

# SATURN'S RINGS

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ILLUSTRATED BY LAWRENCE

*The weird old castle on Saturn's moon was a fortress — protecting a dynasty and a terrible secret!*

## I

The summer of Matthew North's life was a dream so deep in his past that he sometimes doubted whether he had really dreamed it. Autumn had set in eons ago, it seemed, and now winter was on hand. He did not find its cold and bitter breath the least bit to his liking.

Once again, pale Hyperion was coming forth to meet him. Once again, resplendent Saturn was advancing in her ice-blue gown. How many times before had mother and daughter greeted him at journey's end? How many times before had they seen his sleek jettractor emerge from the immensities with a big black egg impaled upon its prow?

Too many times.

Well, there would be no more times. The Bimini base was gone, and the mysterious source of the many payloads which he and the other jettractor-pilots had delivered to the House of Christopoulos down through the centuries was buried beneath the raging waters of a newborn sea. The unanticipated tectonic revolution had begun mere hours after he had blasted off from the little Proxima Centauri planet which Nick the Greek had christened "Bimini" some five hundred years ago.

For a long while Matthew had been in a state of shock. Recovering from it, he had radioed the news on ahead. He could just as well have waited, though, and delivered the news by word of mouth, for while radio waves exceeded his jet-tractor's near-photic velocity, they did not exceed it by very much. In all probability the message had preceded his arrival by no more than a few weeks.

Such proved to be the case. *Message received last week*, the words that suddenly spelled themselves out on the luminous bulletin-panel informed him. *Establish capsule in orbit, memorize but do not record readings, then land and proceed to the Hostel, there to await further instructions. — Zeus Christopoulos IX.*

"Orders acknowledged, sir," said Matthew North. "Will proceed as directed."

Precisely as directed. One does I not question the commands of God, no matter how unorthodox those commands may be. And to Matthew North, Zeus Christopoulos IX was God, just as the previous male descendants of Nick the Greek had been God. The fact that Matthew had never laid eyes on any of these gods argued for rather than against their divinity, and the fact that he had never been permitted to set foot inside the House of Christopoulos bolstered rather than undermined his respect for them.

Choosing a polar orbit of maximum altitude, he reduced the jet-tractor's momentum to the velocity he wanted. Then, after mentally recording his instrument readings, he disengaged the capsule and fired his retros. He watched the huge egg-shaped container dwindle into the blue-black distances and fade from sight. Finally he began orbiting in.

Saturn hove into sight with each crossing of the twilight belt, but each time he saw not Saturn but a rich and dazzling jewel hanging upon the Brobdingnagian cheek of the Ethiopie goddess Space — the black bitch-goddess of vast immensities and burning suns at whose cold and unfeeling feet he had laid the best years of his life. "For you, Zeus, I did this thing," he said, unconsciously lumping the successive heirs into a single entity. "For you I put my years upon the block in order that your House might never be without the precious payloads I have delivered to its door — payloads I have never seen and do not even know the nature of. And now they are no more.

"Now I have come home to die."

But he had no true right to regret, and he knew it. He had put his years upon the block, yes — but no one had forced him to, and he had not auctioned them off for nothing. With them he had bought a safe little island of changelessness in the giddy onrushing torrent of time.

Night passed, and came the day, the pale day with its cold and distant sun and its wan, cold stars.

Gliding downward along an ever-shrinking orbital path, firing his retros with the passing of each dawn, Old Matt North became Young Matt North again — Young Matt North standing in a bustling bar that bewildered him, rubbing shoulders with strangely garbed, gesticulating people who frightened him; Young Matt North recently returned from a Hyperion-Sirius XXI run, adrift in a civilization that, thanks to the Lorentz-FitzGerald contraction, had left him almost two decades behind.

Beside him stood the man from the House of Christopoulos who had spotted him from across the room. He had come over and bought him a drink and told him glowingly about the Great Opportunity. "You paint a pretty picture," Young Matt said. "I'll say that much for you."

The man was young — almost as young as Young Matt North. His cheeks were smooth and plump, and you could smell money on his breath. Zeus I was his shepherd — he did not want.

"As true a picture as it is pretty, Matthew North," he said. "The House of Christopoulos takes care of its spacemen. It doesn't cast them adrift between runs the way the commercial carriers do. Zeus I was a spaceman once himself—he knows what it's like to be cast adrift. That's why he spared no expense when he built the Haven.

That's why he duplicated a sane and sensible setting out of the past instead of building a modern setting. That's why he guarantees his jet-tractor pilots a job for life. Thus far, there are only two, and he needs but one more, but the Haven is large enough to accommodate a hundred. And it will never change. The Hostel will always be there waiting for you when you return, and during your six-months layovers there will be girls for the asking, and taverns with open doors."

## II

It had been true — every word of it. And it was as true today as it had been then ...

Old Matt North berthed his jet-tractor, climbed out through the locks carrying his duffel bag, and walked around the big platform-lift on which he had lowered so many capsules into the subterranean pneumotube that led to the crypts beneath the House of Christopoulos. The little port gave directly onto the single street of the Haven, and he walked down the street toward the big stone structure at its farther end. As always, the sight of the Hostel reassured him. There was a permanence about stone that could not be duplicated, a solidity that other materials lacked. Inside, there would be warmth and welcome, and more food than he could eat and more wine than he could drink. And there would be girls, too. If he still wanted them.

He wondered if he did.

It was mid-morning, and a cold wind was blowing in from the surrounding ice-flats. It outlined his spacetogs against his spare frame and ridged his skin with gooseflesh. Beyond the Hostel, the great pile of the House of Christopoulos stood massively against the gray, star-starved sky. It had been patterned after the Parthenon, but in the distance-decimated sunlight its noble Doric columns and magnificent entablature tools on a pale cast that was out of keeping with the trabeate architecture. And while the force-field that played darkly between the columns let in what little light there was, it gave back nothing in return. The over-all effect was one of Gothic gloom.

