

The Boy Who Had The Power -- Jean and Jeff Sutton -- (1971)

(Version 2002.09.29 -- Done)

For Erin and Michael Patrick Mahanay

1

SPRAWLED COMFORTABLY in the lush green panda grass, Jedro idly watched the big yellow sun Klore slide downward toward the rim of the Ullan Hills. Its warmth felt good. Far behind it, small and bright in the yellow-blue sky, raced the small orange sun Bergon. Once Klore fell below the horizon, Bergon would splash the darkening hills with its dusky orange light.

Jedro lazily reached out to scratch the ear of a browsing gran, his thoughts languid. He seldom wondered that most of his days and nights, for as long as he could remember, had been spent tending the sleek woolly animals that grazed the rolling hills. He could scarcely conceive that life, at least his own, could be much different.

Neither did he know that his memory cells were blocked.

Yet occasionally in the quiet of night, when Klore and Bergon were down and the sky was agleam with stars, strange things nibbled at his mind -- unidentifiable things which crouched just beyond the borders of his awareness so that he never quite managed to give them shape or substance. But he could remember his life quite clearly, all the way back to that morning, some four years earlier, when he had awakened in the attic room of Oscar Krant's ranch house. That far he could remember, but no further. Beyond that morning was a nothingness.

He had awakened, not knowing who or where he was -- a small boy staring blankly at a dirty ceiling, the scarred and grimy walls that hemmed him in, the tattered curtains that hung limply over the single narrow window. A stale, musky odor touched his nostrils. Lying there, he wondered without wondering, his mind grappling with an awesome vacuum. It was like gazing into a curious emptiness that extended back and back and back.

Who am I? The question came unbidden, bringing a moment of stark terror. His body shook convulsively. He gazed for a long moment at the pale light filtering through the window before rising stealthily to pull aside the dingy curtain. Trees, bushes, low rolling hills limned against a strange yellow-orange horizon -- he knew what he was seeing, knew the names of most of the objects that met his eyes, but with no comprehension of the source of his knowledge. Neither could he remember ever having seen such a strange landscape. That bizarre yellow-orange light on the horizon...He trembled and moved his gaze.

His eyes settled on a dilapidated barn fronting a series of large fenced fields that had been designed to hold what? He didn't know, for the fields were empty. Trampled mud around a nearby water hole suggested that the fenced areas had held animals of some kind.

He let his gaze wander. A rutted dirt road winding off into the distance, an old wagon with a broken wheel, a small vegetable garden overgrown with weeds -- his recognition came totally without conscious memory. It was as if his strange surroundings had been conjured up in some nightmarish dream.

Who am I? The question came again, this time more forcefully. Swirling out from some hidden place in his mind, it brought with it an anxiety that caused him to tremble anew. Trying to remember was like looking into a black and bottomless well; the effort was almost a pain. Closing his eyes, he fought to think.

J-E-D-R-O...Letter by letter the name formed in his mind. Flaring there in the darkness of his thoughts, it gave him an odd sense of identity. The name (for he instinctively knew that it was a name) had seeped out from that region of blankness from which he himself had seemed to come. I am Jedro! He gripped the window ledge filled with the knowledge while the name surged through his consciousness like a pleasant stream. He was Jedro!

A door slammed somewhere below, followed by the loud clomp of boots coming closer. Frightened, he sprang back into bed and watched the door. It opened and a heavy-set man with coarse, mean features stepped into the room. His grimy trousers, faded shirt, and muddy boots were oddly at one with his dark, scowling face.

"Awake, eh?" he snarled. "It's about time." Staring down at the boy, he rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

Terrified, Jedro asked, "Where am I?"

"Where are you? Ha, you are dumb."

"Please," he whispered.

"My name is Mr. Krant, and you're here to work on my ranch."

"Please, Mr. Krant, how did I get here?"

Krant's eyes narrowed. "The fewer questions you ask, the better off you'll be," he warned.

"But..."

"Get up," he roared. "Get dressed and go downstairs. I can't have you loafing around all day."

"Yes, sir," Jedro answered hurriedly. Frightened and bewildered, he hastened to comply. Krant left the room, clomping back down the stairs.

That's the way it had been that morning, when first he had awakened in the attic room -- back at the edge of his memory, beyond which there was nothing. Dressing, he'd hurried downstairs. Krant's wife, Lena, had served him a bowl of cold mush. Thin and sloppy, with stringy gray hair that she seemed to be continually brushing back from her narrow face, she didn't speak until he began to eat.

Then she said to her husband, "He looks puny."

"I'll build him up," growled the rancher.

"Hmmmph!" She eyed Jedro disparagingly. Shifting uncomfortably, he looked down into his bowl.

"Hurry up and slop it down," snarled Krant. "I can't wait all day."

Hastily gulping the mush, he trailed the rancher from the house. The big yellow sun, balanced on the morning horizon, held an alien look that startled him. Halting to gaze at it, he felt a slow hammering somewhere deep inside him -- the hammering of a thought trying to break through into his consciousness. That sun wasn't, wasn't.

"Hurry up," barked Krant. Jedro tore his eyes from the gleaming yellow ball and hurried after him.

The rancher outlined Jedro's duties while giving him a quick tour of the yard and barn. From early spring until late fall he would pasture Krant's flock of gran in the Ullan Hills, moving the animals along the rolling slopes to keep them from cropping the grass to the roots. Sleeping and eating in the open, he would return to the ranch house only occasionally to get food; the rest of the time he would be alone. He savored that.

Before the onset of winter the fattened gran would be herded into the fenced yards to await the chain of reldrawn wagons that would take them to market in a distant town. Relks, Jedro learned, were large, flat-headed quadrupeds that served both for transportation and as beasts of burden. Krant owned two of the creatures, thin, nervous animals that were kept locked in small stalls in one corner of the gloomy barn. They reared, snorting with terror, whenever Krant entered. Their large, dark eyes rolling wildly, their brown and white bodies would tremble. Sight of them evoked a deep stirring in

some hidden part of Jedro's mind, although he was quite certain he had never seen such animals before. He could sympathize with them and understand their fear.

"Not worth their feed," explained Krant. "Only use 'em a few times a year to go to town or ride out to pasture. The rest of the time they're dead weight."

"What are their names?"

"Names? They haven't any. They're just animals."

"They look hungry," he ventured timidly.

"No work, no food," snapped Krant. "That's the policy around here and don't ever forget it."

He gulped, feeling a surge of pity for the animals. He could see no reason why they couldn't be pastured in the nearby panda grass, especially when the relks were only ridden a few times a year. He wanted to suggest it but didn't dare.

The rancher pointed out the various tools and pieces of equipment, explaining how each was to be used. "I'd better not catch you breaking anything," he warned. It struck Jedro that almost everything he'd seen already was broken, but he didn't say so.

As he followed the rancher outside, he glanced at the sky, then jerked straighter. Two Suns! The big alien yellow sun and another -- a small orange sun just lifting above the horizon. Fright stabbed at his mind.

"What are you gawking at?" growled Krant.

"Two suns," he exclaimed.

"What did you expect?" asked the rancher sarcastically. Caught with a deep sweeping incredulity that told him that such a thing could not be, Jedro scarcely heard him.

"An orange sun," he whispered.

"You'd better give me your attention," grated Krant, "because I'm not going to tell you anything twice. You'd better remember that."

"Yes, sir." Jedro wrenched his gaze from the sky, his mind in tumult. Again he had the impression of living a hideous nightmare. He could recognize things that he was certain he'd never seen before, even read the words on the supply containers he'd seen in the barn and know what they meant, although he couldn't remember ever having seen a written word before. Yet he knew his name, the individual letters that composed it. How was that? But a sky with two suns! Although he couldn't recall ever having seen another sky, he knew that two suns couldn't be; and yet they were.

Krant continued outlining his duties. During winter he would repair the barn, fences, water troughs, and perform innumerable other tasks. There was the garden to be tended, fruits and nuts to be picked, wood to be chopped. After dark he would help Mrs. Krant in the house. Jedro couldn't imagine there were enough hours in a day.

When his first day's chores were finished, long after the big yellow sun and its smaller orange companion had set. Mrs. Krant provided him with a bowl of watery soup, some greens from the garden, and a chunk of stale bread. He gulped the food greedily, then asked for more.

"More?" she demanded. She towered over him, hands on her bony hips, her narrow face wrathful. "You'll get exactly what I give you and no more," she snapped.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered meekly.

Still feeling the pangs of hunger, he went outside. It felt good to escape, even if for but a few moments. The sky was alive with stars and a cool breeze touched his face. The cry of a nightbird came faintly from a distance. Again he had the sense of the unfamiliar familiar. Whispers from a deep corner of his mind told him that the strangeness around him was not strange at all, but was merely things he had known in different shape, color, and context. But

two suns! He shuddered with the sense of something terribly wrong.

The consciousness of his hunger made him think of the relks. Glancing cautiously at the house, he sneaked toward the barn. Reaching the door, he hesitated, remembering how the animals had reared and snorted at Mr. Krant's approach. If they kicked up a fuss with him, Mr. Krant would hear for sure. Yet they had to be fed. The knowledge fortified his courage.

Boldly opening the door, he crept inside and paused in the darkness. To his relief, he heard only a low whinny, followed by a stark silence. He had the strange feeling that the animals had been waiting for him. Procuring an armload of fodder from a bin he'd noticed earlier, he dropped half in each stall.

The relks' eyes, aglow in the blackness, fastened on him. The animal nearest him moved forward to brush its moist nose across his cheek. Gazing at the creatures, he felt an odd sense of companionship with them.

"Eat, boy," he whispered. He patted the animal, appalled at its thinness. It seemed scarcely more than skin and bones. As the relk dropped its head and began munching, Jedro patted the animal in the adjacent stall and went outside.

The next night he fed them again, and on the following night. On the fourth or fifth night, as he stole toward the barn, he heard a loud snorting in the stalls. Hoofs thudded against the wooden walls. Frightened, he halted. Abruptly the barn door burst open and Krant rushed out.

"Caught you," he shouted angrily. He struck Jedro alongside the jaw, sending him sprawling.

"I didn't do anything," Jedro shrieked, scrambling to his feet.

"Don't lie to me," roared Krant. "You've been feeding those worthless relks." He lashed out again, a smashing blow to the ribs that sent Jedro reeling back into the dirt. This time he was smart enough not to get up.

Krant sprang forward, glaring down at him. "That's just a small sample of what you'll get if I catch you at it again," he shouted. His face contorted with anger, he kicked Jedro savagely and strode back into the house.

Jedro pulled himself to his knees, staring at the rancher's retreating figure. "I hate you," he said through gritted teeth. Holding his side, he pushed himself painfully to his feet and gazed toward the barn. The relks had tried to warn him! He felt grateful for that.

Each night thereafter he was more careful. Long after the Krants were asleep, he would tiptoe from the silent house to feed the animals. Certain that Krant was checking the fodder in the bin, he brought them fresh panda grass from the nearby field. His reward each night was the nuzzling the animals gave him.

It was the only love he had known that whole first winter.

But all that was long ago. Since then he'd learned many things. Here and there, beyond the Ullan Hills, were villages and towns. Ramsig, a neighboring gran herder, had told him of them. "Big towns," explained Ramsig. "Some have four or five thousand people."

"That many?" Jedro was amazed.

Ramsig nodded. "One town around the curve of the planet -- they call it New Portland -- has close to ten thousand people. It's the biggest town on Doorn." His dark eyes gazed thoughtfully across the rolling hills of panda grass. "That's hard to imagine."

"Ten thousand people," exclaimed Jedro. His eyes grew wide with wonder. "Have you ever seen a town?"

"Little Paris," answered Ramsig. "That was close to six years ago. I got to stay there for five whole days."

"What was it like?" he asked eagerly.

"Little Paris?" Ramsig rubbed his jaw reflectively. "What I remember most were the trucks."

"Trucks?" The word held a familiar ring.

"They're like the flatbed wagons that haul the gran to market, only they're drawn by what they call engines instead of relks," he explained. "They go chu-chu-chu-chu, a real odd sound. They can go faster than a man can run. Even faster than a relk," he added.

"I remember." Jedro searched his mind. "I heard Mr. Krant say that people back on the home planet had millions of them."

"Earth? I've heard that. They say that place is just one big city." Ramsig frowned. "Imagine a planet being all city? But it's true. I saw pictures of it in a library."

"What's that?"

"A building in Little Paris where they keep books and tapes that talk. They've even got a machine that makes pictures move, just like in real life. Some of the pictures showed people flitting around in the sky in what they call aircars."

"Aircars." Something pinged in Jedro's memory, then faded before he could grasp it.

"You should see the buildings," said Ramsig. He gestured toward a distant hill that humped against the sky. "Some were even higher than that."

"In Little Paris?" Jedro was awed.

"On Earth," corrected Ramsig.

"That must be a long way off," he suggested tentatively.

Ramsig smiled wisely. "Thousands and thousands of miles," he said. "It goes around another sun."

"Another sun!" The words burned in Jedro's mind.

As Ramsig turned to leave, Jedro called after him, "Better find a good shelter tonight. It's going to rain."

"Rain?" Ramsig glanced at the cloudless sky. "Not a chance."

"It's going to rain real hard," insisted Jedro. The gran herder, striding down the slope, gave no sign he heard him.

That night, wrapped in his blanket under the shelter of an olog tree while the rain slanted down, Jedro pondered all the wonderful things Ramsig had told him. Most wonderful of all was the planet Earth that was all city. People flitting like birds in aircars and buildings that touched the sky! While contemplating the story with awe, he was aware that the scene the gran herder had painted had roused small echoes in his mind. What was it that lay hidden there? He struggled to bring it to the fore, and failed, yet retained the awe.

Surely the universe was a strange place.

The following week, when their flocks came close together again, Ramsig waved him over. "How did you know it was going to rain?" he called, as Jedro drew near.

"I just knew."

"But how?" demanded Ramsig. "The sky was clear."

"I just felt it." Jedro didn't believe it strange; he always knew when it was going to rain. It wasn't a feeling exactly, and yet it was. Because the knowledge came so naturally, he had never questioned it.

"That's quite a trick," admitted Ramsig. It was his turn to be puzzled.

That summer Jedro kept his flock as close to Ramsig as possible, talking with him at every opportunity. The tall, silent, taciturn youth, who liked to stand facing into the yellow-blue sky, told him many marvelous things.

Ramsig said that the large yellow sun Klore and the small orange sun Bergon went around each other, just as Doorn -- the planet on which they lived -- circled Klore. Fascinated, Jedro drew their paths in the dust, trying to imagine how it must be.

More magical yet was a third sun named Glost, which appeared as little more than a red spot in the sky. One night, after both Klore and Bergon had

set and the stars gleamed magically in the blue-black firmament, Ramsig pointed it out to him.

"It goes around the other two suns, but it's so far away that you can hardly see it," he explained.

"How far?" Jedro stared at the reddish spark in the darkness.

"At least a million miles."

"A million miles," he echoed wonderingly. Although he had no idea of the distance, he sensed it must be very far indeed. Little Paris, the nearest town, lay sixty miles away and took two days to reach by relk. But a million miles!

"It's called Alpha Centauri," explained Ramsig.

"I thought you said it was called Glost?"

"That's the small red star. I'm talking about Klore and Bergon."

"If they're called Klore and Bergon, why do you call them Alpha Centauri?" asked Jedro. He found that quite puzzling.

Ramsig shrugged. "Just one of those things, I guess."

"How did you learn all that?" he asked admiringly.

"Remember I told you about Mr. Harper's radio? In winter, sometimes, he lets me listen to it." Ramsig smiled enigmatically. "You'd be surprised how much you can learn from it."

"I wish Mr. Krant had a radio."

"Krant doesn't know much. He's plenty dumb."

"Plenty mean," Jedro replied.

"How come you ever went to work for him?"

"I don't know."

"You don't?" Ramsig eyed him speculatively.

"I can't remember how I got there."

"It was only a few years ago."

"Four," said Jedro. Prodding at his memory, he sensed again that curious blankness, that wall beyond which he couldn't go. He looked quizzically at the other youth, then blurted, "You won't laugh if I ask you something?"

"I won't laugh," Ramsig promised gravely.

"How old am I?"

"You don't know?"

"Please," he begged.

Ramsig studied him as if seeing him for the first time. "You're starting to grow," he said finally. "You must be around fourteen or fifteen. You're going to be big."

"Thank you," Jedro answered humbly. Fourteen or fifteen! He felt a fierce pride. But then, caught with the knowledge that he could only remember back four years, he wondered at the ten or so years that lay beyond the curtain. From where had he come? Did he have parents? If so, what had happened to bring him to Mr. Krant's? The questions made him desolate. What was wrong with his mind that he couldn't remember? Perhaps he wasn't smart enough to remember. That could be it, he thought, yet somehow knew that it wasn't.

"You don't have to work for Krant," suggested Ramsig. "A good gran herder can get a job most anywhere."

"Is that true?" The idea startled him.

"Sure, you might even get a job in one of the towns."

"You think I could?" he asked eagerly. The thought of escaping from Mr. Krant was overwhelming.

"Lots of people do."

"What kind of work could I get?"

"Maybe building houses or working in a store." The taciturn boy shrugged. "Lots of people work in towns. You should see how crowded Little Paris is."

Jedro eyed him speculatively. "If it's that easy, why don't you get a

job in town?"

"I like it out here," replied Ramsig. He gazed upward at the yellow-blue sky. "It's quiet and peaceful, a place where a man can think. Town is all right to visit, but it's no place to live. You can't hear anything but the chu-chu-chu of trucks, and at night they light the main street so you can't enjoy the darkness."

"Light the whole street?" Jedro exclaimed disbelievingly.

"With lamps set on the tops of poles," explained Ramsig. "Do you know what electricity is? That's what they use. Every night all the lamps go on at the same time. They turn them on in the store windows, too, and they got them on the fronts of trucks. You ought to see the trucks at night, rolling down the street, their lights blazing like big eyes. It's plenty scary."

As Ramsig talked, Jedro again was conscious of a faint stirring of memory. Every now and then the gran herder's words struck strange chords in his mind, like the time he told about the big starport that lay around the curve of the planet, outside the main city of New Portland. Occasionally nebulous images would flit through his mind. Perhaps, long ago, he had been to one of the towns. Was that possible? Blazing eyes rolling through the night...

"I'd like to see that," he exclaimed.

"It's quite a sight," agreed Ramsig, "but after a while you want to get back here where you can see the stars at night. You miss the quiet."

Lights that chased away the night! Long after Ramsig had departed, Jedro savored the wonder of it. And towns filled with people! He tried to visualize such a scene. If there were lots of people, then some would be like himself -- not big and coarse, like Mr. Krant, but young and slender. Boys and girls.

He dwelt on the vision. He had never seen a girl, nor any boy other than Ramsig, and Ramsig was so old he was almost a man. Would the girls, aside from being young and slender, look anything like Mrs. Krant? Picturing her mean, pinched face, he fervently hoped not. But, of course, they wouldn't, he told himself. Ramsig didn't look a bit like Mr. Krant so why should other girls look like Mrs. Krant? Neither did the men who drove the gran trucks look like Mr. Krant, although they wore the same kind of dirty clothes. Perhaps people, unlike the grans, were all different. That would be much better.

When he looked at his reflection in the stream, he saw a lean-jawed face, broad at the cheekbones, eyes that were as dark as the otog nuts that he gathered in the woods. Framed in its long tousled hair, that tanned face did not at all resemble Mr. Krant's. He was glad for that.

In more sober moments, when alone, he pondered the enigma of his being, yet always pushed against the mental murkiness that blotted out his early years. At times he had fragmentary memories that escaped before he could grasp them. Like leaves in an autumn storm, they swirled too swiftly to be caught.

Who am I? Where did I come from? The twin questions were the companions of his solitude. Everything had a beginning and an end; he knew that. Only he had never had a beginning -- not in the sense that the flowers and the birds and the gran did. He had just awakened, opened his eyes, and he was there.

In Mr. Krant's attic bedroom.

2

JEDRO WAS LOLLING on a hillside, idly watching the gran when first he saw the gaunt man. That was his first impression -- a tall man, incredibly lean, with long white hair that whipped in the wind. Appearing suddenly along a path that led down from the hills, he strode swiftly toward him, his head tilted upward as if sniffing the breeze.

A stranger! Jedro rose, his heart hammering. It was the first time he'd ever seen anyone other than Ramsig and Mr. Krant in the hills. As the stranger

drew closer, he instinctively took a backward step.

"Don't be frightened." Those were the gaunt man's first words.

"I'm not," he denied. Although his voice quavered, he realized he wasn't so much frightened as surprised. Closer up he saw that the gaunt man's craggy face was seamed, the cheeks sunken, the eyes all but hidden under enormous frost-covered brows. But it was not an unpleasant face.

The gaunt man stared back along the trail before squatting on his heels. "You're Jedro," he said.

"How did you know?" stammered Jedro. The eyes watching him, blue and glacial, held the suggestion of some vast infinity.

"I know." Chuckling, the gaunt man nodded sagely. All at once the craggy face was warm and understanding. "I'm Clement."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Clement," Jedro managed to say. He added desperately, "How did you know my name?"

"Know all about you," said Clement.

"Who I am?" he blurted.

"Quite well, Jedro."

"Then who am I?" he pleaded.

The gaunt man smiled. "You're Jedro."

Jedro stared at him. "That doesn't make much sense."

"Not much does," agreed Clement. "That's characteristic of the universe."

"The what?"

"The universe." Clement gestured toward the sky. "The suns and planets and moons -- the big box in which we live."

"We live in a box?" he exclaimed.

"A box filled with puzzles." The glacial blue eyes studied him. "Oh, it holds its hopes and it holds its dreams, but it also holds endless enigmas. The universe itself is the biggest enigma of all."

"What's that -- a puzzle?"

"Vast and baffling," asserted Clement. His gaze returned to the trail. "Can't stay but a few moments," he said.

"Do you have to hurry?" Jedro felt a pang of disappointment. With the exception of Ramsig, the gaunt man was the first person with whom he'd really had a chance to talk since the morning of his awakening. Although the gaunt man's words were strange, they excited him.

"Time runs swiftly," said Clement.

"Are you talking about night coming?" He glanced at the sky; the yellow sun was still high above the horizon. Bergon, trailing it, would be up longer yet.

"Night, eternal night," replied Clement.

"What do you mean?"

"The night that is unending."

"That sounds strange," he answered. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he asked, "Are you from one of the towns?"

"You might say that, yes."

"Which one?" he asked eagerly.

"Los Angeles. It's a city on Earth."

"The home world?" Jedro stared incredulously at him, his eyes wide. "Is it like they say, all one city?"

"Not really, but it's mighty crowded."

"Is the sky filled with aircars?"

"Like moths around a street lamp," asserted Clement. He described the vast urban sprawls and the almost unending smaller cities and industrial areas that linked them together. Men were going ever deeper underground to create new living space. Domed cities were rising under the seas; other cities floated on the oceanic tides. Gigantic transportation systems had diminished

time and space. Slowly the world was becoming a thing of steel and plastic and concrete. Fascinated, Jedro hung on to every word.

"I'd love to see Earth," he exclaimed, when finally Clement fell silent.

"You will."

"I will?" He felt a great excitement. "How do you know?"

"I know," said Clement. He nodded slowly. Filled with wonder, Jedro gazed at him. Cities under the earth, beneath the seas; aircars, and buildings that soared wildly upward -- magical things of which he scarcely could conceive. Earth, where life had been born, sending her children to the stars. He trembled with excitement.

"I'm going to Earth," he cried.

"That is your destiny," declared Clement. A smile touched his lips. "You'll find it just a way station."

"What do you mean?"

"Would you like to walk the universe?" The blue eyes peered out at him from under the frosty brows.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Ah, to walk through the ages while suns flourish and die."

"What does that mean?"

"Destiny has chosen a prince," replied Clement gravely. He reached in his pocket and brought out a smooth, dark object, displaying it in his palm. At first glance it appeared to Jedro somewhat like a polished otog nut, then he saw that it reflected a curious inner glow.

"What is it?" he asked finally.

"A stone." Clement chuckled. "Here, take it." He extended his hand. Jedro plucked it gingerly from his palm, conscious of its warmth. The glow brightened, a deep yellow that held touches of purple and red; small violet flames seemed to leap from its depths. A strange sensation came into his hand and crept up his arm.

He asked shakily, "What kind of a stone?"

"A memory stone."

"What's that?"

"It elicits memory," explained the gaunt man.

"I don't understand."

"You will. Be careful never to lose it," he cautioned.

"I can have it?" Jedro gazed at the stone, thinking it the most beautiful he'd ever seen. The yellowish tinge he'd first noticed, somewhat the color of the light that came from the yellow sun Klore, now had turned completely to purples and deep reds from which leaped the small violet flames.

"Always keep it with you," warned Clement. "It's quite valuable."

"I will," he promised eagerly. His eyes came up, looking into the seamed face. For an instant he fancied he saw a great sorrow there, but the look passed, replaced by a deep tranquility. "Why are you giving it to me?" he asked wonderingly.

"Because it was meant for you."

"For me?"

"Call it a present," advised Clement.

"What shall I do with it?"

"Keep it...and wait." A gentle smile, filled with longing, touched the gaunt man's face. "You have the power."

"The power?"

"It lies latent within you."

"I don't know what you mean." Jedro examined the stone, his mind troubled. The other's words were strange. He would go to Earth; more, he would walk the universe. And that about destiny choosing a prince! What did it all mean? He looked back at the craggy face.

"You will have your answers in time," explained Clement. He rose, tall

and gaunt against the yellow-blue sky, looking back along the trail. Sorrow tinged his face. Gazing back at Jedro, he said, "I have to leave now."

"So soon?"

"I have an appointment."

"You have?" Jedro was startled. No one except the Krants and the gran herder Ramsig lived within a day's travel of where he kept his lonely vigil. His face betrayed his puzzlement.

"With death," said Clement softly.

"D-death?"

"Over yonder" -- Clement threw out a lanky arm -- "where the trail crosses the top of the next knoll."

"I don't know what you mean," he cried fearfully. He switched his eyes to the distant hilltop; it lay quiet and peaceful in the afternoon light. People just didn't die like that.

"Death comes to everyone." Clement's blue eyes fixed him piercingly before he added, "Or almost everyone."

"You can't just die," he protested.

"All life is movement toward death," explained Clement. "For my entire life I've been traveling toward a certain instant of time, toward a certain spot in the universe. Now that time is almost here and the spot is yonder." He gestured toward the knoll.

"But why?" Jedro licked his lips dryly, trying to stem his fright.

"You can't escape death," asserted Clement. "At least I can't." Again a gentle smile softened his craggy face.

"But...how?"

"Death comes in many forms. In my case it will come in the form of a tattooed man astride a relk."

"Tattooed?"

"You'll know what that means when you see him, Jedro." Clement chuckled. "You'll shudder."

Jedro thought the gaunt man must be joking until he looked into his eyes. Deep wells of sorrow, they held a glow strangely reminiscent of that he so often saw in the eyes of the relks, and in the eyes of the gran before they were driven to market. He had a strong feeling that the gaunt man's sorrow was not for himself. What was Clement thinking in this...last moment? The question brought a shock that he realized was occasioned by his acceptance of the other's fate.

"Stay hidden in the tall grass," warned Clement.

"You can't die," he cried vehemently. "Not here, not now. There's no reason to die."

"Destiny needs no reason." Clement tilted his face upward, gazing at the yellow-blue sky. The wind, riffling his long white hair, blew fine strands across his face to form a silver web against the dark skin. "It's a good day to die," he said.

"How do you know you have to die?" whispered Jedro.

"I can see it."

"See death?"

"It fills my whole horizon, Jedro. Death is a great wind that blows through the universe; it is the hunter of life. It has feel, taste, sound, a smell, but most of all it's a vision." Clement gazed down at him. "No man can mistake its presence."

"I can't see or smell anything," he protested.

"It's an individual matter, Jedro. Death is a host who speaks only to his guests." A wistful look pervaded the seamed face. "Take good care of the stone."

"I will, I will," he promised.

"And lie in the tall grass, remain out of sight."

"Because of The Tattooed Man?"

"He's evil, Jedro." Again Clement studied the trail behind him. "Mark him well, for you will see him again."

"I will," he promised huskily. The thought that Clement had to die brought a constriction to his throat. It didn't make sense, none at all. How could death come on such a cloudless day? Mr. Clement had to be mistaken.

"Good-bye, Jedro." The gaunt man turned and strode briskly down the trail.

"Good-bye, good-bye," he shouted. He watched Clement leap a small ravine at the bottom of the hill and start up the opposite slope. Why did a man hurry so when he knew what lay ahead? Why hadn't he taken another route? Destiny, Mr. Clement had called it; no one could change destiny. But how could Mr. Clement know what lay ahead?

Clement turned back to wave without stopping his climb. Reaching the top of the knoll, he halted for a moment, his tall figure limned against the yellow-blue sky. He looked, thought Jedro, like the loneliest man in the universe. He choked back a sob.

The distant clop of hooves alerted him and he whirled, feeling a sudden panic. Remembering the gaunt man's admonition, he darted behind a tall clump of panda grass, peering around it to watch the trail.

A rider on a reik galloped into view, pulling the animal to a halt scarcely a dozen yards away. The reik pranced, its long slender legs performing an intricate dance in the dust before it settled down.

Jedro gasped. The rider's face, neck, and hairless skull were covered with strange red, yellow, and blue patterns, leaving no part of his skin uncovered. His bare arms and sandaled feet were striped in gaudy colors.

Scarcely daring to breathe, Jedro gazed at him. A painted man! "Tattooed" was the word Mr. Clement had used. A tattooed man! A violent trembling ran through his body. Remembering the stone, he jammed it into his pocket.

The tattooed face came up, lean and bony beneath its color. A huge, curving nose, flaring out at the nostrils, added to its fierceness. Both fascinated and frightened, Jedro wondered at what manner of man this was. He had never heard of such an awesome being.

