95¢

Like a fisherman throwing out a lobster net,
the mysterious power from outer space
sent the pyramids—to catch Earthmen

THE PYRAMIDS FROM SPACE

JACK BERTIN



The First Pyramid Landed on a Bridge, Busy with Homegoing Traffic

The driver who saw it swerved abruptly and smashed into the guard rail. The driver behind, pulling out to avoid a collision, ran right into the pyramid. The car was destroyed but the pyramid remained undented.

After that, though, people began to get used to seeing the pyramids. They seemed harmless and curiosity drew crowds of sightseers.

A few even stepped inside—which was what the makers of the pyramids wanted. As soon as the victims had taken the bait, they—and the pyramids themselves—vanished into thin air . . . never to be seen again.

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Jack Bertin

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Prologue

THE PYRAMIDS appeared during the Christmas holidays, silently—unexplainably sinister—enigmatic. They came down to earth haphazardly, without apparent purpose. . . . They came down in Tokyo, in Moscow, in Paris, and in unsettled regions where no one saw them. And they came down on New York City, appearing out of nowhere in the gray, wintry skies and settling slowly to earth. . . .

THE SUN was down over the New Jersey Palisades, leaving a bonfire glow against the wintry sky, when the first

pyramid formed in the sky, directly above the George Washington Bridge. About twelve feet high at its apex, it appeared to be a carefully constructed replica of the giant pyramid of Cheops. It settled slowly, buoyed by some unseen propulsion; it came to rest without a jar in the middle of the busy bridge roadway.

Holiday traffic was streaming in and out of Manhattan. The first driver to see the pyramid swerved abruptly, smashing his front wheels against the guard railing.

The car behind, pulling out to avoid a collision, ploughed into the pyramid!

For a long moment the air was filled with the metallic sound of impact, the screeching of tires, as brakes were jammed down hard in the long line of traffic behind.

The dazed driver stared at the pyramid over his crumpled front end. The strange object remained in the middle of the roadway, blocking traffic—undented, ominous.

Horns began to honk impatiently. A motorcycle cop threaded his way through the snarled traffic to the scene of the disturbance. He stared unbelievingly at the pyramid.

Then, as he drew his pistol and advanced cautiously toward it, the pyramid seemed to crumple inward. It seemed to fold in on itself just before it disappeared, leaving no trace behind except a white-faced traffic officer and stalled, angry traffic.

There were not many of them and they were strangely unstable, these pyramids. At first they caused panic among those who saw them come down, until they were found to be harmless.

And then curiosity drew people to them—which was what the makers of the pyramids wanted!

Chapter One

—The Strange Message—

SNOW SWIRLED gently against Steve Blair's apartment window, rapping with feather touches against the frosted panes. The desk lamp across the room cast a small circle of light on his heavy mahogany desk. A quart bottle of gin, a bottle of Schweppes bitter lemon and an aluminum pail containing ice cubes glinted in the desk light. A half empty glass in Steve's hand clinked as he lifted it to his lips.

New Year's Eve!

One of the wildest and most expensive celebrations in Manhattan's history was going on in the city right now. The bitter chapter of the Vietnam War had drawn to a

close—troops were coming home!

Blair took a sip from his glass. The snow drove past his apartment window on Morningside Heights, swirling like a dancing fog over the sullen squalor of Harlem.

Blair stared moodily, vaguely dissatisfied, restless. He was thirty and unmarried and a physics teacher at Columbia. He was a rangily built man, and in his college undergraduate days he had played end for the Lions. He was still lean and active, but he had lost some of his drive, and current events had deepened a natural tendency to cynicism.

For a few years after his graduation he had been one of the anonymous hundreds who worked on the space program; more specifically, inertial guidance.

He had entered the "race for the moon" with a young man's enthusiasm, but he had come to feel that it was not so desperately important who got there first as what kind of a world the first astronauts to make it to the earth's satellite would be leaving behind.

And so he had returned to Columbia to take an instructor's position while he worked for his doctorate under the brilliant Professor Harry Bucknell, head of the Physics Department.

He had friends (he was not a loner) and he had been invited to several parties, but this night he had preferred to be alone—he had some stock-taking to do.

The door buzzer, vibrating in the stillness behind him, interrupted his thoughts. He let it sound, hoping that whoever was at the door would go away. He did not feel like having visitors tonight.

But the buzzer insisted. Finally Steve deposited his glass on the desk and went to the door.

The girl in the hallway was tall and slender and vaguely familiar. He hesitated, showing his surprise and faint embarrassment, trying to find the proper words of greeting.

"Mr. Blair?" the girl said. "Stephen Blair?"

He nodded. Then he found his tongue and motioned her inside.

"Please come in, Miss—?"

"Mortimer," the girl supplied. She waited a moment for him to remember, then smiled as she walked past Steve into the small foyer, shaking the hood of her raincoat back on her shoulders.

Steve closed the door.

"I can see that you don't remember me," she said, waiting for him to come up. "I was sixteen when I last saw you. I'm Frank Mortimer's daughter, Constance."

"It's been a long time," he agreed, recalling her now. "Six years, isn't it?"

She nodded. The white raincoat with its round-shouldered cut gave her a smartness that went well with her long-limbed, easy grace, the sophisticated set of her jet black hair. She looked quite grown up and poised, and there was no stiffness about her as she gazed curiously about the apartment.

Someone turned on a stereo player across the hall, and music filtered into the foyer.

"Here, let me take your coat," Steve suggested. "And please come into the other room. It's quieter."

She looked quickly into his face, judging him and making her decision without conscious hesitation. He took her coat and hung it in the small coat closet in the foyer, and they walked into his small study.

She paused by the desk, glancing curiously at the book-filled shelves flanking the fireplace. She was wearing a simple black gown with a bow at the waist and rhinestone clips at her shoulder.

Blair walked to a small table and held up an empty glass. "I can offer you a drink, but the choice is limited—gin or vodka." He smiled wryly, adding: "Hold-overs from a recent trip to Mexico City."

"I'll have what you're drinking," she said.

He mixed her a gin and Schweppes on the rocks, remembering her more clearly now—the daughter of his one-time anthropology professor. He recalled that she had been a long-legged kid with an enthusiasm for football and pop records. He had lost track of her when he had left New York.

He was turning to her with her drink when she said: "I've just come from police headquarters."

His brows arched questioningly, but he made no comment. She took the drink, and her hand shook slightly. Only then was he conscious of the strain in her. Her features were composed and had told him nothing.

"You know about the pyramids?" she asked abruptly.

He shrugged. The news media had made cautious reference to them, half afraid the whole thing was some kind of hoax. But he knew they were real.

"They have two of them in the museum on 79th Street," he replied. "Commissioner Healy had them brought there and placed a guard over them. Professor Bucknell and I were called in to have a look at them."

"I read Professor Bucknell's comments in the *Times*," she said. "He was quoted as saying he believed the pyramids came from out in space—"

"Misquoted," Blair corrected her. "Harry said that, as far as he could make out, they might as well have come from out of space."

Constance Mortimer shivered. "I thought they were a hoax or some kind of publicity stunt—until tonight. But this evening I was called downtown to verify something: a tablet with a message in my father's handwriting!"

"Your father?" Steve showed his disbelief. "Your father's been dead almost ten years!"

The girl nodded. "He was on the yacht *Manhattan* when it vanished somewhere in the Mediterranean. Dad was a close friend of Henry Gordon, the oil man. It was assumed Gordon's yacht hit a floating mine, a derelict of the

previous war, and sank immediately."

Blair finished the rest of his drink. "You say the police commissioner has found something with your father's handwriting on it?"

"That's why I came to see you," the girl said quickly. "I'm terribly confused. Commissioner Healy said the tablet came from within one of the pyramids."

Steve frowned. This was new.

For three days the pyramids had sat in the museum wing, somberly gray, silent and unexplainable. Hammer blows had ascertained that they were hollow. But a minute search had disclosed no visible openings, and no provision for openings, in the gray metallic walls that resembled to a marked degree the weathered stone of their more massive Egyptian counterparts. An acetylene torch had been used in an effort to burn a hole into the pyramid without visible effect.

"You knew my father as well as anyone in New York," Constance said. "Dad often talked about you. I remembered that tonight and found your address in the telephone book." She stepped forward and set her unfinished drink on the desk.

"I'd like you to come down to police headquarters with me," she added. "I want you to look at the message presumably signed by my father. I want you to tell me whether or not it's just someone's idea of a bad practical joke."

Blair studied her for a moment. "I don't think anything about those pyramids is a joke," he said slowly. "Perhaps it would be better for all of us if it were."

COMMISSIONER HEALY was a graying, balding man in his late fifties. He had been a New York cop for thirty years, and he had seen a lot of strange things in his career, but nothing as strange as the object he brought out of his desk drawer and placed on his blotter.

He kept his palm over it as he talked.

"I heard about you," he said to Steve Blair. The police commissioner was a hard man with a round, bland face and ice-blue eyes. "You and Professor Bucknell from Columbia were at the museum Tuesday?"

Steve nodded. He was looking at the object under the commissioner's palm. It was about the size of a billiard ball and seemed made of transparent glass. Light pulsed within it, flickering through all the colors of the spectrum.

"What's that?" he asked.

Constance Mortimer pressed closer to Steve as Healy lifted his hand. The ball rocked along the blotter and hesitated on the edge of the desk. It rocked gently, as if imbued with intelligence, as if it were debating the drop to the floor. Then it rolled forward, off the desk, and began to rise.

Steve could detect no visible means of propulsion; only that pulsing, vari-colored light that was obviously cold light, or else Healy would not have held his palm over it.

Steve watched the odd sphere with fascinated gaze. Healy pushed back in his chair and brought his unlighted cigar to his mouth. He was watching Steve and the girl.

The ball rose to the ceiling. It rolled along the smooth plaster as if looking for a crack, some opening that would allow it to escape. It probed with uncanny persistence at corners, rolled down the walls, reached the window. It began to swing like a weight at the end of an invisible pendulum—began to tap against the glass, lengthening its swing until suddenly Healy got up and caught it.

He turned to Blair. "Your guess is as good as mine," he said gruffly. "Your friend Bucknell has one at his place and is trying to figure it out. Some of the city's top scientists are trying to make sense of others like this right now."

He reached inside his desk and took out a small hammer. He tapped the sphere. The ball rang with a crystal clearness that trailed off into a faint, almost inaudible

piping that continued for a full minute.

Like a magician who has gone through his act, Healy pushed hammer and sphere back into the open desk drawer and closed it.

"That glass ball," he said, "and nearly a dozen others like it came from inside one of the museum pyramids. This was with them."

He pulled out another drawer and brought up a gray tablet. Steve moved closer as Healy set it down on his desk. Except that the strange tablet was made of metal, it closely resembled the old stone tablets Frank Mortimer had brought home years before from one of his many field expeditions to the Near East.

A message was scratched across the surface:

"Destroy the pyramids and
the eyes of Ankar."

Below the obviously hurried message was scratched the signature of Frank Mortimer!

Chapter Two

—The Cosmic Trap—

STEVE RECOGNIZED Frank Mortimer's scrawl. He felt Constance's shoulder press against his as he turned to her.

"What does it mean?" she whispered.

"It means your father isn't dead," Steve said. The fantastic theory he had been turning over and over in his thoughts was taking shape. "It means that the *Manhattan* didn't hit a mine and sink off the African coast."

"Then where is he now?" Constance looked up into Blair's face, reading there a strange fear that was contagious. "Steve—where is he? If my father is alive, why doesn't he come home? What are those pyramids?"

She caught at a straw of understanding. "Is it possible that Dad is connected with some secret government experiment?"

"Perhaps that's it," Steve answered. He didn't believe it, but if he had tried to put his own surmise into words, it wouldn't have made sense to her or to Healy.

"When did you break through into the pyramids?" he asked the commissioner.

"We didn't!" Healy's voice was harsh. "A door opened in one of the pyramids this afternoon, and a bunch of these glass balls floated out—"

His desk phone interrupted him. He picked up the receiver.

"Commissioner Healy." He listened to the voice at the other end, his cigar jutting from his mouth. He nodded a few times. Finally he said: "Yes, sir, General. I understand." His voice sounded relieved. He hung up and looked at Blair.

"That was General Schroner. The Army will be taking over in the morning. They've got their own men coming from Washington to examine the pyramids."

Blair was frowning. "When did that door in the pyramid open?"

Healy shrugged. "According to the guard on duty, it was a little after two this afternoon." He paused, listening to the strange ball inside the desk drawer. It was tapping insistently, trying to get out.

Healy licked his lips. He was not a very imaginative man, and the pyramids baffled him. He was glad the Army would be taking the whole affair off his hands.

"The guard said he heard music first," he went on, "like someone had tuned in a full orchestra and then turned the volume down. When he started for the nearest pyramid, a bunch of these glass balls rolled out. They began to float around, like soap bubbles—"

"Where did you find the tablet?"

"Inside the pyramid," Healy replied. "The guard closed the museum wing doors and put in a call for me. I went down with Sanders, our lab expert. We caught all the balls. Sanders has one in his lab now."

He paused and looked uneasily toward the door. "We found the tablet inside the pyramid, in a sort of wall rack. The whole interior was lighted up by a pink light that seems to come from inside the walls."

"Are you sure no one fooled around with the pyramids?" Steve asked.

"Not after you and Professor Bucknell left," Healy replied. "I put a guard inside the wing to keep out snoopers."

"I'd like to see that pyramid," Steve cut in, "the one with the open door."

Healy hesitated, then nodded. "Your friend Bucknell just called in for the same reason. He and a friend—some fellow from the Harvard Observatory—wanted to see the pyramids again. I gave orders to the guard at the door to let them in."

He turned and took his hat from the rack near the door. "I'm coming with you."

THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY was closed, but the guard at the door recognized Healy and opened up for them. The empty corridor echoed to their passage.

They took the elevator up to the fourth floor and turned down a long passageway. The lights were on in the wing where the pyramids were kept. A blue-uniformed guard was standing in the hallway just outside the big doors, a revolver held tightly in his hand. He turned a white face toward them as they came up.

"Look," he whispered. He waved vaguely into the big chamber. "Look!"

Healy paused. Constance pressed against Blair. A dozen

spheres like the one Healy had locked in his desk drawer were floating erratically in the high-ceilinged room. A single pyramid squatted behind its rope enclosure. A door had opened in it. A pink light flooded the interior.

"It's gone," the guard mumbled. He turned a strained face toward the commissioner. "It was there a minute ago. Professor Bucknell and that other fellow were inside, looking around. Now it's gone."

"What's gone?" Healy snapped. "What are you mumbling about?"

"The other one," the guard answered. "It was there two minutes ago. Professor Bucknell was talking to the old guy with him. I heard the elevator coming up and stepped out of the room to see who was coming. Then I heard a noise like escaping steam, and when I looked back the pyramid was gone!"

Healy's teeth clamped through his cigar. "Get downstairs and tell the guard at the doors to let nobody out. Tell Jake to call headquarters for a half-dozen men, and have them sent up here on the double."

He waited until the dazed guard had disappeared before turning to Steve. "That's what comes of letting you fellows monkey around!" he snapped. "Bucknell's probably trying to get that pyramid out of here—"

"You're excited, Commissioner," Steve interrupted dryly, "or you wouldn't be saying that. It took five men and a hoist to get those things in here."

Healy shook his head. "Guess I am," he muttered. "What am I going to tell General Schroner?"

He turned to scowl at a glass sphere that drifted by, and his voice hardened. "If this is some kind of secret government experiment, I wish they'd let me in on it."

Steve's smile was faint. "If it is," he said quietly, "I haven't heard of it. Nor has Professor Bucknell." He

glanced in at the lone pyramid, remembering with a little shiver the way the one on the bridge had folded in on itself and vanished.

What was the explanation?

Constance shivered. The big hall was still. The huge skeletons of its saurian exhibits did nothing to dispel her feeling of uneasiness.

"I'd like to go home," she said. "If Father's alive, I'm sure he'll get in touch with Mother."

"I'd like to take a look at the pyramid," Steve demurred. "I will only be a minute. I'll see you home immediately after, Miss Mortimer."

Healy said: "I'm going down to check with Jake. Want to come with me?" he asked Constance.

The girl hesitated. "I'll be along with Mr. Blair," she replied. She smiled as Healy scowled and turned away.

Steve pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered one to Constance. She shook her head, and he lighted his, his gray eyes thoughtful.

"Harry's probably somewhere in the building," he said. He didn't believe it, but he didn't want to tell Frank Mortimer's daughter just what he did think.

She looked at him. "But the other pyramid?" she asked slowly. "There were two of them, you know."

He didn't answer. The chamber echoed hollowly to their steps. Above them floated the uncanny, flashing spheres. One of them drifted past as they paused by the cord barrier.

Steve eyed the lone pyramid behind the enclosure. A panel had just opened in it, revealing an empty chamber roughly five feet square. A tall man could step inside without crouching.

Healy was right, he thought. The light does come from the walls. Cold light.

He put his left hand on the brass knob of the cord support and stepped over the barrier. Constance hesitated, then ducked under the rope and followed.

THE INSIDE of the pyramid had a rosy, soothing glow. Steve halted in sudden alarm as a small panel in the rear wall slid aside the moment he stepped across the threshold.

A raised oblong, similar to the ground glass view-finder of a camera, faced him. It remained blank. Immediately below this panel was a small knob of what appeared to be white opaque glass.

"Looks like one of those 'take-it-yourself-for-a-quarter' picture machines," he said lightly. He was tempted to push down on that knob to find out what would happen. But Constance Mortimer was with him and he did not wish to include her in what might turn out to be a dangerous venture.

Healy's voice suddenly reverberated in the hall. "Mr. Blair!"

"Guess we'd better go," Steve said. She had come into the pyramid with him, and now he took the girl's arm. He paused to watch as one of the glass spheres floated into the pyramid with them.

Constance pressed against Blair in faint alarm. The sphere went directly to the white knob, like a bird to its roost. The knob gave a little as it settled; it clung there as though some magnetic field were holding it.

The panel door slid shut—smoothly, noiselessly. Steve went rigid. He felt Constance turn to look at him, but he avoided her.

"It's all right," he said, keeping his voice under control. "That knob evidently controls the door panel. I'll get it open."

But he didn't reach it. The floor under his feet shifted, went fluid. He made a desperate attempt to reach the white knob. But he found himself suddenly powerless to move.

He seemed rooted to a floor that was no longer solid. The pink walls seemed to writhe under some cosmic stress. Only the glass ball did not change. It sat on the knob like some big pulsing eye, and on the metal screen above it suddenly appeared a view of the museum wing.

Steve had a glimpse of Healy, his cigar slack in his mouth, staring. . . .

Then the scene dissolved, and there were only the sharp, diamond-bright pinpoints of stars on the screen.

At his side, Constance Mortimer screamed!