Usually the House awoke vague longings in the deeps of Matthew North's being. Today it did not — perhaps because he was not really seeing it.

He was seeing the girls he had known instead — the girls he had slept with down through the

decades, some of whom were old and withered women now, and some of whom had lain for centuries dead. The pretty little call girls he had had with the sweet sad swiftness of a hummingbird's flight and then had known no more ... and now the room that summer dresses in new bloom was empty, and only the sporadic fluttering of the window curtains betrayed the presence of their ghosts.

It was as well, perhaps—who knew? Matthew North sighed, and walked past the tavern doors agape.

He avoided the expectant looks of the villagers — the villagers whose function it was to cater to him during his layover and see to it that he wanted for nothing, and beneath whose breasts pulsed not hearts but tiny motors that never ran down, and behind whose welcoming eyes dwelled not memories but memory banks. Only the girls had been real. The rest was technological fantasy.

The interior of the Hostel had not changed one whit. Indeed, he could have sworn that the log burning in the great stone hearth was the same log that had been burning there the day he left. The hostler was no longer the same though. Matthew stared at the small and portly — and unquestionably human — man who came forth from behind the bar to greet him. The man smiled at his bewilderment. "Zeus IX decided that human personnel could do the job better," he explained. "Taverns are one thing, but an inn needs a human touch. He offered me the building, and the keep of my wife, my daughter and myself if we would school ourselves in mid-twenty-second century lore, and condition ourselves to the early-twentieth-century way of life which the Hostel symbolizes. I agreed to do so, and here I am. Welcome home, Matthew North."

Clearly, the hostler had not as yet been informed that the Bimini base was no more.

Matthew did not bother to enlighten him, and allowed himself to be led over to a big wooden table that stood before the hearth. Presently the hostler's wife — a strapping woman with eyes the hue of port wine brought in steaming platters of food and a tall and dusty bottle of Venerian Chianti. Matthew knew an appetite he had not known in years and ate hugely. He drank largely of the wine. It was red and fiery, and warmed his very bones. Stupor stole over him. "I would sleep," he said.

The hostler's wife depressed a buzzer at the end of the bar, and a moment later a tall girl with shoulder-length brown hair entered the big raftered room. She was wearing cling-slacks, and short fleece-lined boots; a white plastijacket covered her arms and shoulders, fell loosely round her hips. Youth shouted from her blue, smoke-filled eyes. "Faustina will show you your room," the hostler's wife said. "Ask her for whatever you want, and she will get it for you."

The girl came forward, picked up his duffel bag, shouldered it effortlessly and led the way through the side entrance to the period-piece outside-stairway. On the second step she paused and turned. "Would you like some girls perhaps?"

The amusement in her eyes diminished him. He lowered his gaze to the ground. "No," he said. "Not now."

She shrugged and resumed her ascent of the stairs. He followed, marveling at the smooth flow of her limbs, at her graceful strength; at the youth that was manifest in her every movement. *Lord, to be young again!* he thought. He felt suddenly, horribly, cheated — robbed of life and love. He yearned to lean upon her shoulder, to steal some of her youth and strength. He wanted to see desire in her eyes. Instead, when she lingered for a moment in the doorway of the room the hostler had prepared for him, he saw pity.

She lowered his duffel bag to the floor. "There's a buzzer by the bed," she said. "If you need anything just press it." She turned and walked down the hall and out onto the landing.

He heard her footsteps on the stairs. Silence came.

The room was a large one. All of the rooms in the Hostel were large. Large and empty.

Over the decades he had slept in a dozen of them. He would sleep in this one now, sleep the sleep of the dead, and he would forget stars and space, and loneliness. He would forget the pity he had seen in a young girl's eyes and he would forget that the only love he had ever known was the love that the House of Christopoulos had paid hard cold cash for, and itemized on the same list on which it had itemized his

bread and wine. He would forget — for a little while, at least — that for all the slowed-down clocks that had given him relative immortality, he was an old, old man.

He added wood to the fire in the big stone hearth and turned back the sheets of the huge four-poster bed. He undressed, showered, then climbed into the period-piece bed and let his weary body sink deeply into the eiderdown mattress.

He thought of Bettinger and Flynn, the other two jet-tractor pilots. Bettinger must have reached Bimini by now, and seen the dark sea raging where once the android settlement and the fenced-off lake had been. In a few more months—years, if you computed the time objectively — Flynn would arrive here. Both would return with empty capsules.

Matthew sighed, and turned on his side.

There was nothing he could do. The Bimini base was no more, and that was all there was to it. He thought fleetingly of the orbiting capsule and wondered why Zeus X had not wanted it brought down; but the ways of God were by their very nature inscrutable, and not to be questioned, and presently Mathew North ceased wondering, and slept.

A knock on his door delivered him up from a haunting dream of his lost youth. "Yes?" said Old Matt North, sitting up in bed. "What is it?"

"You have a visitor, Mr. North."

"A visitor? Who?"

There was awe in Faustina's voice. 'Hera Christopoulos. She's waiting for you downstairs. Hurry, Mr. North!'

Fading footsteps. Silence once again.

For a while his consternation held him chained. Finally, breaking free, he climbed out of bed and pulled his best suit out of his duffel bag. He got into it, trembling all the while, and wetted and combed his gray and thinning hair. The dark stubble on his cheeks distressed him — he should have shaved before going to bed. Now it was too late.

