

TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW

By Gardner F. Fox

In one swift motion, Trenton twisted Theg downward...

Yes, they'd turned Trenton into a hardbitten space tramp, the breed that beat from Earth to Antares or any other of the seventeen star ports, peddling his disintor or his muscles to the highest bidder....Could such a monster be loyal to the lovely, gentle golden girl who wanted peace for the universe? Would not he succumb finally to the lure of exciting, red-lipped, red-haired Drayatha and the conquest of all time and space she promised?

Was this the end of the universe? Timely, mind-shattering book-length space-adventure novel!

CHAPTER I

TRENTON WAS dead, legally. He stood in the bare room that was filled with a roseate, diffused light. There was a plain desk and chair in the far corner above a dark maroon rug on the floor. Two richly colored prints hung across the room from him. He twisted the brim of his space cap in nervous fingers.

The girl receptionist came through the door and smiled at him. "The Interrogator will see you now."

Trenton went past her, catching a faint tint of her expensive Venusian perfume. She smiled at him and closed the door as he went into the next room.

"I'm here," Trenton announced. There was a quaver in his voice. He didn't like what they were going to ask him to do. It was an honor, in a way; but as far as he was concerned, they could keep their honors.

The Interrogator looked up from a pile of papers he was fitting into a maroon folder. He was an Earth man, with the deep tan of space on his cheeks and forehead. Auburn hair ringed his bald head. Dark blue eyes lifted from the papers to look at Trenton.

"Sit down, captain. You've been through the Extermination Chamber Office?"

"I'm dead, as far as the world's concerned," said Trenton dully. "They took my papers, bankbook and will. I left a complete resume of my life. I

filled out all the forms and signed all the papers."

The Interrogator coughed. "You left a good name behind you, captain. Let's see. Spaceship lieutenant at nineteen. Captain at twenty-three. You smashed the swamp piracies on Mars. You won the Space Medal last year for bravery over and above the call of duty. Right?"

Trenton smiled wryly. "They're mailing it to my sister."

"You don't have a sister any more, captain. Not even a name. It's safest that way. Then, too, there will be the plastic operation on your face. Anybody special you'd care to resemble?"

Trenton shook his head. He asked hesitantly, "I suppose there's a reason for--all this?"

The Interrogator leaned across the glass top of his *twill* desk. He rasped, "Reason? The best reason in the world. Any minute, any second...our universe is going to puff out of existence! Is *that* reason enough?"

Trenton managed to laugh. "Puff out? The universe? It's a reason, but--do you really mean that, sir?"

"I'm not in the habit of taking a man's life and identity away from him and making him someone else, captain. I don't hold my job to play at whimsy. I said what I mean and I mean what I said!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The Interrogator waved a hand. "All we know is that the trouble is somewhere in the Majorca region of Procyon-6. You remember Beutel? One of Mars' greatest scientists. He found the trouble, warned us by space-beam, just before the natives got him."

"The natives, sir? You mean the *trolleyates*, the dappled race of Procyon's sixth planet."

"I don't mean the *trolleyates*. If I had, I'd've said so. I mean whatever Beutel called them in his spacebeam dispatch. We all thought he meant natives. Maybe he didn't. But anyway, they got him."

"You've made other attempts," Trenton said. He stated the words instead of asking a question.

The Interrogator looked at Trenton oddly. He said, "We lost three space-battlers and four cruisers. We rushed land cavalry from Titon. We sent engineers. They never came back."

Trenton gaped at him. "So what in the name of Daneb do you want *me* to do?"

The Interrogator laughed. "Solve the riddle. The Chiefs think one man could get in, learn where to go, what to be afraid of. If we could only get our men there, to take measurements and graphs! We're like men who know that a bomb is about to explode, but are tied to chairs and so are unable to stop it. You will go, Trenton? The Chiefs say your record is the best one in all the Fleet."

"Yes," nodded Trenton, "I'll go."

THEY SENT him to the surgeons, who did a plastic job on his face. Then he was shipped over to the psychiatric ward where mental experts took a dozen charts of him, hypnotized him, fed him full of planned neural-reaction impulses and turned him out--a different man.

He was surprised, seeing himself in a mirror after they were through with him. He was looking at a total stranger. He was seeing a hardened space tramp, the kind that beat from Earth to Antares or any other of the seventeen star ports, peddling his *disintor* or his muscles to fight pirates or alien soldiers. He was big and heavily muscled; they hadn't taken his body from him but they'd toughened it, made him bigger and stronger. His face was rugged, and ruthless brown eyes stared at his reflection. Trenton felt a pulse of fear ripple in him.

What would he be like--this different Trenton?

The Interrogator walked around him, nodding. "No one will know you. You can call yourself what you want. They've done a fine job. One of their best!"

Trenton laughed harshly. "I'm different. I'm not the careful, trained officer I was. I feel bubbly, like champagne. I could even--betray you."

The Interrogator was serious. "I know. It's a risk we have to take. But we have to do it this way. We don't know what we're up against. We feel a tough character would have a better chance. If he has any chance at all!"

They put him on a fast freighter booked for Majorca Port. He was listed as a worker, but they gave him books to study and a couple of *disintors* to play with, and a giant of a Martian to keep the fat off his six-foot frame. When he hit Procyon-5, he was as solid as bedrock. His eyes were keen and his brain was sharp, and he could split a bird on the wing with the blue *disintor*.

Smoke curled up, blue and thin, from the red tip of a *glowette*. The girl with the red hair and the transparent thing that passed for a dress in the Majorca Port tavern laughed hoarsely. Her blue eyes glittered.

"Three weeks hunting in the slums, and you haven't found it yet," she

mocked him.

Trenton grinned wolfishly. "I'll find it. Somebody knows what happens to our engineers. Somebody has to send them--wherever they go."

The woman blew smoke at him. Her mouth twisted amusedly. She asked, "What can you offer for--information?"

Trenton laughed inside his ribs, but he made his face as wooden as the painted tokens hung on the walls of the tavern. He turned and watched the gyrations of the nearly naked dancer atop one of the *barrus* wood tables. When he spoke, it was out of the corner of his mouth. "What do you want?"

She ran a hand up her other bare arm. She whispered, looking at the dancer. "Safe transportation back to Earth."

Trenton lifted his eyebrows. "You're a star-deport? What bounced you off Terra? Drugs? A man?"

"Never mind the details," she whispered harshly. "Do you want the information? Beutel used to come in here once in a while for a few glasses of *procyntal*. He took one too many, one night. I helped him to his apartments. A drunk man tells you a lot of things."

She looked around at the crowd fearfully. "If anyone knew about it, they'd find me without eyes and tongue on the Hell Desert out beyond the Port. I've been so scared--"

"Yeah, yeah. Forget your worries. I'll deal with you. Nobody'll know. I'll write you an order on the Commandant. Take it to him. He'll fix you up with a new wardrobe and a compartment on the *Star Queen*."

Her blue eyes drank him up. A flush of color came into the powdered whiteness of her cheeks. "You'll do all *that*?"

"For the right information."

The woman leaned across the wooden table. "Play up to me. I'll tell you on the way...but you have to convince these people...there may be spies. Funny things have happened since Beutel kicked off."

She was pretty. It wasn't too hard to do what must be done, to convince the spacemen and dappled *trolleyates* that Trenton was getting high on the *procyntal*. In the middle of a long kiss, Trenton kicked back his chair and lifted the woman to her feet.

"Let's go," he muttered, and flung a handful of bills on the wet top of their table.

They staggered out into the cold night as a burst of drunken laughter

followed them.

TRENTON went by flier as far into the desert as he dared. He shoveled sand on the ship and left it just another dune. He went on foot into the blinding inferno of heat and sand, a water carafe and a packet of food capsules tucked in his belt.

He threw his compass away when he saw the black splotch on the horizon, two days later.

It hung low, like a black sail bellying in the wind. All around it, like the frame for a black negative, stood the ruined columns and tumbled stone blocks of an ancient Thaman temple. Six thousand years ago, a lost race had worshipped and sacrificed to its forgotten gods, among those ornamented columns and porticoes. Now the white pillars were bare of paint, smooth and rounded as by a million sandstorms. And beyond the white platform, as if balanced on its edge, stood the black splotch.

Its blackness quivered and shifted, like a hole cut in space that was torn by the terrible storms that whipped between the stars. It whispered sibilantly, as if linen were being stroked across linen.

Trenton went up the tumbled steps and onto the broad white platform. He approached very close to the billowing splotch.

He called softly, "I've come from Beutel. Can you hear me--over there?"

There was no answer. He had scarcely expected any, but he had made the effort. The redhead in the tavern told him that once in a while the *other ones* watched the black hole, that once in a while they showed themselves. They had shown themselves to Beutel: had shown themselves and told him things. That was why Beutel let go of himself with the *procystal*.