For a long moment the beast and its rider, pinned against the sky, remained as motionless as statues. The rider's eyes were fastened on the knoll ahead. Suddenly his hands came up, holding a rifle. Before Jedro could comprehend what was happening, the rider whipped the weapon up, sighted along the dark barrel and fired; a lance of brilliant flame leaped out from the bore.

Jedro twisted around wildly. Clement suddenly had broken his stride. Faltering, he pulled his body erect and gazed upward into the yellow-blue sky for a long moment before he slowly toppled forward, pitching face downward to the dusty trail.

Mr. Clement! Jedro screamed silently, feeling a coldness that he felt certain must be the touch of death. He twisted back. The Tattooed Man, calmly replacing the weapon in its scabbard, started the reik down the slope. Jedro watched him ride to the fallen man.

Briefly looking down at Clement, The Tattooed Man dismounted. He carefully searched the dead man's pockets, then removed and searched his shoes. After that he pried open the jaws to examine the mouth before inspecting the rest of the body.

He's after the memory stone! The sudden insight jolted Jedro. Clenching the stone, he felt its warmth. If The Tattooed Man discovered him, he'd throw it away. He'd never let him get it. Never, never. He made the vow fiercely.

The Tattooed Man finally picked up Clement's body and slung it across the reik, then mounted and kicked his heels against the animal's ribs. The

relk swung around and started back along the trail.

Jedro dropped lower behind the clump, scarcely daring to breathe. When finally he rose, there was neither sign of the relk, its tattooed rider, nor of the gaunt man he'd known so briefly. For one short moment he thought it a crazy dream; but then he knew it wasn't.

The warm stone clenched in his fist told him that.

Wrapped in the single thin blanket that Krant grudgingly had supplied him, Jedro gazed upward into the star-spattered sky. Off to one side, the small red eye of Glost winked at him. His thoughts were on the memory stone.

Clenched in his hand, the stone emitted a warmth that had moved up along his arm, and now permeated his whole body. Prickling sensations played along his nerve trunks. Ordinarily quite cold and lusterless, the stone appeared like an ordinary pebble until he touched it; then the heat would come, the eerie glow, and the small violet flames would dance. What was there about the stone that his touch could change it so? What was its purpose? Memory, the gaunt man had said, but he couldn't see the connection between that and the stone. He often pondered the baffling questions, just as he pondered the enigma of Mr. Clement.

Mr. Clement -- he let the name seep through his mind. Mr. Clement striding down from the hills, his long white hair rippling in the wind; Mr. Clement telling him that he had the power. What power? The gaunt man hadn't said. Half promise, half warning, his words had been wrapped in a strange wistfulness.

As suddenly as he had appeared, Mr. Clement had hurried away. Tall and gaunt against the late afternoon sky, he had rushed to meet the very death he had predicted. He had named both time and place, even the exact manner of his death, and by whose hand. That had been frightening.

The Tattooed Man! Jedro shuddered. Whenever he thought of Mr. Clement, which was often, he thought of The Tattooed Man. Vision of the hideously patterned face with its great curving beak of a nose filled him with awe and dread. Had The Tattooed Man, like Mr. Clement, come from Earth? Why had he killed Mr. Clement? To get the stone; there could be no other answer. What magic, then, had the stone that it could lead to murder? The magic of memory, Mr. Clement had said. That was quite perplexing.

Strangest of all, he decided, was how Mr. Clement had known the exact time and place of his death. Death is a great wind that blows through the universe; it is the hunter of life -- the gaunt man's words came back. Death has a feel, taste, sound, a smell, but most of all it's a Vision -- he'd also said that.

Jedro debated the statements. If they were right, why couldn't he sense death? Trees, plants, animals, and insects were dying all around him; death was a constant in the Ullan Hills, yet he had never sensed it. Perhaps, as Mr. Clement had said, death was a host who spoke only to his guests. Jedro wondered if it was like his knowing when it was going to rain.

He would see The Tattooed Man again -- Mr. Clement had warned him of that. The knowledge was frightening. Perhaps he was still hiding somewhere nearby, watching, trying to discover what Mr. Clement had done with the memory stone. Yet there was no use trying to run; the encounter was bound to come. He regarded it fatalistically. But no matter what happened, he wouldn't give up the stone.

Sensing its warmth, he fell asleep.

Summer was drawing to a close when Jedro had the dream. It came during a crisp night that heralded a change of season.

Floating in a black sky, he saw the rock tumbling toward him. A distant shadow moving against the stars, it grew larger and larger. Off to one side

gleamed a gigantic sphere with four minute spheres clustered randomly around it. Far beyond, thin, shimmery bands encircled a magnificent star.

The tumbling rock rushed toward him. Vast and fearsome, it grew in his vision, obliterating the stars. Larger, larger, larger...Was he rushing toward it or was it rushing toward him? Watching apprehensively, he was relieved to realize that it would sweep past beneath him. As it hurtled underfoot, he saw that it was far larger than he first had supposed. A tangle of black spires jutting outward against the sky, the ebon rock gleamed with the light of a distant golden sun that he knew was not Klore.

He was falling, hurtling downward toward the black mass below, faster and faster and faster. He tried to scream but no sound came. Suddenly his body leveled off racing between the towering walls of a black canyon. Far ahead he glimpsed a silvery sphere nestled at the base of a sheer cliff.

He was floating gently above the sphere. Huge walls rose around him, so close that the firmament appeared as a thin swath far above him. Then, magically, he was looking through the sphere's metallic surface at a strange oblong box that rested in the center of a small compartment. A clutter of tubes penetrated the box at each end.

The lid swung open and he stared down at the pale, patrician face of an elderly man. Like Mr. Clement, he had hair that was long and white, but there all resemblance between them ended. This face held none of the gauntness, none of the craggy lines. Smooth and finely textured, it was gentle in repose.

The eyes snapped open. Clear and blue, they regarded him steadily. The lips moved.

"I have been waiting," said the man in the oblong box.

Jedro screamed.

He jerked to wakefulness, trembling, feeling the wild beat of his heart. The man in the oblong box! Starting to leap to his feet, he remembered where he was and subsided back into the tall panda grass. For a long moment he lay still, his eyes fixed on the blue-black sky. Gradually his heartbeat quieted and his trembling passed. It was then that he became aware that he was clutching the memory stone; he could feel its heat pulsing upward through his body. He looked at the stone in the darkness, marveling at the dance of its violet flame, then thrust it back into his pocket.

Who was the man in the oblong box? What strange world had he seen tumbling through that black and alien space? Certainly it was a world far different from Doorn. It had held no grass, no trees, no sign of life, but only the terrible starkness of twisted rock -- a world that tumbled in solitude under a frightening sky.

A different sun! He had seen that, too. Small and far away, its golden beams had scarcely been more than pale shadows where they touched the rock world's grotesque spires. Not radiantly yellow like Klore, nor a dusky orange like Bergon, it had been a dismal sun, peering out on the rock world as if from a cave in the sky. And yet...He groped at the elusive sense of familiarity. A golden sun. Earth's sun, they said, was golden.

But it was all a dream, nothing more. He resolved that firmly. Yet try as he would, he could never quite forget that black world tumbling through space, nor the man in the oblong box.

Especially not the man in the oblong box.

Jedro never told Ramsig about his dream. Although on the verge of revealing it several times, he abruptly had clamped his lips. If he told Ramsig about the dream, he would have to tell him about the stone, for he was certain that the two were related. Then Ramsig would want to see the stone. He couldn't allow that. In the end, he kept his dream to himself.

The rains came, warm at first, followed by a cold front that moved in from the north. The chill caused Jedro's teeth to chatter. When the leaves on

the otog trees yellowed and began to fall, he knew that autumn was racing to a close. He hated to see the season end, for then he would have to return to the dilapidated ranch house. Sharing the winter with the Krants would be the most miserable of all.

At times, alone in the starry night, he could understand why Ramsig had chosen his solitary life. A man could think in the Ullan Hills. And yet, as often as not, his thoughts skittered and darted through his mind with incomprehensible urgency. Vague, half-formed thoughts that he could never quite manage to grasp long enough to examine. But it hadn't always been that way. The urgency, he was certain, was related to Mr. Clement and the memory stone. To The Tattooed Man.

And to the man in the oblong box.

Early one afternoon he was dismayed to see Mr. Krant riding toward him on a relk. As the rancher drew closer, Jedro saw that the animal was half-starved, its body appearing scarcely more than a hide-covered bag of bones. He regarded the relk sorrowfully.

Krant pulled the animal up short and barked, "Bring in the gran. They go to market tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Jedro was appalled. "I can't get them there that soon."

"Start driving them now, drive all night," snapped Krant. "You have to be there by sunup so we can cut the breeders from the flock."

"I'll try," he offered.

"You'd better do better than that." As the relk pressed forward to nuzzle Jedro's cheek, Krant kicked it brutally in the ribs. The animal reared back, its eyes rolling wildly.

"You're hurting it," shouted Jedro.

"I'll kill it," raged Krant. Jerking the relk's head around, he galloped back down the slope. Jedro watched him grow small in the distance and finally disappear around a bend. He stooped and scratched a gran behind the ear, sorrowful that the sleek animals had to die. In many respects he felt even closer to them than he did to Ramsig. It was a matter of understanding them, he reflected. And they understood him. He could see it in their eyes, by the way they nuzzled him and pressed close around him in the dark of night. But it wasn't only the gran. The small furry creatures that lived in the woods came to nibble food from his hand. So did the birds. Such understandings didn't require words.

That night, while plodding through the darkness with the gran, he remembered Ramsig's words. Perhaps he could get a job in town. But was he old enough? And he knew so little. Perhaps next year, he decided wretchedly.

The following afternoon, watching the gran wagons start back along the dusty road, he felt sad. Now he would be alone with the Krants. The thought was almost more than he could bear.

Krant came up behind him. "Stop daydreaming," he snarled, "there's work to be done."

Jedro swung around, suddenly angry. "No," he said.

"What do you mean, no?" Krant's face flamed.

"I'm leaving."

"After all I've done for you?" roared the rancher. "Come here, you ungrateful wretch." His arm shot out, but Jedro had already leaped back.

"You can't make me stay," he shouted.

"Can't I?" As Krant lunged toward him, Jedro struck out blindly, his fist smashing against the rancher's nose. Krant halted and threw a hand to his face, then brought it away covered with blood. The shadow of fear flitted across his face.

Jedro grinned, suddenly jubilant. "That's for all the beatings," he said. Whirling, he raced down the road after the gran wagons. He was leaving, would never see the Krants again! His joy was dimmed by the thought that

neither would he see the relks again.

Reaching the rear wagon, he grasped the tailgate and swung aboard. Looking back, he saw Krant standing dejectedly at the same spot. Then the wagon train went around a bend.

Jedro settled down among the animals, absently scratching the nearest one behind the ear. "You've got company, boy," he whispered. The gran bleated and nuzzled his cheek. Jedro gazed up into the yellow-blue sky and laughed.

He didn't know where he was going, but he was going.

3

JEDRO SAW THE CARNIVAL in the late evening.

Planted in the fields at the edge of a small town named New Chicago, its blaze of light was visible for miles around. One brilliant beam that stabbed toward the top of the sky and whirled around and around drew him as irresistibly as a moth toward a flame.

A carnival! The magic of it filled his mind. As he drew nearer, the discordant wail of music reached his ears, rousing his excitement to fever pitch. A stone man! A human fish! A snake woman! Little people who were scarcely as high as his hip and a man who was nine feet tall! A boy in Little Paris had told him all about it. His mind awl with all the marvelous things he'd heard, he hastened toward the glowing lights.

"It's from Earth," the boy had told him.

"The home world?" Jedro was startled.

"It was the biggest show there," the other explained. "The signs said so." He told Jedro about the clowns, rope walkers, jugglers, and a man who ate fire. There was a ferocious animal called a lion "The King of the Beasts," he said -- and an old woman who looked into a crystal ball and told your fortune. He eagerly described the merry-go-round, roller caster, sky wheel, the small aircars on cables that whirled you around so fast that the world became a blur. Other cars carried you through dark tunnels where luminescent ghosts and skeletons dangled from the walls.

But Jedro scarcely heard that part. Earth! The carnival had come from there! All at once the indecision and bewilderment he'd known since reaching Little Paris vanished; suddenly he realized exactly what he had to do. He'd get a job with the carnival and go with it when it returned to Earth. Hadn't Mr. Clement promised him that he'd go to Earth? While he hadn't mentioned the carnival, he'd probably had it in mind. It was the kind of thing that a man who could predict his own death would know.

"Where's the carnival now?" he asked anxiously.

"It went to New Chicago."

"Where's that?"

"The next town." The boy pointed the way.

The journey had taken Jedro five days. Aside from a few short rides hitched on relk-drawn wagons, he'd tramped every foot of the dusty road. Feasting on wild berries and otog nuts, he'd slept in the fields. But the discomforts were as nothing compared to the reward he envisaged. Earth! His heart sang with every step.

As he drew near the entrance, his eyes fastened on a crowded street lined with brilliantly lighted booths. A huge banner stretched overhead, dancing in the wind. DR. FAUST'S MAGIC CARNIVAL -- he drank in the words eagerly. Smaller lettering underneath read: BIGGEST SHOW IN THE UNIVERSE!

The boy in Little Paris had been right, he thought fiercely. His eyes glowed. Lights, music, movement, signs -- the bombardment of his senses filled him with awe. Men and women in small booths called and gestured to the passersby, promising rich prizes for breaking balloons with darts or shooting

down toy animals that leaped and raced across the backgrounds. Most of the booths were jammed with eager customers.

Jedro's eyes darted this way and that.

A huge wheel that went around and around carried people in little buckets high into the sky. Another wheel that lay on its side under a striped canopy -- merry-go-round, the sign called it -- carried its riders on strange make-believe animals that jumped up and down as the wheel spun to the sound of raucous music. Small wagons linked together disappeared into a dark cave; when they reappeared at the far side, their riders, mostly young couples, were flushed and merry. Many of the girls were giggling.

The aroma of frying foods assailed his nostrils, bringing sharp hunger pangs. Even though he was stuffed with wild berries and otog nuts, his mouth watered. HAMBURGERS, HOTDOGS, POPCORN, COLD DRINKS signs beckoned him from a score of places. Again he felt the strange prickling of memory; he could all but recall the taste of such things.

Sniffing, he realized that the most delicious aroma came from the black griddles where the hamburgers were frying. He hurried on to escape the sudden craving.

THE STONE MAN, THE SNAKE WOMAN, THE FIRE EATER -- he gazed wonderingly at the colorful pictures that accompanied the signs. Suddenly his eyes lit on a gaudy poster that proclaimed: STRONGEST MAN IN THE UNIVERSE. A picture depicted a brute-faced man, draped in an animal skin, lifting a huge weight. Across the bottom of the sign, in big block letters, was the name: THE STRANGLER.

Jedro flexed his arm, eyeing his bicep surreptitiously; it was nothing like that of the man on the poster. Clenching the memory stone, he wished he had the money to go inside. But he would have when he got a job. Then he'd go into every booth and buy a hamburger from every stand along the way.

The end of the sawdust road was blocked by a huge plastic tent decorated in red and white stripes. A barker -- as Jedro soon learned such men were called -- stood on a platform in front of the main entrance, a flaming torch on either side of him.

"Come in, come in," he cried. His voice rang with a singsong note. "See Earth's greatest clowns, trick riders, rope walkers." His hands made sweeping gestures toward a booth where a woman was selling tickets. "See Jason tame the lions, the most fierce animals in the entire universe! Positively thrilling, ladies and gentlemen. Come in, come in."

Jedro listened, entranced, desperately wishing he could go inside. He ogled a poster that depicted a gigantic lion leaping through a fiery hoop; another showed a scantily clad young woman standing on the back of a galloping animal that somehow resembled a reik. The sign called it a horse. The name struck him like a distant echo.

Jugglers, tumblers, trapeze artists -- surely the gigantic red- and white-striped tent held the wonders of the universe. His eyes went avidly from poster to poster. The garishly painted faces of the clowns at first glance reminded him of The Tattooed Man, but then he saw that they were not the same at all. These faces were wreathed in smiles; the eyes laughed. All but the face of a clown named Corky. Corky's face and eyes were sad. Jedro decided he must be unhappy.

He tore himself away from the main tent to make the round of the booths again. He paused to gaze at a picture of The Pig-Faced Boy, whose mouth was drawn into an enormous snout. He was turning away when he sighted a young girl selling tickets in front of The Snake Woman's booth. He peered covertly at her. Slight and blond, she had a pretty face, yet he thought it tinged with an odd sadness. She was about his age, he guessed. Their eyes met briefly before she looked away. The gaudy posters around her showed a dark, slender woman in scanty attire, her body wrapped in the coils of a gigantic snake. Its head

swinging free, the snake was gazing into the woman's eyes.

Jedro had no conscious memory of ever having seen a snake, yet again he sensed a stirring deep in his mind -- a stirring that offered nothing he could grasp.

Who am I? He pondered the question again. Would he ever know? Did anyone know? Mr. Clement claimed to have known, but now he was dead. He looked back at the pretty blond girl. When she failed to notice him, he wandered on.

Loudspeakers placed along the sawdust road announced that the carnival would close in ten minutes. He felt a sharp disappointment. He hadn't seen half of it yet. Gazing around, he realized that the crowd already was thinning; people were streaming out under the fluttering banner that proclaimed: BIGGEST SHOW IN THE UNIVERSE!

He wondered how to go about getting a job. He could tend animals; he would like that. Or he could sell tickets or clean up the mess left on the sawdust street. He could do almost anything. Who should he see? He looked back toward the young blond girl, but she had already pulled the shade; all he could see was her silhouette.

Perhaps he should ask Dr. Faust. Debating it, he made his way back toward the main tent. Passing a food stand, he paused to inhale the delicious aroma. A man wearing a white jacket spotted with grease and an odd white hat that bloomed out on top was cleaning a griddle. Sniffing, Jedro stepped closer.

The man paused, looking at him. "Hungry, kid?"

"A little," he admitted shyly.

"Have a couple on the house." The man shoved two wrapped buns across the counter. "They're a bit cold."

"Thanks a lot," he exclaimed. He bit into one of the hamburgers, savoring the taste, then gulped it greedily. The man in the white jacket laughed and returned to his work.

The lights along the sawdust street blinked off and on three times, and the loudspeakers announced that the show was closed. Thinking about a job, Jedro continued toward the main tent. He believed the carnival wonderful, but the fear that he might not find work made him desperate.

Munching the second hamburger more slowly to make it last, he watched the carnival workers. They moved quickly and efficiently. Portable ticket offices and barkers' platforms vanished with astonishing swiftness. Metal canopies, swung down over the fronts of the booths, were locked into place. Plastic tarps were secured.

One by one the lights above the booths went out so that the figures on the posters above them appeared to be floating in the sky. The sight gave him a spooky feeling. Passing The Strangler's booth, he imagined a sign that read: JEDRO, THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE UNIVERSE! In the vision the young blond girl was watching admiringly as he lifted a huge weight above his head.

He grinned. But it would be nice to be the strongest man in the universe. If he were, he'd really go back and smack Mr. Krant. Yeah, then he'd bring the relks back to the carnival, let them eat all the feed they wanted. He would train them to do tricks, like the horses on the posters.

But that was a dream, now he had no time for dreaming. Morosely he watched the carnival close around him. Each light that blinked out took some of the magic from the night. He was watching the last of the stragglers emerge from the big red- and white-striped tent when he heard a loud shriek. Abruptly half a dozen people boiled out from the entrance, scattering in all directions.

"The lion is loose," a hoarse voice shouted.

A woman screamed in pure terror.

A lion! Jedro stiffened, aware of the pandemonium erupting all around him. He had a quick vision of the fierce animal shown on the posters. The King

of the Beasts! The most fierce animal in the entire universe! He clenched his hands to stifle his fear. He wanted to run yet couldn't seem to move his legs. They felt paralyzed.

A thin man with a contorted face shot out from the main tent, his arms waving wildly. "Watch out for the lion," he yelled. "It's coming this way!" He dashed madly down the sawdust street.

A horrible growling came from inside the main tent, and an instant later a huge, tawny animal padded out through the entrance. Stalking to within half a dozen yards from where Jedro was standing, frozen with fright, it halted. Its big head swung from side to side. Its tail switched angrily.

"Run, kid," shouted a man from atop a nearby booth. "Quick, get out of there!"

Jedro felt his heart thump wildly. Unable to tear his gaze from the great beast, he watched it with terrible fascination. The lion snarled, bringing its head around until their eyes met.

"Run, kid, run..." The clamor of voices dimly reached him as he kept his entire attention riveted on the animal, prepared to bolt at its slightest move. A tall man in a red jacket popped out from the main tent, halting abruptly at sight of the lion. Ludicrously, or so it seemed to Jedro, he carried a whip and a straight-back chair.

"Careful, kid, don't make a move," he rasped tautly. Snarling softly, the lion glanced at him. The man remained absolutely motionless, holding up the chair as a shield.

As the lion returned its gaze to Jedro, the man said edgily, "Keep your nerve, kid. Don't panic." Crouched behind the chair, he jockeyed closer.

A deep growl rumbled from the lion's throat.

"It's getting ready to leap," a voice shouted hysterically.

Jedro licked his lips dryly, his heart thumping.

"Don't move," warned the man in the red jacket.

Jedro returned the beast's stare. Standing under the lights of the sawdust street, he had a feeling of unutterable loneliness, the illusion of a vast silence. Except for the lion, he was alone in the universe.

"Someone do something!" A woman's piercing shriek shattered the night.

"Don't panic," the man in the red jacket hissed.

For what seemed an immeasurable time, Jedro stared into the large golden eyes. Strangely, his fright passing, he felt a sudden calm. Somehow it was like looking into the eyes of the relk and the gran. He glanced at the man in the red jacket, then back at the lion.

"It's all right, fellow." He spoke softly, the way he used to speak to Krant's relks. The lion regarded him intently. "It's all right," repeated Jedro. He took a step forward.

"Watch out, kid," the man atop the wagon bawled. "That cat's a man-killer!" His voice rang with alarm.

"Don't move," the man in the red jacket warned tautly. Sidling closer to the beast, he held the chair to his chest. "Wait it out until they bring the tranquilizer gun."

"He's nervous," replied Jedro. He fancied the large golden eyes held both a shadow of fear and a curious beseeching quality, as if the beast were turning to him for succor.

"Good boy, good boy," he whispered softly. He forced himself to walk forward.

"That's a man-eater," a strident voice warned.

"Careful, careful," the man in the red jacket hissed. "Don't go any closer."

"He's all right." Trying not to alarm the animal, Jedro kept his voice low. Another step, and then another. Reaching out, he scratched the lion behind the ear, then knelt and slipped an arm around the thick, coarse mane.

The lion turned its head and their eyes met. Jedro had the impression of staring deep into fiery amber pools. He had the same feelings he had known when Krant's half-starved relks had nuzzled his cheeks. The lion wasn't mean at all; it was merely frightened.

"It's all right, fellow, it's all right," whispered Jedro. The animal's plight roused his sympathy. Running his fingers through the thick mane, he was rewarded by a low purr. "Take it easy, big boy," he said.

Aware of the silent tableau gripping the sawdust street, he looked around. The man in the red jacket, still holding the chair, was peering indecisively at him. His long face held a touch of incredulity. Here and there a carnival worker stood as if rooted to the spot. The man atop the wagon had fallen silent. The scene held the eerie stillness of a painting.

Jedro asked softly, "What's his name?"

"Taber." The man in the red jacket answered without moving his lips.

"Where's his cage?"

"Inside." He gestured toward the main tent.

"Follow me, Taber." Jedro rose, running his fingers through the lion's mane. Taber looked up at him, and the big golden eyes blinked. He scratched it behind the ear again and tugged it gently by the mane, urging the animal toward the entrance.

"Don't do that," someone hissed. "That baby will take off an arm."

"He's all right," answered Jedro, to no one in particular. He looked down at the lion. "Come on, Taber, follow me." He released the mane and started toward the big tent. Swishing his tail, the lion padded obediently alongside him.

The man in the red jacket moved cautiously to one side. Out of the corner of his mouth, he said, "Straight ahead to the center of the ring."

Jedro entered the tent, bending to pat the lion's head as he gazed around. The huge red- and white-striped plastic ceiling, billowing in the wind, rose from behind a circle of wooden bleachers to form the central ring. Between the bleachers and the tent wall ran a dark corridor.

"Go to the right till you reach the entrance to the ring," a tense voice behind him instructed. Jedro glanced back, seeing the shadowy figure in the red jacket. Still gripping the chair, the man jerked his head in gesture.

Jedro nodded. "Follow me, Taber," he instructed. He walked along the gloomy passageway behind the bleachers with the big cat padding softly at his side. He knew that the man in the red jacket was following. Perhaps that was the man to ask about a job. Reaching down to touch the lion's head, he wondered why the others had been so afraid. Was this really the most fierce animal in the universe? He couldn't conceive that to be true. It was big and powerful, sure, but its eyes were gentle. Looking into them, he felt that he could all but read the animal's thoughts. Or was it just that he liked animals and animals liked him?

It had always been that way, he reflected. Mr. Krant's relks had liked him from the first, and not just because he had sneaked food to them. It had been the same with the gran, and the small animals and birds that lived among the otog trees. Ramsig had marveled at that several times.

He came to a passageway between the bleachers and turned in, pausing when he reached the central ring. A low steel mesh fence that fronted the bleachers made the ring a veritable cage, accessible only by several passageways used to bring in the animals and equipment.

He looked around wonderingly. A metal pole, shooting upward to an awesome height, provided the central support for the billowing roof. Other poles, canted outward around the periphery, kept the tarp from sagging inward. He saw cages that held strange animals, ropes strung between high ladders, odd paraphernalia for which he had no names. Off to one side, two clowns peered at him from the safety of the bleachers.

"The big cage in the center of the ring," the man in the red jacket called softly. "The door's open."

Jedro took the time to study it. The huge cage, constructed with metal bars to allow visibility from all sides, was set atop a low red platform. Inside was a series of large, swinging hoops, each suspended at a different height above the floor, and several low stools and straight-back chairs. The latter, painted red, were duplicates of the one carried by the man behind him.

Was he the lion tamer? Jedro thought that he must be. Yet why was he afraid of Taber? That didn't make sense. He heard a growl from a smaller cage set off to one side, then an answering rumble from the lion's chest. Taber paused, his tail switching. Jedro halted.

"That's Taber's mate," the man in the red jacket called. "She's locked up."

"Come on, fellow," urged Jedro. He scratched the animal behind the ear.

"Keep him moving, see if you can get him into the cage." The voice behind him held a worried note.

"Let's go," whispered Jedro. As he started ahead, the lion hesitated, then followed. Jedro reached the low platform, hopped up on the edge and opened the cage door wider. "Inside, fellow."

The lion looked at him, its golden eyes somnolent, then crouched and leaped gracefully into the cage. Jedro slammed the steel door, hearing the latch click into place.

"Whew!" The man in the red jacket tossed the chair to the sawdust and strode toward him, mopping his brow. "You took a big chance, kid. That cat's mean."

"I don't think so." Jedro saw a dozen or so people spilling toward them across the ring.

"Meanest cat I ever saw," he affirmed. "So's Rana, his mate. They're tricky and unpredictable. Born killers, kid."

"Are you the lion tamer?"

"Jason Hart." He nodded. "Didn't you see the act?"

"I didn't have the money to get inside," admitted Jedro.

"That's too bad. My wife and I -- her name's Millie, Jason and Millie, The Lion Tamers, we call the act -- have the key spot. We come on right after Corky and Dum-Dum."

"The clowns?" asked Jedro. He remembered the posters.

The lion tamer nodded, pushing his handkerchief back into his pocket. "Weren't you scared?"

"Not when I saw its eyes."

"Eyes?"

"They were gentle."

Jason Hart eyed him sharply. "Do you know anything about lions?"

"Well, no." He felt flustered.

"Any wild animal?"

Jedro shook his head.

"Then how could you tell by his eyes?"

"I've seen relk and gran," he replied weakly. "I can tell by their eyes how they feel."

"Relk and gran!" The lion tamer clapped a hand to his head and groaned. "That cat's a man-eater, kid. Didn't you know that? You're lucky he didn't tear you to shreds. He's clawed up more than one person. I've been handling those cats for more than twenty years and I know how mean they are."

"I don't think he's mean," protested Jedro.

"You're either brave or a fool. I don't know which." The lion tamer patted his head. "Do you live in town?"

"Well, no." Jedro gulped. "I was looking for a job."

Jason Hart asked sharply, "Where's your home?"

"I haven't one."

"No parents?"

"N-no," he stuttered.

"Where have you been living, kid?"

"On a gran ranch." He explained about his job. "I want to work for the carnival," he finished.

"The carnival, hey?" Jason Hart studied him, then continued more soberly, "It's a good life, kid, and I like it, I suspect because it's all I ever knew. But it wouldn't be good for you. It's plenty rough and you're always on the move with never a chance to get your feet planted or learn anything. And what you would learn would be too much and too soon. You don't want it, kid." He shook his head.

"But I do," blurted Jedro.

"You do, eh? What do you know about it?" demanded the lion tamer.

"You've been out there in the sawdust gaping at all the lurid posters and listening to the barkers and you think it's all glamor, hey? But it's not. It's all illusion, boy. Nothing you see is real. And when you get right down to it, there's not much glamor. It's blood and sweat, racing from one town to another, with no life you can call your own. You know what happens in the end? You wind up on an ash heap somewhere."

"You like it," insisted Jedro. "You said so."

"Sure, but I'm me and you're you. You can't judge what you'd like by what I like." He looked more kindly at the boy. "Besides, what could you do?"

Jedro grinned. "I can capture lions."

A bystander guffawed and slapped a leg. "The kid's got you beat, Jason."

"Perhaps," conceded the lion tamer.