Chapter Three

—The Valley of the Saurians—

TIME CEASED to exist for Stephen Blair. As if through a thick, smothering fog, he sensed that Constance Mortimer was there in the pyramid with him, trying to talk to him. Voiceless, her fear penetrated to him. But he was helpless either to move to her or to answer. He was a formless entity trapped within the force stresses that bound them. Yet he retained the ability to think and to see what was taking shape on the view-plate above the pulsing crystal ball.

The universe seemed to have gone wild. Stars streamed by in crazy orbits. Giant suns grew and filled the view-plate with their brilliance and faded again into mere pin points.

Steve himself had no sense of motion. The pyramid seemed to remain stationary in space, while a vast segment of the galaxy streamed past like a broad, corruscating current. There appeared on the cosmic view-plate a great black cap, lighted occasionally by vaguely fluorescent dust clouds, and afterwards there was the steady procession of suns again, waxing huge and waning.

Finally, after what might have been moments, or centuries, the mad jumble on the screen steadied. A binary star appeared in the center of the view-plate and began to take on size. Like binaries Steve had once studied, this one consisted of two suns, one a huge blue globe, the other a yellow dwarf. They revolved in short orbits about one another, like a revolving dumbbell kept from drifting apart by the connecting bar of gravity.

Circling those double suns was a lone planet. It was of colossal size and began to fill the view-plate, edging out the suns. Soon it was no longer a globe, but a vast section of planet, its horizon tilting upward and entirely filling the screen.

A gray cloud mass obscured the details of the planet's surface. Steve knew this was the pyramid's destination—this lone planet on the edge of the galaxy. He knew it with an awful certainty that chilled his boldly imaginative spirit.

The view-plate blanked out as the pyramid dropped through the gray pall that shrouded the planet. It cleared briefly to show a flat, barren landscape and the square white walls of a village. Then the pyramid began to wobble, as though something had gone wrong with it. The bare landscape seemed to flow across the view-plate. A valley appeared on the view-plate, a huge pit in the brown earth. A shallow lake glinted briefly. Then the view-plate blanked out completely.

Steve suddenly felt the floor under his feet and the press of the girl's shoulder against his side. Her voice rang in his

ears, as though it had never stilled.

"Steve! Steve! What's happening?"

He put his arm around her, feeling her body tremble. But there was nothing he could say. He had no answers even for himself.

THE CRYSTAL BALL that all this while had remained motionless on the white knob rose now. With its rising, the panel door slid open.

A steamy heat washed into the pyramid. The odor of dank, rotting vegetation filled Steve's nostrils, momentarily gagging him.

Constance coughed.

"We've moved," Steve said hoarsely, "Constance —we've left the museum!"

"How, Steve?" Her voice held a terrible fear. "Where are we?"

"I don't know," he answered. He was trying to shut out the enormity of what he knew had happened to them, refusing to believe the cruel significance of what he had seen on the view-plate.

He said: "I'll take a look outside. Wait in here."

He moved to the door and shied away as the crystal ball floated past him. Some instinct made him reach for it. He caught it before it soared away. He was surprised at its gentle tugging against his hand. The vari-colored lights made an insistent pulsing between his fingers. Without thinking, he thrust the sphere into his coat pocket.

For a long moment he stared out at the scene presented to him, trying to reconcile his thoughts with the limited view. A grove of conifers lay between him and the sight of volcanic cliffs making a low barrier against the gray sky.

Constance came up behind him and looked past him as Steve stepped out into the grass. Instinctively she followed and then, almost immediately, shrank back.

"Steve?" she whispered. "I'm afraid."

He put a hand on her hand and smiled at her, but he could not hide his own bewilderment from her. He swung his gaze in a searching arc, finding always the same volcanic cliffs against the horizon.

They were on a hillock somewhat off-center in the saucer-like valley, looking down at a muddy stream that emptied a half-mile or so distant into a shallow lagoon. Mist hung over the shoreline, rising in wraith-like streamers as though the lagoon were a steaming caldron. Instinctively Steve glanced up at the sky.

The sky oppressed him. From horizon to horizon a yellow-gray pall obscured everything, capping the strange valley. It was a sullen sky, alien and unfriendly, and a chill washed down Steve's spine despite the humid heat in the valley.

Where were they?

Constance's voice roused him. "Steve—the pyramid!"

He whirled. The pyramid was collapsing inward as though under the pressure of some giant force. There was an eerie, unexplainable lack of sound. The pyramid walls just seemed to fall inward into nothingness. A moment later it was gone, as though it had never existed.

The sphere tugged at Steve's pocket. Gradually Blair became aware of this, and a grim, ineffable fear made him unbutton his coat and hurl it away from him.

The coat humped and bulged gently as the ball sought to escape from its folds. Then the *force* came.

IT MADE a sound. It was a sharp, crackling noise that had the quality of dry paper being torn. It crackled across the clearing, and where it passed things vanished!

Steve whirled, pulling Constance with him. He ran for the conifers, not knowing why, but moving instinctively.

The force crackled back across the clearing, sweeping over the spot where they had been standing. A shallow furrow traced its path into the earth.

Constance suddenly stopped. Steve felt the drag of her weight on his arm and turned to her. She pointed upward with a speechless gesture.

The object she indicated had cast no shadow. But Steve felt the menace of this more tangible threat as huge leathery wings rustled overhead.

A sharp exclamation burst from him. "A pterodactyl!"

The flying reptile glided past less than twenty feet above them. It came to a running stop a few feet past Steve's coat, its leathery wing tips dragging. Turning, it teetered on the edge of the furrow and eyed the two earthlings.

Steve turned a gray face to Constance. "Run for the trees!" he ordered. "Don't stop to look back. Just run!"

He gave her a slight shove and turned back, his hands clawing in the earth at his feet for some missile.

The coat had attracted the reptile. It hesitated over it, eyeing the little humpings of the crystal ball still imprisoned in the pocket. Lowering its wedge-shaped head, the creature caught the coat between its sharp-toothed jaws.

The dry crackling swept across the clearing again, as though the force were groping for something—searching blindly. It crossed the first furrow and swept over the startled pterodactyl, and where it passed there was nothing.

Steve straightened, forgetting the rock he clutched in his hand. Almost blindly he stumbled back, to find Constance standing at the edge of the grove, staring toward the shallow grooves crisscrossing the clearing.

Wordlessly he took her by the arm. Together they ran into the uncertain protection of the pine trees.

Somewhere on their left, among the fern forest that sloped down toward the lagoon, they heard the heavy trampling of some giant animal on its way to the marshes.

. . .

They stopped under the friendly arch of high trees. Constance's legs were giving out. Steve let her rest while he

looked back across the clearing.

He found he had a better view from there of the incredible valley.

Enormous cycads made a dark swatch in the distance, fringing a portion of the central sea. Along the marshy shoreline huge saurians were feeding, moving placidly through the thick reeds. In the distance a pterodactyl was making its hunting run low over the marshlands.

The crazy jumble of stars streaming past on the pyramid's view-plate had been misleading, Steve thought numbly. He had taken it as proof that they were being transported through space. But all the while it had been a journey of another kind—a journey back in time!

Somehow, by some incredible means, he and Constance had been whirled back through the eons and dumped on the shores of some inland sea; cast adrift, as closely as he could make out, some hundred million years into the past!

Constance Mortimer looked up at him, her voice bordering on hysteria.

"Where are we? Steve—*where are we?*"

"Lost," he answered numbly. "We're lost, Connie, somewhere in time. . . ."

And then, as if in sharp disagreement, the clatter of a tommy gun broke across the steamy stillness!

Chapter Four

—The Gangsters From Chicago—

THAT TWENTIETH CENTURY sound was like a friendly voice, speaking to them in familiar tones.

"A gun!" Steve gasped, turning to face the sound. "Someone's using a tommy gun!"

Connie got to her feet. She had discarded her raincoat, and her black evening gown stood out sharply against the forest background. She listened with him, but the firing was not repeated. Nor did the dry crackling of the force cross the clearing again.

"Steve—" she said finally. She had recovered her composure, and when he turned his face to her she looked

at him with a sober expression. "Steve—I can't believe what I've seen. A few moments ago we were in the Museum of Natural History in New York. Then something happened. Now we're on the edge of a jungle clearing that dates back to the Mesozoic. I know," she went on, "my father was an anthropologist. I lived in an atmosphere of field expeditions. Java man, fossil imprints. By all the knowledge we possessed, I would conclude that this valley is a bit of the Mesozoic. But how did we get here, Steve? And that pyramid? Where did it go to? Why, Steve? Tell me why?"

He shook his head. "I'd tell you if I could, Connie, believe me. But I don't know. At first I thought we had come a thousand light years through space. But this—" he turned and gestured helplessly toward the distant lagoon and the feeding saurians—"this is fantastic. All of it is beyond immediate explanation. All we can do is accept it. We'll go crazy trying to reason why. We've got to accept it as a fact. We were deliberately trapped and transported here—whether in space or time or in both—by someone for purposes we have no knowledge of. But your father's message must have come from here. That means he may still be alive. And those shots we heard—perhaps Harry Bucknell—"

The heavy slam of a .45 automatic interrupted him, as though asking to be investigated. The shots were coming from the direction of the volcanic cliffs less than three miles away.

Steve turned back to the girl. "We can't stay here," he told her. "Let's go find whoever is doing the shooting. Whoever they are, they'll probably be friendly."

Connie nodded and managed a smile. "I'll try to keep up with you."

They came out of the conifer grove and began skirting it, preferring the high grass of the park-like clearing to the thicker growth. Several times they heard the crashing of

some enormous animal moving toward the river, and once Steve stopped abruptly and pulled Constance back to let a short-sighted, armor-plated triceratops lumber past.

IT WAS slow going. Connie's gown and high-heeled shoes were never intended for that type of travel. Her skirt caught on snags and tore above the hemline; her hair came undone and hung in damp strands across her cheeks. During one of their rest periods, she tore a long strip from her dress and tied her hair back with it.

She looked small and tired and defiant as she did this, and Steve, watching her, felt his heart go out to her. She hadn't complained once since they had left the clearing, and when she looked at him her lips always managed to frame a smile.

They were now close to the base of the cliffs. The climb to the rim looked dishearteningly precipitous. Steve's gaze searched the barrier for a way to the top.

To the left of where they stood a broad ledge lay across the face of the four-hundred-foot cliff wall. Dark cave openings fronted on this stone platform.

Connie's fingers suddenly dug into Steve's biceps. "What—is it?"

A stooped, hairy caricature of a man had shambled out of one of the caves to stand on the ledge, looking down at them. He was joined by several others, broad-bellied females. Some of them were suckling young.

"Neanderthals!" Steve muttered. "By the Great Horn Spoon—"

The running man came into sight then, appearing out of the rock debris under the cliff. He was a short, fleshy man, already winded from his exertion. He was dark and hatless, and his coat was unbuttoned and flapped awkwardly as he ran.

He didn't see Constance and Steve, partially hidden behind some boulders. He slowed to a stop in the clearing

and turned to face in the direction from which he had come.

"Nick!" he yelled to someone still out of sight.

Nick came into view a few moments later. He backed into the clearing, a tommy gun cradled in his hands. He was a thin man, taller than his companion. A long white knife scar puckered the entire left side of his face. He was a dapper dresser, and even in the steamy heat he had clung to his pin-striped, double-breasted gray suit that fitted tight and hard across his narrow chest and shoulders.

The short man said: "Guess that stopped them, huh, Nick? Guess they never had a good dose of lead before." He wiped his sweaty face. "Geez, didja ever see such mugs? Where in the devil are we, Nick?"

"Shut up!" Nick snapped testily. He glanced back among the rocks, then turned and strode past his companion, heading away from the cliffs.

"We gotta get outta here," he said sharply, "before it gets dark. We'll make a try to get up that cliff further down—"

He saw Steve move into the clearing, and he jerked to a stop, swinging the muzzle of his automatic weapon up to cover him.

"Hey!" he said, startled. But there was a curious note of relief in his voice. "Who are you?"

Steve walked toward them, Constance at his side. "I'm Steve Blair," he said. And then, reacting to the look on the faces of the two men, he felt impelled to add: "I used to teach at Columbia University."

"Huh?" Pete came up to stand beside Nick. "A schoolteacher?"

"How'd you fellows get here?" Steve asked.

"We wuz shanghaied," replied the voluble Pete. "We didn't mean nothing. We ducked out of Mike's joint on the South Side when Big Joe an' a couple of his gorillas came looking for us. There was this funny-looking box—"

"Shaped like a pyramid?" Steve interrupted.

"Yeah—that's it. It looked like a good place to duck into—"

"Shut up!" Nick ordered coldly. He glanced at Connie, and his pale eyes flickered with momentary interest. "How'd *you* get here? What's the dame doing with you? Where are we?"

"You ask a lot of questions," Steve said, smiling. "We got here the same way you did. And I don't know where we are."

"You said you was a perfessor at Columbia," Pete snorted. "Why don't yuh know?"

Steve shrugged. "It looks like we've been shanghaied all right—shanghaied a hundred million years into the past!"

PETE SCOWLED. He had a round, comical face, and it puckered with suspicion as he stared at Steve.

"A million years! You're crazy!" He turned to Nick. "I got an idea where we are. I was in the Pacific with the Seabees, an' this looks just like that stretch of hell in New Guinea where we laid out an airfield. Only—"

"Only it's different," Steve said as Pete groped for words.

"Yeah," Pete growled quickly. "I didn't see any mugs like that that just chased us off the cliff out in New Guinea. Geez—what gorillas!"

"Someone's gonna pay for this!" Nick snarled. "I got a hunch Mike was in with Big Joe. He must have slipped a mickey into our drinks. We passed out in the pyramid." He shook his head. There were too many details that didn't square with this simple version, but he could fashion no other acceptable explanation.

"We was tricked!" He repeated darkly. "Damn Mike—I'll get him when we get back! I'll give it to him—slow!"

Someone had played a trick on them all right, Steve

thought—a cosmic trick. But it would be futile to try to set these two ex-gangsters straight.

Nick had dropped the butt of his tommy gun at his feet and was fumbling inside his coat pocket for cigarettes. He swore without regard to Constance's presence; it was the swearing of a baffled, frightened man.

He thrust a smoke between his lips and chewed on it in silence. Then he seemed to remember his companions and extended the pack to Steve, and by that friendly gesture Steve felt himself tied to these two confused men who would never comprehend the truth. He took a cigarette, and Nick held a light to it.

"How do we get out of here?" he asked Steve. "Which way back to the States?"

Steve shook his head. "I don't know. But I saw a village of some kind just before our pyramid dropped into this valley. It was somewhere beyond that cliff. If we could get to the top before night—"

He stopped then, struck by the uncertainty of his remark. There was no indication that night would come. The unchanging sky offered no indication of the passage of time.

"We tried that," Pete said. "There's a couple of paths that lead to the top. But a bunch of hairy strong-arm boys jumped us on the way up. Nick had to open up with the tommy—"

"We'll have to chance it again," Steve insisted. "We have to make the top. It's our only chance to get back to the States." He looked at Nick. "How many rounds do you have left in that thing?"

"About fifteen slugs," Nick muttered. "An' I got a roscoe under my coat."

Pete tapped the automatic in his shoulder holster. "I got a few left in here, and I carry a spare magazine."

Steve challenged them. "You willing to try it again?"

Pete looked at Nick; Nick shrugged. "What have we got

to lose? Sure, we'll give it another try."

Steve took Connie's hand. For the first time he noticed that her gown was torn beneath the left shoulder. Despite her apparent litheness of figure, he noted that she was a full-breasted woman.

His glance shifted to her, and she smiled a little uncertainly.

"It's going to be a rough climb, Connie," he told her. "We'll rest whenever you say."

Her name came easily to him now, as though their intimacy had been of long standing. Yet it had been only a few hours since he had opened the door of his apartment to admit her. A few hours, or a hundred thousand centuries?

He shook the unsettling possibility from his thoughts.

Nick was already pushing ahead. Pete looked back and gestured to them.

Connie said: "I'll try to keep up."

The footpath wound among the rocks at the base of the cliffs, then went up sharply. Bare feet had worn smooth the rock steps to the top. The path joined another that skirted away from the ledge of caves. They took this one. Nick fell back to cover the rear with his automatic weapon.

A shaggy creature came out of one of the caves and whistled loudly. Nick sent a shot that ricocheted with an angry whine off the rock over his head. The Neanderthal ducked back into the cave.

"That'll hold them," the thin-faced gangster sneered. "They're big—but they can't stand up to this equalizer!"

They made the cliff top unmolested after that. Pete went over first, and Steve followed, pulling Constance up after him. Nick scrambled up a moment later, breathing heavily.

Connie's voice broke the momentary silence. "Steve —the village—the village we saw from the pyramid!"

Chapter Five

—The Lost Legion—

THE SETTLEMENT rose out of the barren plain, shimmering against the distant horizon like a mirage on a desert. There was something fantastically unreal about that distant cluster of white walls, and Steve, glancing up into the sky, saw what it was.

Above the strange village hung a halo of yellow—a ring of intense light, like a band of burnished gold!

For a long time after Connie's exclamation, the small group stared without speaking. Between them and the village lay a vista of dun-colored earth utterly devoid of vegetation—a stretch of landscape as sullen and unresponsive as the somber sky. Nothing moved on that desolate plain; nothing except a smoke column on the far horizon to the right of the village—a column that went up

untroubled by the faintest stirring of wind, flattening and merging into the heavy overcast.

There was life in the valley below them—a teeming noisy type of life they understood. But that life seemed to end at the rim of the plain. Even the atmosphere up there was different. It had a cooler breath and a stillness that pressed against the eardrums.

Nick shuffled his feet uneasily. Pete ran pudgy fingers under his open collar. He glanced at Steve with a questioning look, and the man from Columbia felt the other's dependence on him.

Blair's own spirit recoiled from the alien nature of the scene, but his adaptability was more developed than that of the other two men. He had been chilled by the magnitude of what had happened since he and Connie had stepped into the pyramid. At first his mind had refused to accept the truth. But gradually he had come to understand.

He was familiar enough with the theories of advanced space travel, and his association with some of the world's most brilliant physicists and astrophysicists had opened up vistas of the possibilities in this field. But someone had beat them to it by at least a hundred thousand years!

He could only grope toward understanding the motive power that had actuated the pyramids and attempt to analyze in what medium they had traveled. Even now he was not sure whether they had traveled through space—or in time—or both.

He concealed his confusion from the others. He was a theorist, but more than that he had a resilient toughness that made him fall back and tackle immediate problems first.

Somewhere on this strange planet lay the explanation for the pyramids, and the answer to the Frank Mortimer enigma. For Steve had no doubt that it was Mortimer's writing on the tablet Healy had shown him in the police commissioner's office.

Connie seemed to sense his thoughts. "My father may be in that village, Steve, if he's still alive."

"We'll not find out by remaining here," Steve admitted. He looked at his companions. "We might run into trouble. You boys coming with us?"