The redhead had told him, "Beutel says they can cross from the other side, but not from our side. If you were to attempt to go through you'd be snuffed out. By what? Only Beutel knew and he didn't tell me. Even when he was drunk, he was afraid to say why. He only whispered once, 'To think it's only that. All along our concepts were wrong. It isn't the way we think it is at all. It's entirely different!' That's what he'd say."

And that was all the talking the redhead would do, though Trenton fed her all the rare Pakaris '79 that she could down.

Trenton walked around the ruined temple. He took out his *disintor* and flipped of the safety catch and holstered it. He smoked a *glowette* until he burned the flesh on his fingertips. He waited.

SOMEONE from over there would see him, if he waited long enough.

He saw the face just as the huge whitish mass of Procyon dropped toward the horizon. The blackness stirred and swirled, and there was a cowl of some dark material; and under the shadow of the cowl, livid brown eyes burning at him, blazing with some strange, urgent message. The face itself was thin and pasty-white, as though touched by the hand of some lingering death.

The lips opened and moved, but there was no sound.

Then the face was gone.

Instead, a girl was stepping through the blotch of blackness, onto the flat, crumbled stone of the archway. She was not a tall as he, by half a foot. Her eyes were violet under long, yellow lashes. Her thick hair was swept in twisted plaits on top her shapely head. A thin white garment, moulded to her body by the breeze, was looped over one white shoulder and down under the armpit of her other arm. It was girdled by a thin belt of golden links.

She whispered, staring at him, "You are one of them, aren't you? Like Leibel and Cravath? Mani said you were..."

Leibel and Cravath were fleet men. Commanders, both of them. Trenton had known them, and served under Cravath in his lieutenancy. He said swiftly, "I know them. Where are they? What took them? What--?"

"Drayatha has them," the girl said. A cloud of hate rested on her face at mention of that name, then faded. "She took them as she took others who find this Blotch. Those she cannot use, she destroys. She has killed many. You see, Drayatha is Min-dir, and heiress to the Altar. She hopes to use the Altar to make herself the mightiest weapon ever devised."

She paused a moment, put a hand to her yellow hair. She smiled, "I am Kiryla, of the Llinana-kir. We are the people of the hilltops. We grow food and make clothing for the Min-dir."

Trenton said softly, "So Drayatha has them." He saw the hate-mist cloud her violet eyes again.

"Yes! She and bloody Theg. They have the people of your race. One by one they captured them; as they came to explore the Clot. Beutel first. After him, those who came seeking him."

Trenton took out a *glowette* and lighted it. Blowing smoke, he watched the shadows of the temple columns lengthen along the tumbled stones. He asked, "Is there any way to--help them?"

Kiryla brooded, thrusting her lower lip outward, lowering her long lashes. "No way, unless you rouse the Llinana-kir."

He faced her; asked again, "Will you help me rouse them?"

The girl faced him calmly. The violet eyes clouded with the raw hate in their depths. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "I will help you. Kiryla will do what she may--and Kiryla has power! Only by overthrowing the Min-dir can we strike at the Altar. At Drayatha and her Altar."

"An altar? She's worshipped, then. Like a goddess?"

Kiryla smiled, and the twisting of her lips made Trenton shudder. "The Altar is what makes-that!" Her hand gestured at the black blotch. "She calls it a weapon."

Puzzled, Trenton followed her up the flat stones. She put out her hand, wrapped warm fingers his. "Step swiftly. Mani will help us. Come. . ."

It was like going through a dark cloud. Just one step forward and the ruined Thaman temple was gone, and all around them were fields and browsing goats. A ring of fir trees towered in the distance, forming a dark green band that wound up over the hill. Higher up, where faint traces of snow still lingered, there were slender buildings of sedge color. They resembled, to Trenton's eyes, nothing more than the flat, long dwellings of the ancient Martians. Kiryla lifted a tiny gold whistle to her lips; blew lilting notes from it. She dropped the whistle and smiled, "The Llinanakir will come soon. They will come and take us to their stronghold. There we will plan, with Mani.

THE LLINANA-KIR were tall men, strait of back and muscular of arm and leg. They rode an animal unlike any Trenton had ever seen. It seemed a cross between a horse and a gazelle. Four-legged, its shapely head was a bloom with sharp, ugly horns. Its tail was stumpy, and hung with leathern thongs at the ends of which were attached circular knives.

A half-naked man spoke to Kiryla in a bubbling language that consisted of trills and vowels. For the first time, Trenton realized that Kiryla had spoken to him in his own tongue. As the man swooped from his saddle and waved Trenton toward it, the Earthman smiled at Kiryla, "What speech is that?"

Kiryla laughed, "It is the common tongue that evolved out of the past. Some of it is your language, some Martian, some Procyonic. We are taught dead languages here. That is why I know--yours."

Trenton grinned, "Dead language? I'm as alive as you, and fifty billion people where I come from speak it better than I do."

Kiryla thrust out her lower lip, brooded at him sadly. She shook her head until the golden plaits shook loose. "I was born seven thousand

centuries after you, man of Beutel's race. The year is--as you reckon time--703,172...anno Domini."

Trenton staggered, closed a hard hand down on the metal pommel of the leather saddle. "Seven hundred thousand--you're joking."

"Mani will tell you," Kiryla laughed. "He will reveal everything to you. Of the Llinana-kir, Mani is the wisest. He knows everything."

Trenton lifted himself into the saddle on the *jelafaf*, gathered up the reins. The Llinana-kir ranged themselves in single file, jabbed at their mounts' flanks with sandaled heels. The *jelafafs* were light and sure of foot, and fast as the fleetest Martian sea bottom deer. The wind whipped around Trenton's browed cheeks, played easily across the leather of his space-jacket. His holstered disintor bobbed on his thigh.

They flashed up over the brow of the hill, heading for the upper reaches of the mountain. Kiryla called over to him, "We go fast lest the Min-dir raid us. Since Drayatha rules, they needed-amusement."

Up here, the firs grew fantastically tall, verdured dark green, towering into low-scudding clouds. Beneath their far-spread branches the Llinana-kir raced their mounts. Over needle-strewn forest floor their hooves flew. Into the scented coolness of mountain woods they ran.

Trenton saw the chalet a mile away, low and green, with wide windows and broad chimneys. Its shape and color harmonized with the broad, low bushes that clustered beside it. From the air, it was hidden by the giant firs.

A man in a green cloak came out of the wide doorway, stood looking at the file of racing *jelafafs*. He lifted a white hand to throw back the cowl. Serene of face, he stood silent and still, waiting. Without knowing, Trenton felt him to be Mani.

Kiryla cried out, "Wise one! I have come--with a member of the ancient race. I found him on the other side of the Clot, as you foretold,"

Trenton swung down from the saddle. He stepped toward the old man, found himself staring into old eyes that twinkled with understanding and merriment. Mani said, making a polite gesture with his hand, "Take welcome here, man. We have much--and little."

Trenton said, "I have come for Beutel, to find the danger he discovered. To cure it by ending it, if I can."

Mani smiled wearily. "The danger is Drayatha. And the Altar. What it is--only she and Theg know. Except that it has to do with--Time."

Trenton looked his surprise. "Time?"

"Time, yes. The hours and the days and the years. What do your people say of Time? Do they say it is a force, a living thing that eats at the bowels of men and machines?"

"Rot," Trenton said, without thinking.

Mani went on gravely, "What makes metal in water rust? Not the water, for if that alone did it, then all metal in all water would rust. Oxidation, you will say. But something must be added to metal and water. Time must be added. Time and metal and water equal rust. Is it not so? You agree. Then time is a force, a catalyst."

Trenton shook his head dazedly. "Time--a force."

"It is hard to believe. It changes your concepts. Think of Time as a flow of energy, measured by clocks and watches, sun-dials and burning candles. Drayatha would tap that flow of energy, build herself and the Min-dir strange weapons that would use all time as their fuel. A weapon with such energy behind it--would be the greatest ever invented by a human race."

"What would Drayatha conquer?" wondered Trenton.

"All history," said Mani softly. "You and your civilization among--others. If Time is a flow of energy perhaps Drayatha could reverse it, move backward in it. Conquer. Capture. Make herself and the Min-dir great."

The tired old eyes studied Trenton. Mani gathered his green cloak tighter around his thin shoulders. He smiled wryly, "Stop Drayatha. Stop her--if you can."

Chapter II of *Temptress of the Time Flow*

RED LIGHT flickered over his eyeballs. A hot torch touched his chest. Trenton rolled over, sat up. The flames were not fire, but hair. Red hair. And the whiteness was a face.

"He stirs, Theg. Touch him again with your blade."

Trenton saw a red gash in his chest where a swordpoint had cut. He looked away from it toward the red of the woman's hair. At the red of her sultry mouth. At the slant eyes where green orbs glinted with amusement. A mailed skirt, slit up the legs and thonged with scarlet leather and a plasticine bolero gave her a raffish look.