"I'd do any kind of work," Jedro put in quickly.

"You've really got your heart set on it, haven't you?"

"More than anything," he admitted.

"You'd have to see Dr. Faust. He does all the hiring."

"The owner?" he asked weakly. His heart sank. He had been hoping the lion tamer might put him to work.

"That's the man, kid. What's your name?"

"Jedro."

"What's your last name?"

"I don't know." He scuffed his toe through the sawdust.

Jason Hart saw the boy's downcast look and slapped his shoulder. "Tell you what, you come around in the morning and I'll take you to see him."

"You will?" Jedro's hopes soared.

"I can't promise anything."

"I'll be here."

The lion tamer started to turn away, then swung back. "Where are you staying, kid?"

"No place," he admitted.

"Where do you sleep?"

"In the panda grass."

"The grass, hey? Well, we can do better than that. I don't think the Doc would mind, even if you're not working for us. Had anything to eat?"

"A man gave me two hamburgers."

"We can do better than that, too." The lion tamer glanced around.

"Corky?"

A sad-faced clown stepped forward. "I'll take care of him," he said.

"Thank you," murmured Jedro. He wondered why the clown looked so sad.

Later he learned that not all clowns laughed and rollicked, some, like Corky, wore melancholic masks, and it was this pathos that endeared Corky to the spectators, for they saw in him their own secret bafflements and frustrations. Corky wore their sorrow for them.

Following the clown from the main tent, Jedro felt wildly jubilant. Tomorrow he would see Dr. Faust and get a job; he couldn't imagine that it could be otherwise. The past was past and the future lay ahead.

He remembered back to that long-ago morning when he'd awakened in Mr. Krant's attic bedroom. Then the world ahead had been unutterably bleak; but not this world.

This world was big and bright.

4

"HEY, KID, wake up!"

Jedro opened his eyes with a start. A shaft of morning light streamed in through the back of the wagon in which he had slept. For a wild moment he wondered where he was before memory streamed back. The man peering in at him was the lion tamer.

He pushed aside the blankets provided by the clown and scrambled to his feet, aware that the yellow sun Klore already was well above the horizon. He couldn't remember ever having slept so late. Slipping into his clothes, he leaped to the ground.

"We'd better eat so we can catch the Doc early," advised the lion tamer. "He's usually in a better mood in the morning." He led Jedro to the mess tent. Jedro caught the delicious aroma of frying things and inhaled deeply. Suddenly he was ravenous. The lion tamer gestured him to a table and went back to the counter where a white-clad cook was busy over a griddle. Jedro looked around warily. Several people at a nearby table were eyeing him speculatively. He flushed and looked away.

The lion tamer returned with two plates heaped with food, then brought a mug of black coffee for himself and a glass of milk for Jedro. While eating, he explained, "The Doc is a strange fellow. Moody, not too pleasant. Your best bet is to say 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir' and not much else. In general keep your mouth shut. Don't volunteer any information unless he asks."

"What will he ask me?"

"Can't say." The lion tamer grimaced.

"I'll do my best," he promised.

"Occasionally he's all right." The lion tamer rubbed his jaw. "Once I even saw him laugh."

"When was that?"

"When a rube broke his leg on the merry-go-round."

Jedro looked to see if he were joking and decided he wasn't. "What's a rube?"

"Anyone out there." The lion tamer gestured airily toward the sawdust street. "The great paying public, the chumps. More politely, the customers. But all rubes. The name's as old as the business," he explained.

Jedro asked, "What do you call people who work here?"

"Carnies."

"That's what I want to be, a carney."

"Actually this is more of a circus and carnival combined," observed the lion tamer. "The people who work in the big tent are circus performers. That's where I come from, a circus. The carnies run the freak shows, rides, concessions -- things like that. The con men are on that end."

Jedro thought that the few people present appeared quite ordinary; none resembled the lurid pictures he'd seen on the posters. "Not many people here," he remarked speculatively.

"Most work late and sleep late," explained the lion tamer. He pointed out Rocky, The Stone Man; and Hot Mouth, The Fire Eater. "They're carney types," he said. His voice left the implication that circus performers were a

notch above the others.

Jedro studied Rocky curiously. "He doesn't look like stone to me," he offered.

"Every trade has its tricks," the lion tamer declared enigmatically. Later Jedro learned that the "stone" flesh the carney exhibited was created by a special plastic spray which, hardening, appeared and felt like granite.

He was finishing breakfast when a dark, slender woman of indeterminate age came in, accompanied by the young blond girl he'd seen in the ticket booth. He wondered if the woman was the girl's mother. They certainly didn't look alike.

The lion tamer, observing his interest, explained, "That's Wanda, The Snake Woman. Best show on the street. She works with a thirty-foot anaconda."

"A thirty-foot snake?" he exclaimed.

"It's actually somewhat shorter, but who's going to measure it?" The lion tamer smiled.

"I saw the girl in the ticket office," he ventured.

"That's Kathy."

"Is she from the home world?"

"We all are. If the Doc hires you, you'll be the first carney from this planet. But don't get your hopes too high, kid. The Doc doesn't cotton much to outworlders."

"Why?" he asked defensively.

"No particular reason, except that it takes a long time to train a carney. No matter what you do -- performer, shill, barker, or just plain roustabout -- the work's specialized, takes time. Carnies are born, not made; it's in the blood. Same with circus people. You don't find that kind of talent on a world like this."

"I'm still going to work here," he declared stoutly.

"We'll see what we can do, kid."

Jedro studied the girl covertly. "Is The Snake Woman her mother?"

The lion tamer frowned into his coffee cup before saying, "She lost her father. The Snake Woman took her in. Kathy's a fine girl," he added.

"Oh," exclaimed Jedro. He felt a pang of sorrow for the blond girl. "Did he die?"

The lion tamer said harshly, "He ran away, abandoned her." Abruptly he pushed back his chair and rose. "We'd better see if we can corner the Doc."

He led Jedro to a long red- and white-striped house trailer parked alongside the main tent. Block letters on its side read: DR. FAUST'S MAGIC CARNIVAL. The trailer was neat and clean. Portable steps led to a rear door. Blinds drawn over the small windows at either end gave it a deserted appearance.

"The Doc used to be a master hypnotist in show business before he started the carnival," explained the lion tamer. "That was back on Earth. They say he was the best."

"What's a hypnotist?"

"A man who makes you do what he wants you to do. I guess that's the best way of explaining it."

"How does he do that?"

"By suggestion."

"You mean he puts thoughts in your head, makes you think they're your own?"

"That's a good way to put it, yeah. Remember what I told you." The lion tamer ascended the steps and rapped on the door.

"What is it?" called an irritable voice from inside.

"Jason," shouted the lion tamer. "Got a minute, Doc?" There was movement inside before the door opened, revealing a tall, slender man with a dark, inscrutable face. His black eyes, riveted on Jason Hart, pointedly excluded

Jedro.

"What is it?" he demanded testily.

"I brought a kid who wants a job."

"We don't hire on this planet," snapped Faust. "You know that."

"This boy's different," protested the lion tamer. "He's a good hand with animals."

"Oh, the boy who returned Taber to his cage." Faust's dark eyes appraised Jedro. He had the impression that they were looking straight through him, concentrating on something behind him. He forced himself to return the carnival owner's gaze.

"He has no parents," said the lion tamer. "He's free to go anywhere. Besides, we need help with the animals."

"You always need more help," Faust said curtly. His eyes remained on the youth.

"Ain't that the truth!" The lion tamer grinned.

"What made you so certain the lion wouldn't hurt you?" asked Faust. It took Jedro a moment to realize the question had been directed at him.

"His eyes," he blurted.

"What about his eyes?"

"They were gentle."

"Gentle?" Faust smiled sardonically. "Do you know how many people that cat's ripped up?"

"That's because they didn't understand him," he protested. He had the awful feeling of the job slipping away.

"And you do?"

"Yes, sir," he asserted.

Faust's harsh laugh denied the statement. "All right, you can try him out," he told Jason Hart. "He can help with the relks, horses, all the animals, but I don't want him loafing around the lions."

"I won't loaf," Jedro promised eagerly.

"Don't come whining to me when you're missing an arm," he snapped. He stepped back and slammed the door.

"You're in," the lion tamer said softly.

"I'm in." Jedro gazed wonderingly at the big red- and white-striped tent. "I'm a carney."

His face broke into a happy grin.

Jedro sprang joyfully into his new life. Although his main job was tending the horses and relks, Jason Hart occasionally allowed him to help with the lions, but never when they were feeding. "They're too dangerous at meal time," he explained.

That first night Jedro got to view the show in the big tent. Clowns, acrobats, jugglers, trapeze artists, rope walkers, trick riders -- he'd never dreamed it could be so wonderful. But most wonderful of all was the act put on by the lion tamer and his wife Millie.

First Jason, dressed in a bright red jacket, tight breeches and polished black boots, entered the cage where Taber and his mate Rana prowled restlessly. It was then that Jedro understood why the lion tamer had been holding the chair when Taber had escaped, for in the act he used it as a shield, always keeping it between him and the lions. As he cracked his whip, shouting orders, the lions raced around and around, their lean bodies stretched until their bellies were close to the floor. Abruptly he struck a pose, cracked his whip, shouted a new order; the lions halted, wheeled around, and leaped onto the low stools set in the center of the cage.

While Jason Hart bowed to the roaring, stomping, clapping crowd, Millie Hart entered the cage. Slight and graceful in a bright red blouse, black tights, and polished boots that reached to midcalf, she carried only a short

whip. With Jason watchful in the background, she put the big cats through an intricate routine of tricks. At the climax, with the drums beating louder and louder and Millie directing with fast movements of her whip, Taber led Rana in a series of jumps through fiery hoops that continually were raised higher above the floor of the cage. Watching in awe, Jedro thrilled to their graceful leaps. Afterward, Millie and Jason took their bows to a thunderous ovation that marked the closing of Dr. Faust's Magic Carnival.

To Jedro's intense satisfaction, he was quickly accepted by the performers, barkers, ticket sellers, shills, and roustabouts, the latter of whom performed the carnival's manual labor and maintenance. They called him "Jed" and "the kid" and made him feel very much a part of the show. He was "the boy who captured the lion." Jedro loved it.

Jason took the first opportunity to introduce him to Kathy, the blond girl who sold tickets at The Snake Woman's booth. "Jedro's with us now," he told her.

She gave Jedro a friendly smile. "I hope you'll like it."

"It's wonderful," he declared, then blushed, afraid she would think him a rube.

"Kathy is with Wanda, The Snake Woman," explained Jason, as if Jedro hadn't known.

"I saw you selling tickets there," he offered. "Do you like snakes?" Realizing the inanity of the question, his face flamed anew. She didn't appear to notice.

"Not exactly."

"Jedro has a way with animals," Jason Hart told her.

"I don't know about snakes," he protested. "I never heard of one until I got here."

"They don't have them on Doorn," she observed.

"Why don't you show Jedro around?" suggested the lion tamer. "He hasn't seen much of us yet."

"I'd be happy to," she murmured.

Jedro grinned. "That would be great."

"Don't be late." Slapping Jedro's shoulder, the lion tamer vanished into the big tent.

Kathy studied her watch. "We haven't much time."

"If you'd rather not..."

"It's not that," she cut in hastily. "I have to open the booth before long."

"We could walk around," he suggested.

"All right."

As they started along the sawdust street, he asked, "How long have you been with the carnival?" The troubled look that flooded her face told him it was the wrong question. He writhed inwardly.

"A long time." Her voice was strained. "I came with it from Earth."

"Mr. Hart is wonderful. So is Mrs. Hart." He spoke quickly, trying to repair the damage. "I never knew a place could be like this."

She glanced sideways at him. "Where are you from?"

"A gran ranch."

"Around here?"

"The other side of Little Paris," he explained.

"Oh, that's a pretty town. Do your folks live there?"

"It wasn't my home. I just worked there. Most of the time I tended the gran, but during the winters I worked around the house and barn." He caught her puzzled expression and blurted, "I haven't any folks."

"That's too bad." She stared straight ahead.

"That's why I wanted to join the carnival," he continued lamely. "I never saw anything but the gran ranch, not even a town until I got to Little

Paris. I want to stay here, go with the carnival when it returns to the home planet."

"Earth," she said painfully.

"Do you miss it?"

She nodded, her face tight again.

"I want to see it," he explained quickly. He had the frantic feeling of getting into deeper and deeper water. Why, he didn't know. Did Earth remind her of her father? "I've heard about the big cities and aircars and buildings that almost touch the sky. I have to see them," he added desperately.

"It's a lovely world." Her voice closed the subject. She pointed out the more interesting sideshows, explaining a little about each. The Fattest Woman in the Universe weighed only a little over five hundred pounds rather than the advertised eight hundred and the Tallest Man in the Universe stood only seven foot six instead of nine feet.

"Fakes like The Stone Man," he exclaimed.

"We shouldn't mention those things."

"About being fakes?"

"Not to anyone outside," she cautioned.

"I wouldn't do that." He looked at her. "Is The Pig-Faced Boy a fake?"

"Some people are unfortunate," she answered gravely.

"How about Hot Mouth? Does he really eat fire?"

She nodded. "But I think he uses some kind of a spray. Have you seen The Sword Swallower? He really does run the sword all the way down his throat. I used to think it telescoped or something but it doesn't. He showed it to me."

Jedro remembered the lion tamer's words and said, "Mr. Hart told me that everything here is an illusion, that nothing is real."

"That's not true," she objected. "Lots of the shows are real, like The Human Pincushion. He actually does jab pins into his arms and legs. And I think The Strangler might be the strongest man in the universe."

"He sure looks it on the posters," he exclaimed. "I'd like to see him."

"He frightens me."

"Why?" He shot a glance at her.

"He's stupid and cruel." She tossed her head disdainfully. "They use him to kill the animals that get wounded or are too sick to be of further use."

"But if they can't be cured..."

"He likes it," she cut in. "He likes to smash their bones. He's a sadist."

"Gosh." He gulped. Even Mr. Krant wasn't that mean. "How about Wanda? Does she really charm snakes?"

"She says it's a form of hypnosis." Kathy raised her head. "Oh, there's Granny. You'll have to meet her."

Jedro followed her gaze and saw a thin, white-haired woman wearing a black shawl around her frail shoulders. Her face, wrinkled and brown, made her look incredibly old. A sign above her booth read: MADAME BREVET SEES ALL, KNOWS ALL.

"Hello, Granny," called Kathy.

The old woman smiled toothily. "Bless you, child. My, how pretty your hair is today." Her gaze rested on Jedro. "I don't believe I've met your young friend."

Kathy introduced him, explaining, "He works for the carnival."

"He does?" Granny's interest sharpened.

"I've just started," he said shyly.

"Oh, you're the boy who's working with Jason." Her smile returned. "I heard how you handled that lion. That was a brave thing to do."

He flushed. "He isn't mean."

"Of course he's not," she agreed. "I'll tell you a secret. I pet him myself now and then, and Rana, too."

"You do?" He gazed admiringly at her.

"I don't let Jason know. He'd be scared stiff."

"Does he really think they are dangerous?"

"Almost everyone does. It's because they don't understand them." Granny patted his head. "I'm glad you can be with us, Jedro. I know you'll like the carnival. It's a wonderful place."

"It sure is," he exclaimed.

"Perhaps you'll have a show of your own someday."

"She's nice," said Jedro, when they turned away. He cast a sidelong glance at the girl. "Can she really read the future?" He had a quick memory of Mr. Clement predicting his own death, and shuddered. But it hadn't been a dream; he had the memory stone to prove it.

"I believe she's more of a mind reader than a fortune teller," reflected Kathy.

"She can read your thoughts?" He was startled.

She nodded. "She guesses the future from that."

"Then why doesn't she advertise herself as a mind reader?"

"Oh, no." She shook her head. "People like to have their fortunes told, perhaps because they know that fortune tellers only tell the good things. It gives them hope. But most people would be afraid to have their minds read. She wouldn't get many customers."

"Why is that?" he demanded.

"People don't like you to know what they're thinking."

"How does she do it?"

Kathy considered the question. "I don't know," she said finally. "I don't even think Granny knows. It's just something she does."

"That would be scary."

"Very scary," she agreed.

He thought of Mr. Clement again, and said, "Reading minds isn't the same as looking into the future."

"There's a difference," she admitted.

"Do you believe anyone can do that?"

"Look into the future? Granny says so."

"I guess she'd know."

"Yes, she'd know." Her tone settled the issue.

A voice from the loudspeakers announced that the carnival had opened. Kathy didn't appear to have heard. A few spectators wandered in through the entrance, the signal for the barkers to begin their cries. Barracuda, The Human Fish, stalked out from The Strangler's booth and returned to his own. Hot Mouth waved at them as they passed. It all made Jedro feel very good.

"You'd never get tired of this," he exclaimed impulsively.

"Occasionally I do."

"I won't," he stated. He couldn't imagine that the excitement could ever end. Drinking in the strange sights along the sawdust street, he thought it the most marvelous place in the entire universe.

As the carnival came to life, its noises swept over them in a growing wave. Pleasant aromas filled the air. The animals on the merry-go-round jumped up and down as they spun around and the sky wheel, still devoid of passengers, sent its small buckets reeling against the stars. Clanking cars rolled into the Tunnel of Love. Everything that was to be seen was to be seen here, he thought. Who could ask for more? Perhaps someday he would be a lion tamer like Jason Hart. Jedro, The Lion Tamer; or perhaps he would simply bill himself as Jedro The Great. Glancing at Kathy, he wondered what she would think of him then.

His face brightened as they came to a poster showing a tall, thin man standing alongside a reik to emphasize his height. His finger was pointing to a sign which read: SEE GEORGE -- TALLEST MIDGET IN THE UNIVERSE!

"No one could fall for that gag," he cried.

"But they do," she corrected. "The people here marvel at midgets. Have you seen their troupe? They're wonderful. Being the tallest of the short makes George appear even more wonderful."

"But he's not a midget," he objected.

"Of course not." She tossed her head and smiled. "Dr. Faust -- you've met him, haven't you? -- says that people believe anything that's in writing. If you want to make a person believe something, write it."

"Why is that?"

"It has to do with psychology," she explained. "Dr. Faust says it's related to the permanency of the written word."

"What do you think of him?"

"He frightens me, perhaps because he's a hypnotist." She appeared momentarily startled at her confession, then quickly consulted her watch. "I have to start work. I'm already late."

"This was great," he exulted. He looked hopefully at her.

"I'll show you some more later," she promised.

"That would be fine." Walking with her toward The Snake Woman's booth, he felt as if he were treading on air. Kathy was wonderful. Pretty, too, especially when she smiled. Yet there was a sadness in her face that he couldn't decipher. It had been there at his mention of Earth, and he'd detected it several times since. He wondered if it were because her father had run away. Why would he do a thing like that? She was an orphan, just like he was. The thought brought a constriction to his throat. That wasn't so bad for a boy. A boy could move around, make it on his own. But not a girl. Girls needed someone to take care of them. He was glad The Snake Woman had taken her in, given her a home.

Abruptly he halted, staring at a small booth across the way. Above its lurid posters was the single word: TATTOOING.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. Before he could answer, a tall, lean man emerged from the booth, gazing both ways along the sawdust street. Jedro gaped at him. His bony face with the big curving nose and the hairless skull were covered with strange colored patterns that gleamed under the yellow sun. Gaudy stripes covered his bare arms and sandaled feet.

The Tattooed Man! Jedro fought to subdue his sudden fright. Plunging a hand into his pocket, he clasped the memory stone while his body shook and his heart thumped wildly. A mental picture of that sunny afternoon when Mr. Clement had died brought the sweat to his brow.

"What is it?" she repeated.

"His looks startled me," he managed to say.

"Oh, that's Gurdon."

"Gurdon," he echoed. Mr. Clement had said that he would see him again.

"Most people call him The Tattooed Man," she explained. "He's a good friend of Dr. Faust. He is kind of scary."

"Yeah," he answered thickly.

"I have to hurry."

"Sure." He tore his eyes away from the lean figure of The Tattooed Man and shakily accompanied her to The Snake Woman's booth. When she went inside, he turned quickly to look back along the sawdust street.

The Tattooed Man was nowhere in sight.

5

THE BIG TENT came down.

Roustabouts sectioned it with amazing speed, folding it into neat, square bundles which packed compactly into the large flatbed wagons. Working

quickly and efficiently, other roustabouts pulled stakes, removed wires, signs, and posters, and still others dismantled booths. Jedro accompanied the lions as they were moved into small cages on one of the wagons, for the great beasts were always nervous at such times.

In what seemed to him but moments, New Chicago was falling behind. Soon, in the distance, it appeared like a toy village set upon the flat grassy plains.

Led by Dr. Faust's big red- and white-striped trailer, the procession wound among the Kliton Hills, two days later emerging onto the rolling Wisconsin plain, where the town of New Milwaukee was situated. By the following morning, the carnival appeared exactly as it had in New Chicago; only the surrounding landscape differed.

Jedro's days were filled with excitement; the carnival was a source of never-ending wonder. He was learning many things. He discovered that nearly all of the towns were named for great Earth cities, usually preceded by either the prefix "New" or "Little." In time he realized that every great ship carrying colonists to the stars also carried an unseen passenger whose name was Nostalgia. Men left Earth, but never forgot it. Now, on Doorn, they were trying to re-create the world from which they had come.

The carnival moved on.

New Berlin...

New Boston...

Little Rome...

As the wagon train spanned prairies, moved over rich farmlands and wound along forest roads, Jedro's horizons broadened. Best of all, he wasn't alone anymore. The lion tamer and his wife treated him as a son; Corky and Dum-Dum, the clowns, were his special friends.

"I had a son once," Dum-Dum told him, in a moment of rare confidence, then glanced away, his eyes brimming. Jedro was too choked to answer, for he knew the clown had been trying to express a long-buried sorrow. Later he learned that while Dum-Dum's laughing face was a mask to hide the tragedy of the son he had lost, Corky's plaintive sadness was founded in the loneliness of never having had a son.

But Jedro's greatest happiness came in his friendship with Kathy. From the first, they had recognized in each other a kinship. If he was lonely, so was she, although the word was seldom mentioned. Strolling hand-in-hand along the sawdust street, they brought to each other what all the clowns and friendly carnival folks around them could never bring: the solace of friendship founded in understanding.

In a town named Little Newark, Kathy got a substitute to handle the ticket booth while she toured the sawdust street with Jedro. They rode on the merry-go-round, laughing and shouting to each other above the raucous music. Swooping starward on the sky wheel, they gasped at the small figures far below them on the sawdust street; then the small seat in which they were riding plunged downward, with everything suddenly growing in their vision.

The Tunnel of Love.

The Midget Troupe...

Hot Mouth, The Fire Eater...

They howled at the short, fat, tall, thin, grotesque, and twisted caricatures of themselves in the distortion mirrors. Viewing herself as a roly-poly dumpling, Kathy exclaimed, "Goodness, do I really look like that?"

"You're really pretty," he told her.

He wanted to take her to watch The Strangler, but she refused. "I get goose bumps just being near him," she confessed. Instead they went to see Twisto, The Contortionist, maneuver his lean body into unbelievable shapes.

"Ugh," exclaimed Kathy, "he reminds me of Caesar." Jedro laughed. Caesar was The Snake Woman's anaconda.

They watched Barracuda, The Human Fish, swim in his glass tank amid fronds, seaweed, and a host of strange sea creatures. Rail-thin, with diminutive ears pinned close to his shaved head and a body covered with silvery scales, Barracuda peered out at the spectators through bulbous eyes. Kathy explained that the stems of the fronds really were air tubes through which he breathed whenever he turned his face from the crowd.

The night came to an end too soon.

"It was fun," Kathy said with a sigh, when at last they stood in front of The Snake Woman's booth.

"Next time we'll watch the lion tamer," he exclaimed. As he bade her good night, his heart sang with pure joy. Traveling in the wagons, first with one and then another of the performers or roustabouts, he became privy to a host of rumors, few of which offered any basis in fact.

He heard strange stories of how, at every new town, Dr. Faust would stand unobtrusively at the entrance to the sawdust street, scanning the face of each new arrival; how he would closet himself for days at a time in his big red- and white-striped trailer, attended only by The Tattooed Man, who was said to have worked for Faust back when the latter had been a master hypnotist in show business.

Other rumors had it that Faust was a secret imbiber of creel, a powerful native drink that stimulated the sense in bizarre ways; and that he was a hater of mankind, a fugitive from some unnamed terror, a man with an unmentionable past. Although Jedro paid scant attention to the whispers, he did perceive that the carnival owner was both hated and feared, although he wasn't certain why.

But he didn't wonder at the unsavory rumors concerning The Strangler's cruelty. While the carnival was unloading at Little Rome, he had surprised the brutish performer in the act of jabbing the lions through the bars with a pointed stick.

"Don't do that," he cried angrily.

The Strangler whirled, his stupid face filled with malevolence. "Why not?" he growled.

"You're hurting them!"

"Makes 'em frisky," sneered The Strangler. "They put on a better show." He jabbed viciously at Taber and the big cat crouched, snarling.

"Stop that," shouted Jedro.

The Strangler swung toward him. "You trying to tell me what to do?" he roared.

His heart pounding, Jedro dashed between the performer and the cage. Looking up into the mean eyes, he cried, "I'll tell Mr. Hart -- I'll tell everyone what you're doing!"

"I'll smash you," muttered The Strangler. Turning abruptly, he vanished among the wagons. Jedro knew that he had made a dangerous enemy but didn't care; no one had the right to hurt the animals.

Thereafter he avoided The Strangler, yet couldn't help but notice that the strong man wasn't without friends. One was Barracuda, The Human Fish. Another was The Human Pincushion. Occasionally Jedro would see them together in the mess tent or strolling along the sawdust street. More surprising, he discovered that The Strangler occasionally visited Granny. Kathy said that was because Granny liked everyone.

But Granny, too, was a target for rumor. "When she looks into her crystal ball," ran the whisper, "she is really looking into your mind." Other whispers had it that she was pondering your soul. Old and emaciated, with bony hands ridged with blue veins and a shriveled face made grotesque by gleaming dentures, she nevertheless managed a gentle smile. If she were held in awe, she also was well liked.

Occasionally Jedro managed to share breakfast with Kathy and The Snake

Woman in the big warm mess tent. At other times, as he and the blond girl walked along the sawdust street, they gravely discussed life. But not once did she mention her past, nor did he question her about it. Intuitively he knew that it was sealed off behind a curtain of pain. All in all, there was but one jarring note in his mind: the presence of The Tattooed Man.

Why had he killed Mr. Clement? Every time Jedro glimpsed The Tattooed Man or thought of him, the question came unbidden. Each time, touching the memory stone to feel its warmth, he instinctively knew the answer: The Tattooed Man had been trying to get the memory stone. But why?

For that question, he had no answer.

Jedro awoke in the cold hour of dawn. Throwing aside the blankets, he dressed hurriedly in the rickety old wagon that had been assigned as his personal quarters. Although it was filled with strange odors that spoke of former tenants and odd cargo, he thought it the best home he'd ever had.

The horses and relks whinnied softly as he approached their corral. He spoke reassuringly to them as he dumped fresh fodder in the troughs and filled the water tubs. Now and then he paused to pat one or scratch it behind the ear. Their large dark eyes reminded him of the rain pools set among the otog trees in the Ullan Hills.

Afterward he crept into the big tent and went to the lion cage. Lying alongside the bars, Taber lifted his head, watching him approach. Rana, sprawled on her belly with her head on her paws, raised herself from the floor and came toward him.

Jedro reached through the bars and ran his fingers through Taber's mane, then scratched Rana under the chin. He was rewarded by deep rumbling purrs. He tried to keep such visits secret, for he knew that Jason Hart would be quite angry.

"Those cats are dangerous," the lion tamer had warned time and again. But looking into their large golden eyes, Jedro knew that Jason Hart was wrong. The lions weren't at all dangerous, not where he was concerned. They were merely lonely. And if they were irritable, it was because they were penned up. When he spoke to them, he had the odd feeling that they understood him -- if not his words, at least his thoughts.

When his chores were finished, he washed in a tub of cold water before going to the mess tent. Disappointed that Kathy wasn't there, he had breakfast with Corky and Dum-Dum. Devoid of their makeup and ring attire, the clowns appeared quite ordinary, although Corky's eyes never lost the sadness that gave his long face such a lugubrious expression.

Later he wandered outside. Both Klore and Bergon had risen, painting the eastern sky a glorious golden-orange. He was gazing around when he saw The Tattooed Man emerge from the carnival owner's big red- and white-striped trailer. Jedro shrank back against the mess tent, his pulses quickening. A sharp tremor ran through his body -- reactions he got whenever he saw the man. Nervously he watched him.

Gurdon's bony, brilliantly patterned face gleamed in the morning sun. Glancing around quickly, he strode along the sawdust street. His lithe body and quick, light steps reminded Jedro of the big cats; The Tattooed Man was like them -- all sinewy, flowing movement.

Jedro's thoughts were uneasy. What business had The Tattooed Man with Dr. Faust? Although they were rumored to be close, he couldn't imagine the carnival owner choosing such a man for a friend. Yet Barracuda and The Human Pincushion had picked The Strangler; and The Strangler visited Granny...

Friendship, he was discovering, was an odd thing; likes seemed more often drawn to unlikes than likes. Or was he seeing the exceptions? Perhaps his perturbation was caused by what he'd seen in the Ullan Hills. If The Tattooed Man ever discovered that...He shuddered at the possible consequences.

He saw Madame Brevet standing in front of her booth, her wrinkled face

turned toward the sky. Her skin, in the morning light, resembled old leather. Glancing up, he saw that the guy wire holding her sign had become loose, allowing it to cant at an odd angle.

"I'll fix it, Granny," he called. Leaping, he caught the edge of the roof and pulled himself up. Tightening the wire, he dropped back to the street.

"My, you're agile." She patted his head, her old eyes wistful. "I used to be that way. Long ago," she added.