Nick sneered. "Trouble's our business, Perfessor. If them monkeys get tough—"

"Quo vadis?"

The short crisp challenge in ancient Latin interrupted them. . . . It came seemingly from nowhere, and it rang with authority.

FOR A FEW moments the earthlings froze, seeking the source of the voice. Then Pete Colucci cursed, and Steve, turning away from Constance, muttered a surprised exclamation.

A compact band of short, dark, stocky men had materialized along the rim of the valley. They moved with disciplined intent, advancing in a solid line behind their hawk-nosed leader. The wings of the group closed in around the Americans. Behind a protective barrier of bull-hide shields, men fingered deadly-looking short swords.

With numbed comprehension Blair eyed the eagle standard of ancient Rome flying from the lance of one of the foremost warriors.

Romans?

Nick started to unsling his tommy gun. Steve restrained him. "They may be friendly."

The Roman chieftain raised his right hand. The warriors at his back halted. He came on alone, a tall, dark, hook-nosed man in his early forties—a hard and battle-scarred veteran of a score of campaigns.

His truculent gaze lingered on Nick's weapon.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "You are not Akkans. Nor are you the half-men of the pit. . . . " He made a short gesture toward the saucer-like valley below them.

It had been years since Steve had used Latin, and then only within the academic atmosphere of the classroom. But he understood the Roman's question.

"No," he answered haltingly, his tongue fumbling with the language. "We are, Americans. Who are the Akkans?"

The centurion frowned. Lifting a muscular, rawhide-bound arm and shield, he gestured to the distant village. "That is the city of Akkah. The Akkans are our enemies; they are in league with the Evil One."

"We are Americans," Steve repeated. "We came in the pyramids. Do you know where we are?"

The other shook his head. "Your speech is Roman, the Roman of the outlanders. But I have never heard of this land, Merika. It must be beyond Gaul; perhaps even beyond the Pillars of Hercules."

Steve smiled at the man's reference to the headlands hemming in the Straits of Gibraltar. "Yes," he replied, "beyond the Pillars of Hercules. But this is a strange land to us. We are lost. Do you know where we are?"

The old Roman warrior shook his head again. "We were campaigning in Gaul," he explained, "with Caesar. I was ordered to make a forced march and catch the barbarians on the flank. We were coming down through a mountain pass when the Devil Wind caught us." He made a circular motion with his sword arm. "We were transported by this agency of darkness to that pit of Hades there, from which you have just emerged. We fought our way out, leaving behind many of our comrades who died. For days now we have been trying to find our way back to Rome. . . ."

Steve's breath sucked in sharply. What the Roman was saying was impossible! For the man was speaking as though Rome were still the center of power; he spoke as a contemporary of Julius Caesar. The Emperor had been dead for twenty centuries.

"What's he jawing about?" Nick broke in suspiciously. "Who are these characters?"

"Romans," Steve told him. "He says that is the village of Akkah. Seems that the boys in town aren't friendly."

"We'll take care of that," Pete said, tapping his holstered automatic. "Won't we, Nick?"

Nick kept his eyes on Steve. "How do we get back to the States?" he asked. "Ask him that."

Steve turned to the Roman. The man was eyeing Connie with frank appreciation.

"A comely wench," he observed. "Your woman?"

"Yes," Steve said flatly. "My woman."

"It is good." The Roman nodded. "She reminds me of Tia, the mother of my sons. Fortunately Tia is back in Rome, waiting for my return." He glanced up at the sky, and some indefinable change in the gray pall seemed to alarm him.

"Come," he said abruptly. "Soon the Long Sleep will be upon us. We must be gone from here before it overtakes us."

"The Long Sleep?"

The centurion shrugged. "It is the time of immobility," he said shortly. "It is then that Talia, the handmaiden to the Evil One, comes forth." His voice turned grim. "We must be gone."

Steve turned. "He says to follow him," he told the others. "I think it's best that we do. The old boy seems to know his way around this place."

Constance Mortimer drew close to him. He felt her shoulder touch his, and the sensation was suddenly warm and compelling. She looked up into his face, a slow, teasing smile in her eyes.

"My Latin always was atrocious," she whispered, "but I got by." She laughed at his sudden confusion. "I didn't mind, Steve, being called your woman."

Chapter Six

—The Long Sleep—

THEY BORE right, away from the village of Akkah, seemingly heading for the unwavering smoke column on the horizon. The centurion walked with the Americans, his men falling in disciplined marching order behind them. The clank of their armament was a strange sound in that silent and lonely land. The monotonous terrain occasionally revealed cracks in the earth; shallow fissures that reminded Steve of the arroyos of the Southwest. They saw no vegetation. Nor was there any sign of water in that parched and barren land. The earth was gravelly and packed hard, and even in the dry gullies there was no sand.

Steve was becoming conscious of a dryness in his mouth, a need of water. He glanced at the girl to see how she was taking it.

The centurion was setting a stiff pace. Connie began to limp. Finally she stopped.

"I'm sorry, Steve," she whispered as he bent over her. She was sitting down, massaging her arches. "I should have worn my walking shoes," she quipped. "High heels are a little out of place here."

The old Roman warrior looked down at her shapely legs with interest. Steve conveyed her need to him. He turned and gestured to one of his men, who brought a pair of sandals from his rucksack. They were a little big, but the leather thongs held them securely to Connie's feet.

The centurion suddenly crouched beside her and fingered the badly run surface of her nylons. Connie reddened and pushed his hand aside. "Now wait a minute—" Her voice was indignant.

The Roman straightened. "Soft," he said to Steve. "I'm sure Tia would like something like that. This country of yours—Merika—has other marvels like this?"

"Yes," Steve said. "I'll show some of them to you, if we get back."

The centurion became talkative. His name was Claudius Ancipolo, captain of a company in Caesar's Seventh Legion. He had been away from Rome for two years, and he was due to return after the campaign in Gaul.

Steve tried to draw him out. Who was the Evil One? But all he could get from the Roman on this subject was a vague answer. "The Evil One dwells in the flame, in the cave of Ankar."

Some tribal god, Steve thought, carried over in the thinking of these men.

As he talked, Claudius kept looking up into the sky. He quickened his pace.

SUDDENLY one of the men behind them called out. Claudius halted. Not quite understanding, Steve glanced around him. The warriors were staring uneasily at the somber sky.

It was changing! The yellow-grayness of the overcast was becoming infused with a greenish tint. And now Steve became aware of something else. It was a faint—a very faint—piping sound; a sound that had the quality of the lightest stirring of wind; a pulse beat that somehow conveyed a dread insistence.

"Too late," the Roman chieftain said grimly. "We'll have to chance the Long Sleep here." He waved ahead to where one of the shallow arroyos broke the monotonous country.

"Why?"

The other shook his head. "We must hurry," he said harshly.

They scrambled down the gully side. The piping was stronger in Steve's ears. The greenish tint in the overcast was growing more pronounced.

And now Steve became aware of a strange phenomenon. All about him the others were moving with an odd slowness—it was as though their muscles were drugged. The Roman warriors, wiser than the Americans in the knowledge of what was about to take place, were seeking places of rest under the arroyo's cutbanks.

"Claudius!" Steve called. The word formed on his lips with incredible slowness. The old warrior turned. He made a motion with his hand, a pantomime in slow motion. His lips framed the command: *"Down!"*

The eerie, piping sounds were loud now, a fugue of tinkling melody pacing the change in the sky. Little by little the small band was freezing into immobility—into the grotesque positions in which the change overtook them.

Steve turned to Connie. He willed himself to turn, but he didn't quite succeed in facing her. He saw her out of the

corners of his eyes. She was standing close to him, her mouth open, one hand lifting as though to smother a cry. She made a lovely statue.

The Long Sleep, Steve thought. Immobility. This was what Claudius had warned him of. He wondered if it presaged death. Then he discarded the thought. Claudius and his men had evidently experienced this phenomenon before.

There was nothing Steve could do except wait. The word echoed in his mind. Wait! Like a grotesque statue of a man, one arm half extended, his left foot clear of the ground.

Wait?

Chapter Seven

—The Handmaiden of Ankar—

THE SKY was a gray-green and the earth a muddy green, as though it had taken on the strange glow in the sky.

This was twilight.

Nothing moved!

Slowly, slowly, even the mind of Stephen Blair began to still. His frantic thoughts had tumbled about within the enclosure of his mind, but under the influence of that twilight sky even his thinking ran down.

At first Steve had tried to seek an explanation for this occurrence in a vague theory of combined solar radiations. But thinking soon became too much of an effort, and he

gave it up. He fought the Sleep with all the intensity of a strong-willed man, and because of this he was the last of the group to succumb.

He had not seen the vehicle that came gliding up the arroyo. But suddenly it was there before him, and his awareness of it pushed down into his thoughts, as though against a rubber shield. It was a two-wheeled car of glossy red metal with a plastic canopy top. It appeared between him and Claudius, frozen in a crouched position, his muscular left arm crooked in a downward sweeping motion.

A face looked out from behind the transparent windshield—a woman's face, framed in a cascade of golden hair that rippled in soft waves onto exquisitely rounded shoulders. It was a face so artistically molded, so perfectly beautiful, that even Leonardo da Vinci would have despaired of capturing it on canvas.

A door opened in the gyrocar. The girl stepped out, flashing a long naked leg and thigh before her. Standing, she was as tall as Steve, regally poised and unconcerned under that deadly sky. She was dressed in a very short, pliant material that looked metallic, and a halter bra of a softer weave caressed her high, rounded breasts. A small, light power pack with a short hi-gain antenna rod was slung on her back.

She brushed by Claudius, pausing to chuck the old warrior under his hard, bristly jaw. Then she turned and walked to Steve.

Her smooth, delicately tinted face and dark eyes were as young as innocence. Her full red lips were at once cruel and sweet, and there was arrogance there, too—the arrogance of power.

She came to Steve and put a hand on his arm, and almost at once he felt awareness come back to him. Sluggishly he regained the power to think, to move, to hear again.

This last faculty was brought home by a change in the

pipings that had become audible with the coming of the green twilight. The pipings no longer had a complacent note. They were angry, furiously angry. It was as though something were displeased at this interruption of the Long Sleep.

"Come!" the girl commanded.

Her lips had not moved. The word had sounded in Steve's head—an imperious order.

Mental transmission, he thought hazily, and was only faintly surprised.

HER ANSWER was swift, and conveyed a faint amusement. "Yes. What you earthlings sometimes call telepathy." She made a gesture toward the gyrocar. "Come!"

He was reluctant to move. "Connie!" He said her name clearly, and tried to turn to the girl who had journeyed with him through countless miles of space.

"No!" The strange girl's tone crackled with displeasure. "I have no need of her, or of your other friends, nor of the Romans. They shall be dealt with later. I came for you. I knew you had landed on Gohr. The eyes of Ankar told me."

"No!" Steve was stubborn. "I cannot go without Connie—"

Her fingers loosened on his arm, and almost immediately his muscles became immobilized and his lips froze before they could frame Connie's name. The strange girl's voice held an abrupt finality. "You cannot disobey me, Stephen Blair. We have no need for the earth woman. We shall leave her with the Romans."

She grasped his arm again. "Into the *gato*!" she commanded.

Steve turned and looked at Constance Mortimer. Her rigidity had not changed, nor was there any flicker of awareness in her open eyes.

She's asleep, he thought, and with a pang he reflected that when the Long Sleep passed she'd awaken to find him gone. Would she think he had deserted her?

He stepped into the gyrocar and sat down on a padded, bench-like seat in the rear. The girl slid in behind the red plastic hand-wheel, and the door closed quietly under pneumatic pressure. The angry pipings grew faint, and then a deep hum from the gyrocar's power source blanked them out.

The car began moving. It glided down the arroyo as if on a cushion of air. Steve twisted to look back at his recent companions, frozen in grotesque positions under the green twilight of the alien world.

He turned and slumped back in his seat, feeling helpless and miserable, knowing he was completely at this girl's mercy. After a while he became aware of her dark eyes watching him from the rear-view mirror in front of her.

Steve straightened, anger setting his jaw into a hard, resentful line.

"Who are you?"

The girl's thoughts answered him with patient condescension.

"I am Talia, handmaiden to Ankar—the Power!"

Chapter Eight

—Sol Eban—Ruler of Akkah—

THE GYROCAR moved swiftly over the barren earth, the only thing in motion under that bizarre sky. It headed straight for the far white-walled village, and Steve, peering through the plastic enclosure, noticed that the halo above the cluster of buildings had changed, too. It was now an intense, blinding green, and a partial explanation came to him.

This green twilight was the result of the blue and yellow suns, both shining now with equal intensity upon the lone

planet. This condition, he reasoned, would last until the blue sun eclipsed the yellow star. Then "night" would come upon the planet, and the overcast would take on a depressing blue hue.

But what about the phenomenon of the Long Sleep? Something in the combined radiations from the two suns quite possibly induced a strange catalepsy. . . .

Talia's voice intruded into his speculations. "Yes, that is so, Ste-fan." That was the way she pronounced his name. "The *badar* radiations have that effect on all foreign life on the planet Gohr. It does not last long, but during this interval the *piliie* feed on the life forces of the sleepers."

"The *piliie*?"

"Yes. The makers of the piping sounds. The invisible people. They are the true natives of this world of Gohr. We others are all strangers here; even Ankar, the Power. Were it not for the shield of Ankar which I carry and which protects us from the *badar* radiations, we too would sleep."

Steve tried to grasp this concept.

"Who is Ankar?"

"Even I know not," Talia admitted. "But he is greater than Osiris—greater even than Ammon-Ra, the sun god. He is *the power*!"

Steve leaned forward. "It was Ankar, then, who built the pyramids and sent them to earth?"

"For more specimens, yes," Talia answered. "The crude ether coils were not selective enough. It was I who designed the pyramids and had them sent to earth."

"Why? For what purpose?"

"For men like yourself," Talia said frankly. "For a sampling of what civilizations have so far produced on earth. Inquiring minds would be most apt to be so trapped. And I have need of trained minds, minds that have an understanding of nuclear physics. So far the pyramids have been unusually successful."

Steve relapsed into silence. The gyrocar was coming to a halt before the white walls of Akkah. They loomed up over the small vehicle, twenty-five feet high—and they looked as ancient as the weathered walls of old Jericho. Huge wooden doors as high as the walls appeared able to withstand any old-time battering ram. Watchtowers on the walls flanked the heavy portals.

The gyrocar halted some fifty yards before this massive gate. The entire village, Steve reflected, was enclosed by a "moat" of green light less than twenty feet wide.

It was only a band of strong light, but Talia evidently respected it. She touched a lever on the dashboard in front of her.

The "moat" broke. For the space of seventy feet—the width of the huge gate—the light winked out, as though some shield had come between the earth and the light pouring through the circular opening in the overcast.

The huge doors swung inward on noiseless bronze hinges. As they opened, the gyrocar moved forward, gliding across the "bridge" into the village. Glancing back, Steve saw that the light went on again within a few seconds of their crossing, completing the ominous circle.

They drove down a wide thoroughfare flanked by enormous statues of old Egyptian gods. The broad steps and white walls of a massive building terminated the roadway.

Steve could see no signs of life. As far as he could make out, Akkah might have been a village of the dead.

"The Long Sleep," Talia said. "Everyone on the surface of Gohr sleeps. It is best that way."

They drew up before the imposing building at the end of the street. With Talia's hand on his arm, Steve was able to move, although sluggishly. They walked up the wide stone steps, past huge marble pillars, through a high doorway.

Light filtered through overhead slits, slanting in green

bars into the great hall. Smaller-sized replicas of the Egyptian gods were pedestaled in niches along the way.

At the far end of the long, dimly lighted chamber, a small figure sat upon a throne. To Steve, walking toward it, the scene was a tableau carved in marble. Attendants kneeled in frozen attitudes on either side of the unmoving figure.

"That is Sol Eban," Talia murmured, "ruler of Akkah—by the grace of Ammon-Ra. And Talia," she added coldly.

THEY WALKED down the silent hallway like spectral beings along the hall of the dead; walked up to the throne of Sol Eban, over which hung the sun ball and feathers of an ancient earth god, Ammon-Ra.

Ten steps led up to the throne. Talia paused at the foot of them.

"Kneel!" she commanded Steve.

Steve rebelled. He started to turn to her, but her fingers lifted from his arm, and immediately he felt the slowdown of his muscles. He turned laboriously to face the figure sitting rigidly on the throne.

"Kneel!" Talia repeated imperiously. But he denied her with a grim stubbornness which only force could have overcome. He was freezing into immobility there at the foot of the stone steps, but he looked up at Sol Eban with a defiant stare.

Talia's laughter rippled in his ears. "You are a stubborn one, Ste-fan." She slurred his name in a soft, caressing way. "I think I shall have use for you, when we return to earth."

The pipings were clamoring in his ears. The *piliie*, he thought drowsily. The last thing he remembered was looking up at Sol Eban and noting that the ruler of Akkah was a small, well-knit man with dull black eyes that were staring fixedly at him. Then the Long Sleep claimed him, and the *piliie* swarmed triumphantly in to feed. . . .

Tall and regal and unconcerned, Talia turned and walked away from the frozen figures at the throne of Sol Eban. She walked down past the silent, watching statues, a goddess greater than the stone ones who watched her pass.

On all that vast, silent planet, she alone had the power of motion.

Chapter Nine

—Power For Conquest—

SLOWLY THE blue light replaced the green. The vast orb of the huge blue sun was moving in between the yellow dwarf and the lone planet of Gohr, and down on the plains of Akkah the pipings of the *piliie* began to fade.

The power of thought came back to Constance Mortimer. She roused and looked about her. It seemed only a moment before that Steve had turned to her. Now she couldn't see him. She was very tired. She sank to the ground, one bare leg and thigh exposed by the rent in her skirt. She was unaware of this.

"Steve!" she called drowsily. "Steve! Where are you?"

The others were moving around her. Those who had been caught standing followed her lead and rested on the

hard bluish earth. She turned her head, her eyes searching for Blair. He was gone. Her mind refused to accept this at first. "Steve!" Her voice was filled with a sudden dread.

Claudius answered her. He alone was on his feet, looking down at her like a stern father.

"Your man is gone," he said. She understood him. "Talia came. I saw her, just before the Long Sleep closed my eyes. She took him away with her to the village of Akkah."

"Talia?" Connie didn't understand—she had seen nothing. "Who is she?"

But Claudius was wheeling away, giving orders to his men. She turned, seeking comfort in the two men of her own time. Nick was eyeing her with a look that embarrassed her.

Pete said: "Geez, I'm tired. Guess I'll catch forty winks right here."

Claudius came back to Constance and helped her to her feet. "We must go on," he said. His voice was harsh. "Talia knows where we are. She will send the Akkans. They will kill us if they come upon us out here on the plains."

He barked sharp commands to his legion. His warriors moved slowly, weary under the weight of shield and lance. But they fell into marching order—with uncomplaining discipline.