Drayatha. Her face was lovely and-

Evil!

She laughed unto his eyes mockingly. She said, "Theg!"

A big man with a growth of black beard lumbered from the shadows flung by the little campfire. A naked sword glistened in his hairy paw. He put it toward Trenton, thrust down.

With his wrist, Trenton hit the sword, turned it away. He rolled suddenly from his pine-needle bed, hit the big man's ankles hard and dumped him. Theg was a giant, but Trenton was a mountain *catling*. Trenton was astride the blackbeard then, turning him with a twist of his arm that made the joint rasp in its socket. Trenton wrapped browned legs about the man's middle and locked them. The muscles stood on his naked biceps.

"I can break his arms easily," he told Drayatha who was staring at him with surprise and a cruel delight in her green eyes.

"Break them," she taunted him. "Then when they are mended, I'll give you to Theg for his-entertainment. Theg is not as subtle as I. He--hurts."

It was checkmate. Trenton could see Kiryla and three of the Llinana-kir in the shadows under the tall pines, ringed by Min-dir cavalrymen. Their arms were tightly bound. In the distance, where Mani's house had stood on the hillside, was a chaos of red flame and ruin. He wondered whether the old man lay in that fire, a blackened cinder.

Drayatha smiled. "I have my spies. When I learned that Mani and Kiryla were entertaining a man of the past, I hurried as swiftly as my *jelafaf* could carry me. You see, the Llinana-kir are not proper hosts for a man like you. Only the Min-dir can be that."

"I prefer the Llinana-kir."

"Let Theg up. If you are stubborn--"

Drayatha shrugged her white shoulders. Her green eyes glittered. She was amused, because she held the top cards. Trenton knew that one of the Min-dir could blow the top of his head off, from the shadows under the firs.

He rolled off. Theg got to his feet and shook himself. His dark eyes were pits of smouldering rage. He growled, "Give him to me, Drayatha. I've never asked for anything. Just that. Him!"

Drayatha touched the big man's arm with her fingertips. Theg drew back as she stepped forward. She came close to Trenton, looked up into

his hard brown eyes.

"This man interests me, Theg. I've never seen anyone do that to you. If he could down you, he might do--other things. We need a man to help us, Theg."

"Not him," the giant rasped. Trenton saw the bitter hate that had been born of a shattered pride. Trenton grinned at him and the veins stood out on Theg's neck as he fought for control.

"Who are you, man of beyond?" Drayatha asked.

"Nobody," said Trenton, remembering the Exterminator Chamber and the Interrogator vaguely, as something glimpsed afar off, in a forgotten dream. "Just a star tramp. A hireling. My *disintor* goes to the highest bidder."

Drayatha made a moue with her red mouth, head aslant, green eyes roving his hard face, the span of his shoulders, the muscled frame of him. His clothes were plain and unmarked: a plain space-jacket and slack, tightly fitted to his body. The *disintor* hung by a worn leather belt in a well-oiled holster.

"I'll bid for you, then!" the girl laughed softly. The blood thrummed in Trenton's ears at the odd allure of it. "A thousand *tolans*. In solid platinum! There! Will you wear my Snake?"

Her white fingers lifted a silver serpent, cunningly wrought and carved, that hung by a gossamer chain between her breasts. The snake-eyes were carbuncles, glittering coldly. But the green eyes laughing silently up at him were warm, alive.

THERE WAS something that Trenton should remember, something out of his past: a duty to be performed. There had been an Interrogator, yes. That much he faintly recalled. The Interrogator had sent him on a mission. But there had also been a white-walled room a psychiatric ward. Men in spotless uniforms had worked on his mind a long time, in that dream. Before he went into that room he had been honored, proud to hold his head up. Now-

Now he did not know. It was as if a stranger had slipped into the muscles of him, along the veins and the arteries, into the very nerves themselves. Only one thing stood out. His name.

"I am Trenton," he murmured dazedly. His eyes went past Drayatha, sought and found the golden Kiryla. She stood proudly, chin upthrust. Her eyes blazed fire at him.

And Trenton sneered at her look. He felt bubbly, exhilarated. No woman

could tell him what to do! He was a nobody, a sword-seller.

"I'll take your bid," he said to Drayatha. "You won't regret it."

She put out a hand, ran it along his hard forearm. Trenton tingled as her fingers lingered. She whispered mockingly, "I'd better not!"

Drayatha swung about, clapped soft hands. Her cavalymen leaped to saddles, jerked on the ropes that held their captives. "We ride to Min-dir! At the gallop. Mani escaped us as usual! Next time we ride, we'll get him."

The Min-dir waited impatiently as Kiryla and the captured Llinana-kir mounted on their own *jelafafs*. The cavalymen shouted oaths, reined in rearing mounts. Then they were off, and Trenton watched the dirt leap and drop beneath the pounding hooves.

He turned to Drayatha, found her brooding into the distance, lower lip outthrust petulantly. She felt his eyes on her, slid her own eyes sideways, impishly.

"We're in enemy territory, Trenton. The Llinana-kir hate the Min-dir. A roving band of hunters might--attack us."

Trenton touched the smooth handle of his blue *disintor*. It was an unconscious gesture. They hadn't overloaded his subconscious. A man trained to battle would seek reassurance from the hang of his weapon. The move raised him a notch in Drayatha's eyes.

She laughed, "Would you like to see the Altar, Trenton? *My* Altar? I'll show it to you."

The blood pounded in his veins, hearing that. That was his mission--to destroy the Altar! It threatened his world, the world wherein he had dreamed. He cried out hoarsely, "Show me."

Drayatha swung up into a jewelled saddle, swayed to the curvetting of her dappled *jelafaf*. Her green eyes mocked him. "Do you know what the Altar is, Trenton? You are eager, but you cannot know, unless Mani told you. Did he?"

Trenton shook his head, swinging into the leather saddle, heeling his saddler forward. They loomed dark and brooding to one side of him, never taking his eyes from Trenton's hands.

Drayatha said softly, "The Altar has a history. To understand it, you must know that history. We are part of what was once the Earth Empire. Thousands of centuries ago a little planet called the Earth discovered how to travel in space. They send their ships throughout their own solar system, then into other systems."

Trenton nodded. He knew all this. That dream of his--they hadn't taken away his knowledge at any rate. He smiled, "That Empire lasted at least seven thousand years. I was in the employ of-the Fleet--a long time ago."

"How long ago even you can't imagine, Trenton. That Earth Empire lasted two hundred thousand years. Their spacers sent luxuries to all corners of the universe. From Deneb to Sirius, their colonists built cities. And then the reaction came. Too much ease of living, too much of everything. The people decayed. Only on the outermost planets of the systems, where there still remained animals and savages to fight, did the men retain their manhood.

THE EMPIRE degenerated. It took fifty thousand years, but after that, there was no Empire. Only planet-states remained. Cut off from Earth, dependent on themselves for support. Here on Procyon, a bloody revolution began. It was a glorified civil war, between men and the robots that served them. For thousands of years the battle went on. Great scientists on both sides were killed. The people took to living in caves. Fighting on the run. Cooking when they could.

"The humans had one advantage. They could propagate. To one of the scientists a child was born who was destined to be the greatest scientist the Min-dir ever knew. His name was Nannar-kir. He found a way to smash the robots, to set up organization and a sort of culture. He recognized two basic types of people: those who worked in the air, those who worked in confinement. The farmers, the hunters, the builders--to them he gave the wide spaces of the planet, with a duty to hunt and feed and clothe the others. To the scientists, the clericals, the business men--he gave the cities. The Llinana-kir and the Min-dir.

"Before he died, Nannar-kir discovered Time. He found out that it was a force, a living, vital thing. Frightened, he locked his discoveries away in the Altar. But he left the key with his son, to be handed down to his son's sons. And to make doubly sure that they would not be tempted beyond their means to resist, he placed the Altar in the heart of the Llinana-kir's lands."

The hooves of the *jelafafs* pounded across scrub-spotted plains. In the distance a new fringe of mountains flung their fir-topped breasts at a cloud-pocked sky. Drayatha lifted a white arm and pointed at the firs.

"Over there, Trenton. In those mountains. That is where the Altar is. For a long time the Llinanakir and the Min-dir were friends. But with the passage of the centuries--*aie*, there were many centuries to follow Nannar-kir before Drayatha!--the Min-dir and Llinana-kir grew apart.

Jealousies. Murders. Hate grew. Now all that keeps Min-dir and Llinana-kir from each other's throat is my power!"

Trenton saw the pride that etched itself on the girl's face, saw the lift of her breasts beneath the plasticine bolero.

Trenton said drily, "If you have so much power--and the Altar--what's stopping you?"