Hera Christopoulos. The wife of Zeus IX ....

She was tall, and coldly beautiful. Her dark eyes were set beneath delicate black flares of brows, and held in them a quality that was reminiscent of deep space. Her black hair, upswept into a twist that flowered out and spilled down like the waters of a Cimmerian fountain, stole microcosmic stars from the hearth-fire before which she statuesquely stood. A scarlet sarong, secured by a silver chain around her throat, swirled thrice around her Junoesque body and terminated in a silver band just above her right knee.

She had unfastened the throat-clasp that had held her ermine cloak in place, and the cloak had fallen to the flagstone floor like snow, half-burying her sandaled feet, and she stood in the snow haughtily, the firelight heightening the insolence of her naked arms and shoulders and her semi-naked legs.

Entering the room, Matthew thought for a moment that he had seen her before. The absurd thought was followed instantly by the memory which explained it. Oftentimes descendants duplicated the physical traits of a long-dead ancestor. Here was a case in point. It was not Hera whom he had seen, but Dione Christopoulos the wife of Zeus IV, and Hera's great-great grandmother.

The memory, once unleashed, ran rampant in his mind. Once again the long-ago night closed in around him — the night and the wine and the laughter, the girls and the synthetic gin. Once again he was forty-five and afraid. Once again the strange restlessness came over him, and suddenly the intervening years were no more and he was plunging out of the stifling Haven bar and into the wind-washed street.

The coldness of the night shocked him, but he did not go back inside for his greatcoat. He welcomed the coldness. He reveled in it, and he let the icy wind wash over him as though he were a boulder lodged in midstream, delighting in the clean, clear current. Saturn was on high, a great and gleaming jewel hanging in the heavens, bathing the ice-flats in bluish light and imparting to the House of Christopoulos a majesty which the daylight would destroy.

Something about the storied structure tied in with his restlessness. He set off across the flats, into the

river of the wind.

### III

The building was less than a mile distant from the Haven, but the wind and the ice made the going arduous. Only the heightened sugar-content of his blood enabled him to reach the row of artificial cypress trees that paralleled the rear line of columns.

Gasping, he collapsed in the lee of a gnarled trunk and massaged his numb legs. When his breath returned, he peered round the trunk — and saw the rift.

It was the result of a circuit defect in the force-field, and apparently neither Alexander the Great nor the other three roguards had noticed it as yet. It wasn't a large rift, but it was large enough to see through. The trouble was, it was way up on the force-field wall—just beneath the entablature. However a tall cypress stood not far away. From its topmost branches an enterprising man might obtain glimpse of the building's interior—  
if he wanted to badly enough.

Matthew North did.

He was at the base of the tree in a matter of seconds. Minutes later he was riding the wind on lofty bough, chest tight from the climb, hands numb and bleeding. The rift had a pinkish cast now. The room beyond it was pink.

The room was a bath.

He had believed in his naive that because the House had been patterned after the Parthenon, it must of necessity have but one floor. He saw now that such was not the case. For all the loftiness its ceiling, the bath into which I was gazing was unmistakably a part of a second story.

Apparently the rift in the force field wall was on the visual circuit only, for the three women in room seemed unaware of the cold wind.

Two of them would have been unaware of it in any event, for the were not truly women. They were android handmaidens. One of them had been created in the image of Helen of Troy, the other in the image of Hecuba. So perfectly wrought were they, however, that he would not have guessed the truth had it not been for the names embroidered beneath the neck lines of their Grecian Tunics.

The woman in the bath proper was real, though. She put to shame the flaming torch of Helen of Troy, and all but extinguished the flickering one of Hecuba. A monogram on one of the huge white towels the handmaidens were holding revealed her identity: Dione Christopoulos.

Matthew could not breathe.

Dark of hair and eyes, scarlet of sultry, almost sullen lips, soft-white of water-rivuleting skin, she stood up in the marble basin. He saw the full breasts, scarlet-nippled to match her lips, the gracefully flowing buttocks, the breathless slopes of gleaming thighs. As though cognizant of his presence and eager to flaunt the pastures in which he could not feed, she faced the rift for one full minute before surrendering herself to handmaidens. He saw the birthmark then: the purple dagger-shaft between her breasts, its blade seemingly buried in her white flesh—

At the same time, his eyes caught a movement at the base of the tree.

Lowering them, he saw the roguard standing there. Saturn's ice-blue light glittered on the Macedonian armor, on the long, lethal lance whose inbuilt laser tube was capable of leveling a mountain. Matthew shrank against the bough, trying to efface himself from view.

He needn't have. Antigonus or Seleucus or Ptolemy—whichever of Alexander the Great's generals the roguard was — had eyes only for the rift and was utterly unaware of the Peeping Tom in the tree above his head. Presently he left the trunk and hurried round the corner of the House, heading for the entrance where Alexander the Great was stationed, and leaving the coast clear.

Matthew reached the ground in seconds, and began running across the flats. He was spent when he reached the Hostel trembling, when he climbed into bed. All night long Dione Christopoulos had walked through his twisted dreams, and he had carried a mental picture of her standing in her bath down through

the years to this very moment.

The resemblance between her and the beautiful young woman standing before him in the Hostel was striking. He had heard it said that interfamilial marriages had been the rule in the House of Christopoulos ever since Nick the Greek had married an indentured chambermaid — a peasant girl named Antonia Anzalone — and set the dynasty in motion. Matthew had always discredited the rumor, but now he wondered if perhaps there might not be something to it.

He shuffled across the room and paused humbly before his visitor, staring down at the ermine snow that lay around her feet. Should he bow? he wondered. Or should he kneel? In his indecision, he did neither but stood there like the bewildered and frightened old man he was.