Pete remained sprawled on the ground, resting his head in the palm of his crooked hand. He cocked an eye at the Romans. "You guys go on ahead," he mumbled. "Me, I'm staying right here. I'm tired."

Claudius strode to him. He reached down and jerked the fleshy gangster to his feet. "You march with us!" he growled. "Already we have lost too much time!"

Pete jerked loose from the Roman chieftain's grasp, sudden anger flaming his round face. He reached inside his coat for his automatic.

Claudius slapped his face. The blow whirled Pete

around, and the drawn gun went off in his hand. The bullet ploughed a small furrow in the earth several yards past the Roman veteran.

The explosion, more than Pete's reaction, surprised Claudius. He scowled, staring at the weapon in Pete's hand.

Nick came to aid his partner, unslinging his tommy gun. Pete brought the back of his hand up to his face. "Why, you blasted monkey!" he snarled at Claudius. "I'll show you who's—"

Connie grabbed his gun hand. "Pete!" she cried, terrified. "He only wants to help us. He says he can't stay here—"

Pete shoved her away from him. "Like fun we can't! Let them go, if they want—"

The Roman warriors had fanned out at the first sign of trouble. Now the wings were closing in. One man raised his lance, and Nick, eyes slitted, let go with a burst from the tommy gun.

The Roman warrior doubled up and sprawled on his face. The others halted, staring at the Americans.

"That's what will happen to all of them if they try to crowd us," Nick sneered. He nudged Connie with the muzzle of his gun. "You speak their language. Tell them to scram. We'll take care of ourselves. Go on—tell them!"

Connie turned to Claudius. Her Latin was bad, but Claudius understood her. He was a wise leader as well. These men meant nothing to him. Let the Akkans have them.

But the woman reminded him of home—something warm and familiar in an alien and terrifying land. He asked her to go with him. She wavered for a moment, then shook her head. Claudius and his men were from another time—Nick and Pete were her countrymen.

Claudius shrugged. He moved to the head of his legion and barked an order. They moved at a dogtrot down the

narrow ravine, disappearing quickly around a bend in the bluish earth.

Connie watched them go. Without Steve at her side, she suddenly felt lonely and afraid, and not until Claudius and his men were gone was she conscious that she had made a wrong choice. She turned and looked at Pete.

Colucci was still raging at the cuffing he had received from Claudius.

"For the Lord's sakes, shut up!" Nick snapped. "I'll do all the yapping around here!" He swung around to Connie. "We'll head for that town we saw back there. I don't care what they said, I ain't swallowing all this double-talk about us being off earth. That's all right for the kids who read *Buck Rogers* and *Superman,* but not for me. I'm smart. Somebody's pulling a fast one, and I want in on it."

Pete nodded in wholehearted agreement. "Sure. And if anybody gets funny, we'll let little roscoe do the arguing."

He sneered at the dead Roman. "There's one monkey who lost his argument."

There was no choice. Constance nodded agreement. She saw Nick look at her again, and a hot angry flush stole over her.

"Steve!" she called silently. "Oh, Steve!"

THE LIGHT was blue against the overcast, and still the village of Akkah slept. The moat was now a circle of blue light, less intense than the yellow or the green. It filtered through the columns of the huge hall of Ammon-Ra, to the dais where Sol Eban held court.

Slowly Steve Blair became aware of his surroundings. He was on the bottom step, staring up into a pair of black, unblinking eyes that were beginning to light up with a sharp surprise.

The attendants stirred. They pulled away from the throne and turned to face the lone man at the foot of the stone steps. They were giant Nubians, dressed in loin

cloths, their naked muscled torsos gleaming in the blue light. Each man held a huge iron-tipped lance in his right hand.

Sol Eban came to his feet—a small, wiry man with an arrogant mien. There was a naked ruthlessness in the man that angered Steve and created dislike even before a word passed between them. Sol Eban was not the type who would be content to rule over a village like Akkah.

"Who are you?" Sol Eban asked, and once again the words were in Steve's head. The mental transmission of speech was not confined to Talia, Steve thought, and he saw Sol Eban bob his head in sudden understanding. It gave him a startled feeling to realize that the other could sense his thoughts and Steve made a resolution to shield them.

"So Talia brought you here," the ruler of Akkah stated. "You must be Ste-fan Blair, latest arrival from earth."

Steve shrugged, holding onto his composure with an effort. At least, he thought wryly, Sol Eban was under no delusion he was still on earth.

The Egyptian looked him over with a penetrating glance. "You are dressed like the others," he observed. "You also must come from the land beyond the great Pillars of Hercules, the land of Merika."

The others, thought Blair, must be Harry Bucknell and Leland Stanford, the Harvard astronomer.

"Merika is a powerful country, I am told," continued Sol Eban, "a very powerful country; much more powerful than the ancient kingdom of Sumeria, the land of my ancestors."

Steve nodded. "It is true. But sometimes," his tone was ironic, "great power can become a curse to the country that wields it."

"You think so?" Sol Eban was curious. He leaned forward, putting his weight on his hands as they gripped the sides of his stone throne.

"Everything is power, earthman, even here. It is

unimaginable power that keeps the sky from destroying us; great power that protects this village from our Roman enemies. And it was a power even greater than you know in Merika that brought you here."

He laughed, suddenly arrogant again. "You think you are mighty in your land, earthman. But you do not yet know the full meaning of power. This earth will come to know when we, the chosen of Osiris and Ammon-Ra, come back to earth, not as a handful of people plucked out of time and cringing in terror before the progress of four thousand years, but as conquerors, earthman—*conquerors*!"

STEVE REACTED in silent wonder at the man's intensity. Slowly Sol Eban settled back on his throne. "It will not be long now. Already the machines are being calibrated. The transport pyramids have been assembled in the Hall of Power. Soon, very soon now, we shall return—"

He stopped talking as Talia came down the long hallway behind Steve. Fear momentarily swept the arrogance from his eyes.

Talia's cool voice rang in Steve's mind. "You talk too much, Sol Eban. Remember, Ankar has not yet gone."

Sol Eban rose. Talia came to stand beside Steve. "Come," she said to Blair. "I will show you to your friends. They will be pleased to see you again."

Sol Eban made a gesture as if to stop them. Talia turned. The ever-present power pack on her shoulders generating the "field of Ankar" caught the thin blue light and sent it streaming. Sol Eban quailed at the look in her eyes. He sank back on his throne, sullen and dangerously quiet.

Steve followed the strange girl down the hallway, past the pedestaled dog-headed Egyptian gods to a side passageway that led along a breezeway spanning a courtyard to another wing.

Two Nubian guards stepped away from a bronze door as they approached. At Talia's nod, one of them pushed the door open.

"I shall return later for you, Ste-fan," Talia said, "when I am ready to take you to Ankar, the power."

She turned away, and Steve walked into a large room ventilated by two slit windows in the far wall. Two men were sitting disconsolately on a gilded bench.

"Harry!" Steve hailed, striding forward.

Behind him the bronze door clanged shut.

Chapter Ten

—Planned Revolt—

HARRY BUCKNELL came to his feet with an amazed cry. His companion, an older and frailer man, turned and watched Steve come toward them.

Bucknell was a husky six-footer who looked more like a pro football player than a top-flight physicist. He had a ruddy face and a hearty manner of speaking, and he kept looking younger than his forty-seven years by a rigorous schedule of exercise.

He came to meet Blair with extended hand. "Steve!" he boomed. "It's good to see you!"

With a wry smile, Steve said: "I'm not so sure I'm glad

to see you, I'd rather be back in Manhattan getting over a legitimate hangover." He glanced past Bucknell to the gray-bearded, dignified man slumped on the bench.

Bucknell turned and waved his hand in an incisive gesture. "Steve—this is Leland Stanford. You know—with the Harvard Observatory. Charted that new comet last year. . . ."

Stanford came slowly to his feet. He had bright blue eyes in a lined and somewhat worried face, and a nice smile which made him look younger by a dozen years when he used it.

"Mr. Blair," he greeted Steve, extending his pale, blue-veined hand. "Harry's mentioned you often. You wrote a paper on negative charges which I found most interesting."

"I'm glad you liked it," Steve said. "Harry found it too imaginative to suit him."

"Imagination is the doorway to man's destiny," Stanford murmured. "I always fancied mine. But I confess I am staggered by all this." He waved vaguely toward the closed door. Then the brightness went out of his eyes, as if it had kindled only in greeting. He looked old again, and beaten.

"We're lost," he said sadly, "lost on some planet clear out of our galaxy. I can't adjust to it. It is too utterly fantastic."

Harry Bucknell was a more practical man. "You arrived here in a pyramid, I assume," he said to Steve. "Anyone else with you?"

Steve nodded. He walked to the far end of the room and looked up at the narrow windows ten feet above him. The blue glow coming through made his face look thin and drawn.

"Constance Mortimer was with me," he answered. "Frank Mortimer's daughter!"

LELAND STANFORD sank down on the bench and buried his face in his hands. He was too old to endure the

incredible thing that had happened to him. His mind could view it and accept the truth without flinching, but his spirit shrank from it.

But Bucknell was a fighter. "Frank's girl!" he said with some surprise. "I knew her quite well. A brainy, interesting girl. Tell me, where is she now? What happened to you?"

Steve told him. "I've got to get out of here," he concluded grimly. "She's stuck out there with two bad Hollywood-type gangsters and a bunch of Romans who think they are lost somewhere in ancient Gaul." He laughed without much humor. "It's funny, isn't it, Harry? All my life I've dared to dream of the day when men would make their first big jump into space. We've landed on the moon. Mars appears to be the next step. And now—"

"Now we've been plucked off earth and carried a thousand light years through space," Stanford concluded for him, lifting his head from his hands. His eyes had a hopeless stare. "A thousand light years—maybe more. Do you know what that means?"

Steve shrugged. "Are you sure of that?"

The astronomer laughed bitterly. "I'm sure."

"We didn't move through space as we know it, then," Steve muttered. "We couldn't have come this far from our solar system in the little time the flight lasted."

"How long do you think your little flight lasted?" Bucknell interrupted dryly. "Can you guess?"

Blair glanced at him. "You mean—?"

"What else?" the physicist said. "It might have taken a year, ten years, a hundred. We moved through *stressed* space—a convenient term for something we know little about—and even time changed. What do we know about this planet? Why, we may even be in a different space-time continuum of the universe. Your account of the Romans bears me out. Claudius was a centurion under Julius Caesar. That was around two thousand years ago, earth time. But to him it was but a few weeks since the incident

in ancient Gaul. Do you see, Steve? Even our metabolism is changed here, slowed down to a fraction of its normal working back on earth!"

Stanford wagged his head in despair. "We're lost," he repeated, "a thousand light years from earth. I know."

Steve sat down beside Stanford and looked up at Harry Bucknell. "Trapped—like flies in a bottle."

"More like guinea pigs in a laboratory cage," Bucknell answered grimly. "That's the way I see it, Steve. These pyramids were designed to bring back from earth whatever wandered into them. For what reason? They weren't destructive. They weren't weapons for conquest. Traps," he repeated angrily, "that's what they were. Cosmic traps, designed to bring back specimens from earth—specimens to be studied by whoever designed them."

"The valley of the saurians," Steve muttered. "The Akkans. The Romans."

Bucknell nodded. "That force you spoke of—the force that swept across the clearing back in that valley, taking your coat and the pterodactyl with it. Whoever is doing this must have used that force clear across to earth in early times, sweeping up bits of flora and fauna. That valley you landed in was evidently created by this power. The saurians were placed in it, under conditions carefully approximating their environment on earth. The Romans were thus taken. Steve—the whole planet must be a gigantic laboratory for this being—this thing Talia calls Ankar, the power. The Akkans themselves, she told us, were pulled across space more than four thousand years ago."

Steve straightened, remembering the intensity of Sol Eban's revelation.

"The Akkans are the dangerous ones," he agreed. "Whoever this Ankar is, he is an impersonal quality. But the Akkans plan conquest, with the aid of Talia."

"A strange woman," Bucknell commented, his eyes

lighting up. "As beautiful as a goddess and as cold as polar ice."

A restlessness laid hold of Steve. He began to pace under the high, narrow window slits. "There must be a way out of here," he said angrily. "If we could make it to the outside—"

"What then?" Bucknell interrupted flatly. "Where would we go?"

"To the cave of Ankar, wherever that is," Steve said grimly. "Where the pyramids of conquest are!"

Chapter Eleven

—The Moat of Death—

THE WALLS of Akkah lifted slowly out of the bizarre blue plain. The village took on shape. It sprawled in a roughly circular pattern slightly more than two miles across, an incongruous touch of intelligent life in a barren and utterly alien landscape.

There were no roads to Akkah. It loomed up like an unreal picture, a dead city under a blue sky. The closer the three Americans came to it, the more Constance Mortimer shrank from its inhospitality.

The atmosphere had a close, dry quality. In the long march from the gully where they had split with Claudius

and his Romans, they had felt no cooling breeze, no stirring of air whatever.

Pete Colucci had long since discarded his coat and yellow flowered tie. A beard was beginning to darken his jowls. He wiped his heated face with the back of his hand. The underarm holster chafed him, but he suffered its weight with patience.

Nick clung to the tommy gun, constantly shifting it from one hand to the other. He still wore his double-breasted suit and tightly knotted wine-colored tie, as though denying the hostile environment.

The broad wooden gates suddenly drew his attention. They were swinging open silently, smoothly.

Nick halted a dozen feet from the circle of blue light that ringed the village. Pete and Connie paused beside him, staring at the girl being revealed by the opening portals.

Pete sucked in his breath. "Geez!" he said admiringly. "That's some pinup, Nick!"

A sharp twinge went through Constance. The girl in the village had a breathtaking beauty, a commanding presence that stirred admiration even in the Mortimer girl. She stood looking at them with an amused smile.

Talia's lips did not move, but her voice sounded a warning in their ears.

"You were foolish to have come to Akkah. Talia has no need of you."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Nick snapped, unslinging his tommy gun. "Maybe you're the big cheese around here—and you've got plenty of class, I'll give you that—but we're coming in, see? We want to get back to the States. And I'm not taking any double-talk—"

"Fool!" the girl interrupted him. "Go back before it is too late!" She gestured imperiously. "Go!"

Nick sneered. "You don't scare us. We're coming in. And don't try to close those doors." He made a threatening

notion with the tommy gun. "This thing talks big, see!"

He started to walk toward the circle of light. Pete and Connie hung back. Connie felt there was a deadly fascination in that band of light.

"Nick," she said uneasily, "wait."

Nick swaggered forward, ignoring Connie. Talia made no further effort to stop him. She stood framed in the doorway, an easy target for Nick. On the wall flanking the gate, two Nubian guards stood with arms folded across their chests. They appeared confident in their own security.

Nick paused a few feet from the "moat" of light. Some feeling of danger cautioned him. Pete broke away from Connie's side.

"I'll take care of the girl, Nick," he growled. "You cover those guards on the wall—"

He was still talking as he stepped into the circle of blue light.

There was no sound, except for the dull clump of Pete's automatic as it smashed into the earth beside the suddenly flattened, unrecognizable thing that had been Pete Colucci, a small-time gangster.

Nick uttered a strangled cry. Fear clawed at his taut nerves, and he whipped the tommy gun up and started to spray lead at the girl just inside the village.

Less than eighty feet separated them, but the bullets seemed to spend themselves traveling the distance. They kicked up little puffs of earth at Talia's feet.

"Fool!" The word mocked Nick. "You cannot harm Talia, handmaiden to Ankar. Go now, before it is too late!"

She turned her back to him. Behind her the gates began to close. In the blue light, the pulped mound that had been Pete Colucci glistened with a grisly warning.

STEVE BLAIR heard the staccato clatter of Nick's

tommy gun as it filtered in through the high slit windows. Hope flared up in him, breaking through his numbed contemplation.

"Nick!" he said, and the picture of Constance Mortimer flashed into his mind. He had not guessed how much he missed her; the sudden thought of her out there, alone and frightened, sickened him. It was his fault that she had gotten into this, and by all the dog-faced Egyptian gods, he'd see that she got safely back to earth.

Bucknell came up beside Steve, his face lighting, and even Stanford roused himself to listen. They waited with hopeful faces, but the tommy gun made no further sound, nor did they hear any other commotion.

Gradually the expectancy died in them. Bucknell managed a wry smile.

"Never guessed the sound of a gun would make me feel like this," he said. "For a moment I felt as though I were back home."

"I'd welcome the sound of a car backfiring," Steve said grimly; "anything except this smothering stillness. Nothing seems to move on this planet, not even a breeze."

"Your friends," Stanford interjected wearily, "will never get through the gravity lane."

Steve swung around toward the older man. "Gravity lane?" Then: "You mean that circle of light—"

Bucknell answered for Stanford. "Yes. Didn't you figure that one out, Steve?"

Blair shook his head.

"Talia told us about it," the physicist explained, "the day she took us to Akkah. The pall in the sky is manufactured in the cave of Ankar. It's a gravity nullifier. This planet had a thousand times the mass of earth. Its gravity would reduce as to a pulp. But the mist cuts it. It stabilizes the pull of gravity to correspond to that of earth. That's why you feel no differently here. But where the mist is cut and the light of the double suns shines through, the

full force of this planet's gravity is exerted. The circle of light is truly a protective moat—a moat no living thing from earth can cross."

"Then there's no way we can get out of the village," Steve asked, "even if we managed to escape from this room?"

Bucknell shook his head. "Only Talia has the power to cut the gravity lane. Even the Akkans are imprisoned here at her whim. They are afraid of her. They look upon her as the incarnation of their goddess, Osiris, who will some day deliver them from this strange land. But they are afraid of her."

Steve squared his shoulders. "Then she's our only hope. Somehow we'll have to overpower her, get her to open the gravity lane for us—"

"And then what?" Stanford interrupted. "Then what, Blair?"

"We'll find the cave of Ankar," Steve replied. "Sol Eban told me the transport pyramids were ready to take the Akkans back to earth. Once we find them—" He saw Bucknell make a gesture of disparagement, and he added angrily: "Harry, we'd at least have a fighting chance!"

Stanford looked up at Steve with a faint smile. "You are young, Steve. But even you must realize our impasse. What can we do against a power that has mastered forces such as these? You talk of finding the cave of Ankar. But we do not even know what that is—or what Ankar is like. Is he human, as we know the word, or some utterly alien and incomprehensible form of life to whom we are as ants? The latter seems most likely, judging from past events. Harry has made the point that we were brought here in the pyramid traps as specimens to be studied, the way naturalists and zoologists study plants and animals back home. This whole planet, or what we saw of it, is one vast laboratory. To this 'being,' for want of a better word, we are nothing more than that. What can we hope to—"

He raised his pale hand to silence Steve's impatient interruption. "Let me finish, Steve. I am old, and my mind is not as resilient as yours. I deeply miss my home environment, my colleagues, my friends. But it doesn't matter. If I don't get back, there is little loss. But I must emphasize to you: *What can we do?* What can a laboratory rat do, trapped in his cage, waiting only to be injected and studied at the whim of the scientist who caged him?"