"The Altar is locked--locked in Time! *Aie*, if the Altar were all mine--everything would be mine. Trenton! With the Altar goes godhood! But Nannar-kir was wise. He enclosed the Altar in a sheath of Time itself. When that sheath wears off, then the Altar will be open to me. And when that day comes--"

Drayatha broke off, urged her mount closer to Trenton. Her hand rested on his naked forearm. She breathed, "Be my man, Trenton. Then when my day comes, you can have what you will. Anything!"

Her eyes were promising pools, uplifted to his. Trenton let himself sink in them, slid down into the verdant coldness that sparkled, changed to bright green flames, to fire. His arms were out, half-raising her from the saddle, crushing her against his chest. He mocked her, looking into those hot eyes, "You promise what you can't give, Drayatha. What are you afraid of? You promise when you should demand. You hear me? Demand--like this!"

His mouth burned on hers in a savage kiss. Faintly he heard Them bellow; felt Drayatha stiffen, lift both arms to fight him off. And then--suddenly--she was limp, returning his kiss with both arm locked about his middle.

He let her go, still watching her eyes. He murmured, "Why are you promising, Drayatha? Why can't you--demand?"

She shuddered. She whispered, "The Llinana-kir! If ever they united against me--my Min-kir calvary[sic] would be like leaves on a windswept hilltop! That's why I need you, Trenton--because the girl Kiryla--loves you!"

Trenton grinned. Drayatha slid her eyes sideways at him, sullenly. She spat, "She does! She does! I saw it in her eyes when she looked at you. She'd do anything for you! Even to--urging the Llinana-kir to--aid me when the Altar comes free of the Time sheath. The Llinana-kir worship her. She's the last descendant of the old nobility that chose to go out with the hunters and farmers rather than stay with the scientists in the cities. They look up to her, do what she tells them. Is love stronger than hate,

Trenton? Her love for you--would she ally her Llinana-kir to you as you allied yourself with me? I wonder!"

They rode on, up the fir-clad slopes, along the stony ridges.

THE ALTAR burst on them as they came out of a clump of aspens. It was long and low and flat with spires at the four ends, and a faery delicacy in the stonework around the sides. It was architecture of a thousand planets and a hundred thousand years. It combined Martian motif with Procyonic execution. Earthen roof with Sirian towers. It took away the breath with beauty, and returned it with simplicity.

Trenton rubbed his eyes, looking at it. The longer he looked, the stronger became the blur that surrounded the Altar. It quivered and shook and--was still. It was a haze, a mist, a fog. It shrouded and it revealed.

Drayatha whispered, "The Time sheath. The Altar is there, but we see it through the sheath. Some day--soon--the haze will go. Then I'll enter it, Trenton. Then the whole course of history will--be mine!"

Trenton scowled, looking at her. He muttered, "But the Blotch! Mani said--"

Drayatha shrugged. "There is a miniature Altar in Min-dir. It permits contacts with the past and future. It made the Blotch, which is in reality only a Time-bridge between your world and mine. But the model is not as strong as the true Altar. It's only a toy."

Trenton held out his hand, grinning; baring strong white teeth against the tan of his face. A toy? By Deneb, but a toy would fit his hard palm. He curled his fingers and squeezed.

Four times had the sun lifted and set beyond the sprawling white city of the Min-dir. From the chambers hung with golden cloth and platinum rods that Drayatha had given him, Trenton brooded over a crystal goblet of *frothla*. Four days, three nights. And no nearer to the Altar than when Kiryla had found him!

He swept the goblet from the metal table; heard its music *tinkle-akkle* as it crashed on the tilings. He put his big hands to his forehead and pressed.

He groaned, "They did too good a job on me! I--I can't remember much, any more. The dream is fading. There was an Interrogator--I was a Fleet officer, hand-picked for a job. To find out what was behind the Blotch and--smash it.

"They sent me to the psych ward. That was a mistake, because they gave me a different personality and-

"I'm afraid of it!"

Trenton got to his feet. He could see his big body reflected from a wall glass: brown of face and body, big-muscled. A close-cropped head, and a tight mouth. Hard brown eyes, that slanted slightly--cruelly! He sneered at the white stuff girding his loins, at the cloak dependent from his jerkined shoulders. He should be wearing leather and battle-sandals.

The door opened behind him. Trenton did not turn, but a stray gust of wind carried past his nostrils. Perfume: Drayatha's sweet stuff. Knowing her eyes were on him, he posed and preened before the glass; preened and walked and-

Leaped!

His hands caught and lifted her, held her helpless in that first flush of surprise. His right hand was at her white throat, fingers sinking into the soft white flesh. Her green eyes flared at him.

"Drayatha! The Llinana-kir fear you. The Min-dir worship you, but they're afraid, too. One man does not fear you. Trenton!"

"Let me go," she hissed. "I'll have you--"

His fingers tightened. She coughed, choked. "No threats, witch! Or your neck snaps--*crrrk!*" He laughed and let her go suddenly. She staggered and almost fell. Her cheeks were white.

"I should have killed you," he told her evenly. "Killed you and destroyed your Altar! Part of me tells me that. And another part of me--a part that is growing daily stronger--"

The woman laughed and stretched. She whispered, thrilling to the gleam of his dark eyes, "What does the strong part of you say, Trenton?"

He turned away toward the white roofs of the city sprawling below his balconied windows. He fought for control, fought to hold back the seething pride and force inside him.

A soft hand slid over his arm. A voice whispered. "Let me tell you, Trenton. The other part says--take this woman. Take her and rule her--and her Altar! Be a conqueror beside whose name the sound of Napoleon and Kravman and Yoll are babies' lispings!"

FAINTLY, up from below, a harp's strings twanged. Their melody was rich and heady, gay and resonant. Those strings plucked matching chords deep inside Trenton's chest; plucked and strummed and roused the sleeping dreamer.

"Kiryła!" he said softly. "She's the answer to the whole thing. Through

her, I can win over the Llinana-kir. You said so yourself, witch."

The redheaded Drayatha dug sharp nails into his naked arm. She hissed, "By Yoll! I offered you myself--not her. The Altar is mine. Mine, Trenton! It can be yours only if you--belong to me!"

He laughed harshly, freely. The dream was fading faster, faster. No more a man with a mission; instead, a freebooter who took what his own strong hands closed on.

He reached out and caught the redhead. He whispered into her mouth, "I belong to no one, Drayatha. Take me to Kiryla. After that--" His mouth burned hers. Drayatha sighed, stirred free.

"Come," she told him.

Kiryla was alone in the fountain-dotted garden when Trenton entered, waving Drayatha aside.

She was bent above a shallow pool, idly making ripples. Whirling at his footsteps, she flung back her yellow head; eyed him coolly. She was silent, proud. A pulse hammered where her throat met the first swells of her breasts. Trenton said, "I've come to you. I've been lucky. I've had to act a part and I did." That roused her, brought her to her feet, both hands trembling, reaching out to his. She

whispered, blue eyes hunting his features, "You've changed! They--she did something to you."

He shook his head irritably. "No. no! Not changed. I managed to see you alone, like this. Can we escape? Is there any way?" Her lips were sad. "No one ever escaped from Drayatha." "What about--the toy Altar?" "Zann! It's a way, of course--but a dangerous one. You see, the Altar is well guarded and--oh, it's

stupid even to think of it." "Go on! Guards. What else?" "It's a long path from the Altar to the hill country of the Llinana-kir. The Altar deepens into a

long tunnel bored a thousand centuries ago by Nannar-kir's orders. The tunnel leads past depths that--border on--on madness. Beasts. Perhaps renegade Min-dir." "And beyond the tunnel?"

She laughed softly. "If we win out of the tunnel, Mani will find us." Trenton nodded. There was a way--winning Mani and the Llinana-kir to his banner, taking Kiryla for his own. And--the Altar!

Kiryla shivered, staring up at him. "You frighten me, Trenton, when your eyes blaze yellow-

brown like that. They are cold and hard. Ruthless!"
He smiled down at her. She nestled against him, blushing. She whispered,
"I liked you the way
you were when I first saw you."

He tilted up her chin with a fingertip. "And--as I am now?" She looked
deep into his eyes and nodded.

"Good. Be here tonight at the hour of the Snake. I'll get away, come for
you. Be ready!" Lifting his eyes suddenly, Trenton caught a glimpse of red
hair behind a *prayathus*-bush; a glimpse of red hair that could have been
only an excited imagination, or--Drayatha!

CHAPTER III of the *Temptress of the Time Flow*

TRENTON lifted himself from the perfumed cushions. Drayatha lay
beside him, red hair sprayed fanlike about a white pillow. Her red mouth
mocked, and lured.