Caught by her nostalgia, he declared stoutly, "You can do other things, Granny."

"Not much." She shook her head sadly. "I'm getting old."

"You can tell fortunes. Not many people can do that."

"Bless you." She smiled toothily. "Come inside and I'll give you a treat." She led him into a small room and flipped a switch. A cone of light blazed down on a large crystal ball set atop a small table that had a chair placed at either side. The walls, ceiling and floor were covered with a dense black material, giving the impression that nothing existed beyond that which was illuminated under the cone of light. The chairs, table, and crystal ball appeared to float in a sea of nothingness. The room gave him a spooky feeling.

"Wait here," instructed Granny. She went into the next room, returning shortly with a bowl which she placed on the table alongside the crystal ball. He saw that it was filled with strange-appearing nuts.

"What are they?" he asked.

"Salted almonds." answered Granny. "Try some. They're from Earth."

He nibbled one experimentally, finding its strange bittersweet flavor pleasant to the taste. "Good," he admitted.

"Take a handful," she urged. "You won't often get a treat like that." Scooping up a few, he plopped one into his mouth and dropped the rest into his pocket. He gazed at the crystal ball, his curiosity stirred. Sitting in the cone of light, the silvery sphere caught and reflected the rays in such a way that he was reminded of staring into the starry firmament during a jet black night.

"Where are you from?" asked Granny. "I haven't heard."

"A gran ranch on the other side of Little Paris."

"Your folk's ranch?"

"I haven't any parents," he explained lamely.

"That's too bad." She smiled sympathetically. "Why did you join the carnival?"

"To get away from Mr. Krant." He caught her inquisitive glance and continued, "He was the man I worked for. He was real mean. So was Mrs. Krant."

"You did right to leave," she declared. "You'll be far better off with us. Do you like it here?"

"It's great," he answered enthusiastically. "Besides, I want to go back with the carnival to Earth."

"Why?"

"Just to see it -- the big buildings and aircars and things like that," he explained.

"Poof, it's so crowded a soul can scarcely breathe."

"I still want to see it," he objected. He returned his gaze to the crystal ball. "Can you really see things in that?"

"Not really." Granny smiled and shook her head. "What I see is really in the mind, not the crystal."

"Then why use the crystal?"

"It helps me to concentrate, bring my thoughts into focus," she explained. "It's also a great prop."

"What's a prop?"

"Something to impress the rubes. They expect it."

He digested that. "Then you don't really need the ball?"

"It's better with it," she countered.

"What I meant was that you really don't see anything in it," he explained.

She displayed her dentures in a bright smile. "But if it brings the vision alive in my mind, it's the same thing."

"But what you think isn't actually reflected in the ball," he protested. "You said that yourself."

"Perhaps, I'm not always certain." She eyed him gravely. "When I'm concentrating, I see a vision, but exactly where it is, I can't say. I imagine that it's in my mind, but it might also be in the ball."

"Suppose someone else looked into the ball?"

She shook her head. "It wouldn't work unless that person had the power."

"The power!" He was startled. "Do you mean the ability to see the future?"

"That's just one kind of psychic power," explained Granny. "There are many other kinds."

"Such as?" He waited, tense and breathless.

"The ability to see around corners, or to move objects by mental force..."

"Move them by just thinking?" he cut in.

Granny nodded. "That's called psychokinesis."

"Can that be done?"

"Of course, Jedro." She explained about levitation, teleportation, the ability to commune with the dead, raise the dead, and call up poltergeists.

"What are they?" he interrupted.

"Poltergeists?" Granny chuckled. "You might call them noisy ghosts."

Awed, he asked, "Do you believe all that?"

"Certainly." Her lips crinkled into a smile. "The universe is far stranger than we know, Jedro."

"A box of puzzles," he observed, remembering Mr. Clement's words.

"That's a good way of putting it." Her eyes were approving. "But nothing is stranger than the human mind. Most people just inhabit its surface; they never look deep inside. And it's the nether part of the mind that's most fascinating. Strange tides are at flood down there, Jedro."

"I don't understand."

"The brain is the house of the mind," she explained. "It's a dark cavern filled with spooks, but it holds a lot of goodies, too."

"How do you get the goodies?" Fascinated, he stared at her, his mind awl with what she was saying.

"It's a gift, Jedro, a genetic one. But with such a gift, there's no end to what the mind can do."

He asked carefully, "Could a person tell when he's going to die?"

Her head jerked up. "What makes you ask that?"

"I just wondered." Flustered, he shifted his gaze to the crystal ball.

Granny asked sharply, "Have you heard of such a person?"

"I heard a boy talking about it," he lied glibly.

"What boy?"

"A fellow I met, back in Little Paris."

Granny looked at him. Against the black background, her ancient face and clawlike hands appeared afloat in some black and endless sea. "That would be a form of psychic power," she finally commented.

He forced his gaze back to her face. "What do you call it?"

"A form of precognition, the ability to see into the future."

"But isn't that what you do when you tell fortunes?"

"Not a bit. I predict from what I see of the present, Jedro."

"By reading minds?"

"Every good fortune teller is a bit of a telepath." she explained.

"Is that what you are, a telepath?"

"Gracious, you are inquisitive." She favored him with another smile.

"Are you?" he persisted. He had the frantic feeling of having to know.

"Now and then," she conceded.

Curious, he asked. "Why only now and then?"

"I don't know, Jedro. Perhaps there's a door in the mind that opens and shuts. Who understands the human mind? I certainly don't."

He grinned. "But you know what lives in it."

"I know that." She nodded. "But you can understand the sea without being able to swim," she added.

He weighed her words, sensing an evasion. "Can I look in the ball?"

Granny smiled. "Would you like me to tell your fortune?"

He thought of Mr. Clement, The Tattooed Man, and the memory stone and shook his head. He couldn't risk what she might see. "I'd just like to take a peek," he explained.

"Go right ahead," she invited, "but get comfortable. Gaze straight into the ball and try not to think of anything. Keep your mind blank."

Jedro adjusted himself in the chair before riveting his attention on the ball. His first impression was of staring into a murky sky. The crystal sphere was bright, silvery, solid-appearing. Catching the light from the overhead lamp, it brought the rays into a sharp focus that hurt his eyes.

But suddenly the murk appeared to dissolve; it was like gazing down into the black pools in the Ullan Hills, glimpsing the sandy bottom through dark waters. Concentrating, he endeavored to shut out the world around him; all thought of Granny receded from his mind.

The hard light waned and vanished, becoming an even luminescence that pervaded every part of the crystal sphere. He had the swift impression that by some magic he had been transported into the vast loneliness of outer space; his eyes beheld an awesome infinity. Silence engulfed him.

The dream returned.

It came to life in the crystal depths. As before, it unfolded scene by scene with the stark clarity of reality. The man in the oblong box! Jedro's body twitched and jerked and his hands shook violently. Perspiration beaded his brow.

"What is it?" A voice, coming as if from a great distance, touched his mind. Granny's voice! He struggled to pull himself back to conscious reality.

"What is it?" she demanded insistently. He looked into her ancient eyes, unable to shake the vividness of the image. He felt unutterably weary.

"What is it, Jedro?" she asked more calmly.

"I s-saw something I dreamed once."

"Saw?"

"In the crystal ball."

"What did you see?"

"A man in an oblong box." He felt compelled to answer. "Perhaps it was a coffin. He was old and pale and had long white hair. The coffin was inside a silver ship...or I think it was a ship." He closed his eyes, still sensing the sharpness of the imagery.

Granny leaned closer. "Was that all?"

"His eyes opened; they were clear and blue. Then he said, 'I have been waiting.'"

"Nothing more?" she demanded. Her dark eyes focused into small glittering points.

"I...saw stars."

"Stars?" she whispered. "Describe them, Jedro."

He told her of the big reddish disc with the four silvery spheres grouped around it, and of the strange star with the gleaming bands encircling

it. Speaking, he heard his own words as if from afar.

"Jupiter and Saturn," commented Granny.

"What are they?"

"The two largest planets in the solar system. The sun system of the home world," she added. "The four smaller planets were moons of Jupiter. It really has twelve moons but perhaps you were viewing it from too great a distance to see the others."

"Moons..." He contemplated the word wonderingly. Although Doorn had no moon, he'd heard of the naked planet that circled Earth. "What are the bands around the other planet, the one you called Saturn?"

"Meteoritic dust." Granny leaned closer. "What else did you see?"

"A big rock tumbling through space." He spoke reluctantly, yet with a certain relief. Perhaps Granny could explain the meaning of the dream. The pupils of her eyes appeared to grow sharper and sharper as he described the silver sphere he'd seen deep in the black rock valley, and the alien skies above. His voice broke as he told of the faraway golden sun. Finally he ceased speaking.

"When did you first have the dream?" asked Granny.

"It was" -- he tried to remember -- "just a few weeks after I saw Mr. Clement..." He stopped abruptly, aghast at his words.

"Clement?" Granny's voice rose. "Where did you see him?"

Jedro shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. "He was one of the gran herders," he lied lamely.

"Jedro?"

"Well, he was." He eyed her defiantly.

"You can trust me," she coaxed.

"But he was," he protested.

"Jedro" -- she leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper -- "never mention that dream to anyone. Never even whisper that name."

"Mr. Clement?"

She nodded. "Not a peep."

"Why?" he asked bewilderedly.

"It's dangerous, Jedro."

"But why?"

"I can't tell you," she replied firmly.

"But if you know..."

"But I don't," she interrupted. "I know just enough to realize that the knowledge is dangerous."

"To me?"

"Yes, Jedro." She nodded solemnly.

"I won't tell anyone," he promised.

"Never forget that." She leaned forward, scrutinizing him. Her bony hand rested alongside the crystal ball. "Now tell me about Mr. Clement," she instructed briskly.

Jedro returned her gaze. For a long moment they regarded each other silently. "I can't," he said finally.

"Can't?" She lifted her seamed face.

"I just promised you that I wouldn't." Before she could answer, he sprang to his feet and bolted from the room. Granny went to the door, watching him retreat down the sawdust street. Finally she smiled.

A satisfied smile.

The dream had meaning!

Gazing up at the dark ceiling of the wagon, Jedro pondered that fact. The old man in the oblong box and Mr. Clement somehow were related. Although Granny hadn't stated that as a fact, her warning and sharp interrogation left scant doubt of that. But how had Granny known about Mr. Clement? Perhaps he'd

been with the carnival. That also would explain the connection between Mr. Clement and The Tattooed Man. But it didn't explain the man in the oblong box.

Perhaps he should have told Granny the whole story. Debating it, he decided that silence was better. Besides, he couldn't tell her about Mr. Clement without mentioning the memory stone...and The Tattooed Man, and he certainly couldn't do that. He shuddered at what might happen if The Tattooed Man should discover what he knew.

Who was the man in the oblong box? Granny hadn't said. Reflecting on it, he realized she hadn't appeared overly concerned with the dream until he'd let slip Mr. Clement's name; then she'd reacted as if she'd been burned.

Just having knowledge of Mr. Clement was dangerous; Granny had been explicit about that. But if the knowledge were dangerous, it also must be valuable. To whom? The Tattooed Man? Granny hadn't explained that point. Or did she know? He felt a sense of bafflement. There was so much he didn't know. And when he summed up what he did know, it didn't make much sense.

He tossed the odds and ends around in his mind. If his conclusions were right, the man in the oblong box, Mr. Clement, The Tattooed Man, and the memory stone were all linked. More, he was part of the link. Yet what possible relation could he have, say, to the man in the oblong box? He couldn't imagine.

He reached under the tarp he was using for a pillow, fumbling around until he located the stone. Its immediate warmth was reassuring. Why had Mr. Clement called it a memory stone? You'll know when the time comes -- the gaunt man's words came back. You have the power -- he'd said that, too.

Power? Granny had used the word to describe the ability to see into the future. That was but one kind of power, she'd said. He felt a flare of excitement that as quickly died. It was crazy to imagine that he could see into the future, or to do any of the other wonderful things she'd mentioned. Perhaps Mr. Clement had meant something else. Yet, looking into the crystal ball, he'd seen his dream!

What did it all mean?

He looked at the sky through the end of the wagon; the winking red eyes of Glost peered down at him. Somewhere in that vastness of space was a tumbling black world; on it was a silver ship and in the silver ship was an oblong box in which an old man waited. Was that more than a dream? He felt certain it was.

Next morning, while walking with Kathy along the sawdust street, he asked, "Have you ever looked into Granny's crystal ball?"

"Not up close," she admitted.

"I did." He stared straight ahead.

"See anything?"

"A dream I once had."

"A dream?"

"About an old man in a...coffin."

"Someone you knew?"

"No." He shook his head. "He was an old man with long white hair. He spoke to me."

"He did?" she asked incredulously.

"In the dream." He glanced away self-consciously. "He said he had been waiting."

"Why would you dream a thing like that?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Did you tell Granny about it?"

"She asked."

"What did she say?"

"She warned me not to tell anyone."

Kathy halted, facing him. "Why, Jedro?"

"She said it was dangerous." He described the black world tumbling through space, the silver ship and its strange cargo, but made no mention of Mr. Clement, The Tattooed Man, or the memory stone. Those things he couldn't tell her.

"That's strange," she mused, when he'd finished. "When did you first have the dream?"

"Back when I was a gran herder."

"Do you think it has any meaning?"

"Granny does, but there's something else that bothers me." He saw her waiting expression and continued, "The two planets I saw in the dream were Jupiter and Saturn."

"What's so strange about that?"

"I never heard of them before, never knew they existed. But there they were, in my dream."

She said slowly, "You believe it's more than a dream, don't you?"

"I think so."

"That would frighten me." She looked worriedly at him. "I wouldn't tell anyone about it, Jedro."

"Because of what Granny said?"

"She warned you not to."

"What could she know about it?" he demanded.

"I don't know." Kathy glanced toward the fortune teller's booth. "She knows an awful lot."

"Yea," he said heavily.

6

JEDRO AWOKE with the feeling.

Hurriedly dressing, he clambered down from the wagon. A single shaft of light came from the mess tent and he heard the clatter of pots. An orange-yellow thread lay astride the eastern horizon and the paling sky above it was clear. Low in the west, where the sky still was dark, he saw the glimmer of stars. The air was nippy, but calm. Outwardly, it was much like any other morning. Nevertheless, he knew it was going to rain. Not only rain, but storm violently. His mind whispered of fierce winds. He couldn't remember having had the feeling quite so strongly.

The horses and relks, crowding against the fence, whinnied softly at his approach. He sensed their uneasiness. It was communicated by their quick, restless movements, the skittish way they tossed their heads. They know, he thought. He spoke encouragingly to them as he brought their feed and refilled the water troughs.

He found the lions restlessly prowling their cage. In the heavy gloom, broken only by the single night-light that hung from the center pole, they resembled gray shadows. Heads lowered, they padded back and forth inside the bars. Taber saw him and halted, switching his tail. His golden eyes glowed in the dim light.

Jedro reached between the bars and scratched him. "Everything will be all right, fellow." A soft rumbling came from the big cat's throat. As Rana pressed forward, he tickled her under the chin. Taber turned his head, gazing at him. Jedro fancied that the animal's eyes were filled with understanding.

After breakfast he went outside. Klore, climbing swiftly, flooded the scape with its yellow light. He scanned the banners and posters that lined the sawdust street. Most, he knew, could be adequately secured or quickly taken down. But what of the big tent?

He studied it worriedly. In the still morning air, its red- and white-striped top hung limply between the supporting poles. He had a quick vision of

it billowing in the wind, ripping loose from the stakes, soaring off into a blackened sky. If that happened, the lions would go mad with fright. He moved closer to inspect the metal stakes that held the tent ropes. They appeared firmly imbedded in the ground. Grasping one, he tugged at it experimentally. It failed to budge.

"What do you think you're doing, boy?"

Jedro released the stake and whirled around, flushing at sight of the carnival owner. Tall and lean, Faust glared down at him.

"I was trying to see how strong it was," he explained.

"What business is that of yours?"

"There's a big storm coming."

Faust gazed upward at the cloudless sky. "On a day like this?" he demanded sarcastically.

"It's going to be a bad one," insisted Jedro. "A big rain, a wild wind. I was worried about the lions."

A look of recognition came into the carnival owner's face. "Oh, you're Jason's helper -- the boy who captures lions." He laughed nastily.

Jedro said desperately, "The lions get nervous when it storms, and if anything happened to the big tent..."

"Suppose you let me worry about that," interrupted Faust. "Get back to your work. Next time I catch you fooling around with the stakes, out you go."

"Yes, sir." Jedro hurried away, glad to escape the carnival owner's wrath. But it was going to storm, he thought miserably. Even the animals knew that. At a safe distance he turned to look back. Standing in the middle of the sawdust street, Faust was gazing thoughtfully into the yellow-blue sky.

In the late afternoon a black smudge appeared on the western horizon. It grew rapidly. Jedro watched it apprehensively, wondering how bad the storm would be. Recalling one in the Ullan Hills that had uprooted trees, flinging them through the air like straws, he shuddered.

Black, scudding clouds, like rivers in rampage, careened across the sky, blotting out both Klore and Bergon. The day darkened. A wind came up with alarming suddenness. Gusty and raw, it ballooned tents, caused banners to whip about with sharp cracking sounds, and sent candy wrappers and paper bags sailing along the sawdust street. Customers crowding the carnival grounds eyed the sky worriedly; many hurriedly began leaving.

A peal of thunder rolled across the sky; as if that were a signal, the rain lashed down. Jagged lightning flashes danced overhead. The gusty winds grew stronger and more erratic, swirling first one way and then another. With the violence of the storm increasing and the last of the customers fleeing in a drenching rain, the show abruptly was closed.

As if by magic, crews of roustabouts sprang into action. They pulled down banners and posters, double-staked tents, rushed ticket booths and barker platforms under cover. Metal awnings were lowered over booth fronts and locked into place. The merry-go-round was buttoned up around its perimeter, and the small cars that rolled through The Tunnel of Love were locked into place. The sky wheel was secured with heavy cables.

Jedro quieted the relks and horses as heavy wagons were drawn up to reinforce the weak fencing around the corrals. Later Jason Hart dispatched him to give whatever help was needed along the sawdust street.

Jedro found the carnival owner directing the work. His voice snapping curt orders, Faust appeared to be everywhere at once. Jedro saw him send The Strangler to move some heavy equipment, order The Human Pincushion to help the midget troupe, dispatch Barracuda to secure a loose tarp. His thin body wrapped in a transparent cape, Faust paused only occasionally to glance worriedly at the sky.

With the twisting, howling wind growing in fury, Jedro began fretting about the lions. Finding himself unobserved, he slipped away to visit them.

Vast and gloomy and empty, with the supporting poles swaying and creaking and the red- and white-striped tarp billowing in the wind, the main tent was a sea of movement. The beating rain filled it with muted thunder.

Hurrying across the sawdust ring, he found the big cats pacing nervously. They grew quiet at his approach. For a moment he watched them. The reflection of the night-light atop the main pole shone in their eyes. As the pole swayed, the light moved back and forth across their irises. Taber pressed forward against the bars, followed by Rana.

"Everything is all right," whispered Jedro. He scratched Taber's ear and tickled Rana under the jaw. The big cats purred. Jedro pulled himself to a sitting position on the platform and leaned against the cage. Talking soothingly, he petted the animals while he listened to the wind howl and watched the huge tarp billow overhead. He could understand the lions' nervousness; the storm was frightening. He worried that it would get worse.

Taber suddenly growled, his eyes fixed on a point beyond Jedro's shoulder. Jedro whirled and saw Jason Hart approaching.

"Watcha doing, kid?" The lion tamer's voice was more worried than angry.

"They're nervous," he explained. "I'm quieting them."

"With your hand in the cage? Take it out, kid, before you lose it."

"They like to be petted."

"Take it out!"

"Yes, sir." Jedro slid off the platform.

"Don't do it again," the lion tamer warned bluntly. "They're unpredictable, kid. One minute they're gentle and friendly, the next they're ripping out your throat. I know. They're jungle animals. All their instincts are to kill. When you think they're friendly, that's when they're sizing you up." He shook his head grimly, but his eyes were not unkind.

"I don't think it's that way at all," offered Jedro.

"Never take a chance," he advised. "I don't. That's why I'm still here after twenty years. Now see if you can find some way to help. This place is about to blow away."

"Yes, sir." Hurrying across the sawdust ring, Jedro thought that Jason Hart really didn't know much about lions, even if it was his job. Because he feared them, they feared him; their relationship was founded on mutual distrust. The big cats would respond to anyone who loved and understood them. He believed it that simple.

As night fell, a broken electrical line plunged the carnival into darkness. Flashlights flickered to life, appearing like giant fireflies. In short time an emergency generator coughed to life and the lamps came on, casting an eerie glow over the sawdust street. Dr. Faust's big red- and white-striped trailer, swaying perilously in the wind, was driven into the main tent and parked near the lion cage.

Jedro was securing a loose tarp when he heard a scream. High and shrill in the wind, it held a note of terror. A woman's scream! He straightened, then heard it again -- old, quavering, filled with alarm and fear. Granny! Plunging toward her booth, he saw a glimmer of light through the curtains. He reached the door and yanked it open. "Granny," he yelled.

"For heaven's sake, come in," she screamed. He rushed through to the next room, halting abruptly at sight of the old woman standing atop the table that held the crystal ball. Holding her skirt tightly, she was staring downward, her wrinkled face a mask of pure terror.

Following her glance, he saw the floor appear to undulate. He took a quick backward step, at the same instant realizing that he was seeing a long, writhing body, scarcely discernible against its dark surroundings. "That's Caesar, Wanda's snake," he blurted. "The storm must have scared it."

"Get it out of here," screamed Granny.

"Aw, it won't hurt you. Wanda says it's friendly."

"I don't care what Wanda says. Get it out of here!" Her voice shrill and cracked, she tried to rise on her toes as if to get farther away from it.

Jedro eyed the snake dubiously; at the moment it appeared to be all of the thirty-foot length the posters claimed it to be. Writhing, it drew its body back and the flat head came up. Beady black eyes reflecting the light of the overhead lamp fastened on him. Jedro felt none of the confidence he felt with the lions. Hoping The Snake Woman was right, he stepped hesitantly toward it.

The snake lowered its head, its thick body coiling sinuously. Jedro abruptly halted as it glided toward him. Standing fearfully, he felt it brush against his leg; before he realized what was happening, the snake was coiling around him.

"It's just me, Caesar," he gasped.

"Take him outside," shouted Granny.

"He's winding around my legs!"

"I don't care, Jedro. Take him out this moment!"

"Sure," he croaked. Standing rigidly, he felt the snake entwine his torso until the small, flat head was weaving back and forth scarcely a foot from his face. The black pinpoint eyes were fixed on him. Eight or nine feet of the snake's body were still extended across the floor. Hobbling a few feet, he stooped cautiously and picked up the tail. As he straightened, it jerked free of his hand, then looped around his arm, all but immobilizing it. The weight of the large body made it difficult to stand.

"Don't play with it," Granny screamed hysterically.

"I'm not," he gasped. He turned toward the door, the looped body restricting his steps to a few inches at a time. The snake constricted its coils, causing him to wheeze. "Take it easy, Caesar. Don't get excited," he pleaded.

"Don't try to ingratiate yourself with that creature," shouted Granny. "Get it out of here!"

"I'm trying," he said desperately. Watching the weaving black head fearfully, he hobbled toward the door. He managed to open it with his free hand and sidle outside. The snake reacted to the lashing rain by tightening its coils.

The door slammed behind him. A moment later it opened a few inches and Granny shouted, "Thank you, Jedro." It slammed again, this time with finality.

He peered through the storm. A light shone in The Snake Woman's window. He started toward her booth, hampered both by the thick mud and the constriction of the anaconda's body. Maneuvering his free hand, he managed to grasp the snake just below the head; after that he breathed more easily. Reaching the rear of the booth, he banged on the door.

"Who is it?" Her voice came faintly above the howl of the wind.

"Jedro," he shouted. "I've got Caesar!" Quick movement came from inside before the door opened. The Snake Woman stood framed against the light, with Kathy peering worriedly over her shoulder.

"Goodness, I just discovered that he'd gotten out of his box," exclaimed Wanda. "I'm certainly glad you found him." Jedro lurched through the doorway. Wanda reached out, and the snake moved to meet her, slithering around her arm and up over her shoulder. Jedro exhaled with relief when the transfer was completed.

"It was at Granny's," he explained.

"Gracious, you're all wet," cried Wanda. "I'll make you a warm drink."

"I am kind of cold."

"Weren't you frightened?" asked Kathy.

"Naw," he answered disdainfully. "Caesar's harmless."

"He frightens most people half to death," declared Wanda. She let the snake uncoil from her body, dropping into a rectangular box, then shut the

lid. "Was Granny frightened?"

He grinned. "A bit nervous," he admitted.

"She had a right to be," stated Kathy.

The Snake Woman eyed him. "How did you get into the act?"

"I heard Granny yell."

"I'll bet she did." Wanda laughed. "Snakes frighten her stiff."

"Why? She's not afraid of the lions."

"Snakes are different," she answered. "Most women are afraid of snakes."

"You're not," he protested.

"I understand them." Her eyes weighed him. "I'm surprised that Caesar came to you. He keeps his distance from most people."

"Jedro has a way with animals," Kathy said admiringly.

"I don't know about snakes." He flushed.

"They're really quite friendly," explained Wanda. "Their looks frighten people more than anything else."

He grinned again. "He sure isn't pretty."

"But he is," she corrected. "Have you ever seen a more graceful animal?"

"Taber and Rana," he replied.

She shook her head. "Beautiful, yes, but they're awkward by comparison."

"Do you think they're dangerous?" he asked with curiosity.

"Any animal can be dangerous. It's all in knowing how to handle them."

"What's the most dangerous animal?"

"The human animal," she answered. "He is by far the most dangerous." Jedro gazed at her, not knowing what to say. Then she smiled, and added, "But that only applies to a few humans. Most of them are quite wonderful."

"That's what I think." he admitted shyly.

Over hot chocolate, they listened to the storm. Driven by gusty winds that shook the booth, the rain came in waves. Occasionally the lights flickered and dimmed.

Kathy said, "Jedro knows when a storm is coming." He flushed, remembering that he had boasted about it.

"Is that true?" Wanda eyed him over the rim of her cup.

"I guess so," he mumbled.

"How can you tell?"

"I just feel it."

"Old people sometimes feel it in their bones," she suggested.

"Jedro's not that old," exclaimed Kathy indignantly.

"Why shouldn't people know when a storm's coming?" he asked. "The animals know. You should have seen the relks and horses this morning, all skittish. The lions, too. I'll bet Caesar knew."

"He was skittish," admitted The Snake Woman.

"Animals can smell storms coming," he declared, not certain the statement was true. Kathy gazed admiringly at him.

"You should have warned us about this one," said Wanda.

"I did," he asserted. "I was worried about the lions."

"Who did you tell?"

"Dr. Faust." He saw her surprised glance and added, "He caught me testing the tent stakes."

"What did he say?" She raised her eyebrows enquiringly.

"He threatened to fire me."

She smiled. "He'll think twice about it next time."

"He can be mean." interrupted Kathy.

"He's a strange man," agreed Wanda. She lowered her eyes to her cup. Falling silent, they listened to the howling winds.

Between rain squalls, Jedro made a dash toward his wagon. In the dim glow of the night-lights he saw the big tent undulating, at times ballooning outward as if it would burst. The sight brought back his worries about the

lions and he decided to check them.

The interior of the big tent was cold and drafty. The yellow glow cast by the single lamp suspended from the center pole shone down on the carnival owner's red- and white-striped trailer, which had been parked scarcely a dozen paces from the lion cage. He eyed the trailer uneasily. A narrow shaft of light seeped out from under the door. Listening, he heard nothing save the muted thunder of the rain, the creak of the swaying tent poles. He started forward again.

The lions ceased their pacing as he drew near. Their eyes, in the dim light, shone with a golden glow. Taber padded toward the bars, with Rana following. Jedro hopped up on the platform.

"Does the storm worry you?" He ran his fingers through Taber's mane and scratched Rana under the jaw. Sitting alongside the bars, he spoke reassuringly to them. Taber sprawled out, his big head on his paws. Jedro listened to the beat of the rain and wished the storm would pass.

Suddenly Rana snarled, backing away. As Jedro stared bewilderedly at her, Taber growled and rose. His tail switching angrily, he looked past Jedro's shoulder.

Startled, Jedro whirled. Standing in the doorway of the trailer, Faust and The Tattooed Man were regarding him woodenly. "Good night, fellows," Jedro croaked.

Slipping down from the platform, he raced from the big tent.

7

THE SUPERMINDS had been dead for more than six hundred years when Gerald Faust, then in his early twenties, had started his career as a master hypnotist on the nightclub circuit. From the stark reality of their existence, time had relegated the Superminds into well-worn niches in both academic texts and the lurid mythology of the Space-Age Man.

Gerald Faust was well acquainted with the mythology. Most people were, for the imaginary as well as the actual and make-believe heroes of the conquest of the solar system and, more recently, of interstellar space were daily fare in the pulps, comics, and on the three-view. But the legends of the Superminds were, to Gerald Faust, most intriguing of all.

It had all started with Holton Lee, a mysterious eccentric multibillionaire who had founded the first colony on Ganymede, the largest of Jupiter's moons.

Some whispered that Holton Lee was a spiritualist, others that he was a telepath; still others claimed that he could see into the future. Whatever his gift, the fact remained that by never guessing wrong in the stock market, he had quickly amassed the largest fortune ever held by an individual. Branching out, he had soon controlled the commercial carriers that supplied the growing moon colonies and the outposts on Mars. His wealth grew to staggering proportions.

It was then that Holton Lee had marked Ganymede as his own personal fief. When suitable subterranean space had been carved from the satellite's underlying rock mantle by controlled atomic fire, Holton Lee began building his community. For more than five years crews of workmen, paid at a fantastic rate, labored to create the colony of Holton Lee's dream. During the next few years he spent the remainder of his fortune in moving vast quantities of tools, supplies, and scientific and life-support equipment to his faraway world.

