours that followed, Dave's original intentions bounced a dozen times between ridiculous hope and a combination of desperate need to keep himself occupied with the obligation to give his hosts what comfort he could. Perhaps, it was the horror that he remembered lay beyond the camp, or, perhaps, the sight of the rotted, pitted sky itself. But ultimately,

hope and a stumbling faith won out.

Somewhere, in the combination of what science couldn't be avoided by any technician on his world, along with the magic of this world, there might be an answer—or a means to stay doom long enough for an answer to be found.

The very bulk of the factors he had to contend with was the most frightening feature of the problems. There were the seven planets and the sun. And, with them, were some three thousand stars. All had to be ordered in their courses. But, above all else, the sky had to be complete.

He tried to think out the simplest possible similarity-computer machine. Electronics was worthless. In his head, he worked out the rough idea of a machine similar to the tide machine, then gave it up. His hosts couldn't build it—nor was there time.

Nor could he depend on the help he would have had from them in normal times. He couldn't get materials through magic. Only the basic, most elementary magic functioned at all, since the rest was keyed too closely to astrology. And astrology was gone with the sky. Names were potent in command—resonance might work within its limited, uncontrollable nature—and the broadest powers of similarity remained. He knew too little of contagion to be sure of that

branch of the art, but most of it, he feared, was worked by some association with the nature of zodiacal houses and the course of the planets.

He found himself thinking in circles of worry, and desperately pulled himself back to the need to simplify. A computer had to be built to handle the most flexible conditions. But this one could be made to handle only one situation—it had to duplicate the courses of the planets and simulate the behavior of the sky. It wasn't necessary to equip it to handle any theoretical set of courses, only the given ones.

And that, of course, meant a model—the one thing which *is*, functionally, the perfect representation.

IT brought him sharply back to magic. Make a doll like a man, stick pins in it—and the man dies. Make a model of the universe within the sky, surround it with a shell—and any changes in it should affect the real universe here.

A model with three thousand stars in their orbits!

He had been doodling while he thought, making symbols that meant nothing, but which convinced the Sather Karf and the others that he was working on the needed scientific spell. Sersa Garm moved nearer, studying his marks. "Three thousand—that is for the

stars?" he asked doubtfully. "It's wrong. There are but two thousand seven hundred eighty-one—or there were."

"And, I suppose, you've got the exact orbits of every one?" Dave asked.

"Naturally. They are fixed stars, which move with the sky. Otherwise, why call them fixed stars? Only the sun and planets move through the sky, as the sky moves over the world itself."

Dave grunted. That meant only one control for all of them—or, better still, for the sky itself. They could be stuck on. Seven planets and the sun—all in a series of complex orbits—was a rugged problem, but a feasible one.

He began to sketch it out roughly. A glass sphere with dots for the stars. The planets could be bits of something with iron in them, held and moved about by magnets outside the bowl—there were magnets in some of the equipment they had brought him. Men could control them, if necessary. The sun could be a disc, secured in the same way. But the business of holding the earth in the center would be tricky.

Sersa Garm came over, staring at the sketch. He grunted in disgust. "Why waste time drawing orbits! If you want a model, we have the finest orrery in existence. We brought it from the great crypt for your use here, before you were

abducted. I'll get it for you!"

He dashed off, calling two of the mandrake men after him. In a few minutes, they staggered back under a bulky affair in a clear plastic box.

It was a beautiful job. Probably, the material was all of precious gems and costly crystals, hand executed to add to its value in a world where magic was cheap. The dome was nearly eight feet in diameter, running on a set of jeweled gears that were powered by weights, like an old-fashioned clock. The planets were suspended just outside the dome from a series of tracks. And the world, depicted in colors, hung from a slender rod that went through the glass, suspended precisely in the center of the sphere.

DAVE bent forward to examine the rod but could see no hole in the crystal or glass of the shell.

"A bit of the sky." Sersa Garm confirmed his suspicions. "It fell nearly fifty years ago. Our first warning, though no one knew it then. It slips through the crystal with ease and is—or was—our most precious possession."

It was beautiful—and completely damning to all of Dave's hopes. No model he could make could equal it—but, in spite of it and all its precise depiction of the orbits, the sky was still falling!

The Sather Karf had sat back,

apparently watching nothing. But as Dave's face changed expression, the old man hobbled over. The weight of all his centuries lay on him, yet a curious toughness showed through it. "What is wrong with the orrery?" he asked.