"You forget," Steve snapped, "there is Talia. She is of earth, Stanford. She is an Egyptian, or Sumerian—or was. And she has plans to return to earth. Something is holding them up. Ankar is leaving. Evidently they dare not make the move while he is still here. But they are getting ready to return to earth. And when they go, I intend to go with them!"

Stanford threw up his hands and turned away. Bucknell shook his head.

Steve began to pace again.

THERE WAS no way of telling time. Steve's wrist watch seemed to have stopped. They were given food. It was served on a large copper plate and consisted mainly of fruit. Copper goblets held a cloudy white liquid that tasted like fermented coconut juice. They ate desultorily. They had no hunger in them.

Steve kept pacing and eyeing the window slits. He could not rid himself of the thought that Constance Mortimer was out there somewhere on that barren, alien plain beyond the walls of Akkah.

Eventually the door swung open, and an Egyptian guard of four men filed into the room. The leader pointed his lance at Steve and indicated the door.

Bucknell started to join Steve, but another of the guards stepped between them, crossing his lance before the physicist. Bucknell shrugged. "Looks like they want you, Steve."

Blair went out. The guard fell in around him and escorted him down a long passageway. They paused before a wide gold-plated door, while attendants, armed with small power packs, opened and let them inside.

Evidently, Steve thought, this was Talia's sanctuary.

The white marble floor of the chamber was all that was visible. The rest of the room was hidden by a thin veil of steam rising from a wide central pool. The atmosphere was heavy with the cloying scent of incense and myrrh.

The guard led Steve to the edge of the pool and withdrew. Steve stared down at Talia.

Her body looked long and cool in the cloudy water. She was lying on her back, floating, her eyes half closed. Steve felt a pulse throb at his temple. The steamy heat and the smell of incense had a sensual quality that went to his head, and he had to stiffen himself against its aphrodisiac effect.

He waited silently.

Talia opened her eyes. They looked up into Steve's, dark and soft and utterly feminine. There was no coldness in her now, no arrogance.

"Ste-fan," she murmured. She made a movement and stood up.

"Ste-fan," she repeated, and laughed softly. "I like you, Ste-fan. You are not afraid of me. And you fight me." Her laughter had a tinkling, caressing sound. "You try to hide your thoughts from me, and you have a strong will. I think I shall like you even more."

"Why did you have me brought here?"

"To tell you that I am fond of you," Talia said softly, "and to inform you that I am taking you back to earth with me."

"And Constance Mortimer?" Steve asked.

The softness went out of Talia's eyes. "The girl of the black hair?"

"Yes."

Talia shrugged shapely shoulders. "I turned her away.

She is with the narrow-faced one—the one whose gun you heard." She looked amused at the sudden concern on Steve's face. "The fat one walked into the lane of death. I told them to go or they would get hurt, but they were stupid and arrogant and wouldn't listen."

Her mood changed, and softness came back into her eyes. "Ste-fan, I have been lonely here. I have given myself to no man. Until you came, I had no desire. Now—" She looked up at him, waiting.

He gave no answer.

Her lips pushed out into a pout. "You are thinking of the dark-haired one, Ste-fan. Fool! You choose her above me?"

"I make no choice," Steve said. "You are beautiful, Talia. But I will be no one's pawn. We were brought here against our will, and even now I have but little understanding of where we are. I want to get back to earth. And I want Constance Mortimer with me, for it was because of me that she is here."

"I will take you to earth," Talia said coldly. "Come with me, and I will give you not only myself, but earth as well."

Steve shook his head.

"You will come, Ste-fan," she said, "or remain behind, forever imprisoned on this inhospitable planet of Gohr."

She moved away from him, turning her back to him. It was a dismissal.

The guard appeared out of the mist and closed in around Steve and marched him to the door.

Chapter Twelve

—Escape—

THE EGYPTIAN GUARD marched in stolid silence, flanking Steve on the way back to the chamber where Harry Bucknell and Stanford waited. A grim impatience was making Steve edgy. He couldn't sit like his colleagues, waiting for whatever would be their lot. He had to make a move, had to make a break for freedom.

The black-skinned guard at the door came to attention as Steve approached. The Egyptian contingent flanking Steve made a snappy about-face, leaving him in the charge of the others. Their swords clanked as they marched away.

The Nubian guard standing to the right of the door, a

slow-witted man, dropped the butt of his spear to the floor and reached for the bronze ring pull. The heavy door resisted his effort with the drag of inertia; then it began slowly to open.

Steve made as though to enter. He was abreast of the guard when he pivoted. His fingers closed around the shaft of the spear, and he wrenched it free of the other's grasp before the guard was aware of his intentions. The Nubian straightened with dull surprise. Steve swung the spear like a club. The iron tip smashed against the man's skull, sending him stumbling into the room.

The other guard, freeing himself of shocked surprise, made a lunge at Steve. Blair parried the spear point on the side of his lance, and as the guard stumbled past he drove the point into the man's side.

The Nubian shuddered. The other was half out, on his knees, inside the cell. There had been no time for an alarm, and the Egyptian guard who had escorted Steve there did not appear.

Bucknell and Stanford were on their feet, staring at the dazed guard. Steve stepped quickly into the room, gestured.

"Come on! We're getting out of here!"

THEY FOLLOWED him wordlessly. Steve paused to drag the dead Nubian into the cell. The other guard was slowly getting to his feet. Steve swung the spear in a savage smash across his face. The big Nubian stumbled around like a poled ox, and Steve swung again, breaking the thick spear across his head. The guard dropped limply beside his companion.

Stanford and Bucknell were waiting outside, in the passageway. Steve joined them. He still retained part of the broken spear in his hand. It made a handy club, and he liked the feel of it.

"We'll take a chance and go this way." He gestured.

"There has to be a way out."

The others made no protest. He had taken their fate into his hands, and they had no recourse now but to follow Steve.

The hallway led to a side street. They met no one on the way. The "blue" night seemed to restrict movement in the village of Akkah.

Steve led the way. When they were halfway to the main thoroughfare, the warning notes of a great bronze gong shivered the still air!

The death of the Nubian guard had been discovered!

They kept to the blue-black shadows, working their way toward the main gate. Several times they drew back to cover while a company of Egyptian spearmen clanked by. The great gong kept vibrating its alarm throughout the sleeping village.

Eventually they reached the huge main gate. They crouched in the shadows of a low square building, eyeing the fifty feet or so of open space between them and the wall. Huge Nubian guards, armed with spears, patrolled the wall top. The gates were closed.

Stanford shivered. The little old man was already winded. He put a trembling hand on Steve's shoulder.

"It's no use. This is as far as we can go, Stephen."

Steve eyed the closed gate. Bucknell moved closer to him, his voice low and excited. "Look! Talia!"

The gyrocar was coming swiftly down the main street, its glassex top glinting in the blue night. Ten yards from where Steve and his companions crouched, it came to a stop. Talia's golden head seemed to glow with an ethereal light inside the car.

A way of escaping the village suddenly presented itself to Steve. He had acted upon impulse back there in the building that had been their prison, and the futility of his move had begun to impress itself on him and destroy his brash confidence. But now—now there was a chance to get

through those guarded doors.

"Wait for my signal—then follow me!" he whispered tensely to his companions. "When I run—run like blazes! I think we can make it!"

The heavy portals were swinging inward as Talia waited. Beyond them glowed the circle of blue light—the gravity lane. Talia's head bent forward as she flipped a lever on her dashboard. An instant later the break appeared in the ring of light.

The gyrocar rolled out through the huge gateway. The guard on the wall turned to watch it pass.

"Now!" Steve said, and made a run for the gate. Bucknell and Stanford followed.

The doors were already beginning to close. Stanford barely made it. He was staggered as the doors closed behind him. But he did not call out for help.

The gyrocar was rolling swiftly over the barren plain, rapidly becoming a blur in the night. At any moment the break in the gravity lane would disappear!

One of the guards standing by the watchtower gave a sudden grunt of surprise. The three running figures seemed to materialize directly under him. For a moment he watched that silent, deadly race against the gravity lane's appearance. Then he drew his arm back and burled his spear.

Stanford, trailing the others, felt the tearing impact of the spear as it entered his back. The shock sent him staggering forward. He let out a sharp, half strangled cry.

Steve turned. Bucknell was right behind him. But Stanford was down, trying to crawl after them. Steve's stomach did a flipflop as he saw the shaft of that heavy spear protruding from the astronomer's back.

Bucknell dragged him back as he tried to go to Stanford's aid.

"Steve, no! It's too late—"

The light came on before he finished. The old

astronomer was right in the middle of the gravity lane. In that one instant he was transformed from a crawling, dying figure to a quivering, shapeless mass of crushed flesh!

THE GYROCAR bearing Talia had vanished into the distance. Back on the village wall, the guards were gesticulating, pointing toward the two earthmen. But they were beyond pursuit and as effectively shielded from their weapons as though a solid wall of armor plate had come down between them.

Steve turned to Harry Bucknell. The big man's face was a sickly hue. He and Stanford had been close friends.

"Leland didn't have a chance," he said bitterly. "Squashed like a fly—"

They turned away from the village of Akkah. They had no immediate point of destination, but Steve kept bearing toward the valley of the saurians. They came to the shallow gully where Claudius and the legion had rested through the period of the Long Sleep, and here they found the body of the Roman whom Nick had shot.

Steve looked down at the dead man. It took no great imagination to reconstruct what had happened. Evidently Nick and Pete had split up with the Romans and taken Connie with them. Then Steve remembered that Talia had talked of the "fat one" walking into the lane of death. Pete, then, had been killed. That left Connie alone with the thin-faced gangster.

Bucknell was staring up at the blue-gray sky. He looked old and drawn, not like the Harry Bucknell Steve remembered. The face came home to Steve, and he felt sorry for the physicist.

What good had the breakout done them? He had killed Stanford almost as surely as though he had dropped the gravity lane down on the old man. They were free of the village of Akkah. But just where were they? Where was the "cave" of Ankar?

Bucknell answered his silent questions.

"It's no use, Steve," he said heavily. "We're like ants that have gotten away from the ant hill." He lifted his right hand in a gesture that took in a goodly portion of the desolate horizon. "We're lost," he repeated bitterly. "We'll never get back to earth!"

Steve bent over the dead Roman and unbuckled the man's sword belt. He hefted the short, broad-bladed weapon in his hand, his eyes on the horizon, staring without seeing into the murky distance.

Maybe, he thought bleakly, *Bucknell was right!*

To Bucknell, watching him, Steve made a strange figure against the night: a tall, broad-shouldered man whose white shirt clung raggedly to his muscled torso. A shock of dark hair hung over his lean, bitter face.

He looked tired and grim, but there was something indomitable about Stephen Blair that roused a spark of courage in Bucknell.

He said: "Any weapon is better than none, I guess," and the quietness of his tone swung Blair around to face him. Steve's eyes searched the older man's face, and he smiled.

"I didn't think you'd quit, Harry."

Bucknell shrugged. "What now?"

"Find the Romans," Steve answered. "They know where the cave of Ankar is. If we can talk them into making a sortie against the Akkans, we've got a fighting chance!"

Chapter Thirteen

—The Voice From Beyond—

CONSTANCE MORTIMER sank slowly to rest on the alien earth, her back propped against a small hummock of ground that felt neither familiar nor friendly. They had been moving without pause since leaving the vicinity of the village of Akkah, and Constance was close to complete exhaustion.

She looked out over the empty land. Inside her was a growing terror—a terror of the unknown—and of Nick Marengo.

She had made a mistake to throw in her lot with him and Pete instead of staying with the Romans. She knew this now.

The slim gangster was standing at the edge of one of the innumerable fissures that cracked the flat plain. He was looking back toward Akkah, but the village was no longer discernible, nor was the deadly halo that hung above it.

Nick reached inside his coat pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes. The feel and sight of something familiar eased the fear gripping him, and he shook one up and stuck it between his lips. The feel of the lighter in his palm brought back memories. He lighted up, sucking in a deep breath of smoke. His hand closed over the lighter for a moment, unconsciously holding onto something that was not utterly alien.

It had been a long trek away from Akkah, and he had no idea which way to go. All he knew was that he wanted to get home. . . . He wanted to be back with Pete Colucci in Mike's place in Jersey. He'd take his chances with Big Joe. . . .

He eased the tommy gun down at his feet. His coat was open, revealing the Luger automatic in his underarm shoulder holster. He had lived all of his life in a violent world—but it was a world he could understand.

Nothing moved across the sullen, bluish land. Off to the right the pillar of smoke rose up into the overcast. . . . It could be ten miles away, or a hundred. Distances, Nick had learned, were deceptive here.

He turned and looked at the girl huddled on the ground behind him. Then he picked up the tommy gun and walked back to her.

Constance looked up and caught the look in his eyes. She stiffened, pulling the tattered skirt of her dress over her legs.

Nick said: "Looks like we're all that's left. You better start being nice to me—"

She came to her feet and started to back off.

Nick took a drag on his cigarette, then tossed it away.

"Go ahead," he sneered. "Start running." He waved toward the distant horizon. "You've got lots of room out there—"

Constance paused. She was too tired to run. She made a gesture of appeasement. "This is foolish," she said. "And we're not alone. There's Steve—"

"The perfessor?" Nick's voice mocked her. "He left you, didn't he? Maybe he's in that village we saw. But if he is, he isn't worrying about us."

He moved toward her, and Constance took a step backward. "Nick, please. You want to get home, don't you, away from this nightmare place?"

He frowned. "Sure." He looked past her, seeing nothing familiar on the horizon. "But I ain't sure any more. Looks like the perfessor was right. We're a long way from the States."

"The Romans!" Constance said quickly. "They've been here a long time. Maybe they know a way back—"

"Just forget them monkeys!" Nick spat. He moved closer to her. "There's only me and you left, sister—you better make the best of it—"

Constance was looking past him; something was moving in the distance!

"Look!" she cried. "Someone's coming!"

Nick thought she was trying to divert him. "That's an old trick," he sneered. "Been pulled a thousand times—"

"Something is moving out there!" she insisted. "Look!"

The look on her face convinced him. He turned, swinging the muzzle of the tommy gun with him.

The gyrocar was only a dot on that limitless plain. But it was moving swiftly, slanting away from them; it seemed to be heading toward the column of smoke.

It was too far away to make out what it was. But it was the only moving thing Nick Marengo had seen since he had left the village of Akkah.

Constance backed up slowly as he turned. Then she turned and ran. She ran wildly, terror whipping aside her fatigue.

Nick swung around. "Hey!" he yelled.

Constance kept running.

Nick shot a glance at the moving gyrocar slanting away from them; then he started after Constance. The tommy gun hampered him. He was not that interested in her as a woman. But he did not want to be left alone there—he was afraid of being alone.

They ran across that bluish land—a slim girl and a gangster from another world. They moved without sound and without direction, under a depressing and alien sky.

Neither of them saw the crystal ball that floated up from the gully paralleling them. The ball halted, poised several feet above the lip of the fissure. It hung there as though listening, or sensing, the colored lights within it flashing, revolving.

Nick's breath was coming fast. There was a pain in his chest as his lungs labored to suck in air. Constance stumbled. She fell, too spent to get up immediately. Nick came up and stood over her, his eyes flinty.

"I oughta—"

Then he saw the crystal ball coming toward them. Instinctively he swung the muzzle of the tommy gun up and fired, emptying its magazine.

The ball jerked and bounced to the battering of the bullets. It rang like a clear crystal bell, but it did not smash. It began to wobble crazily, however, as though something within it had been thrown out of kilter. Then, like an iridescent soap bubble, it popped—and vanished.

Constance scrambled to her feet, remembering what had happened with Steve back in the valley of the saurians.

"Run!" she screamed.

The groove appeared in the ground as the force came. It made a thin, dry, crackling sound, moving toward them.

Nick stared.

Constance grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. Then, frightened, she began to run.

The force crackled toward the spot where Nick had been standing, making a groove in the earth as it came.

Nick panicked. He flung the now useless tommy gun away and ran after Constance Mortimer.

The force crackled across the spot where he had been standing, ripping an instantaneous furrow six inches deep. It made a wide circle, came back and began to search for them, blindly, methodically. . . .

FOR ALMOST a half mile Constance Mortimer kept ahead of Nick—running, stumbling, finally staggering to a stop as the last of her terror-induced strength gave out. She looked back. Nick was stumbling toward her, waving, yelling something she could not make out. She picked up a rock, held it tightly in her small fist. . . .

"Steve!" she whispered, and the memory of the tall man brought an ache to her heart. Somewhere on this alien and terrifying world Steve Blair was still alive. And he would be looking for her. Deep inside herself she knew this—and it buoyed her, kept her from sinking into utter despair.

Nick came up, walking the last fifty yards. He ignored her threatening motion; perhaps he did not even notice it.

"What was it?"

His eyes had a haunted, cornered look as he glanced back. Sweat beaded his narrow, feral face. He turned to Constance, his voice hoarse, repeating:

"What was that thing?"

Constance shook her head and slowly lowered her clenched fist. She had no answers for Nick.

"This is crazy," Nick said bitterly. "This whole place is crazy!" He looked up into the strange sky, and his snarl was instinctive, like that of a cornered rat.

"Where are we?"

It was a stricken, hopeless cry, and he did not expect an answer. His mouth was dry, but he was not thirsty. Nor was he hungry. It seemed ages since he had eaten anything or had a drink.

He took out a handkerchief and mopped his sweat-beaded face. The plain seemed to run endlessly in all directions—barren, bare, hostile.

His voice fell to a whimper. "Ain't there any trees in this blasted place?"

Constance shrugged helplessly. "Maybe," she said, "somewhere ahead. . . ."

He turned to her, his eyes frightened. "We've got to stick together."

Constance stepped back from him, raising her clenched fist. He shook his head. "I won't bother you. Just don't leave me. I don't want to be alone. Not here. . . ."

Constance lowered her hand and let the stone slide out from between her fingers.

She studied him for a moment, not quite trusting him. But he was staring off into the distance, subdued, cowed by what he could not understand.

"What are we going to do?"

"We can't stay here," Constance said. "There'll be more of those crystal balls with the flashing lights, looking for us. The Romans call them the 'eyes of Ankar,' whatever that means."

He turned to her. "Whatever you say, sister."

She said coldly: "It's Miss Mortimer—not sister."

He nodded submissively.

"Yes, Miss Mortimer."

THEY MOVED without direction over that vast fissured plain. They slanted away from the smoke column, sensing danger there. They moved without hope, two tiny lost beings under that alien sky.

Constance's mind was numb. She thought of Steve, and a

flash recall of the golden-haired girl standing just inside the gates of Akkah brought a pang of jealousy to her. *Talia!* Was Steve with her?

Nick's fingers, gripping hard into her arm, jerked her back into awareness.