Not once during all that time did Holton Lee give a press release. Not once did he explain his purpose. When the job was finished, he was sixty years of age. Shortly thereafter, with a handful of followers, he left Earth for the

last time. On departure, he announced that he was severing all ties with both the world community and its other colonies in space.

Who were his disciples? No one knew. Research at the time indicated them to be mostly common people drawn from various parts of the world. None had previously figured in the news. How could the colony subsist without a lifeline to Earth? Speculation in the news media -- and among government circles -- was rife. In time, when no answer was forthcoming, Holton Lee and his disciples were forgotten.

Nearly a century later a Navy survey vessel, mapping the Jovian moons, spotted a dome on Ganymede and landed. The story brought back was quickly hushed, at least officially, but the crewmen talked. They told of men, women, and children who read minds, who moved objects through space with no visible power, and who miraculously vanished and reappeared at will. More unbelievable yet was the story that the colony still was headed by Holton Lee. It was claimed that he'd appeared no older than when he'd left Earth.

Most hush-hush of all was the story of the boy colonist who, with crew connivance, stowed away on the naval vessel and wasn't detected by the officers until the ship was well inside the orbit of Mars.

The youth told his interrogators -- again it was rumor -- that he'd fled the colony because he'd been born a normal, with none of the mental capabilities of his companions. As such, he'd felt like an outcast, even though none of the colonists had ever been unkind enough to mention his shortcomings. But he'd wanted to live among people like himself.

It was then that he dropped his bombshell.

"Holton Lee," he told his interrogators, "had discovered the secret of immortality."

The revelation sent shock waves among the high government circles (the lower levels not yet knowing of it). The entire story promptly was classified Ultra Top Secret (UTS). In a short time, a Navy cruiser was dispatched to Ganymede with orders to return Holton Lee for questioning, a move justified by a nebulous connection deemed to exist between Holton Lee's alleged power and national security.

The colony was found abandoned.

During the following decades, the government quietly conducted a methodical search of every possible habitable and not-so-habitable foothold in the solar system. Detector probes were placed around all planets and moons while elaborate scanning systems monitored all space within the orbit of Pluto. Despite the far-flung vigil, no sign of the colonists was found.

Officially, for the record, Holton Lee and his disciples were declared dead.

Knowledgeable psychologists and psychiatrists who continued to probe the matter usually agreed that the sights reportedly witnessed by the crew of the survey vessel represented a classic example of mass hysteria. The story told by the youthful stowaway was branded as fantasy. Academic minds were in almost unanimous agreement that the psi powers didn't exist, let alone immortality.

More than three hundred more years were to pass before the invention of the star drive led to the discovery, exploration, and subsequent colonization of the first human outpost beyond the solar system -- a settlement on the single planet Doorn which circled the largest component of the binary Alpha Centauri.

Nearly two hundred years later Gerald Faust, by then acclaimed (by his press agent) as Earth's greatest hypnotist, stumbled onto a secret that was to terminate his career as a nightclub entertainer and send him among the stars.

The secret came to light after a tipsy patron, under the spell of hypnosis, revealed himself as a telepath. Faust was astounded. While he'd always considered telepathy a hoax, he knew his subject was telling the truth. His nimble mind told him that the secret somehow was worth money.

While conducting his act in full view of the audience, he obtained his subject's name and occupation -- Jasper Gollard, a salesman -- and implanted the posthypnotic suggestion that Gollard come to his hotel room following the performance.

Gerald Faust was waiting impatiently when Jasper Gollard arrived; it required but a gesture to place the man back into a deep hypnotic trance.

Faust's mind spun. Recalling the legends of Holton Lee and his vanished disciples, he wondered if there might not be some genetic connection. He pushed his questioning in that direction.

The remainder of the story was fantastic.

Holton Lee was alive! So were his disciples! In a state of suspended animation, they were awaiting the time when an advanced technology would enable them to flee to the stars, establish an entirely new and separate branch of the human kind -- that was the gist of Jasper Gollard's words.

His hands trembling, Gerald Faust pressed the inquisition.

Holton Lee and his people, Gollard revealed, had converted a spaceship into a gigantic cryogenic vessel that could sustain life in a suspended state for as long as necessary. The ship had been dispatched to a secret destination, where its passengers and crew now slept out the long centuries.

"Where is that place?" demanded Faust.

Jasper Gollard didn't know.

"How will they know when to awaken?"

"They will be awakened," he replied haltingly.

Faust pressed his questions skillfully. Hesitantly, as if fighting the deep hypnotic trance, Jasper Gollard told how certain of Holton Lee's people secretly had been returned to Earth when the colony had been abandoned. Of them, one in each succeeding generation was entrusted with a strange stone which was known to the sensitives as a memory stone. In generations to come, the stone would give a particular bearer the knowledge with which to find and awaken Holton Lee. He revealed that Holton Lee was not with his disciples, but slept apart in his own cryogenic vessel. Gollard could give no reason for the separate quarters.

"When will his waking time be?" asked Faust edgily.

"When the technology is sufficiently advanced to enable men to go to the stars."

"That technology is nearly two hundred years old," snapped Faust.

"Yes." Gollard nodded reluctantly.

"Then why hasn't he been awakened?"

"The circumstances have to be right."

"What circumstances?"

"I don't know."

"He could be awakened at any time," reflected Faust. He studied the portly middle-aged man sitting opposite him. "Who has the memory stone now?"

"I...don't know."

"But someone will awaken Holton Lee?"

"Yes."

"Who?" he demanded insistently.

"The person who has the power."

"The power? You mean the stone?"

"No." Jasper Gollard shook his head.

"What do you mean?"

"The person who has the power will be given the stone."

"Then that person hasn't the stone now?"

"Not yet."

"When will he get it?"

"Soon..." Gollard faltered. "Perhaps within a few years."

"What power will that person have?"

Gollard's eyes came up. "A very great gift," he said.
"What kind of a gift?"
Gollard didn't answer.
Faust frowned. "What power has the stone?"
"It will tell its bearer how to find and awaken Holton Lee."
"If that person hasn't the stone, who has?"
"Someone, someone..." Gollard trembled as if fighting against his bonds.
Faust took the time to induce a still deeper trance before asking, "Can you find out who has the stone now?"
"N-no!" Gollard shuddered.
"Do you know where the person is who will receive the stone?"
"On Doorn."
"The planet Doorn?" Faust was both startled and dismayed.
"Yes, the planet Doorn." Gollard nodded.
"Why there?"
"He was sent there for safety."
"Safety?" asked Faust sharply.
"Others were trying to get the stone."
"Telepaths?"
"Yes, and others."
"For what reason?"
"They hoped to obtain Holton Lee's secret."
"What secret?"
"The secret of immortality," replied Gollard.
Immortality! Faust recoiled. Eternal life! Then the story told by the boy who'd fled from Ganymede had been true! A man needn't die; he could live forever! Small tremors ran through Faust's body as he gazed at the hypnotized man opposite him. Holton Lee slept in a cryogenic crypt with the secret of immortality! That was fantastic, and yet...He fought to bring his emotions under control.
"Why would a person be safer on Doorn?" he demanded.
"He was spirited there secretly and placed in hiding."
"He?"
"None of the stone bearers have been women."
"Any particular reason?"
"No."
"How do you know that person was spirited to Doorn?"
"I...I read it in another telepath's mind."
Faust brooded a moment. "Does he know he's going to get the stone?"
"No, he doesn't know he has the power."
"Why not?"
"His memory cells were blanked out. He won't know that he has the power until after he gets the stone."
"Will that restore his memory?"
"I don't believe so, but the stone will tell him what he has to know."
"How can the stone do that?"
"It's...like the transfer of memory."
"A set of directions, eh?"
"Something like that."
Faust eyed him sharply. "Someone knows who and where he is."
"Yes, the person who will give him the stone."
"So in the meantime he's in hiding, is that right?"
"On Doorn," said Gollard.
"You described the power as a very great gift. What did you mean by that?"
"He would be a sensitive."
"A telepath?"

"Perhaps more."

"More? You mean like the stories they told about Holton Lee's people?"

"Yes."

"You don't really believe all that, do you?"

"Yes, the stories are true."

Looking at him. Faust suddenly knew that they were true. Telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis...He tried to control his agitation. The whole thing was like a crazy dream, yet there stood Jasper Gollard, deep in trance, revealing what he believed to be the simple truth. More, his words substantiated the legends of the past. Immortality! The word rang like a bell in Faust's mind. He asked, "Could anyone who got the stone learn its secret...how to find and awaken Holton Lee?"

"The stone will respond only to the person who has the power," answered Gollard.

"So if I got the stone I couldn't discover its secret, is that right?" Faust eyed him intently.

"You would have to get the secret from the person who has the power."

"Is that possible?"

"All things are possible," answered Jasper Gollard.

Driven by a desperation beyond anything he'd ever known, Faust pressed his questions more vigorously than ever, probing every corner of his hapless victim's mind. At times he backtracked, asking the same questions in different ways; the answers never varied. But one thing he did learn: Knowledge of the stone and the circumstances surrounding it were generally known in the small circle of telepathic families. It was only when "the stone was ready to bear fruit," as Gollard put it, that certain sensitives had conspired to seize it. Jasper Gollard had been among the greedy, but his gifts had proved too small; he'd managed to obtain only fragments of the necessary information. Frustrated, he'd turned to drink.

Fate had brought him to Gerald Faust.

Immortality!

Gerald Faust contemplated the story long after his visitor had departed. Jasper Gollard would never reveal their conversation; would, in fact, never remember it. Hypnosis had erased it from his mind.

Immortality!

Holton Lee, now living in a suspended state in a strange cryogenic vessel, was the guardian of that secret. If Holton Lee could be found, he could be made to divulge that secret. Hypnosis would ensure that.

Immortality!

The key to Holton Lee was on the far planet Doorn. There a man with a blanked-out mind was to receive a precious stone which in some strange manner would reveal Holton Lee's hiding place. The bearer of the stone would awaken Holton Lee. His thanks: immortality. That was the bait that Holton Lee had tendered to ensure that someone, some day, would awaken him.

Immortality!

It lay as close as the planet Doorn; more exactly, as close as the person with the blanked-out mind. If he found the bearer of the stone, hypnosis would do the rest.

Immortality!

Untold ages to walk the planets while generations came and went, tumbling into time like autumn leaves. Such a man could laugh at kings and emperors and presidents. The future of the human race would be a vast play in which he would hold the lead in every act. To live forever!

The contemplation made him tremble.

Gerald Faust put his agile mind to work. For several weeks he read avidly, gathering every morsel of information possible on the lonely world

that swung around the big yellow sun of the binary Alpha Centauri.

Doorn was, he learned, a planet with but a few dozen towns, a sprinkling of villages, a scattering of farms. It was a world that still awaited the benefits of civilization. It held, perhaps, two hundred thousand people; certainly not much more. If he had to contact every person on the planet, it wouldn't be too much. Not with the stakes as they were.

A current song hit, "Everyone Loves a Carnival," gave Gerald Faust his big inspiration. A carnival, of course! On a lonely farm world like Doorn, not a villager or farmer would miss it. Men, women, children -- everyone would flock to see it. They would come not once, but again and again. Every single person on Doorn would, in time, pass under his eye!

It took Gerald Faust but a single year to beg, borrow, and yes! steal the money to buy a defunct carnival. Mostly the money was obtained through the clever medium of hypnosis. It required another year and the accumulation of more money to refurbish the carnival and gather the entertainers and roustabouts who were willing to abandon Earth. It took two additional years, more theft, and the hypnosis and bribery of public officials to get the carnival transported across the span of four and a third light-years to the planet Doorn.

It took...

But Gerald Faust would rather forget that. The past was past but the future loomed ever larger -- a future that went on and on and on, never-ending. Immortality! That magic word supplied the fuel that drove him, that shaped his thoughts and actions, that powered his hopes.

Landing in New Portland, the capital of Doorn, Faust made ready for his first showing. On a warm spring day, with two suns in the sky, he commenced his search.

New London...

Little Denver...

New Montreal...

Farmers, ranchers, villagers, townsmen all flooded in to see Dr. Faust's Magic Carnival. At each new location Faust stood at the entrance to the sawdust street to scan each new arrival, as if somehow the bearer of the memory stone might differ from the others. Whom did he seek? A faceless man with no past of his own! The magnitude of his task seemed enormous. At times he raged, at times he despaired, but he never ceased to hope. He had invested nearly five years; another five wouldn't matter. No time was too much. He could only wait, watch, hope.

Little Albuquerque...

New Houston...

New Vancouver...

The carnival rolled over the land.

Gerald Faust vividly remembered the night of the first big storm. On that night he'd taken his first good look at Clement, a widower who'd joined the carnival on Earth, bringing with him his young daughter.

Faust had hired him as a maintenance foreman, chief of the roustabouts and jack-of-all-trades. He had been pleased to get him, for few skilled men were willing to make the long leap from civilization into the backwash world of the binary Alpha Centauri.

Long hours before the storm had struck he'd seen Clement's men securing the main tent with additional stakes. Others lashed down loose gear or removed the banners and flimsier signs from along the sawdust street.

Clement caught Faust's quizzical glance and explained, "A big storm's coming."

Faust glanced at the sky; it was clear.

Late that afternoon the clouds rolled in and the wind struck, a driving gale that drove in across the Berthol Hills. The main tent flapped and popped,

billowing out with each gust until Faust was certain it would be carried away. But thanks to Clement's foresight, the big tent held.

When the wind finally died, Faust started toward the maintenance foreman's quarters to thank him for his good work. Midway he halted, struck by the thought: How had Clement known about the storm? It had come out of a clear sky, with not so much as a breeze to herald its onslaught.

But Clement had known it was coming! He had spoken with a certainty that precluded all guesswork. How? How? The question pounded at his mind. Jasper Gollard's revelations rushed back, stark and clear. Other sensitives had plotted to seize the memory stone! Could the maintenance man be one such?

Or could he be the carrier of the stone?

The thought shook him. If Clement were a sensitive, he undoubtedly would possess Jasper Gollard's knowledge -- would know that the person with the power was hidden on Doorn. If he were seeking that person, how better could he do it than by joining the carnival? Faust felt a wild hope.

He resumed his stride.

"Nice work," he told Clement. "When you're through, stop by at the trailer for a drink."

"I could use one," replied Clement.

Faust took the precaution of mixing the strong creel drinks beforehand. To the one prepared for Clement, he added a drug used to tranquilize and muddle the senses. While waiting, he pondered the questions he would ask.

When the maintenance man arrived, Faust greeted him cordially. Seated comfortably, they discussed everyday problems over their drinks. Soon he saw Clement's expression change. His eyes took on a vacuous look that told Faust the drug was taking effect. His words slurred, Clement blinked sleepily.

Faust placed him under a light hypnosis, studying him with curiosity before inducing a deep trance. Next he tested him with several questions. Assured that Clement was under hypnotic control, he asked, "How did you know the storm was coming?"

"I saw it," answered Clement.

"Saw it?" Faust attempted to stem his excitement.

"Saw the wind whipping the canvas," he explained.

"How is that possible?"

"I...can see things."

"In the future?"

Clement shuddered as if fighting an inner battle.

"Sleep, sleep," Faust urged soothingly. "Relax and sleep, Clement. You are very tired."

"Tired." Clement sighed.

"I am your friend, Clement."

"My friend." The maintenance man nodded sluggishly.

"You can confide in me, Clement."

"Yes..."

"Tell me, can you really see the future?"

"Yes." As Clement spoke, his agitation started to rise anew. Faust spoke pacifying words, at the same time trying to stem his inner excitement. Until he'd met Jasper Gollard, he'd considered the fantastic powers attributed to Holton Lee and his followers as myths; but no longer. Now, staring into Clement's face, he had scant doubt that even the wildest of the stories were true.

Could Clement have come to Doorn to search out the man who had the power? He was almost afraid to hope. But if it were true, Clement was the carrier of the memory stone.

Faust's hands shook uncontrollably. Immortality! Perhaps it lay as close as Clement's pocket! He fought to control his torrent of emotion. He had to proceed cautiously. When he had Clement quieted, he asked casually, "Do you

have the memory stone?"

"Yes!" Clement expelled the word violently. His features twisted into a look of intense agitation. The cords of his neck jutted out like ropes. His strong hands curving into claws, he leaped suddenly from his chair.

Faust scrambled to his feet and shrank fearfully back. Clement looked like a man in the throes of some terrible agony, yet there was danger in the dark and contorted face. His blue eyes rolled wildly. Clement took a step forward, and another, then whirled and rushed from the trailer. Faust leaped to the door, watching him hurry toward his quarters.

Clement had the stone! The knowledge tore at his mind. The key to immortality doubtless lay in Clement's pocket! After years of plans and hopes and dreams, after hurtling between stars, after all the long months since, the stone was within reach. If he played it right, it was as good as his. He clenched his jaws, filled with cold resolve.

Nothing mattered but that he got the stone. That was the first step. Then he'd locate the person who had the power, make him talk, find Holton Lee -- become immortal! He had lied, cheated, stolen for just such an opportunity as this. If necessary, he would have Clement killed. And he had the killer -- Gurdon, The Tattooed Man.

He pondered murder. It had been with great foresight that he'd hired Gurdon, for he'd known that if he had to murder to get the stone, he'd need a murderer. Gurdon filled the bill admirably. Deep hypnosis revealed him to be as trustworthy as he was bloodthirsty. Well, Gurdon could have the blood; he'd take the stone.

But wait! If he had Clement killed, he wouldn't know for whom the stone had been intended. That he had to know, for only that person could make the stone respond. He could have The Strangler break Clement's bones one by one, make him talk. Only Clement wouldn't talk; he knew that with certainty.

Caution! The word stabbed at his mind. He was rushing too fast, becoming too reckless. He had sacrificed too many years to throw away everything now. Remembering how Clement had broken the bonds of his deep trance, he shuddered. No normal man could have accomplished that, let alone the breaking of a trance compounded with a mind-dulling drug. But Clement was no normal man.

Clement foresaw the future!

Faust straightened, caught with a sudden fright that made him feel ill. No matter what he planned, Clement must already know! Or did he? If he could see into the future, why had he consented to stop by for a drink?

He contemplated the question uneasily. If Clement foresaw the future, could he change that future? Or was he foreseeing the inevitable? If the latter, then he already knew the answers that Faust so desperately was seeking. He would know the name of the person who was to awaken Holton Lee -- know where that person was.

Clement had that knowledge!

Shaken, Faust turned back into the trailer and poured a double shot of creel. "To immortality!" Raising the glass in a toast, he quickly tilted it to his lips.

The next morning Clement was missing!

Faust became frantic at the news. Questioning revealed that Barracuda and The Human Pincushion had seen the maintenance foreman leaving the carnival grounds shortly before midnight; no one had seen him since.

Faust ordered an immediate search of the entire compound. When that failed, he extended the search outward into the streets and public buildings of New Trenton; not a single clue was forthcoming. Clement had vanished completely, leaving his young daughter behind. Desperate, Faust wasted no time. Drawing The Tattooed Man into the privacy of his trailer, he told him about the stone, describing it merely as a family keepsake of great value. "I want it back," he finished harshly.

When The Tattooed Man had withdrawn, Faust leaned back and closed his eyes, fighting the onset of despair. The stone had been so close, so close. Would he ever have such a chance again? The thought that he might not made him groan with anguish. But one thing he did know: Immortality wasn't easy to come by.

On a midnight a week later Gurdon returned.

"I have Clement," he said.

"Where?" Faust felt a sudden elation.

"Over in the field." Gurdon gestured with his head. "He's dead."

"You killed him?" Faust demanded frantically. Staggered, he felt the cold impending touch of final defeat. "I didn't want him murdered," he shouted hoarsely.

"You didn't say." Gurdon's dark eyes remained impassive.

Clement was dead! Faust felt weak and drained. He should have known better than to send a killer to bring the man back. His head jerked up. "Where is the stone?"

"He didn't have it."

Faust's face turned ashen. "Did you search him thoroughly?"

"To the buff."

"Could he have passed it to anyone?"

The Tattooed Man shrugged without answering.

Faust collapsed into a chair. "Get rid of the body," he instructed dully.

Later, standing in the doorway of his trailer, Faust gazed upward into the starry firmament. Had immortality passed him by? He groaned despairingly. But the stone existed; he knew that. It was somewhere on the planet Doorn. But where? After a while he turned back to pour another drink. Fate was a mocker of man -- he'd heard that long ago. And it was true.

He was mocked by fate.

During the long months that had passed since Clement's death at the hands of The Tattooed Man, Gerald Faust lived with the memory of the stone. If it was lost, it was lost only to him; that knowledge was galling.

Someone had it! Somehow, in some way, Clement had managed to pass the stone into other hands before his death. The Tattooed Man? Having taken the precaution of questioning Gurdon under hypnosis, he'd discounted the possibility. But if not Gurdon, who?

No matter. If he'd found the possessor of the stone once, he'd find the person who had it now; that determination had sustained him through the long days and nights. He had dwelt constantly on it as the carnival wound through rolling hills and across plains, going from one small town to another.

Now, listening to the howl of the wind as it ballooned and buffeted the big tent, Faust fancied that his search was drawing to an end. Once he had found a man who could foresee the future, and had all but gotten the stone. Now Clement was dead. Clement, who had foretold storms, who had foreseen tomorrow.

In his place had come a boy who could predict rain from a cloudless sky, who made friends with savage lions. Coincidence? Faust didn't believe so. Not when The Tattooed Man had killed Clement in the Ullan Hills, and when that boy had come from those same hills. Going to the door of the trailer, he peered out.

He had the feeling that the stone was very close.

wagon. A feeling of uneasiness gripped him. What had awakened him? He didn't know, yet the feeling persisted, a prickling sensation that came from somewhere deep inside him.

He sat up, shivering in the cold, damp air. Remembering his fright when Faust and The Tattooed Man had caught him trying to calm the lions, he wondered if his uneasiness had to do with that, and decided not. The sensation held an undecipherable familiarity. Looking out through the end of the wagon into the darkness, he tried to analyze just what he did feel. It wasn't fear exactly, nor was it worry. Rather it was an ominous foreboding -- that and a strange sense of...presence. That was it; he had the sense of someone near, someone watching him! The realization came as a shock.

He sank back, listening to the rain drum down. It came as a deep, subdued roar that filled the wagon with muted thunder. There was always someone close by, sleeping in wagons or in booths. That awareness was always with him; but this was different. This someone was intent on him. His scalp tingled with apprehension.

Hurriedly dressing, he peered cautiously out from the back of the wagon. The surrounding tents, booths, other wagons -- dark silhouettes that appeared afloat in a gray mist -- revealed nothing. Here and there a night light, throwing down its yellow cone, painted an indescribable loneliness. But dawn was in the offing; he saw it as a faint paling of the clouds low in the east.

Studying the surrounding area more closely, he failed to detect any movement or sign of life, yet knew his uneasiness hadn't been founded in imagination. The feeling had been too strong, too persistent to be denied. And it definitely was a feeling of...someone. Now that he had identified the feeling, he felt more apprehensive than before. Why would someone be watching him?

The memory stone! Alarmed, he fumbled under the tarp he used for a pillow, relieved when his fingers encountered its familiar shape. Cradling the stone in his palm, he studied it. At first formless in the night, it began to smolder with a soft yellowish light that gradually turned to reds and deep purples. Occasional small spears of violet flame leaped outward from its depths. A growing warmth sent tingling sensations up his arm. The Tattooed Man had killed Mr. Clement in an attempt to get the stone; he couldn't forget that.

Hastily jamming it into his pocket, he peered outside again. The sense of presence persisted. Stronger, too, was the ominous sense of some indefinable threat. Someone was out there! He knew that with finality. What could he do? Nothing except watch.

He draped a tarp around his shoulders and climbed down from the wagon, his feet sinking into the soft mud. With an arm raised to shield his face against the driving rain, he slogged his way toward the corrals. The lights came on in the mess tent. He stifled the impulse to go in and stand by the stove.

Abruptly he realized that the sense of presence had vanished. So had the prickling deep inside him. Breathing more easily, he determined that never again would he hide the stone in the wagon, but would keep it with him at all times. Yet he realized that could be equally risky. Debating his predicament, he tried to find some sense in this latest occurrence.

Did anyone other than The Tattooed Man know of the stone? Did the carnival owner? Considering the close relationship between the two, he believed it possible. Yet it hadn't been The Tattooed Man he'd sensed. Neither had it been Faust. He knew that while wondering how he knew it. It was part of the strangeness he felt at times.

Since getting the stone, he reflected. He'd always known about the coming storms, of course, and he'd always had a rapport with animals. Yet, since that morning when Mr. Clement had come striding down through the Ullan

Hills to give him the stone, and die, strange things had inhabited his mind. Like the fantastic dream of the old man who slept in an oblong box on a black world that tumbled under an alien sky; like seeing that dream live again in Granny's crystal ball. Like the sense of presence he'd felt on awakening, and knowing it hadn't been either the carnival owner or The Tattooed Man.

But if the latter feeling was right, the inescapable conclusion was that another person knew about the stone. Granny? He felt a distinct shock. He had never considered that. She knew about Mr. Clement, of course, or at least knew the name. But did she know about the stone?

She could know, even if she hadn't let on, he thought. That seemed quite plausible. Perhaps that was why she'd warned him never to mention Mr. Clement's name. "It's dangerous" she'd been quite explicit about that. Yet how could it be dangerous to him unless...

Granny knew he had the stone!

The conviction flooded his mind. She was a partial telepath; she'd admitted that. Could she have gotten the whole story from his mind? He contemplated the possibility uneasily. Certainly she wouldn't have warned him of danger without good reason, and what possible reason could there be except for his possession of the stone?

Granny knows! He viewed the implication more calmly, wondering why the reasoning hadn't occurred to him sooner. Yet, until he'd awakened so abruptly, there'd been no indication that a second person knew of the stone. Second person? It certainly hadn't been Granny he'd sensed on awakening! There was someone else -- a third person!

He felt a quick dismay. The realization that Granny might know hadn't perturbed him; she wasn't a bit like Faust or The Tattooed Man. But to have someone else know...

He had the feeling that everything was moving too fast, that events were beginning to race beyond his control. It was the feeling of a huge net being drawn around him, without his knowing the reason. Except that he had the stone!

What power had the stone?

He'd pondered the question many times. It glowed in beautiful shades and sent tingling sensations shooting up his arm; when he held it long enough, its warmth pervaded his whole body. But that about summed his knowledge of it. Why had Mr. Clement called it a "memory stone"? That was most baffling of all.

"You have the power" -- the gaunt man's words came back to him. But he also had said, "It lies latent within you." That implied something quite different from the power residing in the stone. What had he meant? Mr. Clement had promised that some day he'd know; he'd have to be satisfied with that.

The horses and relks, their backs turned against the main, were standing dispiritedly in a sea of mud when he clambered between the wagons that had been used to reinforce the fence. A few lights were coming on around him.

Corky peered out from an adjacent wagon and called, "No show today, Jed." In the breaking dawn, his lugubrious expression gave him the appearance of being ready to cry.

Jedro acknowledged with a wave, turning his attention to the animals. A relk whinnied and moved toward him, followed by the others. Their large dark eyes were doleful. He moved along the fence, patting each one and speaking reassuringly before bringing their feed.

The chores finished, he stared indecisively at the big tent. The rain drummed against it with a dull roar. Rushing down through the tump valleys formed by the supporting poles, the water cascaded over the edge in dozens of places.

The realization that Taber and Rana would be nervous bothered him. They would be expecting him, yet he didn't dare visit them. Not after last night. Reluctantly he turned back toward his wagon. Glancing toward it as he started

across the field, he was startled to see a bulky figure clamber out from the rear and drop heavily into the mud.

The Strangler! He stared incredulously at the performer, then shrank from sight behind a trailer. Peering out, he saw The Strangler vanish from view around the end of the wagon. Suddenly Jedro understood the strange feeling that had gripped him earlier. When he did, he felt the beginning of panic.

The Strangler was after the stone!

A cold chill swept through him. The Strangler knew that he had it -- had been coming in the predawn to get it! The Strangler must have seen him peering out of the back of the wagon. Perhaps only the performer's fear that he would make an outcry had saved him. If he hadn't awakened! His teeth chattered.

Despite his fear, he forced his steps toward the wagon. He stared inside with dismay. The sleeping pad Corky had given him had been slit open and its contents spread throughout the interior. The contents of a small box, in which he kept personal belongings, had been scattered randomly. His blankets and clothes lay in a jumbled pile, and the small amount of money he had hoarded from his wages was missing. Climbing inside, he viewed the mess numbly.

The Strangler knew!

Fear seeped through his mind. Having failed to find the stone, The Strangler almost certainly would know he had it with him. How had The Strangler learned of it? He considered the question worriedly. Had Barracuda or The Human Pincushion sent him? The two were The Strangler's constant companions. Perhaps all three were after the stone. Whatever value it had, that value must be great.

Jedro forced himself to calmness, trying to apply reason to the chaos in his mind. One thing appeared certain: The Strangler was far too stupid to understand a value that was potential, therefore he must be acting on orders from someone else. If it weren't Barracuda or The Human Pincushion, who could it be? The Tattooed Man? He shook the possibility impatiently aside. The Tattooed Man wasn't one to delegate a job of that kind. Remembering the cold, methodical manner in which he'd killed Mr. Clement, Jedro felt assured of that.

Faust? He drew the name out tentatively. Although Faust used The Strangler to dispose of sick and wounded animals, he knew of no other relationship between the two. Neither did the brutish strong man strike Jedro as one whom Faust would choose as a friend or confidant. The carnival owner more likely would have delegated the job to The Tattooed Man. While Faust could be behind the attempt, Jedro had no proof that the other was even aware of the stone.