Hera Christopoulos looked him up and down. Her voice was as cold as the wind that blew across the ice-flats. "Where is the last capsule?" she demanded. "Why wasn't it delivered to the House?"

He could not think at first, could only stand there dumbly. When at last words came, they emerged in a meaningless mumble. "What did you say?" Hera Christopoulos asked.

He clenched his hands in a vain attempt to still the trembling of his fingers. Faustina appeared timidly at his elbow, bearing a tray with two cups of coffee on it, and in his agitation he seized one of them and gulped down its throat-searing contents. Belatedly, he remembered that he should have let his visitor serve herself first. Acute embarrassment all but overwhelmed him. Miserably, he returned the cup to the tray.

Hera declined the other cup with a disdainful look, and Faustina hurried away. The log fire crackled, and the crackling reverberated throughout the room. "Are you dumb?" Hera said contemptuously. "Or have you only temporarily lost your tongue?"

Anger sparked him into articulation, and he raised his eyes. "The capsule is in orbit, in accordance with your husband's directions."

She took a step backward, and the fluffy pile of ermine snow became a windrow. The deep-space darkness of her eyes intensified. "He *ordered* you to put the capsule in orbit. Why?"

"He did not say why."

"When did he contact you?"

"This morning, just before I made moonfall."

"I order you to bring it down."

"I can't bring it down unless Zeus IX authorizes it," Matthew said.

"Zeus IX was called away on business. Quite naturally I am empowered to speak for him in his absence. I hereby countermand his order with an order of my own: Bring the capsule down and see to it that it is delivered to the House immediately." With a catlike movement she bent down and picked up her cloak. Straightening, she showered it around her shoulders. "Immediately," she repeated, and, turning, started for the door.

"No," said Matthew North. "I can't."

She spun around, a flurry of whiteness and woman. "*I order* you to bring it down!"

The commoner in Matthew quivered, and the servant in him quaked, but his loyalty to Zeus IX refused to let him retreat.

"When your husband notifies me and gives me the necessary order, I will bring it down," he said, "but not before. I am sorry, but I have no right to act otherwise."

"Very well then. Give me the orbital readings and I'll have someone else bring it down."

Matthew shook his head. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I can't do that either. You see," he went on, "Zeus Christopoulos IX represents more to me than just the ninth Zeus in line. He represents all the others who preceded him. I — I have worked for the House of Christopoulos almost all my life. And I have come to regard my duties as a sort of sacred trust — a trust that I could never bring myself to violate. I would die for the House of Christopoulos. I would die for you. But I cannot obey your order."

She regarded him for some time, the Cimmerian fountain of her hair spilling darkly down to the white

snowbanks of her shoulders. Thought, not anger, now resided in her deep-space eyes. At length, "I believe you would at, that," she said; and then, "Such loyalty should not go unrewarded."

Surprised, Matthew said, "It has not gone unrewarded."

"But it has not been rewarded in full." She glanced at the magnified dial of her ring-watch. "It is now six-twenty. At eight-thirty you will arrive at the House of Christopoulos for dinner. That is an order. Will you obey it?"

Weakness came into Matthew's knees and sent his legs to trembling. His gratitude was so great that he could barely speak. "Yes — yes, I will obey it. And thank you."

"I will expect you then."

She turned and walked out of the Hostel, her cloak snowsqualling around her. She climbed into the glide-car in which she had come, the glide-car hummed to life, and a moment later she was gone.

## IV

The Alexander the Great, roguard stationed before the multi-columned entrance of the House was a product of the "realistic school" of android manufacturing. He was slightly larger than his long-dead flesh-and-blood prototype, but in all other respects he was a faithful reproduction. He possessed not only his prototype's character but his prototype's specialized knowledge as well.

The look he bestowed upon Old Matt North artfully combined aristocratic arrogance and militaristic contempt. When Matthew said, "I'm Matthew North — Mrs. Zeus Christopoulos IX is expecting me," the roguard acted as though he hadn't heard. Nevertheless, he relayed the information into the tiny radio attached to his helmet.

A moment later Hera Christopoulos' imperious voice sounded crisply on the night air: "Well, let him in, you synthetic snob! I told you this afternoon that you were to pass him."

Without a word Alexander the the Great stepped to one side and pointed toward the multicolumned facade of the House of Christopoulos with his laser-lance.

Still shivering from his wind-beset walk across the flats, Matthew approached the Pentelic marble steps, all the while staring nervously up at the frieze upon which were carved bas-reliefs of the divine consorts of the original Zeus — Metis, Maia, Leto, Dione, Demeter, Mnemosyne, Themis, and Eurynome. Above the cornice and centered beneath the peak of the gable was a big bas-relief of Hera that rather startlingly resembled the flesh-and-blood Hera with whom he was about to break bread. Flanking it on either side, in attitudes of abject adoration, were bas-reliefs of various mortals who had contributed to the glory that was Greece. Some of them he recognized from the pictured busts and sculptures he had viewed on his jettractor's library-tape: Thucydides, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, Sophocles. One of the figures was groveling at her feet. It was a bas-relief of Homer.

Night had fallen an hour ago, in accordance with Hyperion's neorotational period established some five centuries ago at the instigation of Nick the Greek. Now Saturn was climbing into the sky. Lowering his eyes from the gable, Matthew began ascending the wide marble steps.

The Doric columns seemed to rise higher and higher above him. The feeling of insignificance that had afflicted him ever since he had set forth from the Hostel increased. He felt very small indeed when at last he stepped through the doorway that appeared transiently in the black curtain of the force-field, and into the enormous room beyond, and he wished that he had not come.

The room occupied the entire front half of the rectangular building.