"You are restless, Trenton. Am I not sufficient entertainment?" Trenton
grinned. His eyes swept the clinging gown that scarcely hid her white
body. In the pale candlelight, she was a goal that tugged at him with fierce
bonds. He had tasted her kisses, had heard her whispered love-words. And
yet--

Kirylya was waiting. He rolled from the low divan, went and poured
green *frothia* from a golden carafe. He tilted his head and let the hot
liquor slide down his throat. He picked up another goblet, half-filled it
with

the potent fluid. Back turned to the woman, he moved his hand, flipped
grains of white powder
in the drink.

He carried the goblet to the cushions.

Drayatha threw a white arm around his neck. Her green eyes blazed into
his. She whispered, "Is

the drink for me, Trenton?"

"For you Drayatha."

She put out a hand and took the bowl. Smiling at him--a chill thought
came to Trenton that she

smiled in mockery--she put the goblet to her lips and drank.

Lying back, she tossed the beaker from her. It rattled and bounced on the floor. She smiled, wriggled white fingers at him, beckoning. "Come to me, Trenton. Kiss me, as you did before . . ."

In the midst of the caress he felt her stiffen in his arms. Her eyes rolled back. A little froth gathered at the corners of her mouth. She murmured, "I am. . .not well. I thirst. Give me . . . water . . . water . . ." Her head fell sideways, weakly. Her eyelids closed.

Trenton pressed ear to her chest, heard the muffled beating of her heart. She would sleep well, would Drayatha, while he and Kiryla fled to the Llinana-kir. He stepped from the divan, ran across the room, pulled back the curtains.

The corridors were empty. Only in the outer rooms would there be guards. And Trenton would not pass through those. He ran down an intersecting hall, stepped through a door. A cool breeze touched his cheek, ruffled the hair on his head. Closing the door, he ran impatient eyes about the garden.

Kiryla came forward from behind a scarlet *dictalos* shrub. She was draped in a black cloak, her yellow hair glimmering above it. Her violet eyes searched his face.

He caught her hand, avoiding her eyes. "We'll have to hurry. I don't know how long that drug will hold Drayatha. Remember, if we meet anyone, we're sweethearts. We stepped outside to kiss."

He thought of Drayatha in her perfumed cushions. Ha! It was hard to leave her, but Trenton was playing for big stakes!

No one stopped them. The streets were almost deserted under the silver light of the twin moons. They ran surely but silently on furred sandals. Kiryla guided them. She had been to Min-dir City before, many times. Bringing food and furs, she told Trenton. Once Mani had come with her, taken her to the threshold of the Little Altar and let her see the dim recesses of the Temple.

THEY PASSED men drunk with green *frothla* and painted women who attended banquets for the Min-dir nobles. No one bothered them. No one even seemed to notice them, so intent were they on their own affairs.

And then, so abruptly that he had to put out a hand to Kiryla's shoulder to steady himself, he almost ran into the man he had seen in the Blotch. The same thin white, dying face was shadowed by the cowl of his cloak, and the blazing brown eyes still burned with frantic zeal. Trenton tried, for

a split moment, to read what the man was trying to tell him with his eyes. And could not.

Then the man was gone, and the way to the Temple was clear before them. Against the sheer, straight bluff of a mountainside. The polished black walls of the Temple stood like a black basalt block. Square and hard it was, with an arched doorway of hand-carved metal.

And in front of the door, two guards.

Trenton fumbled in the belt that girdled his lean waist, lifting out the blue *disintor*. He took quick aim as he ran. Bright globules of amethyst fire swept from the nozzle; swept like burning hailstones, to hit and devour the guards before they could lift their own weapons.

He pushed Kiryla ahead of him into the pale darkness of the Temple. They stood arm to arm, breathing softly, ears straining. They heard no sound.

"Now," he whispered, and turned.

It was like a slap in the face from a woman who has kissed you with hunger in the set of her mouth. Trenton had not expected this. He stood, staring; while Kiryla put her hand over her mouth and shrank against him.

A glowing globe of transparent blue glass, stretched so thin it was merest film. Hazy with the opalescent light, hiding the dainty filaments and delicate tentacles stretched from moon-arc of tissue-thin metal to glittering ovoid: all inside the globe.

And the globe suspended in space between the high arched stone ceiling and the flat space of black basalt, like an altar.

And in the strange cerulescent light--

Drayatha!

She stood straight and proud, still in the revealing film of her dressing gown. Her green eyes mocked, taunted. At her right was Theg, a thin *coalsor* lifted toward the two by the tall door. At her right were half a hundred warriors, Min-dir cavalrymen.

Drayatha laughed.

"Come forward to my Altar, Kiryla of the Llinana-kir. Come you also, Trenton."

He thrust Kiryla behind him, with the half-formed notion of blasting with his *disintor* at the redhaired woman who laughed at him, of blasting until he fell, and taking Kiryla with him. And then that new and deadly

part of him whispered, *Fool! Play your cards. You sold your sword, so why not use it?*

Trenton straightened, grinned. He came down the long, dim distance of the Temple floor, walking toward the bluish haze. Like a chastened slave, Kiryla followed.

Drayatha seared him with her eyes. "Did you think I was fool enough to be taken in by that powder, Trenton? I'd swallowed its antidote before you filled the goblet. Did you think me so stupid?"

"ON THE contrary," he grinned. "I thought you'd caught on. That you knew what I was doing. That you were playing the game with me, helping me."

Doubt slid into the green eyes. She cocked her head sideways. Under the blue light, the red hair glistened with purple depths. "You're telling me I knew you'd play the traitor?"

Trenton shrugged. "I thought you knew I was taking Kiryla back to the Llinana-kir, to win them to the Snake banners. How else could I go? With trumpets blowing? With royal blessing? If I'd gone like that, the Llinana-kir'd have pulled me apart between two *jelafafs!*"....

Kiryla gasped, behind him. And Drayatha was plainly puzzled. She said slowly, "If you're telling me the truth, you're a bold rogue. And if you're lying, you act like Tufan himself!"

Trenton hid the savage elation in him. He spread his hands wide. "What other reason would I have? I'm not fool enough to think the Llinana-kir could give me reward enough for bringing Kiryla back to them, to match the reward you could give me!"

It was a bold stroke. Trenton went on, "I thought about it a long time. If I were to go back with Kiryla and help win the Llinana-kir to you, I'd have to make my flight look good. I'd hoped this would be an escape that would wag Min-dir tongues for years. I'd hoped--that you were clever enough to understand."

Drayatha flushed. Theg brushed forward, the *coalsor* shaking in his big hand. "Let me finish them, Drayatha. Two stud-depressings and they'd--"

The back of her hand caught his face, drove him back a step. Drayatha stepped toward Trenton, eyes blazing. "If I thought that was the truth--but no! You could have told me! You would have told me!"

"And you would have told Theg--and Theg might have let his hot head run away with everything you and I planned!"

Drayatha lifted her hands and ran long white fingers through her loosened hair. She brooded at him long eyes half-veiled. Trenton knew she was judging him in her head, in her heart, in the soft flesh of her scarlet lips. She flung back her head, gestured suddenly.

"Mount the altar! Mount it, I say!"

Kirylya brushed past Trenton, not touching him. She was sobbing into the dark material of the hood. She stepped onto the black block beneath the glistening blue globe. Trenton followed her. He stood with the iridescent beams of the blueness all around him; heard from afar and faintly, the deep music of unearthly regions. He sneered at himself, but the thought came-

Was it the music--of Time itself?

Deep and thunderous arpeggios. Tinkling pizzicatos. A swaying, humming rhythm akin to the roar and sweep of the stars through space, partner to a sun's birth and a planet's cold and dying end. Time!

Drayatha moved forward, staring at up him.

"Trenton," she whispered. "I cannot take a chance! I can't let myself fail now. Soon the real altar will open to me. I must be ready--strong for it! --when it comes!"

IT WAS almost a question. Trenton grinned, "Be strong for me. You won't kill me. Not yet."

He was tensing his muscles to lift Kirylya, to turn and whirl into the blackness of the tunnel beyond the basalt block. Kirylya had told him of it. As he ascended the block he'd studied it, found the orifice. Once inside that, his blue *disintor* would keep the tunnel clean.

"I do not intend to kill you." Drayatha said. "I am going to free you--give you as my gift--to the endless corridors of Time. I will lose you, lock you in Time itself. When? Where? Who knows? Not I. Only the Altar!"

Trenton felt the force settle around him. His body locked. He tried and could not move. The deep thunder of the music grew louder and louder. It beat and hammered in his ears, grew faint and shrill. The blue light deepened. It glimmered and pulsed. Above him the transparent globe was whirling, whirling, whirling. The tissue-thin filaments and wires were glittering brighter and brighter.

The mystery of Time was opening to him, yawning at his feet, reaching up to suck him into its boundless maw. Like a voracious whirlpool, it drew him down and down, into grey haziness that was like a thin black *nylanese* veil wafted by a thousand winds.