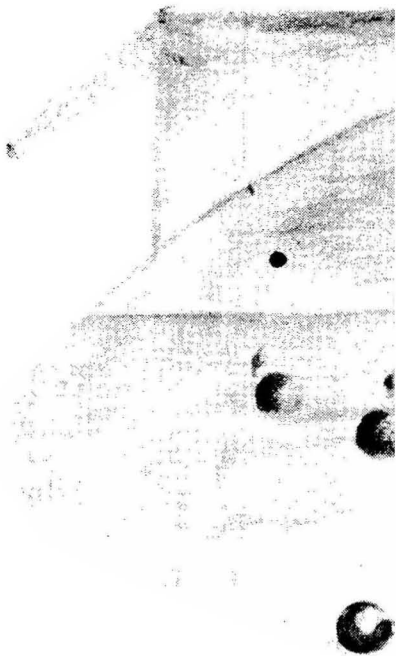
"Nothing—nothing at all, damn it!" Dave told him. "You wanted a computer—and you've got it. You can feed in data as to the year, turn the cranks and find exactly how the planets will run. What more could any computer do? But it doesn't influence the sky!"

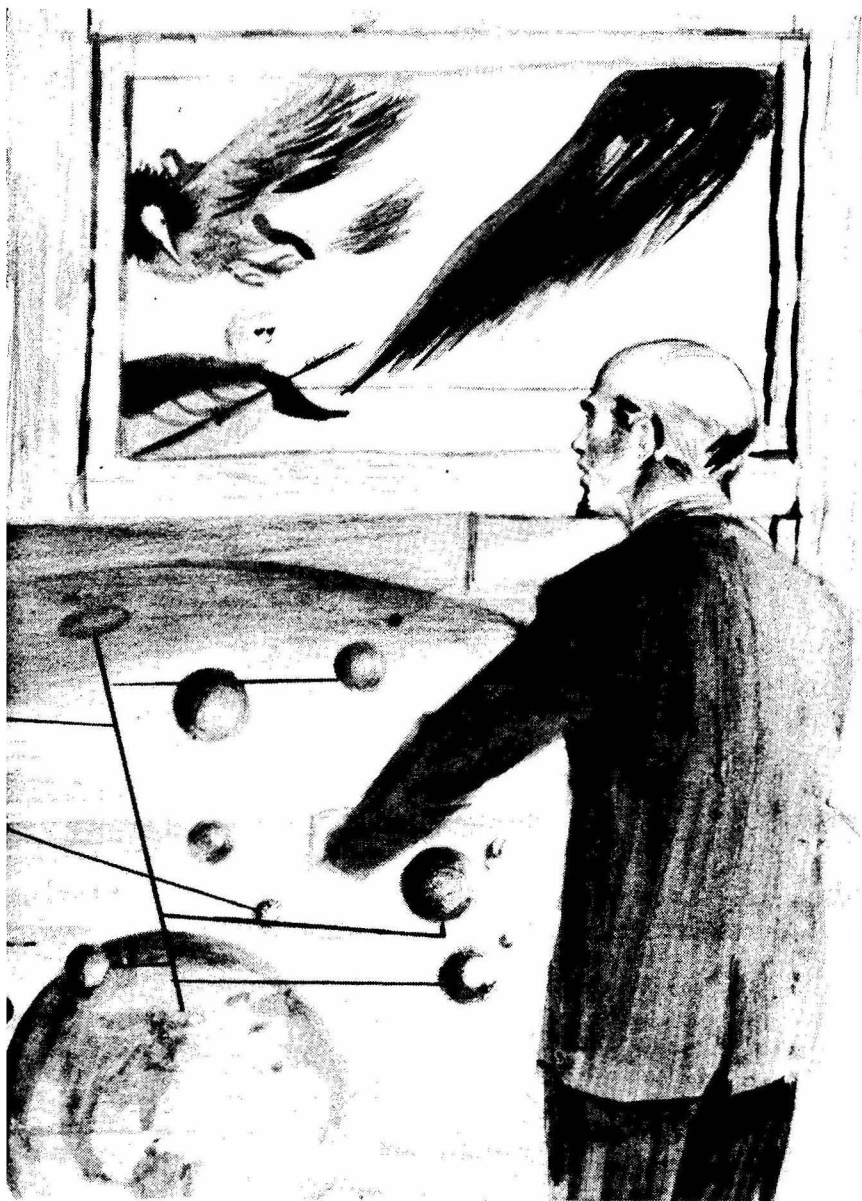
"It was never meant to," the old man said, surprise in his voice. "Such power . . ."