Strictly speaking, it was more of a great hall than a room. On three sides of it, the magnificent Doric columns rose up to the architrave; on the fourth side — the side opposite the entrance — a grand Pentelic staircase climbed majestically to a railed mezzanine, beyond which dozens of ornate doorways could be seen; The appointments were made of Pentelic marble, too — benches, tables, chairs. And in the center of the room a Pentelic marble fountain sent up an exquisite nosegay of twinkling water. High above the fountain, seemingly suspended in midair, an incongruous chandelier, wrought in the shape of a barred-spiral nebula, shed soft but penetrating radiance. The inter-columnar force-field that so effectively

concealed the building's interior from the eyes of the outsider existed here only as a diaphanous mist. Through the mist, the garish bonfire of the mile-away city of Saturnia showed like gentle candlelight.

A robotler dating from the same "school" as the Alexander the Great roguard and wearing a Grecian tunic on the front of which the name *Pindar* was embroidered, came forward on sandaled feet. He took Matthew's greatcoat and ear-flapped cap, and conducted him across the room to a round marble table that stood at the base of the staircase. Passing the fountain, Matthew gave a start when he saw the silvery flashes that spelled the presence of Venerian piranhas.

There were hundreds of them. No, not hundreds. Thousands. Hera's pets? he wondered.

After seating him at the table, Pindar retired to the columnar sidelines. Matthew saw the other androids then.

There was one standing at the base of each column. All of them wore tunics and sandals similar to Pindar's, and all of them save one were standing in statue-like immobility. The exception was an old "man" with a sensitive, bearded face who was regarding Matthew intently.

As Matthew watched, the android left his column and came over to the table. He leaned forward, the tiny tubes that constituted his eyes alternately dimming and brightening. Matthew remembered encountering a similar reaction in one of the robartenders at the Haven. The robartender was a product of the same "school" that had produced the House of Christopoulos "personnel", and in common with all such "character" androids he could function effectively only as long as the scheme of things which he had been built to fit into remained at least reasonably in keeping with his "personal" sense of right and wrong.

His sense of right and wrong was clear-cut enough. But therein lay its weakness. He believed that the three jettractor pilots should drink themselves into insensibility in his bar at least once during their layovers, and when Matthew had refused to touch a drop during one of his (he had been combating a peptic ulcer at the time), the robartender had suffered a mechanical breakdown, the first symptom of which had been an alternate dimming and brightening of his eyes.

Matthew read the name on the old "man's" tunic. "Aeschylus?"

The old "man" nodded eagerly. "Yes. Aeschylus — overseer of baths and bedrooms." And then, "This morning, darkly plotting deep within, the monarch sleeping softly by her side, she —"

"You *dare* leave your post after hours!"

It was Hera. Hera in a sarong-like gown that glittered with diamonds. Hera, tall and imperious, eyes abyss-dark with rage.

Aeschylus stepped back, eye-tubes working furiously. "Bumbling old fool," she went on. "Get back to your column! You'll be scrapped tomorrow — I never could stand listening to your plays anyway. They're stupid!"

The old "man" turned and shuffled back across the floor and took up a stone-like stance by the column he had so recently left. Hera turned to Matthew who had risen to his feet. "I apologize for his presumption," she said. "Please sit down."

Matthew did so, and she sat down next to him on the bench. There were lines of tiredness at her eye-corners — or perhaps lines of worry; it was difficult to tell — and her face seemed slightly thinner than it had been before.

She clapped her hands. A moment later a mech-maid hearing a tray with a tall dark bottle and two flower-stem glasses on it emerged from a doorway to the right of the staircase. The embroidery on her tunic-front revealed her name to be Corinna. "Will that be all, madam?" she asked, after setting the glasses and the bottle before them.

"For the moment. Begone, kitchen wench!"

Corinna departed. Hera filled the glasses and handed one to Matthew.

She raised the other. "A toast to your loyalty, Matthew North," she said. "May it hover forever over the House of Christopoulos like the great and shining star it truly is."

They touched glasses; drank . . . The wine ignited cool fires within him. Lambent flames rose up and

licked his thoughts.

Was this the wine the House of Christopoulos was famous for? he wondered. The wine that Nick the Greek was reputed to have made his fortune on? Matthew did not think so. Such a wine was far too dear ever to have been distributed on the mass market. And besides, it was said that the real source of the Christopoulos fortune was the synthetic gin which Antonia Anzalone had developed in her bathtub before Nick the Greek had married her, and which the good citizens of Earth and the Seven Satraphies had been incontinently consuming ever since.

Hera refilled the two glasses, and clapped her hands again — twice, this time. Immediately Corinna and another mech-maid, whose name was Psappho, began bringing in viands.

The amount and the quality of the food left Matthew speechless. The entree was Martian ptarmigan, a delicacy which he had never tasted before. With each course a different kind of wine was served, none of which he had ever tasted before either, and each of which was more potent than the last. All that saved him from drunkenness was the quantity of food he consumed. And in the end this did not save him either, for the meal proved to be no more than a foundation for the wine to come. There was red wine and blue wine and amber wine, and there was even a red wine with a greenish cast which Hera said came from the vineyards of Sirius XVIII's southernmost continent and had been aged in deep space. Was there another wine, Matthew North wondered, a wine that she had not served him? — a wine that was a product of Bimini and which had also been aged in deep space?

He could not recall seeing any vineyards on Bimini, though, either during his orbits or during the walks he had been forced to take while the android personnel loaded his capsule. About all he had ever seen on Bimini were trees and more trees. That was all Bimini was, really — or rather, all Bimini had been. A big jungle in the sky.

Give or take a few lakes and rivers, of course — and the saltwater sea that had recently kicked over its traces.