Warm in his hand was the hand of Kiryla. He heard her sobbing, felt her shuddering body press to his. "Trenton...Trenton...where is it taking us? I'm frightened, Trenton . . . "

And then there was peace. The veil was there, but it was still, now: and beyond it, glimpsed faintly, was a rolling meadow. They were a part of that scene, and yet not a part of it. Swiftly across the meadow galloped Min-dir cavalry. So swiftly they went that they were scarcely more than a blurred movement.

The meadow changed its contours. Rocks lifted. Trees fell. The ground swelled and shifted. Ice came and went.

"We're going faster," muttered Trenton. "Time is catching us into its rhythm."

"Where will we end?"

"Beyond Time. At the end of all the planets."

Kiryla whimpered and crept against him. "You mean we'll never get out of this? That Drayatha..."

Trenton chuckled wryly. "Drayatha is dead by now. We must be thousands of years in the future. The Altar is open, by this time. But whether Min-dir or Llinana-kir won. . . . who knows?"

A city grew on the meadow before them, lived its span and fell into ruin and decay. Giant vines and creepers grew among the split rocks and twisted monuments. Animals fought and mated and died in the shadows of the metropolis. And then even the stones crumbled and blew away before titanic hurricanes that blasted tree from the ground, that tumbled debris before it, that caught human figures and whirled them loosely, like leaves, before crushing them against a rock or cliff-wall.

The storms died and went away. New civilizations rose and died. Ages passed, and still Trenton and Kiryla drifted in the flow of time.

ONCE, WHEN Trenton found a queer fascination in studying a new type weapon that was being used in a battle, he fought against the flow of time, fought hard, and checked it: he swayed there, motionless, as time itself went past him.

It gave him an idea. He told Kiryla, "If we can stand and let Time go past us, maybe we could go back into the past, by a little extra effort."

But they found that almost impossible. They went back a little, yes; but the effort drew on their strength and left them weak and gasping. "If we only had some motive force, we might make it," Trenton told Kiryla. But

they could not escape from the time flow to find materials.

It was Kiryla who saw Drayatha.

She was seated on a scarlet throne, long red tresses caught up about her shapely head and wound with chains of diamonds and pearls. A cloth of gold skirt was slit up the side, through which protruded her white thigh. Jewel-studded breastplates glittered in the light of the long hall.

Before her, in chains, stood a dozen men. They wore the white uniform of--Trenton frowned. He knew that uniform. He had seen it before, a long time before... when he was . . . of course! It was the Fleet uniform! Earth Fleet! And those were space admirals and lesser officers, before her!

He fought against the *nylanese* veil, hammering its nebulosity with maddened fists. Realization came in a flood of bitterness at his stupidity. Drayatha had conquered the Fleet, had taken Earth and Venus, and the other planets of the System! He, Trenton, was more than a failure.

Dimly he understood what was occurring in the great Chamber. The admirals were captives, taken in a mighty battle by Drayatha. She wanted information that the Fleet officers were refusing. Drayatha stood up, and They came forward. Trenton shuddered, seeing the metal tipped knout that the giant carried. The admirals would be tortured. One or two of them would weaken. Drayatha would learn top drawer secrets. The disposition of space cruisers and starships. Crew complements. Weaponry.

Kiryla whispered, "She must have come far into the future, Trenton, to have a base of operations here."

Trenton whirled, hands leaping for her shoulders. "Of course! It didn't dawn on me, but that's right. She must have passed us in the time flow, come on to this age, built a citadel here! She's giving us our chance Kiryla--our chance to--go back!"

Kiryla stared at him blankly.

"Don't you see?" Trenton said impatiently. "If Drayatha came here, she must have some means of locomotion in Time. *We* need a means like that, Kiryla. It's as simple as taking her means of locomotion away from her!"

They hunted in the *nylanese* mists, with fear and frenzy in their eyes and hearts. This was the one chance they must grasp. There would be no others. Drayatha had come this far into the future to build a citadel of power for herself, a base of operations far removed from chance of reprisal. But once built, she would not go further into the future. Chance was, she had already searched into the misty future, had found it barren,

and rejected it.

THEY SEARCHED on, desperate and afraid. From the great black citadel to the forest beyond. Then on to a smoothly flowing river they hunted, wispy beings in the grey stream of time. And then, when they found themselves yielding to the pressure of the mighty imponderable flow of the years-

They saw it!

A queer ship, it was fitted with fluted vanes jointed to the bright red hull, with convex disks rising above it in tiered brilliance to a glowing green globe atop a single mast. Two valves gave entry, valves that were locked and bolted. The ship hung motionless in the time flow, held by some invisible force.

Trenton pulled Kiryla after him, buffeting the time current. He fumbled at his waist, drew out the *stilsor*. A verdant lance of flame lashed from the barrel; flicked once against the lock, ate hungrily through the metal.

A touch of the palm opened the door.

A narrow corridor framed with metal ridges inset in the *alutistil* wall framed a guard whose eyes bulged at sight of them, whose hand was a second too slow in bringing the *rafantor* out from his leather holster.

Trenton came down the corridor in two long bounds, big fist lifting to strike. The guard made a sodden sound as he went into the wall and bounced. Trenton tore his *refantor* from his fingers and handed it to Kiryla.

Trenton walked on. In the control room an engineer was on his back, working over a shattered rheostat. He was removing the electrode plates when he saw them. He lifted his head, blue eyes startling in his blackened face.

"Wha--what do you want? Who're you?"

Trenton said, "The girl is Kiryla of the Llinana-kir. I am Trenton. How many men are here in this ship?"

The young engineer shrugged, slid out from under the barrel of the cylinder. He said, "Just me and a guard. Nobody ever came out of the stream before. You did come from time, didn't you? Thought so. Dryyatha[sic] keeps her other entrances too well policed."

"Can you operate this thing?"

The engineer looked at Trenton, then dropped his eyes. He shrugged, "I can operate it, but I can't go back beyond the time at which the *timeler*,

this ship, entered the flow. Only Drayatha knows that secret, that she learned from Nannar-kir. She locks and seals the controls. This *timeler* acts as a ferry between two points. I can return you to your starting point, that is all."

Trenton asked, "How long have we--been gone?"

"Eleven years," said the man, bending to thrust over a lever, to spin a grey dial.

"Is Mani still alive?" whispered Kiryla, her free-flung golden hair shimmering like a golden waterfall.

"Still alive and defiant. The Llinana-kir think you two are Drayatha's prisoners. Mani counselled them to wait, hoping you would escape and return to lead them against her. That was why no resistance was offered when the Altar finally opened. She sent messengers to the hill-country, saying you would die by torture if the Llinana-kir fought her. Mani gave her free access to the Altar. Now she has built a city of the Min-dir around the Altar, built walls to keep out the Llinana kir, made it her stronghold."

Kiryla whispered, "Trenton, we've failed! She has the Altar and her weapon!"

Trenton growled to the engineer, "Take us back! Put us down in the hills--near Mani's chalets! Hurry!"

The engineer looked at the round muzzle of the *disintor*, shrugged, and put out a hand.

Faintly from within the hull of the *timeler* a machine whirred. Soft susurrations vibrated all about them as the engineer manipulated the controls. There was a whispering as if a breeze shook the leaves of giant trees.

Then--silence.

A LANTERN swung to and fro from the beamed ceiling. Its glow made faint patterns of shadow on the stooped form of old Mani as he piled a crude wooden platter with food. A curtain behind him moved and lifted.

The old man whirled. His hands shook. A wooden spoon slipped from his nerveless fingers to the floor.

"Wha...wha...?"

"Mani! It's Kiryla! Yes, yes, Mani! I've come back--from the time flow. We weren't prisoners. We were in the time stream!"

Trenton came forward to stand beside her. He told the old man what had happened, how they had tried to escape, been caught and thrown into

time itself; of how they had fled from the distant future to the present.

He concluded, "We left the *timeler* in the City of the Altar, came here under cover of night."

The old man listened, touching his lips with a dry tongue. He shook with excitement. He cried, striking gnarled hands together, "Now we can do what he told me--I mean, the time has come to strike at Drayatha! I was worried, no matter what he told . . ."

"He?" asked Trenton.

Mani shook his head. "I cannot tell you anything about him, except that he comes and goes in some odd manner, that he always wears a black cloak and hood--but he did tell me that he needed you, Trenton, and you, Kiryla, to stop Drayatha!"

Trenton protested, "Stop Drayatha! But she's opened the Altar, used it to power her spacers, to build the *timeler*, to attack Earth! She has her weapon, that terrible motive force that you said was Time itself.

Mani nodded eagerly, "Yes, yes. All that. But there is a way. You see, Time is a weapon beside which an atom explosion is a breath of breeze on a summer day. She has focused that force, has built *timerupters* with it as their power. The trouble is, the *timerupters* are too powerful. She can't use them anywhere but in space itself, against a rival ship or fleet. If she used them on a planet, the resulting blast would blow the planet and everyone on it to spacedust!