Where did that leave him? If The Strangler knew of the stone, as apparently he did, Barracuda and The Human Pincushion also knew of it, or soon would. The knowledge was getting around. If The Tattooed Man didn't already know, it couldn't be kept from him long. It would be but a simple step for him to deduce how the stone had gotten into Jedro's possession. The implications brought a quiet desperation. Having The Strangler after him was bad enough, but if he had to contend with The Tattooed Man...He closed his mind to the thought.

He had to leave the carnival!

The realization came with a dull finality. But he had no alternative not with The Strangler after him. If he left now, he could use the storm to cover his tracks. He looked worriedly outside. The rain was slackening and here and there the camp was stirring with life. Huddled under a tarp, Twisto, The Contortionist, was hurrying toward the mess tent.

A sadness gripped him. Life would be empty without the lion tamer and Corky and Granny. And Kathy. He'd never known that a person could have so many friends. Changing swiftly into dry clothes, he tried not to think of it. But

it was true; the carnival would go on without him. In the long weeks and months to come he wouldn't be there to watch Jason and Millie Hart put the graceful cats through their paces, or watch the sad-faced Corky draw the plaudits of the crowds as he bumbled from one disaster to another in his attempts to emulate the trick riders and tightrope walkers. He wouldn't sit with Granny, munching roasted almonds while she told strange stories of spooks and poltergeists, of dead people who, reincarnated, once again roamed the land. Neither would he creep into the big tent in the dawn's half-light to scratch Taber and Rana behind the ears and listen to their contented purrs. Worse, he wouldn't be with the carnival when, one day, it returned to Earth. (Yet somehow he would get to Earth; Mr. Clement had promised that.)

But most of all he would miss Kathy. The two had built a bridge of understanding which, while seldom put into words, formed a strong bond between them. Not that he would lose her forever, he vowed. He'd come back! Someday, when he was free of the threat -- when the stone was safe! -- he would find her again. Someday. The word held a hollow ring.

He had to say good-bye. He scanned the area. The rain was falling again. Hot Mouth and The Tallest Midget in the Universe were hurrying toward the sawdust street, where several roustabouts were repairing wind damage. He saw no sign of The Strangler. Scrambling down from the wagon, he hurried toward The Snake Woman's booth. The realization that he would be saying farewell made his heart ache.

The Snake Woman answered his knock.

"What brings you so early?" she asked. She looked past his shoulder at the main. "Come in before you're soaked."

"I'd like to see Kathy," he explained, following her inside.

"Kathy!" Wanda raised her voice. The girl came from the next room.

"Hello, Jedro." Her smile failed to conceal her curiosity.

"I, uh, just wanted to talk to you." He looked desperately at The Snake Woman. "I've only got a moment."

"I'll run along to breakfast," she answered.

When she left, Kathy asked nervously, "What is it, Jedro?"

"Well..." He grew flustered.

"You're in trouble," she exclaimed.

"I just wanted to say good-bye," he blurted.

"Good-bye?"

"Just for a while," he added hastily.

"What's wrong, Jedro? Tell me."

"I have to get away from here."

Kathy raised her head, her face suddenly calm. "What's the trouble?" she asked quietly.

"The Strangler's after me."

"The Strangler?" she echoed in a small voice.

He returned her gaze wretchedly, wondering how much he could reveal. Any information about the stone could be as dangerous to her as it was to him. Neither could he mention Mr. Clement, nor could he...

"Tell me," she insisted.

"He's just after me," he mumbled, "and maybe The Tattooed Man is, too."

"Gurdon?" She was startled.

"It's something I know about, and I think he's found out."

"The Strangler or Gurdon?"

"Maybe both."

"What is it, Jedro?"

"It would be dangerous for you to know."

"I have to know," she answered gravely. "You have to confide in someone, Jedro. You can't just run and run. Sometime you'll have to stop, and when you do, it'll catch up with you."

"I won't keep running," he croaked.

"Let me help you, please."

His gaze wavered before settling decisively on her face. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I saw The Tattooed Man kill someone."

"Murder?" she asked faintly.

"He shot a man."

"Who?"

"I don't know," he answered, thinking it was the truth. He knew almost nothing about Mr. Clement except his name...and how he had died.

"When was that?" she asked.

"Before I came here."

"Back where you lived?"

"In the Ullan Hills." He nodded.

"How do you know he knows?"

"I'm not certain." He saw her puzzled expression and rushed on. "But I'm positive he does, and I know The Strangler's after me. He almost caught me a while ago."

"The Strangler!" She shuddered.

"He scares me," he admitted.

"Why would he be after you for something Gurdon did? That doesn't make sense." She held his gaze. "Gurdon wouldn't have sent him. He would have gone after you himself."

"Maybe," he answered evasively. He had the frantic feeling of being boxed in.

"He would," she insisted, "but how would he learn about it after all this time?"

"I've wondered that."

"How would he, Jedro?" She eyed him insistently. "I'm not just asking futile questions. If Gurdon had known what you knew when you came here, he would have done something about it then. If he's just learned it, how did he learn it? Someone else must have known. Or perhaps it's not that at all."

"What do you mean?"

"He wouldn't have sent The Strangler, so perhaps he doesn't know. Perhaps that part's all your imagination. So why was The Strangler after you? There's some part missing." Her eyes pleaded with him.

"I can't tell you," he muttered.

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't." He stared at her. "It could be dangerous for you to know."

"If you believe so." She tried a plaintive smile.

"I know so," he answered finally.

"I'm just trying to help you, Jedro."

"I know that."

She clasped his hand impulsively. "Where could you go? There's nothing but small towns and villages that are miles and miles apart. What could you do?"

"Herd gran." He smiled crookedly.

"Hide here," she exclaimed. "Wanda won't mind. We have plenty of room and..."

"No," he interrupted firmly. "The Strangler knows we're friends. So does The Tattooed Man and everyone else. That would make it dangerous for you."

"I'm not afraid."

"I am," he declared. "We can't take that chance."

"Have you any money?"

He shook his head. "The Strangler took it. He wrecked all my things."

"You need money," she cried. Despite his protests she got several bills and thrust them into his hands. "If you need more..."

"I won't," he answered quickly. "I'll get a job."

"You'll write?"

"As soon as I get settled," he promised. Gazing at her, he felt a terrible anguish at the possibility he might never see her again. But he would! He would find her somewhere, sometime. He couldn't bear to think otherwise. He said in a choked voice, "I have to go."

"Be careful," she pleaded. She clung to his hand as they moved toward the door. At the entrance he turned, looking down into her face.

"You be careful, too," he said.

"I will." She brushed her eyes and he saw that they were wet. Opening the door, he peered out. The rain slashed down and a gusty wind ballooned the tents. Thunder rolled across the sky. A good day to run, a good day to hide.

"Good-bye, good-bye." Her words trailed after him. Shielding his face from the rain, he hurried toward the sawdust street. He wished he could say good-bye to the lion tamer and his wife, and to Granny and Corky and Dum-Dum, but he knew that he couldn't. He had to leave as quickly as possible.

He reached the edge of the sawdust street and paused to scan it warily. With the rain slanting down against the closed shutters and the tarps flapping in the wind, it appeared gloomy and deserted. THE FIRE EATER. THE TWO-HEADED MAN, THE PIG-FACED BOY -- he scanned the signs longingly. He'd never realized how many good friends he had; but there they were, on the double row of posters. Real people; the carnival was life.

But where was The Strangler?

Prepared to either flee or hide, as the occasion might demand, he pondered the route of safest flight. He'd feel better if he saw The Strangler, knew exactly where he was before rushing blindly from the camp. But he had to beware of more than The Strangler. He couldn't chance being seen by Barracuda, The Human Pincushion, The Tattooed Man, or Faust. All were potentially dangerous.

He should have left the instant he'd seen The Strangler clambering down from his wagon, he thought. Now, despite the rain, the visibility was good. He'd wasted too much time. Movement in the big tent's entrance caught his eye. He stiffened as he recognized Faust and The Tattooed Man. Shrinking back between two booths, he watched them nervously. Garbed in a transparent cape, Faust gazed upward into the stormy sky. The Tattooed Man, as usual, wore only a sleeveless shirt open at the throat and an old pair of tan trousers and sandals. The gaudy patterns on his face, neck, and hairless skull, and his brightly striped arms and hands made Jedro shudder.

Faust made a sudden dash toward the mess tent. His tall, thin body bent forward, he leaped awkwardly from side to side as he sought to avoid puddles. The Tattooed Man loped gracefully behind him, his hideous face held up into the beating rain. Watching them vanish under cover, Jedro felt an inner tumult -- he could say good-bye to Taber and Rana.

He eyed the mess tent nervously. Faust and The Tattooed Man should be there for at least half an hour, perhaps longer because of the rain. Scanning the street carefully, he dashed toward the big tent. Entering it, he hurried along the gloomy passageway that led to the main ring. The rain drumming against the overhead tarp filled the air with muted thunder. A single night light shone down on Faust's big red- and white-striped trailer. A dozen paces beyond, he glimpsed the lions restlessly prowling the cage.

"Hello," called Jedro softly. The lions paused, swinging their big heads around. The tips of their tails switched in quick, spasmodic movements. Padding forward against the bars, they watched intently as he hurried toward them.

"I've come to say good-bye," murmured Jedro. Reaching through the bars, he scratched Rana behind the ears and ran his fingers through Taber's thick mane. Soft purrs mumbled from their throats. Taber and Rana were as much his friends as were Granny and Corky, or any of the others. Even though they

couldn't talk, he sensed that he knew their thoughts, and that they knew his.

"I'm going to miss you," he whispered. Looking into the large golden eyes, he fancied he saw a deep sorrow. A lump came to his throat; saying good-bye was difficult. Listening to the tarp buffeting in the wind, he felt the poignancy of the days to come. They would be long and lonely; life would be empty.

Taber's head jerked up and a deep growl rumbled from his throat. His tail switched angrily. Startled, Jedro whirled around.

A half dozen paces behind him, grinning evilly, stood The Strangler.

9

JEDRO FROZE, the fear clutching at his throat. His hands shook violently. The Strangler, his big legs spraddled, held his knotty arms spread to block any attempt at escape. Jedro looked wildly around. Faust's big trailer and the lion cage left him hemmed in a narrow sawdust corridor that was blocked at one end by a pile of ring equipment. Any attempt at flight would be futile. He tried to conceal his fright.

"What do you want?" he croaked.

Obviously enjoying the situation, The Strangler pulled his thick lips into a malevolent smile. His small eyes pinned on Jedro's face, he flexed his huge hands menacingly and took a step forward. As Jedro shrank back against the edge of the platform, a low growl rumbled from Taber's throat.

"What do you want?" he repeated. His mouth felt cottony.

"You know what I want." The Strangler's voice was unexpectedly soft and deadly. His small eyes narrowed, appearing like pinpoints in his coarse face. He took another step forward. Jedro instinctively plunged a hand into his pocket and clasped the stone.

"I don't know," he said. His voice held a hoarse, unnatural sound.

"Give me the rock," demanded The Strangler. "I know you got it."

Realizing that talk was useless, Jedro felt a strange calm. He drew the stone from his pocket, exposing it in his palm. "You mean this?"

"Toss it over."

"No." He clenched his fingers around it.

"Give it to me," The Strangler muttered. He started forward.

"Take another step and I'll throw it into the lion cage," threatened Jedro.

"I'll break your arms and legs."

"You still won't get the stone." Seeing the indecision on the performer's face, he sidled backward along the edge of the platform. As The Strangler started toward him, he raised his arm. "I'll throw it," he cried sharply.

The Strangler halted. Jedro moved backward several more steps, then saw the other hunch his body as if to charge.

"Wait," he exclaimed.

The Strangler hesitated, his face puzzled.

"If I give it to you, will you let me go?" asked Jedro.

"I'll get it anyway."

"Not if I throw it." He waved his arm threateningly.

"Don't." The Strangler's face took on a crafty look. "Give it to me and I'll let you go," he offered.

"How do I know you will?"

"Think I'd lie?" he asked ominously.

"Why do you want it?" Jedro tried to stall for time.

"None of your business."

"It's not worth anything."

"It's worth plenty," sneered The Strangler.

"Who sent you?"

"None of your business." The Strangler thrust out a hairy hand. "Give it to me," he snarled.

"Don't come any closer," warned Jedro. He threw a quick glance toward the door of the cage, knowing it was locked. Jason Hart always made certain of that. Perhaps if he pretended it was unlocked he could fool The Strangler. He edged toward it.

"Don't think you can run," threatened The Strangler. "Try it and I'll smash your bones."

"I won't run."

"I can't wait all day."

"All might." Jedro eyed him calmly, then took several quick steps and grasped the door handle.

"What do you think you're trying to do," bellowed The Strangler. Fear tinged his voice.

"I'm going to open it."

"Don't do that." He retreated a few steps.

"I'll do it if you don't get out of here," said Jedro. He pulled experimentally on the handle. To his amazement, the door swung open.

"Stop that," roared The Strangler. Despite his surprise, Jedro took advantage of the performer's momentary consternation to leap up on the edge of the platform. As The Strangler rushed toward him, he yanked the door wider and sprang inside, then pulled it shut and backed away, his heart pounding wildly.

"Get out of there," bellowed The Strangler.

"Go away," he shouted. As Taber padded toward him, Jason Hart's dire warnings rang in his mind. Panicky, he backed away. A low growl rumbled from the big cat's throat.

The Strangler's eyes gleamed triumphantly. "Maybe he's not so friendly after all," he taunted.

"Go away," shouted Jedro.

"Toss me the stone and I'll let you out."

"No," he cried. Taber's growls roused his fright anew. The lion's tail swished rapidly. Her eyes glowing, Rana watched the proceedings from a few paces away. Suddenly the big cat crouched and leaped. Jedro sprang backward as he glimpsed the tawny body sailing through the air. It wasn't until Taber hit the door that Jedro realized he'd failed to lock it.

The Strangler stared stupidly as the door banged open and the big cat came out.

"Taber!" yelled Jedro. With a hoarse shout The Strangler whirled, racing across the sawdust floor toward the entrance to the ring. The big cat loped after him.

"Taber, come back," Jedro cried frantically. He raced from the cage and slammed the metal door behind him before Rana could follow. Bounding down from the platform, he saw the performer dashing madly to escape. Under the cone of yellow light, his gait was stiff and awkward.

The Strangler threw a quick glance backward, a blast of terror escaping his lips at sight of the lion's proximity. Hunching his shoulders lower, he plunged desperately ahead. The big cat began gathering speed.

Jedro shouted wildly as Taber leaped.

Landing on The Strangler's back, the lion raked downward with its powerful hind paws. A terrible scream shattered the stillness. The performer lurched under the impact, sprawling to the sawdust with the beast atop him. Sickened, Jedro fancied he could hear the crunch of Taber's jaws closing over the back of The Strangler's neck. The hoarse, bellowing shout of pure terror abruptly ceased.

"Taber, Taber," Jedro called vainly. He dashed forward, knowing he was

too late. Horror speeded his steps. Drawing near the lion, he heard shouts coming from the entrance to the tent. Frightened, he halted. Standing astride The Strangler's body, Taber swung his head around, gazing toward the passageway that led into the ring. His tail twitched angrily.

Jedro sprinted toward the ringside fence. Reaching it, he leaped upward, grasped the top and pulled himself over, dropping into the bleachers. Looking back, he saw several figures burst from the passageway that led to the ring. Jason Hart! Following the lion tamer's tall figure was Corky.

"Watch it, Taber's loose," shouted the lion tamer. Waving Corky back, he dashed toward the big cat. "He's got someone!" His strident voice quavered with horror.

"The lion's loose," hollered Corky. He fled back into the passageway, screaming wildly. "The lion's loose! The lion's loose!" His frantic yells filled the tent.

Jedro scrambled to the top row of bleachers and looked back. Halting half a dozen yards from the big cat, the lion tamer was making shooing motions with his hands. Under the cone of yellow light, in the emptiness of the big tent, he presented a figure of stark loneliness.

His forepaws resting on The Strangler's lumpy body, Taber glared at the lion tamer. Jedro desperately wanted to help, yet knew there was nothing he could do. Nevertheless he took a moment to admire Jason Hart's courage before dropping into the dark passageway behind the bleachers.

His feet struck the sawdust and he bounded up, racing toward the main entrance. Through the slashing rain he saw a dozen or so figures boiling out from the mess tent. His throat constricted at sight of The Tattooed Man's gaudy face. Head down, Faust was running behind him.

At that instant the carnival owner looked up, spotted Jedro, and shouted. Jedro raced toward the maze of wagons that cluttered the muddy field behind the sawdust Street. A quick glance backward revealed that The Tattooed Man had veered his steps, now was racing toward him. The sight brought a surge of fear. Dodging among the wagons, he wondered frantically where he could hide. He was despairing when he saw Twisto, The Contortionist, peering out from a black interior. Driven by fear, Jedro raced toward him.

Twisto leaned farther out. "What's wrong?" he called tersely.

"The Tattooed Man's after me," gasped Jedro. His teeth chattered with fright.

"Here," Twisto commanded sharply. Reaching down, he grasped Jedro's wrist and hauled him inside. "Stay out of sight," he instructed. Crouched in a gloomy corner of the wagon, Jedro heard The Tattooed Man run up.

"See that kid around here?" he barked.

"Someone splashed by in a big hurry." Twisto jabbed toward a grove of trees beyond the carnival grounds. "He ran that way."

When The Tattooed Man departed, striding swiftly toward the woods, Twisto looked around. "What's the trouble, kid?"

"I don't know." Jedro fought to control his trembling.

"I won't ask, but Gurdon's bad medicine." He shook his head. "You'd better stay in hiding until things calm down."

"I have to get out of here. He might search the wagons."

"That bad, eh?"

"I'm afraid it is." he admitted.

"Where can you go, kid?"

"I don't know." Jedro edged forward to view The Tattooed Man's retreating figure. "I'll have to leave the carnival."

"That's tough." Twisto stroked his jaw. "Need money?"

He shook his head.

"He's a hard man to shake once he gets after you," warned Twisto. "He's a real man-hunter."

"I'll be okay if I can get away." He spoke with more assurance than he felt.

"You'd do better at night."

"I can't wait," he objected.

"Anyone else but Gurdon looking for you?"

Jedro licked his lips. "Maybe Barracuda or The Human Pincushion."

"Oh?" Twisto lifted his eyes.

"Taber got The Strangler," he blurted.

"Ahhh." The Contortionist drew the word out slowly, then smiled. "That's no great loss, kid."

"It was terrible."

"Not from the lion's standpoint. Did you leave the cage open?"

"Not exactly." He looked uncomfortably at the other.

"Something else, eh? Well, I won't ask."

Jedro felt a sudden urgency. "I'd better be going."

Twisto leaned out of the wagon to gaze toward the woods. "Head in the opposite direction," he instructed. "If Gurdon comes back, I'll send him somewhere else."

"Thank you," Jedro said humbly. He leaped from the wagon and started toward the booths lining the sawdust street.

"Take care of yourself, kid," Twisto called softly. Jedro acknowledged with a wave. Hurrying through the deep mud, he felt a glow of gratitude. He did have friends. Twisto, the lion tamer, Corky, Dum-Dum, The Snake Woman, Granny -- all were his friends. And Kathy. She was the best friend of all.

He reached the corner of the nearest booth and paused, looking around anxiously. A babble of voices came from the big tent. He hoped the lion tamer was safe, and that Taber had been gotten back into his cage without harm. Memory of The Strangler's last terrible scream brought a shudder. But he couldn't think of those things now. He had to figure how he could elude The Tattooed Man.

A light shone through The Snake Woman's rear window; another was visible in Granny's booth. He knew he could hide at either place, but it would be risky. The Tattooed Man almost certainly would search both booths.

He gazed indecisively at the muddy scene. Memory of how The Tattooed Man had tracked Clement to his death burned brightly in his mind. How could he leave without being seen? It would be safer to hide until dark, circle the town, keep going. He'd have to run, run, run. But where could he hide until nightfall? Under the bleachers in the big tent? It would be dark and gloomy there, but thought of the proximity of Faust's trailer was frightening.

Despair tore at his mind. Unless he found a place soon, he was almost certain to be caught. More people were becoming visible all the time. If the rain stopped, the roustabouts would be swarming everywhere to prepare the carnival for opening. Perhaps he should have remained with Twisto.

Sight of Barracuda and The Human Pincushion caused him to recoil. Although neither had ever paid him the slightest attention, he couldn't forget that they had been The Strangler's friends. He inched backward, then retreated more rapidly as another figure slogged through the mud close by. Pressed against the back of a booth, he waited. Chilled to the bone, he realized his clothes were already soaked.

His hand closed over the stone and he felt it grow warm. At times he wished he'd never seen it. Yet if it weren't for the stone, he'd still be herding gran in the Ullan Hills. He would never have come to the carnival, would never have met Kathy or the lion tamer or any of the other wonderful people who had come into his life. Besides, the stone was meant to be his; Mr. Clement had said that. Somehow his destiny was linked with it. But how? It was all very strange.

He glimpsed The Tattooed Man returning from the woods and trembled

against the booth, scarcely daring to breathe. A trapped, hopeless feeling held him. To his intense relief, the lithe figure crossing the muddy field veered toward the main tent. Exhaling slowly, he felt the tumult within him subside.

"For goodness sake, why are you standing there in the rain?" The voice brought Jedro around with a start. Granny was peering at him from her doorway. "Come in this minute before you get soaked to the skin," she commanded.

He hesitated, torn between the urge to flee and the prospect of finding a temporary haven.

"Hurry," she ordered impatiently, "I'm getting cold."

He reached a decision and moved toward her. "I guess I am kind of wet," he confessed.

"You'll catch your death of cold," she scolded. Closing the door behind him, she asked severely, "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

He nodded mutely.

"What is it, Jedro?" Her voice suddenly was kind.

"The Tattooed Man's after me," he confessed.

Her wrinkled face showed surprise. "What have you done now?"

"Nothing," he protested.

"Nothing." Granny sniffed. "Dry yourself and I'll get you something hot to drink." She went into the next room.

He got a towel and dried himself as best he could, then sat in front of her small electric heater. Its warmth revived his flagging spirits. Listening to her bustling around in the adjoining room, he wondered what he should tell her. There wasn't much he could say without mentioning the stone, and he couldn't do that. Was she really telepathic, or was she a fake like Barracuda and The Stone Man? He shifted uneasily.

Granny brought back a steaming cup and a plate of cookies. Placing them on a small table, she pulled the electric heater closer. "The hot tea will keep you from getting a chill," she said.

"Gosh, thanks." He sipped the tea gratefully. Although it scalded his tongue and throat, he felt good. Granny sat across from him.

"Now what's this all about, Jedro?" Her ancient eyes fixed him severely.

"The Tattooed Man was chasing me." He set the cup down, fumbling with his thoughts.

"You said that," she reminded him. "Why in the world would he be chasing you?"

"I don't know," he protested.

"Don't fib to me, Jedro."

"Well, the lion got loose."

"What's that got to do with Gurdon chasing you?" She eyed him shrewdly. "There's something you're not telling me, Jedro."

"It's all mixed up."

"Unmix it," she instructed primly.

"Well, The Strangler was chasing me, too."

"Just how many people were chasing you?"

He smiled weakly. "At first, just The Strangler."

"Why, Jedro?"

"I don't know." He flushed, hoping she wasn't reading his mind. "He tore my wagon all up. I ran into the big tent to hide and he followed me, said he was going to break my arms and legs. I jumped into the lion cage to get away from him and..."

"It was unlocked?" she interrupted.

He nodded. "Taber got out."

Granny smacked her lips. "I imagine that The Strangler didn't wait around very long."

Jedro's eyes moved up. "Taber killed him."

"How terrible!"

"I know he was your friend," he cried miserably.

"Yes, he was a friend." Granny shook her head sorrowfully. "But I try to be friends with everyone, Jedro. I know that The Strangler had his faults, frightful ones, but I could never find it in my heart to condemn him. He was a victim of genetics; it wasn't his fault that he was stupid. You can't blame a man for what nature does to him, Jedro."

"He didn't have to be mean," he protested.

"He knew he wasn't very bright," she answered. "What happens when everyone calls you stupid all your life? You strike back. That's what The Strangler did; his cruelty was a form of vengeance against the world. But I couldn't blame him any more than I could blame The Pig-Faced Boy for his misfortune."

"I never thought of it that way," he confessed.

"I tried to help The Strangler. I always told him that he should glory in his strength, that people would respect him for it. I told him that it wasn't necessary to be cruel. I tried to make him see that, Jedro. But if he failed, the failure was mine. I couldn't make him understand."

"You're awfully good," he exclaimed impulsively.

"Just an old woman, Jedro. I've skimmed the top from life, now I'm walking softly toward my grave. Yet I do what I can. I believe that people should try to help and understand each other. I've tried to make that my guiding principle. I know it sounds maudlin, but humans are alone in this universe. We have only one another."

"I'm sorry I didn't understand him," he mumbled.

"I hope he'll be better accepted where he is now than he was here," she observed wistfully. Her face perked up. "What did you do when that happened?"

"Got scared and ran," he confessed. "The Tattooed Man saw me coming out of the tent and started chasing me."

"Before he knew what had happened?"

"Well, yes," he admitted lamely.

"Why, Jedro?"

"I can't tell you," he exclaimed.

"He was after something, wasn't he? So was The Strangler." She nodded emphatically. "You don't have to be afraid to tell me, Jedro."

"I'm not afraid," he said.

"Then what were they after?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't," he answered miserably. He looked down at his cup to keep from meeting her eyes. Was she really telepathic? The question returned. He'd accepted the possibility once, now he felt a doubt. She certainly wouldn't be asking all the questions if she knew the answers.

"Try a cookie," suggested Granny. "They're good."

"Thanks," he mumbled. Munching on one, he wished he could tell her the whole story. Perhaps she would know what he should do. But he couldn't tell her about the stone. He hadn't even told Kathy.

"You have to learn to trust people," she observed gently. "A person can't shoulder all his worries alone. Some are simply too big. You'd be surprised at how many people would be glad to help you, Jedro. You have lots of friends."

"I know that," he admitted.

"Mostly they're the nicest people you'd ever want to know. You don't find many like Gurdon."

"He scares me," he admitted. "So did The Strangler."

"Hmmpmph, he was a bluff for all his strength."

"He was?" he asked in amazement.

"He ran from that lion, didn't he?" Granny looked indignant. "Those cats are gentle. If he hadn't gotten scared and scooted off, it's likely Taber wouldn't have noticed him."

Jedro nodded numbly, his protest stilled by the memory of seeing Granny petting the lions through the bars. With all that, he knew that not everyone could get away with it. First they had to trust the lions; that seemed the most important thing.

Finished with the tea and cookies, he went to the window. His vision obscured by the slanting rain, he studied the nearer wagons but could see no sign of life. He turned back; Granny was watching him.

"I'd better go," he said huskily.

"You stay right here," she instructed. "I'm not going to let you go out and catch your death of cold."

He asked uneasily, "What if The Tattooed Man comes looking for me?"

"I won't let him in." She went into the other room and returned with a raincoat and plastic hat.

"Where are you going?" he asked anxiously.

"To see what that painted devil's up to. Now don't you fret. Just sit near the heater until your clothes get dry." She opened the door and went outside. Staring through the window, he watched her plod through the mud toward the main tent.

He returned to the heater, pondering his plight. Although he felt safe, he had the uneasy feeling of prolonging the danger. The rain was a shield; he should make the break now. Or was The Tattooed Man waiting for him to do just that? Night would be better, he decided. If he left in the late dusk, he'd have hours and hours of darkness. By the time Klore rose, he could be far away.

After a while Granny returned. She shook the rain from her hat and coat and hung them on a peg before drying her face and hands. Next she removed her muddy shoes.

He asked edgily, "What did you find out?"

"Taber's back in his cage."

"He didn't get hurt, did he?"

She shook her head. "They shot him with a tranquilizer dart. He's already up and around."

"How about The Tattooed Man?"

"He's looking for you." She smiled cheerfully. "He's turning the place upside down."

Jedro leaped to his feet. "I've got to get out of here."

"And have him catch you?" She shook her head. "He has the field watched. That's what I went to find out. He sent Barracuda and The Human Pincushion to watch the roads. You stay right here where it's safe."

"Safe," he echoed dolefully.

"Safer than anywhere," she replied. "Besides, I owe you an eternal debt of gratitude for removing that horrible snake. I was frightened stiff."

"Shucks, Caesar's tame." He looked at her. "Suppose he does come?"

"Don't you fret, Jedro. I can handle Gurdon."

"How?"

"I'll put a hex on him."

"Can you do that?"

"No, but if he thinks I can, it's the same thing."

"I still can't remain here forever."

"It won't be long, Jedro."

"How do you know?"

"Just a feeling." She smiled. "Youth is always impetuous, always in a rush. You have to learn to take the hours as they come, one at a time. When you're young, you race through them; when you get older, you try to stretch

them out. I know, Jedro, I've seen both the short hours and the long hours. It's the speed of youth that makes youth so fleeting."

"I'm not in that much of a hurry."

"But you are," she countered. "You're racing ahead of your thoughts. You have to slow down, let your thinking catch up with you. You have to learn patience. That's one of the most important things in life."

"Patience," he echoed. He returned to the window to view the slanting rain. "I'll have to get out of here tonight."

"Tonight is ten hours away," she reminded. "Sit down and I'll bring the almond bowl."

10

GERALD FAUST gazed intently at The Strangler's bloody body. Sprawled grotesquely under the cone of yellow light, it appeared sodden and lumpish. The piglike eyes stared into nothing. The mouth hung loosely agape; the coarse face still mirrored the abject terror the performer had felt at the instant of death.

Faust's thoughts were studied.

The Strangler had entered the main tent, where he had no business being. The lion had killed him. From the position of the body and the fright etched into the dead face, he could picture the performer's terror-stricken flight across the main ring, the big cat in pursuit. The ending, he thought sardonically, had been pure justice.