The ship of small talk put into this port and that, Hera at the helm and Matthew sounding a polite note of concurrence whenever he thought one was called for. Presently it ran aground on the subject of Greek religious mythology. Hera dwelled lengthily on the Euhemeristic theory of the origin of the gods. "Then you don't think they were true gods, after all?" Matthew asked at length.

She sipped her wine, set the glass back down. "On the contrary, I'm positive that they were true gods. The mere fact that they were once mortal doesn't mean that they couldn't have become immortal. Mortality is a necessary prelude to immortality, just as immortality is a necessary prelude to the super-apotheosis which must logically follow. But aside from all that, the real proof of the immortality of the Greek gods has been staring scholars in the face for centuries. And they have been too short-sighted to see it."

"I — I guess I'm too short-sighted too," Matthew said.

She laughed. It was a genuine enough laugh, but for some reason it deepened rather than lightened the lines at her eye-corners. "They lived near mortals and had dealings with mortals when they could just as easily have lived by themselves and had nothing to do with lesser beings," she explained. "Immortality, you see, is relative. Living with other immortals exclusively and avoiding mortals, they would have been unable to appreciate their superiority. Living near inferior beings and having dealings with them, they could appreciate it. It's such a simple truth that the scholars have overlooked it, the way they've overlooked so many simple truths. Scholars are stupid anyway — almost as stupid as philosophers." She faced the staircase. "Come on out, old man," she called, "and start cleaning off the table."

An android with a block-like head shuffled out from behind the staircase. His huge face was ugly almost beyond belief. A straggly white beard dribbled down from cheeks and chin and upper lip into a mop-like tangle. Only the eyes saved the sorry visage from complete catastrophe. They were a clear, benevolent brown.

The letters embroidered on his tunic spelled *Socrates*.

He began collecting the dishes and the platters, and stacking them, his slab-like bare feet going

*flap-flap-flap* on the Pentelic marble floor. The dishes and platters stacked, he started carrying them through the doorway to the right of the staircase. His movements were slow and clumsy. There was something grotesque about the whole performance. Something pitiful.

A scrap of ptarmigan had fallen to the table. Hera brushed it to the floor, and when the old "man" returned for his last load, she pointed to the scrap with the toe of her sandal. "Pick it up, old man," she said.

Socrates did so, then carried the rest of the dishes and platters from the room. "Make sure you get them clean, old man," Hera called after him. For a moment Matthew felt sick to his stomach. Why Socrates? he wondered. Why Pindar? Why Corinna? However, he held his silence, and presently the matter drifted from his thoughts.

All matters drifted from his thoughts. All save one ....

Hera was a strong and scented wind blowing through him. The wine strengthened the wind, and he found it increasingly difficult to stand against it. He swayed when she said, abruptly and without prelude, "Will you bring the capsule down?" But he did not fall. Not quite.

"No," he said, "I can't."

She moved closer to him, the diamonds of her sarong-gown dancing in blinding blues and whites. "You would not be bringing it down for nothing. I pay cash!"

"On delivery?" he heard his strange voice ask.

"You are an honorable man. Your word is good enough."

He swallowed. Her face was very close. It fascinated and repelled him simultaneously, but the repulsion was a form of fascination in itself — a perverted form, perhaps, but nonetheless compelling. The thoughts that it awoke added to his drunkenness. He remembered that she was the only human being he had seen since entering the House, and he knew suddenly that they were alone, and that she had meant for them to be alone.

"Do I have your word?" she asked.

The dancing diamond-light of her sarong-gown half blinded him. He tried to speak, could not. His glazed eyes made speech unnecessary. She stood up. "You have not seen the mezzanine," she said. "Come, I will show it to you."

## V

He followed her up the marble stairs on unsteady stilts of legs. Seen from above, the enormous room brought to mind the concourse of an ancient railroad terminal. The mezzanine itself was a graceful promenade, and the walls between the doors that opened off from it were decorated with the simplest of Grecian designs. Hera opened one of the doors and stepped into the room beyond. Trembling, he followed.

"My bath," she said.

It was the same bath he had peered into — how many years ago — and seen Dione Christopoulos. He had been forty-five and afraid then. He was still afraid, but he was no longer forty-five. Nevertheless, the restlessness that had afflicted him then came back.

Now he was in a position to apply the cure — if making love to a beautiful woman who was far above his status really was the cure. In any event, it was for sale. And circumstances had provided him with the price.

The trouble was, part of the price was his loyalty to Zeus IX.

What was it that the capsule contained that Hera found so irresistible? he wondered. So irresistible that she could not wait till her husband returned to indulge herself?

Drunk as he was, Matthew was still incapable of asking her pointblank. Wine or no wine, he was still her servant. He dared not risk incurring her ill-will. But was her motivation really important? Wasn't it enough that she did want the capsule brought down, and that only he knew its celestial hiding place?

After the bath, she showed him several other rooms, the last of which was her bedchamber. It was a

large room, and the three-dimensional murals on its walls made it seem even larger. The subject of the murals brought a blush to his withered cheeks. He had read of the rites for which the Temple of Diana at Ephesus had been famous. But reading about them was one thing — seeing them graphically depicted was quite another.

Hera was looking at him questioningly. Light emanating from the obscene murals gave her flesh a reddish cast, deepened the darkness of her eyes: He looked over her shoulder, saw the huge sleeping dais with its scarlet pillows and black counterpane. He heard the hoarseness of his breathing and he felt the pounding of his heart, and he knew all at once that in order to possess her he would betray far more than what Zeus IX represented; that, like all loyalties built on self-deception, his loyalty to the House of Christopoulos was worthless.