Then he stopped, staring at Dave. "Yet—the prophecy on the monument *was* right. You have unlocked the impossible! But you don't know enough. Dave Hanson, do you know nothing of the laws of similarity? Or of any magic? Is that crystal similar to the sky? A part may act as a whole—or a part, properly manipulated, may influence the whole. If I have a hair from your head, I can make a model of you with power over you. But not with hair from a pig!"

"Then if we substituted bits of the real thing for these bits . . ."

"It might work!" Sersa Garm's face almost lost its gloomy fears. "I've seen you melt the sky material—and to blow a sphere is a small job to any magician who has studied his glass blowing in al-





NO MORE STARS

chemy. We have a few of the stars in the pieces that fell and enough mandrakes to break and polish one into the needed pieces."

"And bits of the sun, if we can bring one back. But what about the planets?"

"That closely associated with a thing achieves the nature of the thing," the Sather Karf intoned. "I can resonate a bit of sun here with a few trials, Dave Hanson. We can make the planets from scraps of the colors, metals, jewels and other symbols they control."

"What about some iron in them—so we can move them through the sky-stuff by hanging magnets on the tracks?" Dave asked. "Or does cold iron ruin things?"

THE Sather Karf snorted his disgust. "Superstitious ignorance! Why should it? But there remains one power greater than all to make this work. It must be named with the true and sacred name of the universe."

"Which, I suppose, nobody can pronounce?" Dave guessed sickly, remembering the legends of the tetragrammaton.

The old man drew himself up abruptly, staring at the computer-man with the pride of his world on his face. "No one save the Sather Karf can know it!" he answered, and there was the ring of generations of authority in his voice. Then he turned and hobbled toward

Sersa Garm, and began giving orders to the forty-odd members of the priesthood who had found sanctuary in the camp.

The simulacra of the planets were put together and the old man managed, eventually, to transport a bit of the sun big enough to set one end of the camp into a blazing uproar. They were lucky in this. It had struck a rock, and spattered into smaller pieces of various sizes, of which one was about right.

Nema and two lesser priests molded a globe of clay and baked it carefully near one of the sun-fragments of the hot stuff to heat the crude oven he had made. The salamanders had vanished from the blowtorch.

Above them, the sky continued to break apart, its pieces falling almost continually. And the Sather Karf watched it with a worried expression around his eyes.

"So long as any of it remains, we may succeed," he told Dave. "But, should it all fall, even you cannot achieve such an impossibility as forcing similarity on nothing!"

"Yeah," Dave agreed. He had his own worries. "And how about suspending the globe from nothing to keep it in the center there?"

"Let it sink to the bottom," the old man said. "It will rise of its own accord—provided that all else goes well."

It took more time to mount the

shell and to place the star-similacra in place, where they seemed to sink into the invisible material and rest, just as they had in the real sky. The planets were suspended by the magnets that coupled to the tracks, then the sun was mounted. Finally, the globe was shoved through the shell, before completing the placing of the stars.

Dave made sure the weights were fully raised. From now on, someone would probably have the responsibility of keeping this strange machine wound up, unless they could devise a motor that was foolproof. Then he stepped back to let the Sather Karf set the orrery to the correct adjustment for their current time.

The old man, chanting sibilantly under his breath, set the controls. He seemed to take forever. Then he looked up, frowning.

"It doesn't move freely, Dave Hanson," he said ominously. "If you have wrecked it . . ."

Hanson pushed him aside and examined the orrery through a diamond lens. Some of the gears were loose in their jeweled bearings. Simple enough to fix . . .

If one had tools.

And if one had time.

THE Sather Karf said, "You have ten minutes, perhaps." He was staring calmly into a bead of quicksilver, dancing across his cupped palm.

"Yeah," said Hanson. He didn't even look up. The tools were makeshift, the job tricky—but it was being done. Under his fingers, the delicate structure was almost as tight as on that ancient day when it was first made. His hands were steady, though there were thunder and flashes of light all about him, and once the ground heaved.

There was a shout. The Sather Karf cried out angrily in an unfamiliar tongue. His hand made a throwing gesture and he moaned his disappointment as nothing happened. Hanson turned carefully, gently, not disturbing the orrery—and saw invasion!

Rocs were landing, a score of them. Men were springing from their backs.