But who had loosed the lion?

The boy, of course. He'd glimpsed him fleeing from the scene. More to the point, why had he loosed it? To protect himself from The Strangler; there was no other answer. Conscious of a mounting excitement, he deliberately backtracked to fit the pieces together.

The boy had the stone! He felt more certain of that than ever. Somehow Clement had managed to slip it to him before his own death at Gurdon's hands. That tied in with Clement's flight into the Ullan Hills -- the boy's appearance, shortly afterward, from those same hills. Clement had given him the stone!

Faust closed his eyes, concentrating against his mounting agitation. His mind reeled. Jedro had the stone...had the power...was the one to whom the stone would respond. It had to be that way. Destiny had jabbed a finger at the boy; now destiny had brought the boy to him.

His head jerked up.

Had The Strangler been after the stone? The thought jolted him. That would explain the performer's presence in the big tent, the boy's desperation in loosing the lion. He contemplated his reasoning nervously. The assumption that The Strangler had known of the stone held frightening implications that he couldn't afford to disregard.

The implications were obvious. The Strangler was too stupid to have acted on his own, hence he'd been sent by someone else; ergo, that someone knew of the stone. Barracuda? The Human Pincushion? The two had been closest to him. He clenched his fists until his nails bit into his palms.

Aside from Gurdon, how many people knew of the stone? He had assumed that Clement had been alone in the knowledge, but no longer. The Strangler's death had shattered that belief. He returned his thoughts to The Tattooed Man. Although Gurdon knew of the stone, he had no knowledge of its real potential. Neither would he have mentioned it; he was too closemouthed for that. Yet someone knew!

The realization brought a quiet desperation. Immortality! He wouldn't be cheated of that. He'd all but had the stone once, then had allowed Clement to

escape. He didn't intend to make the same mistake twice. Yet if others were after the stone, time was precious. He had to move fast, yet carefully, and totally without mistake. First he had to grab the boy.

The boy was the key; of that he had no doubt. Suddenly everything was drawing together. Far-flung happenings in time and space were rushing into focus. The time for waking Holton Lee was now; Jasper Gollard had admitted that. And the person who had the power to make the stone respond, tell where Holton Lee was hiding, had been spirited away to Doorn, his mind blanked -- it all tied in with what he knew of the boy. A boy who could predict storms, who made friends with savage lions! An orphan without a past! Now he had, or almost had, both boy and stone. Immortality awaited but his grasp.

What power had the boy? He mulled the question uneasily. The power to make the stone respond. Gollard's words! But Gollard also had said that the person with the power was a sensitive. A telepath? Jasper Gollard hadn't known. Of one thing Faust felt certain: there was no power of the mind that couldn't be controlled through hypnosis. He'd proved that with Jasper Gollard, with Clement. The greater the talent, the more he could make it work for him. The boy would discover that soon enough. So would Holton Lee.

Immortality! To live forever, to stride down through the ages, laughing at the impermanency of life around him; to watch it unfold, bloom, and wither while he himself remained strong and virile -- he gloated at the prospect.

Immortality! He could sense its presence, an aura that filled the air around him. Of all imaginable gifts, that was the greatest, for then a man could vie with the gods. He forced his mind back to the tasks at hand. He had to play it step by step, with no room for error. He had to concentrate on each move, relegate everything else to the shadowy future. Find the boy, get the stone, make the boy talk; that was the immediate now. Later he would find Holton Lee, take hypnotic command of his mind, strip him of his secret -- rid the universe of him so that the secret would remain his alone. Immortality!

But first he had to find the boy.

"Get Gurdon," he barked to one of the roustabouts. Casting a contemptuous glance at The Strangler's torn body, he returned to his trailer to lay his plans.

The Tattooed Man was not long in appearing.

"Where's the boy?" demanded Faust.

Gurdon shrugged.

"He has the stone; Clement slipped it to him. I want it now! Both the boy and the stone."

Gurdon's dark eyes remained expressionless.

"You'd better find him fast," Faust said softly. "My guess is that he saw Clement die."

"He won't have that knowledge for long."

"I want a breathing body, not a corpse!"

"And afterward?"

"He's yours, when I'm finished with him."

Gurdon nodded.

"He couldn't have gotten far," observed Faust. "He's probably hiding in one of the wagons or booths. My guess is that he'll try to wait for night."

Gurdon didn't answer, nor did Faust expect him to; he rarely spoke.

Faust said, "We'll use the girl to draw him out." He explained his plan, relaxing as he spoke. With the long search drawing to a close, he could all but feel the prize in his hand. He had but to close his fist.

After The Tattooed Man departed, Faust prepared a hypodermic injection and laid the syringe on the table. Pouring himself a stiff drink of creel, he sat back to wait.

In the silence he heard the muted thunder of the rain beating against the tent, a lonely sound. He sipped the creel while reflecting on his future.

Years, centuries, millennia -- it seemed an impossible dream. But was that any more impossible than that old Holton Lee, still alive in his cryogenic bed, should be awaiting the day of his awakening? What might a man do in a hundred years, a thousand, a million? There would be nothing he couldn't do. He could know every experience, every pleasure -- tread every inch of the universe save for the burning suns themselves. Would he ever tire of life? No more than the gods, he thought.

He walked restlessly to the door to peer out. The night-light, moving through small arcs on the swaying center pole, shown down on a starkly empty sawdust ring; The Strangler's body had been removed. He glanced at the lion cage. Taber paused in his prowling to gaze at him through the bars.

He turned back to his dressing room to examine his image in the wall mirror. His hair, still dark, was thinning, and a few crinkles were visible at the corners of his eyes. All in all he looked in quite good shape. If he couldn't have youth, he could have eternity. Nor was it the kind of body he would mind taking through all the millennia to come.

What would he do with the boy and girl once he learned the secret? He returned to the other room to pour another drink. He'd committed the boy to Gurdon's eager hands, but the girl was equally dangerous, or could be. Obviously he couldn't risk turning her loose. A doubleheader, he reflected. Gurdon would like that.

He smiled faintly. Strange how people were driven by different things. The Strangler had lived to torture, Gurdon to kill. Himself? He lived to live. He lifted the glass to his lips. Forever.

Moments later Gurdon returned with Kathy in tow. She was pale and frightened. Faust pushed aside his glass and rose. "Did you walk her past every booth and wagon in camp?" he demanded.

Gurdon nodded.

"Good, that'll draw the boy out." He rubbed his hands. "Get out there and nab him when he shows up."

"Please, Dr. Faust," Kathy began.

"Sit down," he interrupted brusquely. He pointed to a chair across from him. She sat slowly, her face fearful. Gurdon vanished noiselessly. Faust stared at her for a long moment, then abruptly asked, "Where's the boy?"

"Jedro?" She wet her lips nervously. "I don't know," she whispered.

"Don't lie," he snapped.

"I'm not lying, Dr. Faust."

"When did you last see him?"

"Just before breakfast." Her eyes appeared enormous against the pallor of her face.

"Where?"

"He stopped by at the booth."

Faust leaned toward her. "Why?"

Her mouth worked convulsively.

"Answer me," he directed curtly.

"He...said he was leaving." She tossed her head in defiance. "He's gone now."

"Oh?" He studied her musingly. Rather a pretty thing. Soft yellow hair, a slender face, blue eyes that mirrored her worry, yet held a certain wariness. "Why did he leave?"

"He didn't say."

"Just said good-bye, eh?" He laughed, a soft, high laugh, filled with derision. "I believe it's time we got to the truth." He rose and got the hypodermic syringe.

"What are you going to do?" she cried. She leaped up, terrified.

He grasped her arm. While she screamed, trying to jerk free, he plunged the needle into her flesh, holding her while he completed the injection.

"There, now sit down," he commanded.

She stared at him. "What was it?" she whispered.

"A little something to quiet you."

"I'm going to leave."

He caught her again, this time holding her more gently. "Sit down." he repeated.

"I want to go."

"No, Kathy."

"But I..." Her words slurred off and she shook her head, blinking bewilderedly.

"Sit down and rest," he urged. He watched her subside slowly into the chair, then quickly put her into a light trance. When he judged her suitably susceptible, he continued, "We are going to talk about Jedro, Kathy."

"Yes." Her voice held a dreamy quality.

"Why did he run away?"

"He was...afraid."

"Of what?"

"The Strangler."

"Why?" He leaned forward expectantly.

"I...don't know."

"Nothing at all?" he asked sharply.

"He was afraid of him...and The Tattooed Man," she added.

"Gurdon?" He felt a shock.

"Yes, Gurdon."

"Did he say why?"

"He saw Gurdon kill a man."

Faust sat back. Although he'd suspected that, the confirmation came as a jolt. The boy must have gotten the stone only moments before Gurdon arrived on the scene. And certainly Clement wouldn't have relinquished the stone unless...Faust's thin lips curved into a smile. That verified that the boy had the power. Everything was falling right into his hands. How much did the girl know? He asked, "Where did the killing occur?"

"Where Jedro used to live."

"In the Ullan Hills?"

"Yes, that's the name."

He watched her carefully. "Did he say who it was that Gurdon killed?"

"No." She shook her head.

Faust wasn't surprised. The boy had struck him as being closemouthed. He asked, "Did Jedro tell you about the stone?"

"Stone?" A puzzled expression crossed her face.

"Didn't he ever mention one?"

"A stone? No."

"Did he mention having anything of value?"

"No."

Faust considered her answers, then backtracked. "Did he say why The Strangler was after him?"

"He said it would be...dangerous."

"For you to know?"

"Yes." She spoke tonelessly, neither her actions nor her eyes acknowledging his presence. He studied her. What she had revealed added up to one thing: The Strangler had been after the stone, hence Clement's secret wasn't so private after all. He'd have to remember that.

"Why, after all this time, did he suddenly become fearful of Gurdon?" he asked. "Did he say?"

"He didn't explain."

"Nothing at all?"

"Only that they were both after him."

Faust frowned. The boy had known of Clement's murder for months, yet only this morning had displayed his fear of Gurdon. What had transpired to bring it on? He had the feeling of events beginning to crescendo. But more important: Who had sent The Strangler to get the stone?

He renewed his questioning, to no avail. Finally satisfied that the girl had told him all she knew, he had her move to another chair at the far side of the room and put her into a deep sleep. While he reloaded the syringe, he reviewed what he'd learned. He had to admit that it wasn't much, yet it did substantiate his belief that Jedro had the stone. His witness to Clement's murder was the clincher.

How much had Clement told him? If the boy's memory banks had been blanked, as Jasper Gollard had claimed, he perhaps knew very little. Neither would the power of the stone come to him all at once: Gollard had been quite explicit on that point. He'd worry about that when the time came, he decided. If necessary, he'd keep the boy locked in a cage until the stone did respond. He had plenty of time, or would have. For the duration of the universe, to be exact.

He heard a scuffling on the outside steps and sprang to his feet as the door burst open. Holding Jedro's arm in a cruel hammerlock, Gurdon propelled him into the room.

"Ahhh!" Faust rubbed his hands gloatingly. "I knew the sight of the girl would bring him out."

He reached for the hypodermic syringe.

Jedro tried to jerk his arm free at the bite of the needle. "What are you doing?" he yelled. He was both angry and frightened.

"Merely a tranquilizer to calm your nerves," explained Faust. "You're excited."

"Why did you bring me here?" He looked wildly around, his eyes falling on the sleeping girl. "What have you done to her?" he cried.

"She's resting. I had to soothe her." Faust completed the injection and jerked the needle free.

"You can't keep us here," he shouted.

"No?" Faust smiled cruelly. Jedro felt a quick consternation. From the instant he'd seen The Tattooed Man walking Kathy through the camp he'd realized the purpose was to draw him from hiding. Despite that, he'd trailed them back into the big tent, where Gurdon had been waiting. He should have been more careful, he thought bitterly.

With a flash of dismay, he remembered the stone. His hand instinctively shot toward his pocket.

Faust smiled.

"Sit down." He gestured toward a chair.

"I won't!" While trying to stem his despair, Jedro became aware that something was happening to his body. A strange numbness pervaded his legs and he felt a light, floating sensation, coupled with an onslaught of drowsiness. The drug! He couldn't allow himself to sleep, couldn't allow...

"Sit down," repeated Faust. His voice seemed to come from across a great void.

Jedro stumbled into the chair while fighting to retain some clarity of thought. Faust was a master hypnotist! The knowledge edged into his consciousness. Faust intended to search his mind! He struggled to rise and a hand pushed him back down.

"Relax," Faust said soothingly. "There's no reason to be alarmed. Relax and sleep."

"No! No!" He tried to shout, sensing that it was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Relax, boy, you're in good hands."

"Kathy! Kathy!" He shouted her name in his mind, at the same time trying to stave off the euphoric feeling that told him to stop battling, that everything would be all right. "Kathy, wake up! Wake up!"

"Sleep, sleep," encouraged Faust. His voice held a lulling note that was as soft as a caress.

"Don't sleep, don't sleep," he told himself desperately. The floating sensation became stronger and with it he lost the desire to fight. Dimly he realized that he was submitting. He had the strange feeling of watching the scene as a bystander. There at one side of the table, leaned back in his chair, his dark eyes glittering, was Dr. Faust. Off to one side, her eyes closed, her face serene, was Kathy. Behind her, his hideous head and body splashed in gaudy colors, was The Tattooed Man. Sitting rigidly in another chair, his face white and drawn, was...himself!

"Wait in the next room." The carnival owner's curt command penetrated his consciousness, followed by the awareness of The Tattooed Man brushing past him. A door creaked, then slammed. In the silence that followed he heard the distant sound of drumming rain.

"Kathy, wake up! Wake up!" He shouted in the silence of his mind as a device to maintain his small spark of awareness and to keep from falling under the carnival owner's spell. If he could fill his mind, keep Faust out...

Distantly he felt his own despair. When he'd entered the tent, had seen Gurdon, why hadn't he raced to the lion's cage? If he could have gotten to Taber...No, the cage would have been locked. Fill your mind! Fill your mind! "Granny! Taber! Kathy!"

The stone! He moved his hand sluggishly, putting it in his pocket. There, he felt its smoothness, its warmth. "Kathy, wake up!"

Faust leaned toward him. "I am your friend, Jedro."

"Yes," he answered reluctantly. (Why did he agree?)

"I am trying to help you."

"Yes..."

"You have been carrying a tremendous burden, Jedro. You need to share it."

"Share it," he echoed. The words seemed to come from some deep corridor in his mind.

"You saw Clement die, didn't you?"

"Yes." He felt himself shudder.

"Don't fight yourself," Faust said soothingly. "You're safe now, Jedro. You've been running for a long time, but you're safe here. I am your friend."

"Friend..."

"You've been afraid, Jedro, terribly afraid. But all that is past. There's no longer a reason for fear. I'm here to help you."

"Yes." (Why was he compelled to answer? Why? Why?)

"Clement gave you a stone," whispered Faust. "He gave it to you to bring to me."

"No!" The denial spilled from his lips in a strangled cry. He knew that wasn't true.

"Relax, relax." The carnival owner sat back, waiting until Jedro grew quiet, then continued, "I am your friend. You must trust me. There is someone trying to steal your stone, Jedro. Did you know that?"

"Yes." It was true, he thought hazily; someone was trying to steal the stone.

"Who sent The Strangler after you?"

"I...don't know."

"Try to think, Jedro."

He shook his head numbly. Don't talk, he thought tiredly. Don't say anything. "Kathy, wake up!" Why was he shouting in his mind? Oh yes, to keep himself from sleeping, to keep Faust out. He had to fill his mind, fill it,

fill it. A great feeling of weariness engulfed him. Why shouldn't he sleep?

"You don't know?" persisted Faust. His face, to Jedro, appeared like a bright dancing oval under the glow of the ceiling lamp. Watching it brought a vertiginous feeling.

"I...don't know," he whispered.

"Have you ever wondered about the stone, Jedro?"

"The stone!" His head jerked violently.

"Don't fight," Faust said persuasively. "We have to discuss it, Jedro."

"The stone," he murmured.

"What do you know about it?"

"Nothing." His voice seemed distant again. The oval face smiled.

"Nothing, Jedro?"

He felt a stir of defiance. "It's mine. Mr. Clement said it was."

"To deliver to me, Jedro. Didn't he tell you that?"

"To you?" That was wrong. He fought the confusion in his mind. He heard himself say, "I have...the power."

Faust stiffened. "What kind of power?"

"I...don't know."

"The power to draw information from the stone?"

"I...Yes."

"What kind of information?"

"I don't know," he repeated.

"But I know," Faust countered suggestively. "Perhaps, if you knew, it would help you to understand the stone."

"You...know?"

"Not the entire story, Jedro, but together we can learn its secrets. That's why Mr. Clement gave you the stone to bring to me."

"No," he whispered.

"Yes. Jedro, we are going to explore the stone together."

He shook his head dully, aware that something was terribly wrong. While he fought to think, he felt his resolution to resist fading. Perhaps Mr. Clement had intended that he deliver the stone to the carnival owner. How could he know? There was so much Mr. Clement hadn't told him. Fate and Destiny -- Granny had spoken of them often, and what but fate had brought him here? And why here unless this were the road of destiny? And at the end of the road was...Dr. Faust. He had been seeking Dr. Faust, only never till now had known it. That made sense. Dr. Faust would help him with the stone. "Kathy, wake up," he shouted in the silence of his mind.

"Now," said Faust, "give me the stone."

Unable to refuse, he brought it from his pocket. His hand, warm from the contact, trembled violently. The carnival owner, plucking it swiftly from his palm, gazed avidly at it. The soft yellow glow darkened; within a few seconds it appeared once again like a polished rock.

"It changed colors," exclaimed Faust. "Why?" His voice sounded hoarse and unnatural.

Jedro didn't answer, caught with the numbing guilt of having given him the stone. Why hadn't he hidden it somewhere, or entrusted it to Corky or The Snake Woman or Granny? Or had he simply carried out Mr. Clement's intent? Kathy! Her name came through a welter of confused thought. He had to help Kathy, but how?

Granny was a telepath!

He caught at the memory. At least she was sometimes. Now and then, she had said. "Granny! Granny!" The scream echoed in the depths of his mind.

"Faust and The Tattooed Man have Kathy!" He sent the cry out again and again while he wriggled slowly around in his chair. Looking at Kathy, he fancied he saw her eyelids flutter.

"Kathy! Kathy!" His screams in the terrible silence of his mind were

like thunderclaps. "Don't let him know you're waking up!"

Her eyelids fluttered again.

"Don't let him know you're waking up!" He hurled the thought with frightful intensity. Her lids snapped open. He had a brief glimpse of the deep blue of her eyes before they shut again; she appeared to be in deep sleep. Her hand jerked convulsively, then lay still.

He looked fearfully at the carnival owner. Intent on the stone, the latter hadn't noticed the girl's movements. I'm waking up, thought Jedro. I've been asleep, now I'm waking up. But he was so drowsy. As if in a dream, he watched Faust study the stone.

The carnival owner held it up to the light, scanning it critically from all angles. He held it to his ear and listened, then blew on it, polished it on his sleeve, tasted it with the tip of his tongue, sniffed at it.

"Granny, I'm in the trailer! Kathy is here!" Jedro repeated the call again and again. Someone had to hear! But what could Granny do if she did hear him? She could tell Twisto or the lion tamer. She could...He suppressed a groan of despair, at the same time realizing that Kathy's hands had moved again. He saw that she had shifted position, but so slightly Faust hadn't noticed. "Kathy, be careful, be careful."

Faust's head snapped up, his face baffled. "Hold out your hand, palm up," he instructed. Despite his slowly waking state, Jedro found himself unable to disobey. Arm extended, he waited apprehensively. Hunched forward, Faust dropped the stone into his hand. For a moment it lay there, cold and dark and shiny. The carnival owner's eyes narrowed to small slits.

Jedro sensed that Kathy had moved again, but dared not look at her. "Careful, careful." He felt the stone grow warm; his hand began to tingle. The dark polish gave way to a yellow glow. He found himself unable to tear his eyes from it. The surface appeared to dissolve, giving him the impression of staring into incalculable depths. The spectrum shifted toward deep reds and purples and small violet flames leaped outward.

"Ah," murmured Faust. "How does it feel?"

"Warm..." Jedro wondered again why he was compelled to answer. He fought to clear his mind, conscious that his lethargy seemed less binding. Could it be the stone? Out of the corner of his eye he sensed Kathy moving again and shouted a silent warning. Realizing she was slowly rotating in her chair to face the door, he felt a wild hope. He called again, certain he was throwing his warning into a void, yet the very fact of the attempt brought him courage.

Faust asked abruptly, "Feel anything else?"

"No."

"Sense anything?"

He shook his head.

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm...not lying."

"I'm trying to help you, Jedro." Faust's voice softened again, becoming silky and persuasive. "But I need your cooperation. We have to work on this together."

He remained silent.

Faust lifted his eyes. "I know that the stone will respond to you, but how?"

"I...don't know." He felt a wave of helplessness.

"The violet flames are getting bigger. Does that usually happen?"

"Yes." The admission came against his will.

"Under what conditions?"

"When I hold it long enough."

"Does it keep getting warmer?"

"It gets warm, then stays about the same."

"What happens if you keep holding it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

He shook his head.

Faust sat back, deep in thought. Jedro watched him covertly. What was he after? Did he know what the stone was supposed to tell? And if so, what could it be? A memory stone...Mr. Clement had known, but that was because he had been able to look into the future. Had he seen what was happening now? He became aware that Faust had leaned forward again. His face held the edgy look of anticipation.

"Did you ever try asking it questions?" he asked tautly.

"No." Jedro shook his head, stunned. Had the carnival owner stumbled onto the secret of the stone? His hands trembled. But who would ever think of asking questions of a stone?

"Let's try it," snapped Faust. "No tricks."

"What shall I ask it?"

"Ask it what happened to the Superminds."

"Superminds?" Jedro gazed fearfully at him.

"Just ask," instructed Faust. Jedro shifted his glance to the dancing violet flames, wishing Mr. Clement had never given him the stone. It had brought nothing but trouble. He tried to avoid asking the question but found that he couldn't. The words dropped numbly from his lips.

Instantly he had a swirling, vertiginous sensation. The room appeared to reel around him. The walls, furniture, Kathy, Faust's face -- they receded faster and faster, leaving him afloat in a gray nothingness. He wanted to cry out but couldn't. His jaw muscles convulsed.

The planet was speeding toward him!

First appearing as a small reddish disc pasted against the blackness, it grew larger and larger, rushing toward him through an ebon night the name of which was infinity. It grew, filling his eyes, a monstrous globe of red, yellow, and gray shadings. Four silvery spheres sprang into view, appearing like tiny pearls around it. Odd cloudlike belts streaked its surface in parallel bands; a giant ellipsoidal eye stared out at him from misty depths. The planet of the dream!

"Jupiter," he croaked.

"Jupiter?" snapped Faust.

He nodded numbly.

"You see it?"

Again he nodded.

"Impossible," barked Faust. Jedro scarcely heard him, for suddenly he was speeding straight down into the planet's misty depths. The clouds, sweeping up, gathered him in, enveloping him in a gray mist. Down! Down! Down! He heard himself cry out, a strangled scream that was ripped from his throat. His wild plunge ceased; he was afloat in the huge planet's all but impenetrable atmosphere.

He saw the ship! Huge, oblong, it floated in the mists!

His mind reeled. With instantaneous suddenness, the scene vanished, leaving him adrift in a mental vacuum. Body and mind curiously empty, he slumped down in his chair.

"What was it?" Faust demanded anxiously.

"A...ship."

"On Jupiter?" The words held disbelief.

"Floating in the mists."

"Impossible!"

"I saw it," he answered tiredly. The words tumbled from his lips despite his attempt to stay them.

"They would never have ventured into such a place without a safe method of return," rasped Faust. "Ask how they intend to accomplish that."

Jedro rubbed his temples in an attempt to banish his weariness, it required all his strength to cast a covert glance at Kathy. She sat stiffly as if poised for flight. He asked the question haltingly. A name came into his mind in visual form, written as if emblazoned on a great banner that flapped against the bleakness of his thoughts.

"Holton Lee," he gasped.

"Ah, Holton Lee." Faust's eyes burned with excitement. "Where is Holton Lee?"

Jedro wanted to rebel, yet couldn't.

"Ask the stone," snapped Faust. Hunched forward against the table, his pale face held a feral look. Jedro unwillingly phrased the question in his mind; the answer came immediately.

He fought to hold it back, then heard himself say, "An asteroid."

"Alive?" Faust demanded edgily.

"He's...in a cryogenic sleep." Mumbling the words, Jedro realized that he knew the meaning of the term, although he was certain he'd never heard it before. How could he know without knowing? He felt vaguely puzzled.

"Ah, he must be awakened," said Faust.

He nodded mechanically. "Then he will call the ship back from Jupiter's methane deeps."

"How?"

"Through...the person who has the power." He felt a slight shock. The person who had the power was...himself!

"But how?" Faust jerked upright, his face clouding. By sheer dint of concentration Jedro managed to avoid asking that question. He couldn't...couldn't tell Faust everything. He succeeded in moving his head in negation.

"Holton Lee has a secret," Faust said abruptly. "What is it?"

"Immortality." The word tumbled from his lips before he realized that he'd spoken.

"Ahhh, it's true." Faust's eyes glittered.

Jedro glimpsed movement and struggled to turn. Kathy had sprung from her chair and was rushing toward the door.

"Stop," shouted Faust. He leaped up as she threw the door open and rushed outside.

"Gurdon," bellowed Faust. The inner door flew open and The Tattooed Man shot into the room. "Get the girl," snapped the carnival owner. Gurdon glided from the room.

Jedro's mind spun dizzily.

11

JEDRO STRUGGLED to clear his thoughts, caught by the feeling of just having awakened from a deep sleep. Faust, across from him, gazed contemplatively at the ceiling. His fingertips forming a small steeple at his throat, he appeared oblivious to the world around him.

Kathy had escaped! Jedro's memory swirled back. The Tattooed Man was chasing her! He started to leap up, then caught himself, aware that Faust still believed him to be in a trance. He watched the carnival owner apprehensively. He had betrayed the precious secret! The realization brought both shame and anxiety. But he hadn't said which asteroid! He only hoped there were a million of them. The drug and hypnosis! He shuddered at how compliant they had made him, how unable to stem his words.

He eyed the door covertly, debating whether or not he should make a dash for it. Finally he decided against it. Should The Tattooed Man catch Kathy, he had to be there to help her. Conscious that he still held the memory stone, he

glanced at it. Warm in his hand, its small violet flames leaped furiously. Tingling sensations filled his entire body.

Immortality! The word flared in his mind. Holton Lee had the secret; the stone had told him that. Or had it drawn the knowledge from some buried niche in his own mind? Not that it mattered. What did matter was that Holton Lee possessed the secret, and that Faust was out to get it. He wouldn't let him, he vowed silently. He'd find some way to stop him.

Humbled and awed, he allowed the memories to flood back. Holton Lee, in his strange cryogenic vessel, was whirling somewhere through the vast asteroid belt, awaiting the time when he would be awakened so that he could bring his fellow colonists from Jupiter's methane deeps.

Someone?

That someone was himself! The realization staggered him. That's what Clement had meant when he had said, "You have the power." He had meant more than having the power of the stone, for he'd also said, "It lies latent within you."

What power? He had no answer. All he knew was that the stone in some strange way stirred his mind and revived memories deeply buried in his subconscious. But how had those memories gotten there originally? Had they been implanted in his mind at some long-ago time before he'd awakened in Mr. Krant's attic bedroom? Or had they been transmitted by some power of the stone?

Engram. The word seeped into his mind. With it he knew that an engram was a stimulus impression implanted in the brain and transmitted by heredity down through time. How had he known that? The stone? His hands trembled. Familial lines had determined who the stone carrier should be. In turn, the stone was set to respond only to a certain type of psychic energy within a certain corridor of time -- the knowledge came unbidden.

He looked worriedly at Faust. If he had power separate from the power of the stone, what power had he? Telepathy? He felt a sudden stillness inside him. Perhaps he was a telepath!

"Kathy! Kathy!" He called the name in his mind, listened, heard only silence. But, of course, Kathy couldn't hear him unless she were telepathic. But Granny might. Or perhaps he wasn't a telepath. If not, what power did he have? He became aware that Faust's eyes were fastened on him. They were cold and speculative, but when he spoke his voice was unexpectedly kind.

"I would like to let you go back to your job," he said. "I imagine you miss the big cats, eh?"

Jedro nodded, afraid to trust his voice.

"But I can't," Faust continued. "You know too much."

"What do I know?" he asked helplessly.

"Secrets you haven't told me."

"I've told you all I know," he protested.

"Not the name of Holton Lee's asteroid."

"But I don't know the name."

"Didn't you ask the stone?" Faust's eyes were studied.

"I...didn't get the answer."

"That's too bad. If I had the answer, there'd be no reason to hold you any longer. Or the girl," he added.

"You'd let us go?"

"If I had the answer, yes, and the knowledge of how to awaken Holton Lee."

"But I don't know," he protested.

"Perhaps we should try again."

"Yes, sure." He licked his lips. Hoping to stall for time, he added, "I get impressions but I don't know what they mean. The words are strange. I can't even explain what I really see. I don't know enough about it. It might

take a long time," he ended.

Faust said, "I'll jog your memory, tell you enough to let you understand."

"About Holton Lee?"

Faust rubbed his temples with his fingertips, his eyes fastened on the stone in Jedro's palm, and finally said, "Over six hundred years ago Holton Lee fled from Earth to found a colony on Ganymede, the largest of Jupiter's moons. The colony was pretty much forgotten for a century or so, then was rediscovered by a survey ship. That's when Earth found out about the Superminds."

"The colonists?" he blurted.

"You don't know?" Faust smiled skeptically. "Yes, the colonists."

"Why did they call them that?"

"They were telepaths, and more. Some were dairies and downthroughs and levitators, but Holton Lee was the greatest of all."