He stood there helplessly as it came tumbling down around him. "I'll bring the capsule down whenever you wish," he said.

"Yes," she answered absently, as though she had heard the words long before he said them. And then, "If you will wait outside, I will have my handmaidens prepare me." She clapped her hands.

Trembling, he stepped out onto the mezzanine. Helen of Troy and Hecuba appeared, side by side, entered the room and closed the door behind them.

His trembling increased. To relax his thoughts he walked over to the marble railing and looked down into the great room below. At the fountain and the tables and the benches. At the columns, at the android standing at the base of each, as though chained. At Ictinus and Callicrates, the architects who had built the original Parthenon; at Phidias, the sculptor who had supervised the building; at Zeno, Polyclitus, Praxiteles, Homer, Parmenides, Leucippos, Aristophanes, Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus—

Aeschylus was looking up at him, eyes flashing on and off.

Now the android left his column, crossed the floor and ascended the stairs. He walked over to where Matthew was standing and touched his arm. "Come," he said, "I will show you so that you will believe."

Matthew was annoyed, "Show me what?"

"I will show you," Aeschylus repeated. "Come."

The blink-rate of the eye-tubes was alarmingly high. What illogicality had this old "man" stumbled upon that could have upset him so? Suddenly curious, Matthew said, "All right— but you'll have to hurry."

Aeschylus led him down the mezzanine to an imposing door at the farther end. The door was locked, but Aeschylus produced a ring of keys from a pocket in his tunic and inserted one of them into the anachronistic lock. A moment later, the door swung obediently open. Following the old "man" into the room beyond, Matthew found himself in a large bath.

It put Hera's to shame. The concave wall was one continuous mural of an Elysian countryside, and it blended imperceptibly into a ceiling-mural of a cloud-scattered sky. So vivid was the illusion of depth that for a moment he thought he had stepped across space and time to ancient Greece. Real grass grew beneath his feet. The bath became a quiet pool on the bank of which he stood. Two life-size statues stood on the opposite bank —one Pan, the other, Syrinx. Syrinx was running away, and Pan was in ithyphallic pursuit.

Matthew looked down at the pool at his feet. It was perhaps nine feet in diameter and had a maximum depth of about five feet. Its concave bottom consisted of white marble. As he gazed into the bluish water, he thought he saw a flash of silver. Reflection? He wondered. Peering closer, he saw other flashes. He identified the shining flickering shapes as Venerian piranhas then, and suddenly sober, he drew back. The water was alive with them!

Why would any man even a rich man who could afford to be eccentric — want to keep Venerian piranhas in his bath?

Aeschylus was pointing toward the bottom of the pool. Stepping forward, Matthew looked down into the strange blue water once again —

And saw the bones—

The grisly bones, picked clean of living flesh. The white bones that almost matched the marble basin. Femurs, pelvis; empty rib box. Dark-socketed skull. Bone-fingers, one of them still encircled by a ring — a ring that bore a familiar seal.

The seal of the House of Christopoulos.

Or, if you looked at it with Aeschylus' eyes, the seal of the House of Atreus ....

Sickened, Matthew turned away. "When?" he forced himself to ask.

Aeschylus faced him. As the android spoke, his blink-rate rapidly increased:

This morning, darkly plotting deep within,  
The monarch sleeping softly by her side,  
She rose, and did with goblet vile  
Scoop death from waters rampant and carry it aloft,  
And pour it into this, her monarch's pool.

The old "man" paused. Raising his eyes to the counterfeit countryside and lifting his arms in supplication, he went on:

Come, Eumenides three, and haunt her. Dog her bloody trail!  
To Apollo and Athena make her flee. Come, do not wait—  
Orestes is no more; Electra lurks not at this sorry bier.  
Beyond the cloud-cast sky where once dimly shone the sun.  
Only darkness can be seen. Woe unto her — woe!  
Awake, ye fiends incarnate, and right this crime  
The indifferent gods looked down but did not see!

Horrified, Matthew seized the keys which the old "man" still held in his hand, and ran from the room. He sorted through them as he hurried down the mezzanine, and by the time he reached the door to Hera's bedchamber he had the one he wanted.

He fitted it into the lock, and turned it. Then he tried the door. It did not give.

He went looking for a visiphone.

## VI

The Saturnia police had to knock out the Alexander the Great and his three generals with a deactivation ray to gain entry.

Matthew did not know this till he left the House hours later and saw the four "bodies" sprawled on the marble steps. Instinctively, he looked away. They brought too vividly to mind the "body" he had found by the piranha-infested pool when he had returned to the bath with the Saturnia Inspector of Police. Alexander, Ptolemy, Seleucus and Antigonus could be re-activated. Aeschylus could not be. Aeschylus had gone insane; his circuits had shorted out, blowing his eye-tubes, and all that remained of him now was a blackened shell.

Perhaps, though, it was just as well. Now that the House of Christopoulos had fallen, there was no more need for period-piece androids.

Nor for period-piece spacemen.

Old Matt North shivered in the raw wind that was rushing across the flats. He turned up the collar of his greatcoat, and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. Dawn was beginning to edge into the sky, and Saturn had long since crept to rest. He wondered what it would be like, living in a world that had left him

over four centuries behind. He could not possibly adapt himself to it. He was too old. Too tired—

A tired old man.

A filthy old man.

That was what Hera Christopoulos had called him when the Saturnia police had led her shrieking from her bedchamber. Disheveled, half-naked in the obscene negligee in which she had adorned herself to awaken his desire and which revealed a dagger-birthmark startlingly similar to Dione's, she had screamed the words at the top of her voice. "Filthy old man," she screamed, face white, and suddenly, shockingly, thin. "I made the Christopoulos fortune — not Zeus! It was I who deserved your loyalty — not him. And you sold me out! Filthy old man! Filthy old Peeping Tom!"