"*Bork!*" bellowed the old Sather Karf. He shouted in Hanson's ear, "*Go on! We'll handle Bork!*"

The masked men from the rocs, their dull colored robes fluttering behind them, carried the long anes-tha-knives. Hanson almost took a step to join the defense, but he dared not leave the analogue. He glanced at the sky—there were more holes than sky now, and in the holes he saw . . .

Shadows. Quickly he looked away, before he could see more. He felt cold sweat at the nape of his neck, and it was not fear of Bork that put it there.

"The orrery!" Bork was bellow-

ing as he ran. "Smash it! *Destroy it—the egg must hatch!*"

The men behind him echoed his yell and the Satheri shrieked back at them. And then, the old Sather Karf was dashing toward the invaders, catching up his staff on which a drop of the sun-stuff glowed, to make a beacon that others might follow in the insane half-light. His voice rose in command and over his shoulder the old man cried, "Fix the orrery, Dave Hanson! Two minutes now—no more!"

Cursing, Hanson bent back to the gears. There was thunder again from the falling sky and near-darkness. The half-light from the reflecting clouds dimmed—the ground shook again. He caught up a bit of the sun-stuff from where it lay with the discarded shards of silver and sky-stuff, pierced it with the sharp point of an awl, held it close to the orrery, lighting his last bit of work. It burned his fingers, burned his face—but he held it.

Two minutes—one was gone, the other going . . .

The Sather Karf was back, though the battle raged unchecked. "*The Name!*" he shouted. "Are you ready?"

Hanson slapped the cover back on the orrery. "*Now!*" he cried.

The old man's fingers spun and a word rang out. It was a deafening, awesome word . . .

The universe stilled, listening.

THE clay globe lifted abruptly to the center position. There were a wrench and twist. Over the horizon, a great burning disc rose and leaped toward the heavens as the sun went back to its place in the sky. The big bits of sky-stuff around also jerked upward, revealing themselves by the wind they whipped up. Some of the smaller ones seemed to do the same, though the scrap under Dave's hand remained, as did the blazing bit of sun-stuff at the end of the camp.

Through the diamond lens, the clay globe had changed. It now floated freely inside the transparent shell—and there were clouds above it, the green of forests, the gray-blue of oceans. He found the city. And, faintly, in the heart of it, a tiny blaze, to mark the end of the camp where the sun-stuff remained!

When, at last, he looked up, all was serene. Sunlight shone down from the sky and, from under the roof, the shell was visible—the shell that was the gaudy, impossible sky of this world. It was complete, with its great cracks smoothing out while he watched.

The battle had stopped. Half the priests were lying motionless, the others had clustered together, close to the building where Dave and the Sather Karf stood. The Sons

of the Egg seemed to have suffered less, but to have been more shocked by the rising of the sun and the restoration of the sky.

Then Bork's voice rang out sharply. "It isn't stable yet! *Destroy the machine!*"

He leaped forward, brandishing his knife, while the other Sons of the Egg followed. The priests closed ranks, falling back to make a stand under the jutting edge of the roof, where they could protect the machine. But they were hopelessly outnumbered.

SOMETHING seemed to bite into Dave's mind. There was no time to think, only to act. He snapped the lens to his eye and his fingers caught at the drop of sun-stuff on the awl. It sank through the shell of the model, just as he located the spot where the glow marked the camp in which they were. His thumb and finger moved downward, delicately, with all the skill of practice at working with nearly invisible fine wires on delicate repair jobs.

Then he jerked his eyes away from the model and looked out. Something glaring and hot was suspended in the air, two miles away! He moved his hand carefully, steadying it on one of the planet tracks. The glowing fire in the air moved another mile closer. And now, around it, he could see a monstrous fingertip and some-

thing that might have been miles of thumbnail.

The priests leaped back under the roof. The Sons of the Egg screamed and tried to run for shelter. But now, jerking horribly, the monstrous thing moved again. For part of a second, it hovered over the open camp. Then it was gone.

Dave pulled his hand all the way out through the shell of the model, throwing the sun-stuff away with a flick of his wrist. His hand ached with the impossible task of steadiness he had set it, and his finger and thumb burned and smoked. But the wound was already healing.

In the exposed section of the camp, the Sons of the Egg were charred corpses.

Bork turned back, his face sick with fear. And then it settled into resignation, as the big man threw down his knife and moved forward toward Dave. His clothes were charred slightly, but he had obviously made it to the shelter in time.