Ahead of them, rising up from the barren plain, loomed a great stone arch—towering, massive, mysterious. It was all that remained standing of what had once been an enormous stone building. Around it lay broken columns and great blocks of stone—ancient ruins of some forgotten time.

Constance stared.

Something seemed to stir among those ancient blocks of stone; a wind sighed through that massive archway. Yet nothing moved beyond it. There was only a shallow, empty valley, as dreary and barren as the plain they had crossed.

Nick took a step backward. "Let's get out of here."

Constance didn't move. They reminded her of Stonehenge, these ruins. But they were incredibly older, more massive.

The small wind stirred across the broken columns, although there was no breeze where they stood. A voice sighed through that towering archway:

"Constance—Constance Mortimer."

Constance started. Was she hearing things? She turned to look at Nick.

"Did you hear it?"

Nick wet his dry lips. "Hear what?"

"Someone calling. Out there." Constance pointed to the towering stone arch.

Nick stared at the massive ruins, his face haggard, his eyes uncertain. Beyond the archway lay the shallow, empty valley. Nothing moved there.

"Constance—Nick."

The voice beckoned on the wind that stirred among those ancient ruins—calling, calling.

Nick stiffened. He turned to Constance, his face paling.

"You heard it!" she exclaimed. Excitement flushed her cheeks. "There's someone out there—someone who knows us."

Nick shook his head. "No. No."

"I'm going to find out. Maybe it's Steve."

She started to run toward the massive Druidic archway.

From the valley beyond that stone gate, the voice sighed. "It's Steve—Stephen Blair."

Nick drew his underarm gun. He was afraid, utterly and incomprehensibly terrorized.

"Don't go!" he yelled to Constance. "I don't want to stay here alone!"

But Constance was running past the fallen columns, toward the valley beyond the stone arch.

"Steve! Oh, Steve, I'm coming. . . ."

Nick fired. He did not want to kill her, only frighten her into stopping. His bullets ricocheted off the fallen stones, whining angrily into the empty valley.

Constance turned a step from the massive arch and cast a frightened glance at Nick. He was running toward her, waving his pistol.

"Come back!"

Something moved just beyond the ancient stone of the enormous doorway—a tantalizing blur, like something seen out of the corners of one's eyes.

"Hurry, hurry," the voice sighed.

Nick stopped.

"Miss Mortimer!"

But she was running between the ancient stones into the gently sloping valley beyond. He fired once more, this time trying to hit her. He saw her stumble slightly; then she was through the stone doorway, still running.

Nick stared, shocked.

Constance was running down-slope, but her body was

thinning, becoming transparent. He could see through her to the empty plain beyond.

She kept running, a wraith of a girl against the bluish horizon. Then she was gone, and only the ruins and the empty valley remained.

Again that odd wind stirred among the broken columns and huge stone blocks. The soft sibilant voice called again: "Nick—come, Nick."

He emptied his Luger toward the voice, the bullets spattering and ricocheting against the stones. It had no effect on that sibilant, inviting voice.

"Nick, come."

The gangster turned and ran wildly away from the old and silent ruins. . . .

Chapter Fourteen

—Beyond the Druid Gateway—

THERE WAS no road, no trails, not even any sign that anyone ever traveled that vast and sullen plain. It seemed endlessly wide and level to the eye. Yet behind Steve and Harry Bucknell, as they walked, the village of Akkah receded, became an insignificant speck on the horizon and finally disappeared.

The two men moved without direction now, heading toward the column of smoke that seemed near and yet never came closer.

The fissures ran like spidery cracks through the desolate plain, most of them less than ten feet deep. But occasionally the bluish earth was rent by cracks that

seemed to reach down into the very core of the planet, and these they had to circle.

Steve moved with a relentless stride, the spear gripped tightly in his right hand. Over them hung the oppressive sky. They could not tell if it was night; only the overcast changed, from yellow to green to blue. No stars, if stars there were in this remote corner of the universe, shone through the cloud cover.

Bucknell began to falter. "Steve!" he called. "Wait, Steve!"

Steve looked back. Bucknell made a weary gesture as he came up. "Have to rest, Steve. Not as young as I used to be."

Steve nodded. "Sorry, Harry."

Harry looked at his wrist watch. It was still ticking away the seconds, the hands indicating it was ten past two. But time was meaningless here. And yet instinctively he had glanced at his watch—it was his only reference to something he knew, and somehow comforting.

"Steve," he said tiredly, "where are we going?"

Steve looked out over the meaningless plain. He was thinking of Constance Mortimer, of her vulnerability. Was she still alive? What sort of death came to people on this planet, those who were not violently killed?

Sol Eban and the villagers of Akkah were at least four thousand years old by earth time! Yet they had not seemed to age at all! Nor had Claudius and his Roman legion!

Grimly he pushed these speculations from his thoughts. It was Constance Mortimer he was concerned with. He had to find her, wherever she was on this bizarre planet, and somehow get her back to earth.

Bucknell seemed to sense his thoughts. "It's one chance in a million we'll find her, Steve."

"Maybe," Steve nodded. His voice was grim; his jaw hard. "But wherever she is, we'll find her!"

They moved on, following the rim of a fissure that was too deep for them to cross. Ahead of them the land rose slightly, and Bucknell began to tire again. Then abruptly the earth sheared off, dropping twenty feet to a depression several miles across.

They stopped on the rim and looked down. Chunks of black basalt rock lay scattered for as far as the eye could see. But there was a pattern to the rock field. The huge basalt blocks were grouped in clusters—five or six smaller ones grouped around a larger block.

Steve glanced down. The slope was steep, but descent could be managed.

"Let's go through, Harry."

Bucknell gripped his arm. "I don't like the looks of this, Steve." He pointed. "Look!"

The bluish overcast seemed much closer here, hanging like a shield above the rock field. Here and there small darts of light speared down, like attenuated electrical discharges, miniature lightning flashes shooting down to each of the larger black blocks of stone.

Steve shrugged. "We have to get across."

He started down the steep incline. Bucknell hesitated, then followed, sliding part way down the slope. Steve waited and helped him to his feet.

They started to move warily among the rocks. Around them the electrical discharges flickered eerily; then the nearest blocks began to move!

The big one nearest Steve turned, making a loud grinding noise as it did so. The smaller ones around it flipped over and began to scatter slowly, moving away from the two men.

Bucknell stopped. "Steve—the big ones—they're coming after us!"

The huge black rock to the left of Steve tilted and fell across their path. An electrical discharge leaped from the

rock toward them. Steve felt a tingling through his body. He spun away and pulled the slower-footed physicist with him.

All around them the rock field was in motion. The grinding and crashing of the big basalt blocks as they turned and flopped over and straightened again was deafening.

Steve yelled in Bucknell's ear: "Stay close behind me!"

He began running like a broken field runner, evading the clumsy but deadly rocks. The discharges from the sullen sky to the big blocks and then to the men grew stronger.

Bucknell gasped as one of the many-pronged lightning flashes hit him. He staggered, his entire side numbed.

The electrical discharges flickered wildly now. The entire rock field was illuminated by the countless discharges.

Great blocks of stone crashed into one another, as though, disturbed, they fought amongst themselves. The smaller rocks were clustered behind, as though huddled together protectively.

Steve pulled Bucknell with him. They staggered past the last of the great blocks and scrambled up the steep slope to the level plain beyond. Then, panting, still tingling from the electrical bombardment, they looked back.

Slowly the electrical discharges began to ebb; the great threshing and clashing of the black slabs stilled. Silence fell across the rock field as the huge slabs settled back into timeless, motionless vigil. The electrical discharges faded altogether.

Harry Bucknell mopped his high-domed forehead. He looked into Steve's grim face. There was nothing to say. They were becoming inured to strange and bizarre events on the planet. Finding them unexplainable, they accepted them.

Steve glanced up at the sky. He sensed a change in the overcast. A sense of foreboding sent a tremor through him.

A greenish tinge was beginning to show on the far horizon.

The Long Sleep!

It was stealing over the planet—a dread dawn, unavoidable, swift. His heart sank. He had to find Constance before it overcame him.

He hurried Bucknell now, swinging into long, tireless strides. The heavy physicist bit his lips, but he kept up, sensing the urgency in the younger man.

Something glinted in the bluish light ahead. Steve swung toward it, Bucknell following.

Nick's tommy gun lay close to a small hillock. Steve picked it up and examined it. The magazine was empty. But the smell of cordite still clung to the muzzle of the weapon.

Bucknell eyed the gun. Steve said, his voice grim: "Nick's." He turned his gaze to the plain around them. "He's out here somewhere—with Constance Mortimer."

Bucknell pointed to shallow grooves in the earth around them. "Look like tracks," he said. "But what vehicle—or animal—"

Steve shook his head. "Something entirely different," he said grimly. "A force, similar to what Claudius called the 'devil wind.' " He took a deep breath. Maybe this was what had overtaken Nick and Constance. If so—

But he couldn't give up now. Finding Constance was the only thing that kept him going. To give up would be to give in to utter madness.

He dropped the tommy gun where he had picked it up. It was no use to him.

Bucknell was pointing to something just beyond the hillock. Steve joined him.

The heel of a man's shoe showed plainly in a bit of soft earth.

"Maybe they got away," Harry said. There was a faint note of hope in his voice.

They followed Nick's flight for a few hundred yards;

then the ground turned flinty and they lost him. Steve stared grimly at the horizon. They could be anywhere out there, hidden from sight by any of the innumerable gullies.

He gripped his spearhead firmly. There was a chance Constance was still alive. That was all that mattered.

They moved past one of the shallow gullies without seeing Nick. The gangster came staggering up and paused. His fear-haunted eyes followed Bucknell and Steve for a long moment before he recognized the taller, younger man.

"Steve!"

His hoarse yell swung Steve around. Nick started to run toward them, waving his automatic pistol. "Wait—wait for me."

Steve tensed, eyeing the gun in Nick's hands. There was no sign of Constance.

The gangster came up, sobbing. "Geez, it's good to see somebody human again. . . ."

Steve reached out and wrenched the pistol from his hand. Nick didn't care.

"I'm going crazy," he cried. "This place—everything—" He sank down and covered his face with his hands.

Steve shot a look at Bucknell. The physicist was looking at Nick, sympathy in his eyes.

Steve checked the gun's magazine. It was empty. He reached down, grabbed Nick's coat lapels and jerked him upright.

"Where's Miss Mortimer?"

The thin-faced gangster glanced off. "Disappeared —changed—Oh, Geez, I don't know."

Steve shook him. "Hang it all, man—*where is she*?"

Nick made a vague gesture. "Out there somewhere. Past the stone ruins. She went through the big stone door."

He shuddered. "I yelled at her not to go. I didn't want to be left alone."

Steve's heart leaped. She was alive!

"Show me where!"

Nick held back. "No. I'm not going back there!"

Steve shoved him away. "All right," he said grimly. "Stay here. We'll find her."

He started to move away, then remembered the Luger in his hand. He turned to Nick. "You carrying spare magazines for this?"

Nick reached inside his coat pocket and tossed Steve his spare clip. Steve tossed the empty away, slid the loaded clip into the Luger and thrust the pistol into his waistband.

He and Bucknell moved away. After a long, indecisive moment, Nick followed.

"Wait!" he called after them. He ran up beside Steve. "That way." He pointed to the right of the distant smoke column.

Steve glanced up at the sky. The green was more perceptible now, higher on the horizon.

He quickened his steps.

THE DRUIDIC RUINS rose up against the sky, thrusting from the barren plain—still, quiet, aeons old, inscrutable. Giant blocks of stone, fashioned by a people long since vanished, leaving behind only the stone arch—a question mark against the somber sky.

Bucknell stared.

"Stonehenge," he said, dry-mouthed. "Stonehenge, only ten times larger. But the same configuration."

Nick pointed to the massive stone gate. "She went through there. . . ."

Steve frowned. There was nothing beyond except a gently sloping valley.

He looked at Nick.

The man was babbling: "She went through, and then she just became a ghost. She was still running when she disappeared. . . ."

Something stirred among the ancient ruins!

Nick felt it. He shrank back.

"The voice," he choked. "We heard a voice."

A slight breeze moved through the arch; a whisper emerged from somewhere, soft, sibilant.

"Steve. . . . Stephen Blair. . . ."

Steve said: "Constance?"

The valley beyond the massive stone gate was empty. Nothing moved as far as he could see. Was it Constance calling him? He couldn't say for sure. But the voice was that of a woman, and it had an hypnotic quality that was hard to resist.

He started for the Druid arch.

Bucknell grasped his arm, holding him back. "Don't go, Steve."

Steve looked at Nick. "You sure she went through that arch?"

Nick nodded. "She was running. I couldn't stop her."

The voice came again from somewhere among the broken columms—soft, inviting, appealing. "Please, Steve, hurry. I'm waiting. . . ."

Bucknell held onto Steve's arm. "Steve, wait! We don't even have an inkling of what lies beyond."

"Constance's there somewhere," Steve said. "I have to go. I have to find out what happened to her."

He pulled away from Bucknell and started to run toward the giant stone arch.

Bucknell hesitated, glancing at Nick. "Well, you coming?"

Nick backed off and shook his head.

Bucknell shrugged. He turned and lumbered after Steve, who was running past fallen blocks of stone. *Something* stirred among those ruins; *something* whispered, laughed.

Bucknell's skin crawled. Fear dried his throat. But he kept running behind Steve.

Nick looked around him. *Things* were moving among the ruins, but he couldn't see them. He glanced back toward the barren, limitless plain; he cringed under that

alien sky. He couldn't stand being alone again.

He began to run, fear giving him speed, behind Bucknell and Steve.

Up ahead, Steve paused in front of the massive stone gate. He drew Nick's automatic and held it ready.

The voice rustled among the ruins around him; he seemed to feel a woman's soft hand (or was it the wind?) caress his cheek.

"I'm waiting, Steve, waiting."

Steve took a deep breath. He stepped into the archway and felt a coldness, as though he had stepped into a refrigerator, and then he began to run—run down a gentle slope toward the empty valley ahead.

Bucknell jerked to a stop a few feet from the archway.

Steve was beginning to fade. The tall man was still running, but the empty plain beyond was beginning to show through his body.

"Steve!" The desperate cry was wrenched from Bucknell.

Steve did not stop. Bucknell took a step into that ancient, mysterious archway. He felt the chill assail him, and then he began to run.

Ten yards behind him, Nick followed.

The three of them ran soundlessly into the silent empty valley beyond the ruins. And slowly they disappeared, still running. . . .

Chapter Fifteen

—The Valley of Illusion—

STEVE EXPERIENCED no sensation of change. It was the barren plain that changed. Ghostly buildings began rising on either side of him, solidifying. He found himself on a wide city street, macadamized, with rows of parked vehicles, no different from the automobiles of his times.

A drizzle was sifting down from a wet gray sky, wetting his face. He walked slowly toward the corner. The stone and red brick buildings were vaguely familiar. People hurried by on the streets, some in raincoats, some carrying umbrellas. No one paid any attention to him.

A car came toward him, emitting the familiar purr of gasoline exhaust. He jumped aside at the last minute as he

saw that the driver, a middle-aged man wearing glasses, was not about to swerve. He turned and watched it roll by. The man was talking to his wife, seemingly unaware Steve was there at all.

A car radio carried a snatch of news program: "Israeli bombers pound Egypt for third straight day—" Then the car was gone, and a voice he recognized was calling;

"Steve! Steve!"

He turned and waited as Harry Bucknell and Nick came running up. Nick turned and waved his arms; he was half laughing, half crying. "We're home! I don't know how and I don't care. But we're home!"

The neon sign above the building on the corner read: JAKE'S BAR & GRILL. In the wet grayness, the red neon light flickered unsteadily.

Nick said: "First thing I'm gonna do is get roaring, wild-catting drunk!"

Steve tried to hold him back as he started for the bar. "Wait, Nick—"

Nick shook him off. "That's all right, Perfessor. I don't need you any more. This is my territory now. I know my way around."

Steve and Bucknell watched him swagger inside the bar.

Steve shrugged. "There's something strange about all this, Harry. Did you notice the car that nearly ran me over?"

Bucknell nodded.

"The driver must have seen me. But neither he nor his wife seemed aware I was there—"

A wild, strangled scream of terror interrupted him. It came from Jake's Bar, and it was Nick's voice.

Steve glanced at Harry; then both men made a run for the building.

The interior of Jake's Bar was like that of any small-time cocktail place. It was small, dingy and dimly lighted. It did not have many customers.

Nick was backed up against the far wall, white-faced, staring, utterly demoralized. He saw Steve and Bucknell come inside, and a flicker of gladness came into his face.

Steve glanced around the small room. The bartender was wiping the bar top. Several customers were talking, their voices a monotone, almost inaudible. A girl was seated at a small table, a drink in front of her. She was checking her face in a small hand mirror.

No one paid any attention to them, or to Nick.

Steve frowned. "What happened?"

Nick just pointed wordlessly at a man hunched on a stool at the bar, brooding over his drink. Steve walked to the bar.

"A double whiskey," he said sharply to the bartender, "for my friend."

The bartender kept wiping the bar top. The customer at Steve's elbow kept looking into his glass, his face unshaven, unhappy.

Steve said loudly: "Hey!" He reached over to tap the unhappy drinker on the shoulder. His fingers touched nothing solid. The man kept staring into his drink.

It was an ordinary scene, and yet utterly bizarre! Steve backed off.

Constance! The name popped into his mind, and from somewhere in the room a woman's soft, sibilant voice whispered back: "Constance. Steve."

He quickly looked around him, but the few customers at the tables were talking to one another, and the girl at the near table, legs crossed, was touching up the corners of her eyes with an eyebrow pencil.

Steve backed slowly toward the door. Nick and Harry joined him. They emerged from the bar into the street; the drizzle sifted down over them.

They didn't speak.

Around them the city went on about its business. People streamed by. A bus roared past, a dark gray exhaust

spuming into the air. Steve could smell it.

It could have been any fairly large city in the United States. And yet—

A late model car came by, tires swishing on the wet macadam. Steve glanced at it, then reacted as he saw Constance behind the wheel. He called out: "Constance!" but the girl did not hear him.

He ran into the street after her, calling. . . .

Ahead of him the car began to waver. The buildings flanking the street tilted and began to melt, red brick and stone pouring down the sides like molten wax.

Steve stopped. Behind him, Nick and Bucknell were running in his direction.

Around them the city melted away!

The gray overcast and the fine drizzle disappeared. It was now flanked by tall palm trees and hedgerows of bougainvillea. And the sun was shining—*earth's sun!*

A warm humid breeze stirred languidly, rustling the palm fronds.

The three men stared. The road curved around a headland, and tall, gleaming hotels perched on cliffs overlooking a sea.

"Acapulco!"

The name exploded from Nick's lips.

Steve nodded slowly. He had been at this Mexican resort city once, some years back, with some college friends; had watched the divers go off the cliffs in their long, dangerous plunge into the swirling sea below—

Bucknell gripped his arm. "That girl—"

She was walking into the lobby of one of the hotels up ahead—tall, well-dressed, chic.