Confronted with the bones at the bottom of the drained pool, she had not even bothered to conceal her guilt. "It would only have been for twenty or thirty more years anyway," she said. "Maybe it's better this way." Abruptly her voice rose. "It was all his fault! There would have been enough in reserve to have lasted us for another century if he hadn't squandered it, if he hadn't given it away. Given it to his mistresses. 'Would you be beautiful forever?' he asked them, and they fawned at his feet. Then he sickened of them and let them wither away, one by one, and found others to give away his years to. *My* years. And then he tried to cheat me out of the handful *we* had left. Well, I beat him there. I'm glad I fed him to the fish. I hope they dined well." She gave a hideous laugh. "I'll bet his flesh was stringy, though. I'll bet his skin was tough!"

More laughter erupted from her, each burst more hideous than the last, and finally the police dragged her from the room. Then the Inspector began to question Matthew.

Matthew withheld nothing. He had nothing to withhold. But the questions which the Inspector threw at him told him more than his answers told the Inspector.

They told him that the condition of the bones at the bottom of the pool indicated that Zeus IX had climbed into his bath shortly after sending his message to Matthew. They told him that the House of Christopoulos had no heirs and that it would become the property of the Hyperion Satrapy. They told him that the House itself had long been a source of mystery to the Saturnia police, and that they had been eagerly waiting for years for a pretext to break into it. They told him that the Inspector was completely in the dark as to Hera's reason for murdering her husband and equally in the dark as to Zeus IX's reason for ordering Matthew to put the capsule in orbit. They also told him that the Saturnia authorities knew nothing about the Hyperion-Bimini shuttle, and hence knew nothing whatsoever about the nature of the Bimini cargo.

Neither did Old Matt North. And now that the Saturnia authorities were going to bring the capsule down themselves and launch an official investigation, he probably never would know. Unless—

He paused on the wind-swept ice-flats. Deliberately, he finished the thought: *Unless he brought it down himself.*

Well, why not? Who had a better right to bring it down than the man who had pushed it all the way to Bimini and all the way back again? Who, indeed!

He began to run. Actually, it was more of a stepped-up shuffle than a run, but it was the best that he could do.

He was gasping when he reached the port, but he did not stop, and minutes later he was in his jet-tractor, climbing, climbing, up the dark and breathless stairway of the night and into the great star-ceilinged hall of space. He caught the capsule deftly, brought it down on a Harlequin-orbit of nights and lays and dawns and set it on the lift-platform. He got out and climbed up on the platform and began examining the meteor-pitted hull. Dawn had departed. Morning was airing the first dirty linen of the day above the warped hack yard of the horizon when at last he found the hatch.

Owing to the capsule's present position, the metal plate was low on the hull, and this made opening it all the more difficult; but finally the final dog gave way before the hammer he had brought from the jet-tractor, and the plate fell free. He dug through the intervening layers of chemically-treated insulation to the inner hull, expecting to find an inner hatch. He did not find one—he found a valve instead.

Wine? Had he been playing Bacchus all these weary years?

Well, he was at least entitled to a taste.

The valve was a large one, and could be opened only with a wrench. He got a large one out of his jet-tractor and locked its jaws on the protruding valve-stem. He did not mean to turn the stem all the way, but the wrench gave him more leverage than he thought he had and far more than he actually needed, and before he knew what had happened, a stream of ice-cold liquid had gushed forth and sent him tumbling off the platform.

He landed on his back and lay there dazed, the liquid pouring down on him and drenching him to the skin. Finally the coldness shocked him into consciousness and brought him gasping to his feet. Finding the wrench, he climbed back up on the platform and tried to close the valve. But in order to get a firm grip on the stem he had to move into the gushing stream, and again the force of it proved too much for him and once more he went tumbling to the ground. This time, the wrench struck him glancingly on the temple and knocked off his ear-flapped cap. Blackness came then, and when at last it went away the stream had dwindled to a mere trickle, and the contents of the capsule were no more.

He sat up. All around him he heard the sound of liquid running off and seeping into the innumerable crevices in the ice. Clothes dripping, he floundered to his feet. He licked his wet lips, but he did not taste wine.

*Jack and Jill went up the hill to get a pail of water.*

Day spread more invisible clotheslines in the sky and hung out more dirty linen to dry. The wind grew sharper. Hatless, he started walking down the street in the wind.

Something was happening in his bones.

He could not get the nursery rhyme out of his mind. *Jack and Jill went up the hill to get a pail of water . . .*

Faustina saw him from the Hostel, and came forth to meet him. "Are you all right, Mr. North?"

"Yes, I'm all right," said Old Matt North. *Jack and Jill went up the hill to get a pail of water.*

"You're wet. You're cold. Let me I help you to your room."

"Walk up the stairs before me—that will be help enough."

Faustina obeyed. He followed, drinking in the sweet and thrilling youth of her. *Lord, to be young again!* he thought ... and even as the thought went through his mind he felt strength flowing into his half-frozen legs and building up in his back and arms. He felt his shoulders straightening, Old Matt North did, and he felt himself growing taller, as one by one the weary fruitless years slipped silently away.

The wine from the stars was no human drink. It was that heady juice called — youth.

No, Ponce de Leon never found his Bimini, but Nick the Greek found his. High up on the big black hill of time and space he found it, and the waters of it were good .... Young Matt North paused at the top of the stairs, and Faustina turned and faced him. The consternation in her eyes soon gave way to better things. Standing on the landing in the wind, he smiled at her.

She smiled back.

END