"You win, Dave Hanson," he said. "You've apparently given this egg a will of its own. What do you want of me now?"

Dave's eyes had located Nema, as she forced her way through the crowd. He grabbed Bork's arm and pulled the big man along with him, heading toward the girl.

"Peace," he said. "And some place where we can see if magic

works well enough to provide a decent meal.”

THREE days can work magic—in a world where magic is worked.

There was food again for all. There were homes. The strange commerce and industry of the world went along its incredible way. Those who had survived the cataclysm, and those who had died but had been called back, showed no scars.

Some were missing. Those who had—hatched—were gone past recall. It was a subject not discussed. Even the Sather Karf sometimes wore a weary, a questioning—almost a fearful look.

Bork still lived—because of Hanson. The Sather Karf looked at him hungrily sometimes—but he lived.

Bork had said, “You win, Hanson. The egg will not hatch.” He brooded somberly for a moment, then, surprisingly, grinned. “I can’t honestly say,” he admitted, “that I am altogether sorry to be alive. Perhaps, I’ll regret it later but—” he stretched—“life isn’t bad.”

Hanson grinned back. Bork was already the closest he had to a normal human friend. The Satheri were—strange, though he knew that their word was inviolate, that he had nothing to fear from them any more. Bork was understandable. And, besides, he was Nema’s brother.

Hanson moved closer to Nema, who was beside him on the soft, downfilled ottoman. She snuggled as closely against his arm as her barrier permitted, admiring him with her eyes.

But old habits were hard to break. She moved away nervously. “Don’t, Dave Hanson,” she said quickly. “Don’t forget that I’m a registered and—”

“That,” Hanson assured her, “is about over.” Bork chuckled.

From the doorway behind them, the voice of the Sather Karf said softly, “I’ve been looking for you, Dave Hanson.”

Bork frowned, still not quite certain of his status with the Satheri. The priests had yammered and demanded, and Hanson had thought for a while that they would take Bork in spite of him. But the Sather didn’t even look at him.

Nema got up quickly. “Come on, Bork,” she said, “let’s leave Dave Hanson with the Sather.”

“Wait a minute.” Hanson pulled her back. “You might as well stay. What is it, Sather Karf?”

The Sather said, “Your reward.” His ancient face was white.

Hanson nodded. “Fine. Go ahead.”

The Sather’s eyes, for a moment, were incandescent. “You want me to tell you *my secret name* before these?” He lashed a long finger at Bork.

“Sure,” said Hanson pleasantly.

THE Sather Karf seemed to grow inches taller. Bright anger flamed in his face.

Then he subsided. "It is your right, Dave Hanson," he said almost in a whisper. "Claim your reward. You wish, item first, my secret name. Item second, to retain what we have given you—strength, healing, appearance. Are there more?"

Hanson thought for a moment. "I guess that's enough," he said. "The only thing is . . ."

He glanced thoughtfully at Nema, then back to the old man. He said in a conversational tone, "I'll make a deal with you, Sather Karf. Those things are, perhaps, not what I want at all."

"What then?"

Hanson said, "Tell me something, Sather Karf. With your secret name, I would always be your master, is that correct?"

"If you had the wit to use it."

"Um. Well, I think I have. I think, for instance, I could manage to get my hands on you with it, no matter where either of us might be. The only thing is," Hanson said meditatively, "I might not know when I wanted to get in touch with you. For instance, I should be very angry if you did anything to Bork in my absence, or to Nema for siding with me. But I might not know it was happening."

"That is true," said the Sather Karf unwillingly.

Hanson nodded. "You see? So the gift of your secret name wouldn't do me much good. As for the strength, health and appearance and so on—well, I already have those things."

The Sather said carefully, "Then, what *are* you asking?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hanson said vaguely. "I have a job here, which I kind of like—and you really ought to have someone around to keep that orrery up, you know; the sapphires in the bearings aren't good for more than a couple of hundred thousand years . . . if that. I expect I could be very useful to you as a maintenance man." He glanced at Nema. Her eyes were a spectrum of hope and fear.

Abruptly he grinned. "Sather Karf," he said, "keep your secret name. I think I'll stand pat on what I've got. The only thing is, instead of your secret name, I want something from you that's somewhat more valuable to me."

The Sather said, "More valuable than my *name*?" There was shock in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed," said Hanson easily, taking Nema's hand. "A simple matter of transmutation, Sather. I want you to transform this certified and registered virgin into a certified and registered wife."