"Drayatha learned that the first time she sent a force to attack the Earth empire's outer forts on Pluto. She lost her entire fleet when they fired their *timerupters* at the Earth fort. The planet exploded, took her entire fleet with it. Unfortunately--Drayatha was not with them."

"Go on" prompted Trenton.

"She has beaten Earth Fleet in space combat. She controls the space lanes of the universe. But she cannot land men on Earth or any of the planets. Earth science--outside of the Time force--is far superior to ours. Our science is lopsided. Against a better balanced adversary, Drayatha is helpless."

Trenton muttered, "Those admirals. She tortured them to try and learn the secret of Earth weapons. Small arms. Atomic blasters and *disintors*.

Mani shrugged, if they talk, Drayatha will be able to arm and equip her armies. She will attack Earth empire on its fringe--conquer slowly--for the Earth cannot send spacers to help its colonies. Drayatha and her *timerupters* would annihilate them."

To Trenton came a picture of the Earth, lying like a trapped animal on a limb: unable to escape, yet safe from immediate attack. Sooner or later, she must leave the limb. And then--oblivion.

Trenton growled, "If there were only some way to strike at her! The Altar is her vulnerable spot. Perhaps an attack on that--"

Mani shook his head slowly. "You would need an army. And Drayatha has armed her Min-dir too well. The Llinana-kir are herders and farmers, not trained soldiers. But there might be a way. With your help--"

"With their help--what?"

Drayatha, a naked white arm holding the curtain aside, stood in the archway of the little chalet, smiling at them. Behind her, levelled blasters in their hands, were a score of black-clad Time Troopers.

CHAPTER IV of *Temptress of the Time Flow*

SHE CAME forward moving like a proud feline. Her green eyes gazed curiously, eagerly at Trenton and Kiryla. Her red mouth quivered amusedly. One white hand she waved at Mani and a Time Trooper stepped around her, dragging Mani from his chair and out of the room.

Trenton, did you think you could escape me? You should have killed the engineer. He came back in the *timeler*, told me where you were. I came as swiftly as you."

She broke off, smiling wryly. She moved a little away from him, put a hand to a wooden mug and slid it aimlessly in circles on the bare tabletop. The lantern-light made her white skin transparent. The blue veins under her skin stood forth with delicate tracery. Her green eyes glowed hungrily. She brushed a lock of scarlet hair from her forehead.

"Tell me, Trenton. What was it like?"

He snarled, "You devil's whelp! What happened to the Fleet admirals?"

Her eyes mocked him. "They died, Trenton. Under the knout. They had a good time with them. But they died obstinately. Three of them bit off their tongues. By that time the rest were dead. I will have to make another raid."

He quivered with rage. He put out his hands, but dropped them. Drayatha might die, but her work would go on. And it was her work, the

Altar and the *timerupters* and the *timelers*, that were dangerous. Without them, Drayatha was just a woman.

Trenton chukled[sic], "You could ask me, Drayatha. Nicely. I might talk--for the proper persuasion."

He knew Kiryla was staring at him oddly, her golden brows gathered. He avoided her eyes.

Drayatha laughed softly. "You played that game once before, Trenton. Once burned, twice shy."

He laughed, "You were a fool. As you are now. Always you take the hard road. What's the matter with the easy one? I told you then I was planning to escape in order to help win the Llinana-kir to you. You still don't believe me.

Drayatha dropped the mug. It fell to the floor with a hollow sound, rolling. She came as close to Trenton as she dared. Her little hands made shaking white fists. Her voice whispered, "If only I dared believe you! If only I did! You and I--you as you can be...hard, ruthless. . . .we would rule. . ."

Trenton whispered, "Ask for proof, Drayatha. How can I convince you?"

Her green eyes flared as though lambent fires danced behind verdant glass. Her mouth made a moue of reflection.

"The most powerful weapon Earth has! A weapon that I can give every man that wears my Snake! Give me diagrams, Trenton. Blueprints to hand my factories!"

"You could go back to Earth in a *timeler* and learn information like that yourself," he said.

"I tried," she admitted ruefully. "I don't know enough of the Earth to let me search quickly. Once I landed on a desert. Once, deep in the ocean. That was a close call, Trenton. The next time the *timeler* dropped on a mountain peak. I almost froze to death. After that--I abandoned those attempts."

Trenton grinned, "And you didn't trust anybody well enough to let him go for you! Always it has to be you. You must hold all the reins of power. The *timeler* controls. Secrets of the Altar, of Time itself. All in your hands."

"It is safest, that way."

She turned, clapped her hands. Two black-clad Time Troopers entered. She gestured at Kiryla. "Take her outside. Put her in a sealed

compartment of the *timeler*."

Trenton saw Kiryla turn and stare at him, saw the doubt and the fear in her eyes. Then he turned and went out before the Troopers, her golden head low-hung, shoulders bowed in despair.

Drayatha watched the golden girl leave. Then she whirled on Trenton, lifting her hand savagely bringing the flat palm of it stinging against his cheek.

Her laughter mocked him. She cried harshly, "Where are you, Trenton? Where is that *man* that's in you? Find him for me, Trenton! I want him! With him beside me... where is he? Where is he?"

Trenton caught her wrist, but she twisted free. Her green eyes flared. Her red hair lashed about her white shoulders like living fire. She panted, fighting him, her fingernails slashing his cheeks, cutting flesh.

He knew what she was doing. With her voice and with her hands she was hunting that other self the psychiatrists had made so long ago, back on earth. That different personality, that ghostlike someone who haunted him, who lived inside him. Vaguely he remembered back to the early twentieth century, remembered the fictitious Jekyll-Hyde, the real and living Beauchamp. Other cases--not exactly schizophrenia--but instances such as the Phantom of Bucharest who was the Crown Attorney, the dual personalities of accredited medical history, the wonder of the human brain where saint and criminal was in one body-

He threw her from him. He needed all his senses to save Kiryla. If Drayatha brought his other-self back with his cold arrogance and hunger for power, his sell-blade philosophy-

"I'll make the blueprints," he snarled, "I'll make them, Only--leave me alone!"

Drayatha laughed at him. She drew herself up; whispered, "You're afraid, Trenton. Afraid of me . . . of what I can do to you. You fool! Go to your blueprints. But remember... you will change for me...some day soon! Then the Earth is mine. . . and yours! Remember, remember!"

He stumbled out after her troopers, head aching, knowing that she spoke the truth.

TRENTON PACED restlessly in the glass-floored room that was his cell. The drapes hung richly golden on three walls. On the fourth was a smooth stretch of black marble with a circular red door. He had finished the blueprints, tossed them in a corner of the room near his sleeping divan.

Soon now, Drayatha would send her Time Troopers for him. They would

take the blueprints and-his life.

Trenton chuckled. Let Drayatha have the prints. Let her build weapons with them! Let her troopers try and use them!

"They'll blast themselves to dry powder!" he whispered. "Every one of those prints calls for a gun that will--backfire!"

A step sounded on the glassine flagging. Trenton whirled.

The man in the black cloak! The man whose face he had seen in the Blotch, and again in the streets of Min-dir-City when he and Kiryla had fled toward the temple! His face was white and lined, old. The deepset brown eyes were filled with sadness, with inscrutable knowledge.

Trenton said, "I suppose you're one of Drayatha's spies. Well, you can go to her, tell her the prints are ready."

The man in the black cowl never glanced aside. He said, "I have not much time. Time! What a fragile thing it is really. Strong, ponderous--and fragile. It is always here, yet when you seek to keep it back from passing--already it is gone. But of that, enough."

"Who are you?" asked Trenton wonderingly.

"A dead man. Aie, yes. Dead for thousands of years. And yet--not dead. Alive in this little segment of space-time. Again, enough!"

"I have come from my deathbed to speak with you, man of a different age! You must stop Drayatha! At once, do you understand? If she keeps on her mad, headlong course, like a maddened steer plunging into a throng--she will destroy the world, all the universes! Time! It's strong, I tell you. It's a flow energy that is kept within rigid bounds by magnetic forces, much as a wire chains electricity."

"Go on," said Trenton hoarsely.

"She has tapped that energy-flow from the Altar...not realizing that as she drains away Time, she is altering the magnetic balances that keep it in check!"

Trenton laughed harshly. "Suppose I agree with you, old one? I'm a prisoner here--or didn't you know? What do you suggest I do?"

"Only one thing, Trenton. Destroy the Altar!"

The brown eyes in the shadow of the red hair widened suddenly. Trenton read alarm in them. And then-

The man faded into mist. Quivered slightly, and-
Was gone!

A BEAM of intolerable heat darted by Trenton's shoulder, stung him, whirled him frantically aside as he dove to escape its blast. The sizzling beam of power ate up the spot where the red-haired man had stood; ate it up and found--nothing.