Steve knew it was not Constance, not the Constance he had last seen on Gohr. Yet he had to try—had to make sure.

He ran after her, calling: "Connie. Connie."

The girl disappeared into the hotel. Steve called again,

knowing the girl could not hear him—that nobody in that strange and illusory world could hear him.

But a voice did answer him. "Steve! Oh, Steve—"

It was Constance Mortimer's voice—he recognized it. He turned and saw her running down the steep road toward him. He recognized the tattered dress, the buckskin footwear Claudius had put on her feet.

This was no illusion!

He ran to meet her. Around them the resort city was beginning to tilt; the hotels wavered. The sun changed. Bluish wraiths of fog slid across its face.

Connie ran into his arms, sobbing with great relief. "Steve, it is you, isn't it?"

He felt her slim, scantily clad figure press against him, and a deep tide of contentment rose in Steve. He tightened his arms around her and kissed her, forgetting the two men behind him. He had found Constance Mortimer! In all the teeming city of New York, he had been a lonely and dissatisfied man. Not until he met Constance did he realize this—nor had he guessed, until this moment, how much the girl meant to him.

The town melted away around them—but Constance Mortimer remained in his arms. A cold wind blew against them—an icy wind.

Steve looked over Constance's shoulder. There were no palms, no flowering bougainvillea, no towering hotels looking down on a warm blue sea; only a dark plain out of which came a cold wind and a thin pelting snow.

The wind grew louder, shrieking; he felt Constance shiver in his arms.

From somewhere in that bitter cold murk the sibilant voice came again: "Steve, Steve."

It was a sigh above the wind; it was warm, inviting. It seemed to promise many things: contentment, peace. . . .

Steve did not follow it. Somehow he sensed the danger. There was death in that deceptive voice.

Bucknell and Nick clustered around them. Nick shivered. Bucknell gasped: "Steve—she wants you, whoever she is."

"Steve, come," the voice sighed.

The figure appeared now, a hundred yards ahead. A wraith, or a woman? The wind seemed to whistle through her. She beckoned toward them.

"Over here, over here."

Steve said grimly: "No!"

Nick started to go toward her. Steve pulled him back and pointed. Through the driving, bitter snow rose the massive Druidic arch. It was the way out of this world of illusion, if they could reach it.

They struggled against the blasts of the icy wind. The snow whitened the ground, blotting out the great stone gate.

Constance faltered. Her feet were numb. She was freezing.

"Keep moving!" Steve urged grimly. "We've got to keep moving!"

Behind them the voice called: "No, Steve. Over here." Soft and seductive now: "Over here."

They turned despite themselves. The wraith loomed up through the wild, howling snowstorm, beckoning. Behind her was a sunlit vista of palms and orange trees; the long white sands of a sunlit tropical beach. . . .

Nick started to go. Bucknell, too.

Steve drew the Luger from his waistband. "No," he said harshly. "It's a trap. If we follow her we'll wander forever among worlds of illusion. She'll call us, and we'll follow and never find anything we can hold onto."

Bucknell paused. Nick eyed the gun in Steve's hand.

"Home," he said brokenly. "I want to go home, Perfessor."

Constance sagged heavily in Steve's arm; she could not last much longer.

"I'll get you home," Steve gritted, "but not this way—not following her dreams." He gestured with the gun. "The stone gateway. It's our only way out."

They followed him, staggering, half frozen, toward the massive stone arch barely seen through the driving storm. The voice behind them became more distant and began to fade. . . .

Only Steve's iron determination got them through the Druid archway. They staggered out onto the plain beyond—onto the now familiar, barren world of Gohr.

The howling blizzard vanished. The cold was gone.

They stumbled among the ancient broken columns and rested here, leaning against the stones, and almost at once a great lassitude overcame them.

Overhead, the sky was a greenish blue. The Long Sleep gripped the land. Constance fell asleep in Steve's arms. Around them rose the hungry pipings of the native *piliie*.

Steve's last awareness was of the towering stone arch, of the empty, innocent-looking valley beyond.

Something rustled among the ruins, and a soft voice laughed mockingly. He thought he saw the woman in the archway, heard the soft seductive voice call him. Then all was quiet, and he slept.

Chapter Sixteen

—The Call of Earth—

THE GYROCAR sped across that trackless land, a speck of life, the only moving thing under that baleful greenish sky. It moved swiftly, traversing the innumerable gullies, slipping over them on invisible roadways of air.

The angry pipings of the *pilíe* beat against the plastic shield that enclosed Talia at the gyrocar's controls. But there was frustration in the sound; they could not get through to her.

Talia sat in the molded plastic seat, her golden hair framing an olive-skinned face. She was an anachronism in that land, a stranger.

As she drove flashes of memory came to her—of a

distant world, another time. She had been a temple virgin in Akkah when the force had struck, lifting the entire village from the banks of the Nile and transporting it across the vast gulf of space.

She did not know how, nor did she care much. She had been given power she could not understand, but she loved having the use of it. She was the chosen of Ankar; she paid homage only to him.

But memories of the land where she had been born stirred in her, making her restless. She wanted to go back home. The planet of Gohr was an alien place, and although she ruled over it, it was not satisfying.

Ankar had understood. He, too, was leaving, going back to wherever he called home. His work was done here, he had told her.

Only vaguely was she aware of the changes that had taken place on earth—and these were gleaned from talking to the Americans, Harry Bucknell and Stanford and Frank Mortimer. The world, it seemed, had changed much in her lifetime—but it was still earth,

She thought of the tall American, Ste-fan. He was different from any of the men she had known—different from Sol Eban. She could be happy with him. And he could not refuse her.

The walls of Akkah appeared on the horizon, white, gleaming, still. A greenish halo hung over the metropolis. It protected the city from any invasion, but it also kept those inside prisoner.

Sol Eban, she knew, hated her for this. But there was nothing he could do but accept it.

The gyrocar sped toward the city and came to a smooth, silent stop a few feet from the lane of death. The heavy portals were closed. The guard on the wall slept, as did everyone within the village.

Talia touched a control, and the break in the "moat"

appeared. The heavy portals swung open on noiseless hinges.

She sped down the wide street toward the temple building wherein Sol Eban lived. The wide thoroughfare was deserted. Only the stone gods looked down on her as she sped past.

Sol was in his chambers, a short dark man, asleep on his bed. Two of his wives stood in attendance, frozen figures, arms extended.

Talia reached over and touched Sol's arm, and his eyes flickered, then opened as awareness surged through him.

"Where are the Merikans?" Talia's voice was impatient. She had searched the prison cell and found them gone.

"Escaped," Sol said. "Don't know how." His voice sounded tired. "One of them died in the lane of death."

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Who?"

He smiled malevolently up at her. "One died—I do not know who."

Talia's hand went to a small rod protruding from the power pack she carried on her shoulders. Sol knew instantly what it was and the agonizing death it caused. He shrank away from her.

"It was not the man you call Ste-fan," he said. "It was the older one."

Her hand came away from the deadly rod.

"They killed the guard," Sol continued. "They waited by the gate and escaped as you left. We could not follow."

Talia stared angrily down at him. "Fool!"

She took her fingers from Sol's arm. She wanted Ste-fan; she would not leave for earth without him. She would need him. Ste-fan was familiar with things as they were on earth now. Sol Eban was a relic from another time; he no longer fitted.

She saw the light of awareness begin to fade in the small man's dark eyes as the Long Sleep reclaimed him. She

touched his arm again; she had something to tell him.

"Soon it will be day. I will leave the lane of death open. You will march through with your men to the cave of Ankar. The transport pyramids are ready."

Sol nodded.

"And Ste-fan—?"

"I will find him," she said confidently. "The eyes of Ankar will find him for me. There is no place on Gohr where he can hide from them."

Sol sighed. "Soon we will go home, then? You promise, Talia?"

"Yes," she said. "You will go home."

Sol smiled. "I have been a prisoner here. All of us have been, even you, Talia. It will be good to go back to earth, to a warm sun, to things growing—green things." He tightened his fingers on her hand. "Yes, Talia, even the rain—"

"Yes," Talia said, "it will be good to be back, Sol." For a moment she was a woman, thinking only of home. She felt a sudden tenderness for the man, and she brushed her fingers lightly across his cheek. "We will be happy there, Sol, all of us."

"Yes, happy," he murmured, "even to die—on earth. But not here. Just once I want to walk free, like a man; not be caged here, in a place I do not understand."

"You will get your wish," she promised him. "Now sleep." She withdrew her hand, and Sol smiled. He slept with that smile on his face.

Talia walked swiftly back to her gyrocar and entered. She rolled through the silent, deserted street, pausing before the gate.

She touched a control on the panel, and the portals swung open. Another control, and the gravity lane beyond the gates broke.

The break in the "moat" remained as she sped through, heading for the distant column of smoke.

DAYLIGHT CAME stealing like a spray of gold through the green overcast. The pipings of the *piliie* began to fade.

Awareness came slowly to Steve. It was as though his frozen thoughts were thawing, beginning to drift sluggishly through the channels of his mind.

He was looking down at Constance, and he saw recognition flicker through her eyes. Her lips moved, and a word, barely audible, formed on them.

"Steve."

He smiled at her and then turned his head to look around at the place where they were. The yellow glow was moving swiftly through the overcast, paling and superseding the green tinge. The chameleon earth changed with it, absorbing the yellow-gray tint from the sky.

A great weariness seeped through Steve, drawing him down beside the girl. He felt the warmth of her bosom as he pillowed his head on her. Her hand felt cool and comforting against his brow as she smoothed back his tousled hair.

"Steve," she said softly, "will we ever get back home?"

He shrugged. He was too tired to think, to plan. "Some day, perhaps," he replied, and Constance Mortimer did not press him. Somehow the matter did not seem as important as it had earlier. She had Steve with her again, and she trusted his capability to take care of her.

Just beyond them Nick was resting, his face in his hands.

Harry Bucknell stirred. He dragged himself to his feet and looked toward the massive stone arch. There was no wild storm beating beyond that gate—no palms, no sunlit sea, no modern, traffic-choked city; only the gently sloping valley. . . .

Had it been only a dream?

Something moved again, unseen, rustling among the Druidic ruins. Enticing, soft, the voice called to them:

"Steve. Connie." It was warm and friendly; it called to them, as if from home: "Nick. Harry."

Bucknell shuddered and turned to Steve. "Let's get away from here!"

Steve rose and pulled Connie up beside him. He walked to Nick and put a hand on his shoulder. His voice held a touch of pity.

"Come on, Nick. . . ."

The gangster raised his head. "We'll never get back, will we, Perfessor?"

"Not by staying here," Steve replied.

Bucknell sighed heavily. "Nick's right, Steve." He gestured helplessly. "We don't even know where this planet is. We could wander forever across this barren land. And God knows what awful place we'll stumble into again. . . ."

"We'll have to take that chance!" Steve said. His jaw set stubbornly. "We can't stay here, just give up!" He looked off across the plain. "Claudius and his Roman legion are out there somewhere. And they know where the cave of Ankar is."

"I doubt if Claudius will help us now," Constance cut in. "Nick shot one of his men."

"We'll have to chance that," Steve said sharply. "I'll talk to him. We're all in the same boat—we all want to get back to earth." He paused. "The Romans are our only chance."

Bucknell glanced toward the stone arch looming above the empty plain and shuddered.

Nick said dully: "What do you want us to do?"

"We'll keep walking," Steve said grimly. "If we have to walk a lifetime, we'll keep looking for that Roman legion!"

Chapter Seventeen

—Point Of Reference—

THE ROMAN LEGION lay resting in one of the ubiquitous gullies that cracked the immense plain. Above them, its bow projecting slightly from the rim, was a Roman galley, its proud pennant hanging limply from its bow.

They had found it there on one of their early forays, beached, lifeless, but as seaworthy as the day it had been launched. The long oars remained in place, blades resting on the alien earth, the place where strong hands had gripped them worn smooth and shiny. A small colored sail stood ready to receive the wind. But there was no wind

there, no inland sea for it to set sail on.

There was no crew; just the ship, poised there above the shallow gully, ready to set sail for some unknown destination.

Perhaps, Claudius had thought, this gully was the river Styx, running dry now, and the ship was waiting to ferry them across to the land of the dead, as it had already ferried the crew that had manned her.

Maybe they too were dead. Claudius had faced this possibility without flinching. They had died somewhere in Gaul, and this was their lot—to wander forever in that gray, depressing land until they crossed the River Styx.

If that was the case, they were ready. Gripping their swords, they had followed the winding gully for leagues, ready to fight whatever shades they might encounter. Anything, Claudius thought, to find an answer to where they were.

But the answer eluded them. The gully ended some twenty leagues from the Roman ship, dropping sheer into some bottomless pit.

They had returned to the galley and made it home. There were amphorae of oil and almonds and water on the ship, kegs of dried beef and leather for repairing of sandals and harness. They clung to it. It was a fragment of home on that lost and lonely place, and here they returned after their forays.

Claudius kept a harsh Roman discipline. A guard stood watch by the ship. A small patrol roamed the perimeters of their camp.

From this base they had searched for a way back to Rome. And in their wanderings they had stumbled upon many strange places.

In shallow valleys, demons roamed and howled and flung themselves against invisible barriers that kept them prisoner.

They had seen a city beyond the scope of their

imagination—towering buildings of glinting metal and stone, laced by roadways a hundred feet above the ground. Strange winged vehicles darted among the buildings, like dragon flies above a small pond.

He and his legion would have assaulted the city, but the barrier of light enclosed it—the "moat" of death.

Finally they had given up. Claudius no longer had any hope of returning home. His wife and sons were a dimming memory.

But they were still a fighting machine, and they kept marching, searching. There was nothing else to do.

Claudius roused now as daylight spread across the gully. He felt tired as he always did after the Long Sleep. About him his men stirred. There was a growing hopelessness in them; he could see it in their eyes.

He fingered his sword. Perhaps it would be best to put an end to it all: a soldier's death, at the hands of his comrades.

A voice hailed him. He turned to watch the patrol jog by the ship and come down the now worn path into the gully.

Jubal, the leader of the patrol, leaned tiredly on his spear. He had news. The Akkans were leaving their village; they were headed for the smoke column.

Claudius knuckled his stubbled chin. What did it mean?

Jubal shrugged. "The gates of Akkah are open to us. The village could be ours."

Claudius considered. It would be pleasant to set foot inside a village again. But it would not get them home. And if the moat of death were suddenly to close behind them, they would be trapped within Akkah.

He shook his head. "We wait here," he decided.

THE FOUR AMERICANS moved slowly across the trackless land. There was no way of measuring how far they traveled, or how much time passed. Nor could they tell in what direction they moved. There was no north or

south or east or west on this planet, and the only fixed point of reference was the smoke column that rose from the horizon.

They rested now at the base of a low hill. It was the only rise of any consequence they had come upon in all their wanderings.

After a time Steve got to his feet. Bucknell looked up at him with curious apathy.

"Where are you going?"

Steve reached down and caressed Constance's cheek. "I'm going to take a look from the top of the hill," he said. "It should give me a good view of the surrounding country."

The climb was a gradual one, but Steve was winded by the time he topped the summit. He looked across to the other side and almost immediately recoiled and flung his arm across his eyes.

"God!" he said sharply.

Sunlight, unchecked and incredibly brilliant, lay across the earth less than three miles beyond the hill. After the dull pall of the overcast, the yellow glare was almost blinding.

Steve shielded his eyes and studied the land that lay under the sun.

The gravity pall ended sharply, its limits sharply delineated, as though a line had been drawn across the earth. Beyond the area of artificial gravity, the planet of Gohr crinkled in fantastic buttes, peaks and canyons. Nothing moved under that blazing sun.

This was as far as they could go in that direction, Steve thought, and a sense of futility momentarily overwhelmed him. Bucknell's analogy concerning their similarity to ants was crushingly apt.

He turned his face away from the dazzling sunlight and looked back down the long slope. Constance, Harry and Nick were doll-like figures below him. The country under

the gravity pall stretched to the far horizon, dull and monotonously level. Scattered throughout the desolate region valley, pits were like frozen depressions.

Laboratory cages! Specimens from a score of solar systems scattered throughout the galaxy, trapped and confined therein, to be studied at the leisure of the being Talia called Ankar.

Despite the awful magnitude of his plight, something laughed recklessly within Stephen Blair. Point of reference, he thought wryly, remembering Lecomte du Nouy's exposition in his book, *Human Destiny*. Back in New York, as an American, he had unconsciously felt himself to be important. Personally, he had developed a measure of humility, but as a human being he had man's unconscious pride that he was the only reasoning thing in the universe.

Here he was less than an ant, crawling over the face of a land utterly alien and remote from the speck of matter he called home.

His laughter had a bitter and frightening ring in his ears. His glance sought his companions, seeking reassurance in their presence, the way a stranger far from home finds relief at the sight of a countryman.

Harry Bucknell was standing waving his arms, calling him back. The distance between them was too great for them to make out his cries, but there was a frantic urgency in his arm waving.

Then, even as Steve started down, the air at the foot of the hill seemed to distort, as though some sudden heat wave crinkled it.

Bucknell vanished. A moment later the distortion overtook Constance and Nick, who had turned and were running away from the physicist. And with its passing Nick and Constance vanished, as though an invisible eraser had wiped the barren landscape clean of their fleeing figures.

Chapter Eighteen

—Ankar!—

CONSTANCE MORTIMER was on her feet at the base of the low hill when the "eyes of Ankar" came drifting like an iridescent bubble toward them. She watched it hesitate, as if that crystal sphere were a sentient thing that had suddenly become aware of the three people at the foot of the hill.

Bucknell came to his feet with a hoarse shout. "The eyes of Ankar! They've found us!"

The fear in Bucknell's voice caused instinctive reaction in Constance.

She turned and began to run.

The force crackled across the base of the hill. She didn't see Harry Bucknell and Nick vanish. She had her back to them when it swept over her.

She had a brief sensation of burning, tearing pain; then a moment of utter blankness in which she ceased to exist. The

next moment she was herself again, and her only awareness of having moved was caused by the fact that the scene in front of her had changed. Instead of looking at a barren land, she was gazing into a vast, softly lighted chamber dominated by a huge central machine and an enormous pipe that thrust straight up through the cavern's high ceiling.

Bucknell and Nick were standing beside her. They stood on a plate of gray, meshed metal. Ten feet above them was a similar plate. These were the grids of the ether coil.

Talia stood before an instrument board to one side of the grid. A central view-plate, similar to a television screen, mirrored a view of the base of the hill where they had been resting a few moments before. The scene was changing as the crystal ball floated erratically along on its endless patrol.

Talia turned and faced them. "Ste-fan!" she said angrily. "Where is Ste-fan?"

Bucknell and Nick remained silent. Constance's eyes blazed. "You'll never find him!" she said feelingly. "You'll never find Stephen Blair!"