"What was he?" Jedro tried to contain his excitement.

"I'm not certain, but he discovered the secret of immortality."

"Immortality," he repeated. He still couldn't believe it.

"The government didn't know about that at the time, not until later. By the time they rushed another ship out there the colonists had fled."

"To...Jupiter?"

Faust smiled without losing his veiled look. "That's the background. Now you know the kind of questions you have to ask."

"About the colonists?"

"That's Holton Lee's problem, not mine."

"Immortality?" he whispered.

"Exactly, I want the secret."

"No one knows but Holton Lee," he protested. "You said that yourself."

"Let's get specific. I want the name of Holton Lee's asteroid, and where he is on it. Some of them are fairly large. And I want to know exactly how he is to be awakened. I need precise details." Faust tapped a finger against the table. "The answers are in that stone. It's up to you to get them for me."

"I'll try," he promised.

"For your sake, you'd better succeed."

Jedro heard a squeal outside the door and whirled around. The Tattooed Man came in carrying Kathy. He had a hand clamped over her mouth.

"Ahhh!" Faust leaned back, watching while The Tattooed Man thrust her roughly into a chair.

"Let her go," Jedro shouted violently.

Faust shook his head. "She knows too much."

"She doesn't know a thing," he protested. He switched his gaze to Kathy. Her face contorted with fright, she commenced to weep. The Tattooed Man watched her impassively. Jedro swung back toward the carnival owner.

Faust lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl up past his face. His glance lingered on Jedro. "Clement was her father," he said.

Kathy's head jerked up. "You know where he is?" she cried. "You had something to do with his running away. I know it! I know it! Where is he?"

"Why don't you ask Jedro?" suggested Faust.

"Jedro?" She turned slowly toward him, her blue eyes suddenly enormous. "Where is he?" she whispered. He gazed at her, unable to answer. "Please," she begged.

"I saw him," he mumbled uneasily.

"Where? Please tell me."

"In the hills...where I used to live."

"Oh!" Kathy blanched.

"Jedro saw him murdered," Faust put in. Kathy screamed.

"Why did you have to tell her that?" Jedro shouted angrily. He started

to rise and Gurdon pushed him down.

"What difference does it make?" asked Faust.

"It's not true," wailed Kathy. Wringing her hands, she looked wretchedly at Jedro for confirmation.

"Tell her," ordered Faust.

"It's true," he muttered. Caught in a surge of anger, he jabbed a finger at The Tattooed Man and shouted, "You shot him! I saw you!"

The Tattooed Man regarded him stolidly.

"You're a murderer," he shrieked. He swung toward the carnival owner. "So are you. You ordered him to kill Mr. Clement. I know that you did."

"Really?" Faust's lips curled in amusement. "Did you get that from the stone?"

"You were trying to steal the stone from Mr. Clement! That's why you did it," he yelled.

"Ah, the stone. It better start telling you things." Faust regarded the weeping girl thoughtfully. Jedro looked wildly around. The Tattooed Man was watching him. There had to be something he could do, he thought frantically.

"Granny! Granny!" The shout echoed like silent thunder through his mind. Please let her be a telepath! He pushed at the hope while sensing its futility. Give me the power, he prayed. A tingling sensation ran up his arm.

He opened his fist and looked down. Violet flames leaped and danced from the depth of the stone, but that was all. He needed help -- Twisto or Granny or Taber. Taber, that was it. Taber had protected him from The Strangler. If only he could unlock the cage! He groaned despairingly. Clement had said he had the power. What power? The knowledge of his helplessness mocked him.

Abruptly Faust said, "The girl will have to die."

"You can't," Jedro shouted.

"No?" Faust laughed derisively.

"Why would you do a thing like that?" he implored.

"She knows too much."

"She won't say a thing," he cried. He looked beseechingly at her. "You won't, will you? Tell him you won't. Say it, Kathy."

"I don't care anymore," she sobbed.

"The same applies to you," said Faust.

"You'd kill us both?" Jedro stared disbelievingly at him.

"I could turn you over to Gurdon, let him decide."

"No!" he exploded.

"Don't fancy Gurdon, eh?" Faust's eyes weighed him. "But there might be another way. If you were to tell me exactly where Holton Lee is, give me all the details..."

"Don't tell him anything," cried Kathy.

"Oh?" Faust eyed her curiously. "You know about Holton Lee?"

She tossed her head. "No, but I still wouldn't tell you a thing. I'd die first."

"A quite likely event," he observed.

Jedro gazed helplessly at him. Somehow he had to save Kathy. Thought of what The Tattooed Man might do to her made him positively ill. "I'll tell you," he whispered.

"Where is Holton Lee?"

"In the asteroid belt." He felt numb and cold. "I told you that."

"Which asteroid?" demanded Faust. "There are tens of thousands of them."

"Don't tell him anything," cried Kathy.

"Shut up or I'll toss you to Gurdon right now," threatened Faust. He looked impatiently at Jedro. "Which asteroid?"

Which asteroid? Which asteroid? Jedro let the question seep through his mind. The stone seemed to throb against his palm. His entire body tingled.

"Don't tell him, Jedro!" Kathy's cry came again, seemingly so faint and

far away that he scarcely heard it. The face of the old man he knew to be Holton Lee blossomed in his mind. The eyes, pale blue and thoughtful, regarded him steadily. A huge rock rushed through space, blotting out the stars. A jagged canyon opened in its side. Far below, boxed in by towering walls, he saw the silvery outlines of what he knew was Holton Lee's cryogenic vessel. Then across his mind was emblazoned the name of the asteroid. He saw...

Suddenly his eyes snapped open.

"Which asteroid?" snapped Faust. His face held a taut, waiting expression.

"Vesta," he whispered.

"Ah, Vesta," Faust rubbed his hands. "Where on Vesta?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask?"

"I just saw the ship...in a canyon."

"A good set of instruments can pick it up soon enough." He leaned forward. "How do you awaken him?"

Jedro closed his eyes. "Open the ship...go inside," he said tiredly. "All the instructions are there."

"You shouldn't have told him," cried Kathy.

"I had to," he muttered.

Faust eyed the girl coldly. "It makes no difference. You still die."

"No," shouted Jedro.

"But she does." Faust brought his gaze to Jedro's face. "So do you."

"I thought you'd planned something like that!"

"It makes no difference what you thought."

"But it does!"

"Why?" Faust lifted his head, suddenly wary.

"I gave you the wrong asteroid."

"You're lying!" He leaped angrily to his feet.

"Am I?" Jedro felt suddenly calm.

Faust swung toward Gurdon. "Wring the truth out of him," he barked. The Tattooed Man stepped forward, his dark eyes glittering. His lips, pulled tightly back against his teeth, gave his gaudy face a wolfish expression. Jedro shrank back.

"What are you going to do?" he croaked.

"He's going to snap your bones, one by one."

"I still won't tell," he shouted.

"I believe you will," answered Faust. "Or would you rather hear the girl's bones snap?"

"Let her alone," he cried. He caught the fright in Kathy's face and said placatingly, "I'll tell the truth."

Faust appeared to consider it. "How can I believe you?" he asked finally. "You lied the first time."

"I won't lie."

"That's no assurance."

"How do I know you'll let her go if I tell the truth?"

"You'll have to trust me."

"Don't do it," cried Kathy.

Faust ignored her.

"Let her go, then I'll tell you," promised Jedro.

"Why should I?" Faust measured the boy. "I've always found people quite truthful under pain."

"You have to let her go," he exclaimed. The fear prickling at his mind, he felt close to panic. He jerked his gaze toward The Tattooed Man. The eyes in the patterned face watched him blankly.

Someone banged on the door. Faust swung around with a look of annoyance. "Go away," he shouted.

"It's Granny," a shrill voice persisted. Jedro caught his breath, the hope swirling through his mind.

Faust crossed the room and shouted through the door, "I'm busy. Come back later."

"It's important," she insisted.

"Not that important!"

"But it is." Her voice rose. "It's about Holton Lee and the memory stone."

"What?" Faust jerked open the door. Jedro caught the flash of a tawny body that knocked the carnival owner violently to one side. Faust's skull struck the metal edge of a protruding shelf and his legs buckled, sending him dazedly to the floor.

"Taber," shouted Jedro. He saw the lion crouch before its powerful body uncoiled like a loosened spring. The Tattooed Man screamed as Taber struck him, driving him against the far wall. He wriggled free and bounded off to one side, blood spurting from monstrous slashes across his chest where the razor-sharp claws had ripped the shirt away. His eyes filled with horror as he watched the lion, his jaw muscles jerked convulsively. Suddenly he screamed again, an ear-splitting scream of pure terror.

Kathy's voice rose in a piercing wail.

"Taber!" Jedro's strangled cry was lost in the din. The lion crouched, switching its tail, its baleful eyes fixed on the screaming figure of The Tattooed Man before it leaped. Jedro heard a horrible crunching sound, then the fearful shrieks were cut short. Sickened, he turned away.

Faust scrambled to his feet and lunged toward the door just as someone outside pulled it shut in his face. He clawed frantically at the wood. "Stop him! Stop him!" His thin, piping wail came like the screech of a metal saw.

Jedro yelled at the lion again. Standing astride The Tattooed Man's body, the big cat looked around. The large golden eyes contemplated the man clawing at the door, then abruptly the big cat crouched.

Faust threw a backward glance, his face twisted in the agony of terror. Jedro glimpsed the tawny body sailing past him and heard a blood-curdling screech. In sheer horror he saw the lion strike the carnival owner, driving him against the door. The powerful hind legs raked downward. Faust's shrieks rose louder and louder, then abruptly stopped.

Kathy screamed.

12

GRANNY PEERED cautiously through the doorway.

"Send Taber back to his cage," she commanded.

Jedro uncovered his eyes. The big cat, standing over Faust's body, switched its tail and growled. "Taber, Taber," he said dully. The golden eyes regarded him, then the lion looked back toward the door.

"Be nice, Taber," admonished Granny. She wagged a finger.

Jedro looked at Kathy. Her face buried in her hands, she was sobbing softly. Sprawled on the floor beyond her, The Tattooed Man stared vacantly at the ceiling. The blood that had gushed from his slashed chest and torn jugular appeared a part of the garish tattoos that covered his lean body. Jedro felt sick.

"Send Taber to his cage," repeated Granny.

"Taber," croaked Jedro, "go back to your cage, boy." The lion swung its head around, the great golden eyes meeting his. They held a curious gleam that Jedro couldn't comprehend. "Go back to your cage," he urged.

Taber switched his tail, growled, and looked toward the door. Jedro grew conscious that he still grasped the stone. Its tingling warmth filled his

body. Small violet flames leaped upward from its depths.

Avoiding Faust's body, he stepped forward and knelt, running his fingers through the thick mane. A growling purr rumbled from Taber's throat. His voice choked, Jedro said, "Go back to your cage, boy."

The lion swung its head around, gazed at him and padded through the doorway. Jedro watched the big cat cross the narrow sawdust corridor and spring lightly into its cage, where Rana still waited. Granny scooted out from behind the trailer and slammed the big metal door.

Jedro looked at Kathy. Her eyes were tear-filled, and her shoulders shook in small convulsions. She turned away to conceal her agitation. He wanted to comfort her, yet felt she wanted to be alone with her grief. He gazed at the stone and wished again that he'd never seen it. Clement, The Strangler, Faust, and The Tattooed Man it had brought nothing but death. He looked back at the bodies and grimaced.

Granny came inside and glanced around. "Messy," she said.

"How...?" He gazed at her, afraid to voice his question.

"It was the only way, Jedro." She looked at the weeping girl. "Stop sniffing, Kathy. Sit down." Kathy dabbed at her eyes and turned, averting her gaze from the torn bodies.

Jedro couldn't stem his curiosity. "How did you know what was happening?" he demanded.

"Faust was a fool," snapped Granny. "I knew what he was up to from the first."

"But how?"

"I read it in his mind."

"You did?" Despite what he'd heard of her ability, he was startled.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"You are telepathic," he exclaimed.

"Enough so to read a mind like that, Jedro."

"Then you know...?"

"About the memory stone? Of course. It's certainly caused enough grief." Granny looked at the dead carnival owner. "That's all the idiot ever thought about. It loomed larger in his mind than his brains."

"Gosh." He grappled with his thoughts, not knowing what to say.

"That's why I joined the carnival on Earth," said Granny.

His eyes jerked to her face. "Because of the memory stone?"

"My telepathy," she corrected. "After all, what's a carnival without a good mind reader?"

"Then you knew about Mr. Clement?"

"Yes, of course." Granny regarded Kathy sadly. "He was a fine man, dear. His death was a tragic loss."

Jedro was puzzled. "But if you could read Dr. Faust's mind, why couldn't he?"

"Clement? He wasn't a telepath, Jedro. He had precognition -- could see into the future. There's a difference," she explained.

"Daddy could see into the future?" Kathy's tear-stained face held disbelief.

"Yes, child. Didn't you ever suspect that?"

She shook her head.

"He wasn't one to exhibit the talent," pursued Granny. She looked around. "Let's sit down. My feet are killing me."

Jedro said, "But if he could see into the future, he must have known about Faust from the first."

"Of course, but he was looking at the inevitable."

"Oh, that's terrible," Kathy exclaimed brokenly.

"Terrible and sad," agreed Granny. "Today's troubles are bad enough without having to carrying the burden of the future."

Jedro glanced at Faust's body and shivered. "Even if you could read his mind, I still don't know how you knew what was happening."

"I heard your call, Jedro."

"You...heard me?"

"You called several times," she declared. "You also called Taber and Holton Lee and Clement, although I don't know how you expected Clement might hear you. Oh, you called, all right, loud and clear."

"You read my mind from that distance?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head. "I'm strictly a close-up operator, Jedro. You projected your thoughts into mine."

"I did?" Again he was startled.

"Good heavens, Jedro, don't you know by now that you're a Supermind?"

"I am?" he stammered.

"A direct descendant," affirmed Granny. "That's what this is all about. So is Kathy. A different lineage, of course."

"She is?" he exclaimed. A startled look crossed Kathy's face.

"But I'm not," she cried. "I...I can't read minds."

"The talent is often slow to develop," explained Granny.

"What makes you think it will?" Her voice was more composed.

"Genetics," replied Granny. "Your parents were sensitives. If you're not telepathic, you'll be clairvoyant or a downthrough or a PK."

"PK?"

"A psychokinetic, child. That's the mental ability to move objects through space. Or you might combine several or all of the talents, although that's quite unlikely."

"I almost hope it's not true," she whispered.

"You can't change your genes, girl."

"What makes you so certain about me?" asked Jedro.

Granny's old eyes searched him. "Who do you think unlocked the lion cage?"

"What do you mean?" he stammered.

"You unlocked it," she asserted. "Both times. And let me tell you, boy, that's a nasty habit. You'll drive Jason Hart stark raving mad. He's got the only key."

"But I didn't," he protested. "I know I didn't."

"Oh, you opened it, all right, even if you didn't consciously intend to. Why do you think Clement gave you the stone?"

"I've wondered," he admitted diffidently.

"He came all the way from Earth to find you, Jedro."

"He told me that."

"You have the power."

"To do what?" He couldn't believe the cage-opening bit.

"Make the stone respond, for one thing."

"But why me?"

"It requires a certain kind of sensitive."

"What kind?" he challenged.

"Psychokinesis." She scrutinized him wonderingly. "It's an extremely rare talent. Aside from that, the talent had to be operative at a certain time. Oh, there have been PK's before -- they say Ganymede was leaping with them -- but they lived in the wrong age. You've hit the jackpot, Jedro."

"But I never..." He floundered for words.

"You unlocked the lion cage," she reminded primly.

Awed, he asked, "Why would I need that kind of power?"

"Perhaps Holton Lee realized it would take that kind of power to retrieve the colonists' ship."

"From Jupiter?"

She nodded. "The task would be all but impossible through any other

means."

He considered it. "Then Holton Lee didn't have that kind of power," he stated.

"Doesn't have," she corrected. "He's still alive."

"Doesn't have," he amended.

"Apparently not, Jedro."

"What does all this have to do with immortality?"

"Immortality." Granny sniffed.

"What's the connection?"

"None, I suspect." Granny's eyes got a faraway look. "Perhaps that's the prize Holton Lee dangled to the colonists' descendants to make certain he wasn't forgotten that someday he'd be revived. That's powerful bait, Jedro."

"Then the secret's not in the stone," he reflected.

"Immortality? No, it's only in Holton Lee's mind."

"How did Faust hope to get the secret?"

"He had the silly idea of hypnotizing Holton Lee as he awakened him. A very stupid man, Jedro."

He looked into the ancient eyes for a long moment, then asked haltingly, "Where did I come from? Do you know?"

"Earth, Jedro."

"Earth!" Somehow he wasn't surprised.

"Five or six years ago," she affirmed. "Of course you wouldn't remember. Your mind was blanked out."

"Why?" he demanded.

"Because of your youth. They couldn't take a chance on your saying or doing something that might give you away."

"I don't understand."

"You have the power," she explained. "You were already beginning to exhibit it. That made it extremely dangerous for you -- the reason they had to blank your memory, your talent with it, spirit you away."

"Dangerous in what way?" he asked.

"Destiny -- or perhaps I should say genes chose you as the person to awaken Holton Lee," she explained. "But the Superminds, as you might gather, weren't all pillars of virtue. A few of them were ready to grab you on the off-chance of getting the secret, and they wouldn't have let a little thing like murder stand in their way. Some people can't be trusted, Jedro."

"I guess not."

Granny eyed him musingly. "Anyone who got you under his control, as Faust tried to do, would be but a step from immortality."

He asked hesitantly, "Do you know who my parents were?"

"They were Superminds, Jedro."

"Were?" He felt a quick pain.

"They're dead now, God rest them." Granny examined her veined hands.

"When...how did they die?"

She raised her eyes. "They were killed by people who thought they had the stone. Fortunately, they'd arranged for its safekeeping earlier."

"Dead," he repeated numbly.

"I'm sorry," whispered Kathy.

He felt a stillness inside him, thinking that, like Kathy, he was an orphan. They were both orphans. "Why did they send me to a mean person like Mr. Krant?"

"A mixup, I suppose." Granny eyed him kindly. "The arrangement was made in an awful hurry, just before they died."

"How did Mr. Clement get the stone?"

"The arrangement I mentioned. He was to deliver it to you at an age when he thought you'd be old enough." She considered her words. "Actually, as a downthrough, he knew all along exactly when he would deliver it to you" -- she

flicked a glance at Kathy -- "and under what circumstances. Of course, your mother knew that, too."

"She was...?" He waited expectantly.

"A downthrough."

"And my father?" he asked humbly.

"A clairvoyant, among other things. Oh, he was quite the telepath and, I suspect, a levitator."

"What's that?"

"He could lift his body from the ground, whisk it around through mental effort. It's a form of psychokinesis."

"How do you know all that?" he challenged.

"I was your mother's aunt."

"Aunt?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Her mother's sister," confirmed Granny. Her lips crinkled into a gentle smile. "So you see, Jedro, I'm your great-aunt."

"My great-aunt," he whispered. He felt a fullness in his throat. He wasn't alone! He had Granny. Still, like Kathy, he was an orphan. But she had known her parents, or at least had known her father. He never would. But then he'd known his parents once! He'd lived with them for perhaps ten whole years before the memory block. He grasped hungrily at the knowledge. Perhaps...

"Will I ever regain my memory?" he blurted.

"Possibly," she answered quietly. "That's largely an unknown, Jedro. Perhaps if your mind is strong enough to break through..."

"It's strong enough," he declared. "I'll make it strong enough. What's my full name?"

"Jedro Lee."

"Lee?"

"You are a direct descendant of Holton Lee," she explained.

"Holton Lee," he echoed. He became aware of the warmth of the stone again. Unfolding his palm, he gazed at it, his mind reeling from all that Granny had told him. Reddish-purple, filled with violet fire, the stone blazed more brilliantly than ever.

He contemplated it broodingly, thinking of all the deaths it had occasioned. His parents, Kathy's father, Faust, The Tattooed Man and -- Yes! -- The Strangler. Those were the deaths of which he knew, but how many others might have died because of it during the long centuries of Holton Lee's sleep? He was afraid to think.

His parents had died to protect the stone!

He lifted his head. They had made certain he would get the stone; now he had it. It was up to him to locate Holton Lee, free him from his self-imposed exile, help him bring the colonists back from Jupiter's deeps. Then Holton Lee would lead his people to new worlds among the stars. And he would go with them. And Kathy.

He turned toward her, caught with a surge of excitement. A strong, confident feeling swept through him. She brushed at her eyes and smiled.

Granny said, "We have work to do, Jedro."

"Yes, sure." He brought back his thoughts.

"We have to find Holton Lee, awaken him."

"I'll find him," he promised.

"I'm certain you will." She smiled approvingly. "Which asteroid is he on?"

"Don't tell her," cried Kathy.

"Child!" Granny looked hurt and shocked.

"You can't tell her," continued Kathy. "You're not supposed to tell anyone, Jedro. She said that herself."

Granny allowed a bewildered smile to cross her face. "You're right, child, but Jedro's not out of danger yet. There are others trying to get the

stone."

"There are?" He looked at her in dismay.

"Powerful forces, Jedro. But my main concern is with Holton Lee, waking him safely. He's been too long on that frozen world." She looked at Kathy.

"I'm just trying to help, child."

"I know you're trying to help," said Jedro.

Granny sniffed reproachfully. "After all, I am your great-aunt, Jedro. Your mother called me Aunt Amelia. Did I mention that? I used to hold you when you were a tiny tot."

Jedro hung his head.

"I feel responsible for you," she added.

"Sure." He shifted irresolutely, aware that Kathy had placed him in an extremely uncomfortable position. But she was right: her father and his parents had died to make certain that no one learned the secret. He looked back at Granny; her expression was one of waiting.

"Kathy's right," he said. "I can't tell you."

"Pish, Jedro." Granny tossed her head. "I'm an old woman, your great-aunt, and I'm just trying to make certain that nothing else happens. I promised your parents that I would watch over you. They would turn over in their graves if I failed to do it."

"I appreciate that," he muttered.

"It was Vesta, wasn't it?"

"She's trying to read your mind," cried Kathy. "Don't let her, Jedro!"

"She can't," he answered.

"Can't?" Granny flicked her head toward him with a quick, birdlike motion. "Why not?"

"Because I don't know the answer yet. I haven't determined that." As he spoke, the name of the asteroid was emblazoned in his mind, as it had been before. Watching Granny, he saw no reaction and felt satisfied that her telepathy was quite elementary.

"Then ask it," she instructed.

"Don't do it," warned Kathy.

"I won't."

"I believe you will," said Granny. Her bony hand came from a pocket holding a small, black heat gun.

Caught in a surge of fear, Jedro leaped from his chair.

"Sit down," snapped Granny.

He regarded her, while in his mind the pieces fell into place. "You sent The Strangler after me," he accused.

"A bumbler," snorted Granny.

"But you did, you did."

"I thought it might save time, Jedro."

He looked at Kathy. Her eyes, wide and fearful, were riveted on the weapon. Slowly he returned his gaze to Granny. Her face had grown mean and cold.

"Sit down," she snapped.

He sank back into the chair. "Even if you get the stone it won't do you any good," he whispered.

"Won't it?" Granny cackled, showing her white dentures.

"You'd have to be a PK. You said that yourself."

"To bring the colonists back from Jupiter's gas seas," she acknowledged, "but not to locate Holton Lee. And that's what I want to know -- how to find Holton Lee."

"Why?"

"Immortality, Jedro. Don't be a fool."

"You'd sacrifice the colonists still on Jupiter?"

"Let them keep their icebox." Granny tossed her head. "They mean nothing

to me."

"Does immortality mean that much to you?"

"Why do you think I'm here?" she snapped. "Do you think I've liked living with a bunch of freaks in a flea carnival? I've spent my entire life, ever since I was a girl, trying to get that secret. Do you believe I'm going to let it escape me now?"

"Holton Lee wouldn't tell you the secret, even if you found him," he declared.

"He will when he wakes up and finds himself staring into this heat gun." Granny cackled. "That old fox will talk but fast."

"You're as bad as Dr. Faust," Kathy interrupted. "Worse, you're as bad as...as The Tattooed Man."

"You don't understand, girl."

"What don't I understand?" she demanded angrily.

"You're young yet," replied Granny. "Your whole life extends before you. The years stretch out, each one seemingly like an eternity. You can't imagine growing old, can you? But time isn't forever. The older you get, the faster it passes. Then, when you feel the wind of death, the short time ahead becomes the most valuable commodity in the entire universe. I'm seventy-six years old; I haven't time to spare. When you get that old, you'll think about immortality, too."

"You've been thinking about it ever since you were a girl," countered Jedro.

Granny smiled toothily. "I plan ahead."

"I still won't tell you the answer."

"No?" Granny swung the barrel of the heat gun, centering the muzzle between Kathy's eyes. "How would you like to watch her fry?"

Jedro jerked violently upright. "Don't do that," he cried.

"You'll cooperate?"

"Yes, sure." He licked his lips nervously.

"Don't tell her," cried Kathy. "I'm not afraid."

"Quiet," snarled Granny. She hefted the gun menacingly.

Jedro said shakily, "Put it away and I'll tell you what you want to know."

"Put it away?" She shook her head.

"Well, turn it away."

"No tricks, Jedro." Granny swung the barrel of the gun to one side. "Remember, I'm your great-aunt. Try to think of this as helping a member of your family."

"I will." He gulped.

"And don't try to trick me because I'm going to stare into your mind."

"How can I concentrate if you do that?"

"I'll wait until you give me the answer, Jedro, then I'll verify it."

"Don't tell her," pleaded Kathy.

"I have to." Feeling the stone's warmth, he opened his palm and gazed at it. The leaping violet flames gave the illusion that it was throbbing.

He had the power! Clement had told him that. So had Granny. The power, if Granny were right, to draw the cryogenic vessel from Jupiter's methane deeps. Even Holton Lee couldn't accomplish that. The power to move objects! Contemplating it, he trembled.

"What's the matter?" asked Granny sharply.

"Nervous, I guess."

"Jedro," wailed Kathy.

"Get on with it," snapped Granny.

He shut his ears to her voice, his eyes on the curious flicker that came from the depths of the stone. He closed his mind to the present: Kathy and Granny receded from his consciousness; the table, the chairs, the dead bodies

of Faust and The Tattooed Man appeared to dissolve, along him, dazzling beach with a with the floor and ceiling. He had the eerie impression of floating in the vastness of a universe in which the very stars had been blotted from existence.

A pulsing sensation came from the stone. Transmitted into his flesh, it felt like the beat of a giant heart. Holton Lee! The name came unbidden to his mind. Unbidden, too, came the vision of a gaunt white face, peaceful in the darkness of its cryogenic shell. He glimpsed a sweeping firmament broken by the great blaze of the planet he knew to be Jupiter. Off to one side gleamed ringed Saturn. A jagged black asteroid tumbled toward him and blotted out the stars.

A tumultuous stream of memory engulfed in its imagery. A child ran along a sandy laughing man and woman. His parents!

The man soared through the air

The woman looked at tomorrow

Krant's relks watched him from the darkness of their stalls

Clement gazed upward into a yellow-blue sky

Taber leaped

Strangler died

Faust

Tattooed Man

Kathy

Granny

heat gun, heat gun, heat gun, heat...

Instantly he blanked his mind.

He had the power!

A great calm came to him, the sensation of standing in the eye of a storm while the wild winds swirled around him. He felt an overpowering sense of certainty, of destiny. He opened his mind to the stars again.

They were waiting!

He had the power!

Abruptly he lifted his head and looked into Granny's squinty eyes. She waved the gun menacingly.

"Well?" Her voice betrayed her anxiety.

"I have the power," he said.

"Certainly, I told you that." She leaned toward him. "Which asteroid, Jedro?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "That's not important."

"What is?"

"I have the power."

"Stop quibbling, Jedro."

"Psychokinesis, just as you said."

"I'm not interested in that." Granny's voice rose querulously. "Tell me what I want to know or I'll fry the girl. She'll be just a grease spot, Jedro."

"If you pull the trigger you'll fry yourself." As he spoke, Granny's wrist contorted, bringing the barrel of the gun around until it pointed between her squinty eyes. She screamed and dropped the weapon. He kicked it aside.

"Get out," he said.

"Jedro, I'm your great-aunt," she wailed. "All I'm asking is immortality. Is that too much?"

Jedro grinned. Suddenly the chair in which she had been sitting was empty.

Kathy screamed.

"It's all right," he said. "I put her outside."

"Jedro, I was so afraid." Kathy attempted a smile as she brushed at her

eyes.

"Never be afraid again," he counseled. He walked to the door and looked out. Granny stood near the lion cage weeping silent into a handkerchief; her thin shoulders shook convulsively. She looked far older than her seventy-six years. Immortality had passed her by.

He turned back into the room, then paused and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Kathy asked tremulously, "What did you do, Jedro?"

"Moved two relk from a dirty barn to a pasture where the panda grass is always green," he answered. He laughed again. Krant would never find them.

Kathy smiled brightly. "What do we do now, Jedro?"

"We'll have to go to Earth."

"Earth?" She waited.

"To get a ship to go out to the asteroid belt," he explained. "Holton Lee is waiting."

"Could we do that?" she whispered.

"Get a ship?" He caught her hand. "We have the power, Kathy."

"The power." Her voice was awed.

He glanced at the ceiling. "The stars are waiting."

"Waiting." She sighed.

"We have plenty of time," he said. He felt certain Holton Lee would arrange that.

The Authors

Jean and Jeff Sutton are a man-wife writing team whose collaboration has won three Junior Literary Guild Selections for their Putnam books: *The Beyond*, *The Programmed Man*, and *Lord of the Stars*. An ex-newspaperman and author of many novels, Mr. Sutton is an editorial consultant in the aerospace field. Mrs. Sutton teaches high school social studies in San Diego, California, where they live.