Talia smiled. She was tall and commanding and secure in her power. "I shall find him," she said confidently. "He shall come with me to earth."

She made a slight motion with her hand, and a pair of Nubian guards, armed with spears, stepped forward.

"Come," she commanded the Americans. "Ankar wishes to see you."

The earthlings stepped off the grid. Flanked by the impassive guard, they were ushered away from the central machine that dwarfed everything else in that vast underground chamber.

In a niche smoothed out of the gray stone wall an unsubstantial pink flame rose and fell like a fountain of light. It occupied a small space in the chamber—an unimpressively small space.

Talia halted before the flame. Slowly her arms raised in the ancient symbol of worship.

"Ankar!" she called.

The pulsating flame steadied.

CONSTANCE STARED with horrified fascination. A face was taking shape within that pale pink light—the face of a woman. A coldly chisled face, mask-like in its lack of emotion. A face incredibly beautiful and intensely evil. The eyes in the face watched her as though with remote and amused consideration.

Bucknell, too, was staring into the flame. But the face he saw was not that of a woman. It was that of an old man —a stern, tired man whose eyes looked at him with quiet chiding, the way an understanding father might look at a son who had been naughty.

Nick gasped. The face in the flame was neither that of a woman nor of an old man. It was a broad, vicious countenance, and it was vaguely familiar. It was the face of Joe Bizaki, exaggerated and cruel out of all proportion to reality, leering at him with a triumphant sneer. So real was the face to Nick that he recoiled from it.

The flame flickered. Through the three of them passed a tiny shiver, as though some entity within that flame was touching them with intangible fingers—weighing them.

The sensation was brief, and with its passing came an odd feeling of cold. Slowly the face in the flame faded.

Talia turned. "Ankar is through with you," she said. "Come. I will lead you to the others."

They followed her. They crossed the chamber, heading for the far wall where openings honey-combed the gray rock. They entered one of these, passing into a smaller room where intricate machinery was being tended by dozens of men.

Talia made a brief gesture to their guard; they left them alone in that small chamber.

Constance stared at one of the machine tenders who had turned to look at them. He was a spare, dignified-looking man, and though it was more than ten years since she had said goodbye, she immediately recognized him.

She ran toward him, crying. Bucknell came lumbering behind.

"Frank Mortimer!" he cried. "By all that's impossible—it's Frank Mortimer!"

ELEVEN YEARS had gone by since Frank Mortimer and Henry Gordon, owner of the yacht *Manhattan,* had vanished somewhere off Cyprus in the Mediterranean. Yet neither looked a day older than the afternoon they had set out on that ill-fated journey.

Henry Gordon was a thin wiry man with an angular, shrewd face and a small blond mustache. He and Frank had gone to Yale University together. Gordon had made his money in oil, but he and Frank remained friends, and in his later years Gordon had taken to financing field expeditions in the Near East that combined vacations with work for both of them.

Frank stared at his daughter. She had been eleven years old when he had left New York, and this slim young woman in a tattered dress who called him "Father" was a shock he found it hard to adjust to.

"Connie," he said unbelievingly. "You're joking. My daughter is only a child. . . . "

"It's true," Bucknell said, putting out his hand. "You've been gone eleven years. Your daughter's grown up, Frank!"

Mortimer turned to Constance, his eyes searching her face. "Eleven years!" He whispered the words. "God—it seemed but yesterday."

He put out a faltering hand, and Constance, half crying, threw her arms around him.

"Connie!" he whispered brokenly. "Connie—how did

you get here? How is your mother?"

She told him while Harry Bucknell supplemented her story. "We received your warning, Frank," Bucknell said. "But it was too little to go on, too fantastic to believe. Even the pyramids—the police thought they were some kind of a hoax. They managed to get a couple of the pyramids into the museum on 79th street. But no one seemed to know what to do with them."

Gordon added grimly: "We haven't been outside this chamber since the day we arrived. Most of my crew were destroyed after a short time here. We were kept alive at some whim of Ankar. I guess it also suited Talia, who has plans of her own."

"Ankar is impersonal," Frank Mortimer supplemented. "But Talia is of earth, with the faults or the hopes of all of us.

"She wants power for her own personal satisfaction. She wants to rule earth as she now rules the village of Akkah. Ankar gave her the gift of immortality, but the planet Gohr is too sterile and alien for her. She is cunning and wise, and from us she has drawn a rather detailed picture of the changes that have taken place on earth since her time. And in these underground chambers the Akkans have been making weapons that make those we possess seem as crude and outdated as the first gunpowder-propelled projectiles.

"The Akkans number less than a thousand men in their fighting force, but I assure you they will have the means to conquer a large segment of earth. Already the transport pyramids are ready. Talia is waiting only for Ankar to leave—"

"An old man," Bucknell interrupted. He was frowning. "A sad old man. I saw his face in the flame—"

"It was a woman!" Constance cut in. "A cold, cruel woman of remarkable beauty. That's whom I saw in the flame."

"No!" Nick shook his head and turned to look back into

the larger chamber. "It was Big Joe—"

Frank Mortimer smiled. "Ankar is all things to the viewers. I know. I, too, saw a face—and so did Henry. Each of us saw a different face in the flame. But in reality there is no face there; only the entity that is Ankar. The flame, I think, only mirrors the unconscious expectancy of whoever looks into it. To you, Connie, it was a woman—an evil woman. And for you, Harry, as you said, it was a sad old man—"

Bucknell interrupted. "Just who is Ankar? Or, maybe better—what?"

"As nearly as I can make out, aided by Talia's own observations," Mortimer answered, "Ankar is some super entity from a galactic system on the rim of the universe. I will use the personal pronoun for lack of a better term," he added wryly.

"Ankar was exiled to this remote planet for some infraction of the rules of his people. To while away the time in solitude, he built himself a laboratory and began collecting specimens from neighboring star systems. Earth, particularly, seemed to interest him. With the first crude ether coils, he scooped up bits of earth landscape. Later, at the suggestion of Talia, whom he uses as a medium of communication between himself and his specimens, he built the pyramid traps.

"All this must have happened countless years ago, by earth time reckoning, for his early dredgings on earth brought back the gigantic saurians. From time to time thereafter he sampled earth. I use the term *time* rather loosely. Time has not the meaning for Ankar it has for us. Seemingly the interval of a million years is no more than a few days to Ankar. I am guessing, of course. I feel like an ant trying to understand the passing of human feet by its ant hill when I try to understand the entity within that pulsating flame."

Gordon glanced toward the doorway, where the Nubian

guard watched them in stolid silence.

"Ankar is leaving!" he announced. "Sol Eban and his men have arrived!"

Mortimer stiffened. "This is the moment Talia has been waiting for. Once Ankar is gone, the Akkans will invade earth!"

"And us?" Bucknell questioned. "What does she plan to do with us?"

"She will leave us here," Frank replied, "exiled on this God-forsaken planet—" he glanced at the guard—"unless we manage to make a break and gain access to the transport pyramids before the Akkans leave!"

Connie stared numbly at her father, suddenly remembering the man she loved.

"Steve!" she said brokenly. "Stephen Blair is out there somewhere—alone!"

Chapter Nineteen

—The Way Home—

FOR A LONG time after Steve returned to the base of the hill, he stared at the sullen landscape. He had gone through hell to find Constance, only to lose her again, and the sickening realization rendered him momentarily incapable of action.

What had happened?

Did the force kill? Or did it merely transport the objects of its power coils to a destination controlled by Talia, or to one chosen by the unexplainable Ankar?

He found himself mired in his thoughts, and anger came then, pushing aside his futile speculations. He would not give up! As long as he remained alive, he'd look for Constance Mortimer! Somewhere on the planet was the cave of Ankar—and on this point of destination he set his iron will.

He began to walk, a grim figure with a Roman sword clanking against his twentieth century trousers. He headed back toward Akkah.

He was the only moving thing under that unchanging, yellow-gray sky. Or so it seemed to him. The earth was as dry and inhospitable as a desert. Only the valley pockets broke the monotony, and these he skirted cautiously.

He was bearing away from one of these when he saw the Roman galley. He stared at it for a long moment, unbelieving; then he broke into a run, calling as he did so:

"Claudius!"

The ragged Roman legion came out of the gully at the sound of his voice, wheeling around and falling into battle position.

Claudius strode to the head of his men and stood waiting, a hand on his sword.

"We meet again, Merikan," he growled.

Steve held up the palm of his sword hand in a friendly gesture. "Hail, Claudius!"

The old warrior chief glanced past him, searching the country beyond.

"You are alone?"

Steve nodded.

"The little man with the scar on his face?" Claudius' voice was grim. "Where is he?"

Steve spread his hands wide. "Taken by the devil wind," he explained. "I do not know where."

Slowly then, in halting ancient Latin, he explained what had happened to the quiet listening men. A grudging

admiration came into Claudius' eyes.

"You are a fighter," he acceded. "You are the first man ever to escape from the village of Akkah."

"I wish to go to the cave of Ankar," Steve said bluntly. "Only there shall we find the gateway back to earth."

"To earth?" the Roman echoed.

Steve tried to explain. "The devil wind that took you and your men from Gaul carried you farther away than you realize. We are no longer on earth. We are somewhere among the stars."

"You mean we are dead?" the centurion interrupted.

Steve sighed. He could not make plain their plight to this ragged group of fighting men in terms of modern astronomy. So he fell back on terms they could understand.

"We are in a strange land, far beyond the Pillars of Hercules; farther away than my country, America. Only in the cave of Ankar will we find the way back."

"The road to Rome?"

"Yes," Steve replied, and felt a twinge of guilt at his deception. Claudius would never see his wife and sons again. "Yes," he repeated. "In the cave of Ankar is the road to Rome. I am not deceiving you. This I learned from Talia."

The old warrior turned and faced his men. They stared back at him with impassive countenances. Wherever he led they would follow, even into hell itself! It was the old Roman discipline.

"We have searched every valley, marched to the farthest corners of this strange land," he told them. "Never have we found the road that leads home. Now this Merikan says the way to Rome is through the cave of Ankar. Shall we follow him?"

There was a moment of silence—then a half-hundred clenched fists thrust upward in a gesture of affirmation.

The old warrior turned back to Steve. "It is agreed. We

will show you to the cave of Ankar."

IN A FORCED march, the remnants of the Roman legion, a thousand light years from earth and two thousand years out of their time, headed for the smoke column that dominated that barren land.

Steve matched the old centurion's ground-eating, swinging stride. They talked little.

Blair was staking everything on this Roman fighting force. What would happen when they fought their way into the cave of Ankar would lie entirely in the lap of the old Roman gods.

Claudius found the gully he was looking for, and they followed it to their destination. The cut-banks barely topped the crested helmets of his men, but it provided an effective cover.

Finally Claudius called a halt. He had evidently scouted the ground before, because he acted without hesitation. In a low voice he detailed three men on a mission.

"The Akkan guards," he whispered to Steve, "bar the entrance to the cave."

Steve followed Claudius' example and rested on his heels. The others relaxed around them.

Somewhere beyond the near bank, a man gave a short, gasping cry. There was no other sound. Moments later one of the Roman detail showed up on the bank and nodded silently to Claudius. He wiped a bloodstained sword blade across his tunic.

The Roman chief got to his feet. Steve followed him over the embankment.

The mouth of a tunnel broke the symmetry of the low mound. The smoke pall rose up from a stubby black funnel breaking through the center of the hill. The column went up and spread out over them, like an umbrella, shielding

them from a gravity a thousand times greater than that of earth.

Two Akkans lay sprawled before the entrance. Claudius beckoned to Steve.

"This is the entrance to the cave of Ankar. From here on we will obey your commands, Merikan."

Steve nodded. He took the lead and strode into the tunnel that led downward under the hill.

They had no need of light, for the walls gave out a cool pink glow that softened the harsh features of the grim men. The tunnel was less than twelve feet wide, symmetrically smooth, and it graded gently downward. Twice they came to confusing cross-passages, but Steve kept to a downward way, heading toward the sound of a distant throbbing.

Deep within the bowels of the earth, the tunnel became a bridge of pink light above a dark chasm. Claudius clutched nervously at his sword.

"This truly is the abode of Vulcan," he muttered darkly.

They arrived at last at the end of the tunnel. It opened into a huge chamber dominated by the colossal gravity machine. On the far wall, above the ether grids, hung a television screen. Akkah and the surrounding landscape were mirrored in it.

Steve halted. Claudius and his legion bunched up behind him.

So far they had come unobserved.

Luck played with them. That thought came to Steve as he watched the strange ceremony taking place in that underground temple.

For Talia, with the Akkans grouped in concentric half-circles behind her, was bidding farewell to something in a fountain of pink light. To Ankar, Steve guessed, who was leaving Gohr.

Steve's eyes searched among that silent group of worshippers. Sol Eban was there, at the head of his armed men.

But it was Talia who held his interest. She was standing before the flame, arms outstretched. The entire chamber was hushed, except for the low throbbing of machinery from somewhere beyond.

Then Steve's heart gave a sudden jump as he saw Constance standing with her father and Bucknell just behind Talia.

Claudius shuffled impatiently.

The flame was dying. It flickered convulsively, ebbed, waxed high once more, and then went out.

Ankar had gone home.

Talia turned. Sol Eban was pushing through the waiting Akkans toward her.

Steve gave the order. Silently the remnants of that old Roman legion issued out of the tunnel and charged toward the unsuspecting Akkans.

Surprised and frightened, Sol Eban's men broke and scattered under that charge. Caught unprepared, they gave way and fell beneath the flashing swords of the grim-faced Romans.

Steve slashed and fought his way to Constance's side. The earthlings were huddled together in a tight group.

"Frank!" Steve yelled. "Where are the transport pyramids? They are our only hope." Then, as Mortimer stared, wordless, Steve shook him. "The pyramids, Frank!"

Comprehension lighted up Frank's face. "The middle chamber." He pointed. "In there."

Talia had fallen back at the appearance of the Romans. Now she began to give orders. The disorganized Akkans rallied and began to fight back.

Apparently the Akkans had not yet been equipped with the new weapons, for most of them were relying on lance

and scimitar to meet the Roman short sword. In this they were no match for Claudius' men.

Steve headed for the middle chamber, where the transport pyramids lay in their launching racks.

Talia's orders cut sharply above the clash of steel. A small group of Akkans cut loose from the fighting and ran toward a platform at the far end of the chamber.

A two-foot sphere was mounted on a swivel base. A short nozzle projected from it.

The first Akkan to reach the platform swiveled the nozzle toward the fighters. A blue light, thin and weak, beamed into the men. And where the light struck, men disintegrated.

The Akkan gunner used the deadly ray without discrimination, grimly wiping out friend as well as foe. Steve halted as the ray cut a swath toward them.

Without thinking, he drew Nick's Luger from his waistband. The automatic jumped in his hand, spewing a stream of lead that tumbled the Akkan gunner out from behind the ray machine.

Untended, the nozzle swiveled out of control. The blue ray swept across the colossal gravity machine. A segment of the towering structure vanished. The rest of the boiler-like container, weakened by the sudden disappearance of part of its base, collapsed in a grinding crash.

Frank Mortimer's voice lifted in frantic alarm. "The gravity machine! Good Lord! The gravity shield is going!"

The grim significance of this reached the fighting Akkans. They were scattering again in wild confusion, pursued by Claudius' men.

Mortimer thrust his way to Steve's side. "The pyramids! We've got to make it to the pyramids!"

Steve was conscious of a growing weight. His legs felt heavy. The gun in his fist seemed to double its weight.

A chunk of the cavern ceiling fell into the chamber with

a heavy roar, burying Claudius and a score of his men in the debris. Steve dropped his gun and took Connie by the hand.

The gravity was rapidly increasing. The chamber Frank had pointed out was only a few yards away. But Steve had a moment of panic that they wouldn't make it.

Slowly the monstrous pull of the increasing gravity was beginning to tell. Constance went down to her hands and knees. Steve bent over her. It took all of his strength to help her to her feet again. Half dragging her, he staggered across the doorway.

The nearest transport pyramid squatted silently less than ten feet away. It seemed to take a lifetime for Steve to drag the girl into it. She collapsed almost immediately on the pyramid floor.

"Father!" She pointed weakly. "He's just behind you, Steve!"

Steve turned. Frank Mortimer was less than a dozen feet away. But the crushing gravity was bringing him down. Desperately he began to crawl toward them.

Steve went out to meet him. On the great television screen across the main chamber, he could see the village of Akkah crumbling like a pasteboard mockup under the intense light of the yellow sun. Nick and Harry Bucknell were struggling just behind Mortimer. Gordon and the rest of the Roman legion were still in the main chamber.

For one last moment Steve had a clear view of Talia standing with amazing strength before the fountain where Ankar had dwelt. Her arms were outstretched, imploring, calling him back. . . .

Another chunk of the ceiling crashed down, and the dust of the debris rolled over Bucknell and Nick. Steve reached Constance's father and pulled him back into the pyramid.

He was down on his hands and knees now, unable to rise. Mortimer and Constance were helpless, crushed by the slowly increasing gravity.

Steve's teeth ground with the effort he made. Slowly he dragged himself to the wall where the white, actuating knob protruded. Sweat poured out on his face. With the last of his strength he pushed his hand up that smooth surface until his fingers closed around the knob.

THE PANEL DOOR closed, shutting out the vast turmoil in the cave of Ankar. The pyramid floor went fluid under Steve's feet. The terrible, crushing weight lifted.

On the view-plate on the inside of the pyramid wall, Akkah was briefly mirrored. The buildings were rubble. The valley of the saurians came into view as the pyramid lifted. The shallow sea was boiling under the intense sunlight. Inexorably the enormous pressure was leveling the saucer-like rim of the pit.

A dazzling yellow sun appeared on the screen, flanked by its blue companion. Then they shrank, became part of the familiar procession of stars across the pyramid's screen.

Through it all Steve was aware of two things: a great relief that Constance Mortimer was by his side; and a grim fear that the power that actuated the pyramid was dependent on a central source back in the cave of Ankar.

The stars streamed past. Earth finally appeared on the view-plate. Its green, cloud-spattered surface welcomed them. They dropped through a bank of clouds, and the view-plate went dead.

A slight jar told them they had landed.

Steve pulled Constance to her feet. Mortimer tugged at Steve's arm.

"Quickly," he said, "before the power goes!"

They stepped out into the crisp coolness of a fall evening; stepped out into a pasture with a low rocky hill in the background.

Behind them the pyramid walls fell inward with a little hissing sound and vanished!

Steve put his arms around Constance's bare shoulders. She was shivering. At the end of the pasture he could see a road in the starlight, and farther on the yellow lights of a farmhouse.

They were back on earth!

How many years had passed they could not know, nor what changes had occurred. But it was earth, and that was all that mattered.

Mortimer was looking up into the star-splashed sky. Constance shuddered.

Steve bent his head down and kissed her.

Frank Mortimer kept his eyes on the stars.

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