From the floor, Trenton stared at Drayatha. Her right hand was clenched around a beam gun. Her breasts rose and felt angrily. In the whiteness of her cheek, Trenton read--fear.

"Who was that? Trenton, tell me! That man with the red hair! Was it--but no! In the name of all the sanities, it couldn't have been! Not--he! Trenton, who was he?"

"The little man that wasn't there," grinned Trenton, getting to his feet.

Drayatha was across the room in a low, feral stride. Her right hand came flashing up, stung hard and tingling against his cheek. Automatically, Trenton drew back. A Fleet captain was trained in gentlemanly ways. A Fleet captain did not strike back at a woman who slapped him. . . .

But he had been caught off guard. This time the stinging slap released the other that was inside Trenton: the come-day-go-day, God-made-Sunday sell-sword that they had made out of him in the psychiatric wards back in the Interrogation Building, ages ago...Inside him he could feel it building up, sweeping forward, cyclonic, brushing aside the fragile barriers that held it out, that kept it in check...

He snarled in his throat as his left hand moved up and sideways. He struck Drayatha's wrist with the edge of his hand, hard. She cried out. Her fingers released the beam-gun. It arched through the air.

Trenton was after it like a Procyonic *Tigrat*. He caught it inches from the floor, whirled and blasted a sheet of flame in front of the redhaired Drayatha.

"Don't move," he told her coldly. "If you want to go on living, don't move!"

She was a statue, standing there, arms by her side. Only her green eyes were alive and filled with throbbing triumph.

He came back towards her, insulting in the arrogance of his catlike stride. He towered over her, smiling wryly. He put out a hand and closed it on her jaw. Holding her like that he bent his head and kissed her hard. When he drew back, she clung to him.

"Trenton, you've come back! I knew you would! Now, you and I together we could . . . "

He shoved her away, laughed at the raw anger in her face. He said, "The man in the black cowl asked me to destroy the Altar."

"Trenton--you wouldn't!"

He said, "I don't know. One time I think that's the most important thing there is, to smash the Altar and you with it. At another time, when somebody else is inside me, riding my body and brain--the way I am now--I think I'd like nothing better than to go with you into space, to find worlds and conquer them! To drag the loot of unguessable centuries to Min-dir City and pile it high. To walk ankle-deep in diamonds and *whorl*-stones. To hunt the woman of Time, find the loveliest ones of all and--take them!"

Drayatha lifted her arms, toyed with the piles of rich red hair that crowned her shapely head. With slumbrous green eyes she mocked him. She whispered, "I am not jealous, Trenton. You can have other women for your playthings--as long as you are mine!"

TRENTON WENT and kicked the divan aside with a foot to reveal the blueprints piled beneath it. Drayatha watched him.

"Your blueprints," he told her. "I bought my freedom with them. Or did I?"

She studied him. "I was going to kill you, Trenton. That is truth. Now--I don't know. If you were as you are now, always! By Yoll! What a man you are--like this!"

She reached out, ran teasing fingertips across his mouth. She whispered, "Why aren't you *this* you all the time, Trenton? What softens you?"

Trenton laughed harshly; thought of golden Kiryla, and scowled. Could it be her goodness that called to the real Trenton, that penetrated under the hard, sneering shell of the man he was now? Had she something in her psyche that brought out the otherness in him?

Drayatha brooded at him. She slid her white palms up his chest, touched his neck, his cheeks. Pressed to him, she whispered, "Tell me, Trenton! You know. I can read the answer in your eyes! Is it--Kiryla?"

Her laughter was soft, provocative. "That's it, isn't it? She draws the hardness out of you, as I put it in. With me you are all the conquerors of all Time. You are Alexander and Napoleon of Earth, Bral Ban of Procyon, Gartillin Vo of Deneb. You are! I feel it, inside the big chest of you. I like this side of you, Trenton. I hate the milksop that *she* makes of you!"

Her red mouth burned on his until he responded to her lure. His arms

tightened, crushed her full, supple body against his. Breathless, she fought clear of him; laughed, "Don't kill me stop! Tonight Trenton, tonight!"

He thought of her perfumed cushions and released her, grinning. She hummed a song, luring him with green eyes and rounded body. She twisted aside as he reached for her. Sank against him suddenly, breathing, "One thing, promise me. Only one thing--and I take you as my lord!"

"You white witch! What do you want?"

I want death Kiryla's death! Say that she must die, Trenton! Say it!"

"NO!"

The word burst from him explosively. He brooded into the promising green eyes. He growled,

"No man wars against a woman."

"This isn't war. It's politics!"

Not death, no . . . not that!"

Drayatha clapped her hands. "The Altar! We will give her back to Time, Trenton. She will not

die perhaps she will live forever."

Trenton drew away from her. His heart hammered inside his chest. That was the answer! That

was the way to rid this self of the golden girl who prevented his taking this redhead for his own,

who barred the path to other worlds, who held him back by a tenuous grip from looting planets and universes!

"Yes," he said slowly. "That might be the way. Time's flow will not hurt her. She and I were

there once before. It will carry her along. . . not hurting her. . . "

"Carry her, Trenton, out of our lives! And now, come kiss me! Kiss me hard, hard, hard. . . "

CHAPTER V of *Temptress of the Time Flow*

IT WAS a good throne, this gigantic ebony seat encrusted with gold snakes. Trenton slapped his palms on the broad arms and laughed. His laughter rang loud in the room, rang over the white head of Mani, over the bowed, golden-tressed head of Kiryla of the Llinana-kir.

Against the walls the black-garbed Time Troopers stood, their dark uniforms lashed with golden snake designs. They were his troops now! And those drapes that had hung in a sunken palace on Tanit were *his*, and the massy vases like the ceramics of the ancient Thaangkong, the captured swords chain-hung on the wall, the floor beneath and the groined roof far above him--*his!*

Trenton stared at Kiryla, felt the softness stirring inside him. He sighed. *Condemn to the time flow this girl who loves you? Be wise, Trenton! Drayatha is using you. . .*

A cool white hand touched his wrist, sent a tingle through him. And recaptured that other self that was a hunter of loot and women! Trenton looked again at Kiryla and laughed.

Drayatha whispered, "Condemn them. Mani and Kiryla!"

Trenton stood. He looked down at the girl, and the man. He said slowly, "Out of the gentleness of our hearts, your ruler and mistress spare you death. Instead, we give you immortality. You will be put into the time flow above the Altar."

Mani said in his deep voice, "Trenton! Listen to me. Trenton, I have spoken with --"

A trooper brought the hilt of his sword against the old man's mouth smashing skin and teeth. The trooper picked him up and hit him again. Then another trooper came up and dragged Mani out of the chamber.

"Kiryla. . ." Trenton whispered.

She did not raise her head. She turned on bare feet and padded out behind the unconscious form of Mani. Trenton watched her go, his heart slamming under his ribs.

Drayatha slid a cool hand over his shoulder. She said, "We must follow them, lover. We too, go to the Altar. Come!"

A white *jelafaf* and a black sidled restlessly under the restraining hands of a big trooper. Trenton swung up into the ornate saddle of the black. The trooper saluted, turned aside to his own mount. Drayatha reined her white saddler close to him.

"Go first, my lord. This is now--your city!"

Trenton felt the terrible pulse of pride beat up in him. His nostrils quivered. His head lifted. Far ahead Mani and Kiryla were being led to the Altar. And once they were gone forever--his real life would begin, beside the red-headed witch who stared at him with provocative green eyes!

They pounded though the wide avenues of the town. Sparks rang from the hooves. Thigh by calf with Drayatha, Trenton rode the streets of his city, knowing the power that was his, the loot that would be his, the exciting woman beside him who would share every universe in space-time with him. He thought of the perfumed cushions and her white body and--last night.

Once, as Trenton reined his *jelafaf* round a corner, he saw a man in a dark cowl staring at him with brown eyes. The man stared, and there was wordless appeal in those dark brown eyes, and fright etched in the planes of his thin face. Appeal--against what? Fright--of what? Dimly in that other-self of him, Trenton knew the answer. The man had told him. . . something...before Drayatha slapped him. Something of danger. Danger, not just to a person or a thing, but something frightful that affected every living and non-living thing in all the universes. Destruction? Something about Time? If Time lost enough of its energy, the delicate balances would-

Trenton reined in, turned his stallion's head aside.

Drayatha cried, "Trenton! The Altar. They are waiting, Trenton! And her white hand was a flame on his arm and the lure of her voice sent ripples of delight down his spine. He kicked his heels into the animals ribs, and went on.

TRENTON remembered the Altar as long and low and flat, its faery traceries in stone friezes paneling its borders. Now it was dwarfed by giant stone ziggurats at each of its four corners; ziggurats solid with men and beam-gun emplacements. Atop each tier of steps was a twistybarreled thing glittering in sunlight, aimed at the blue sky. Trenton knew it for a time weapon, without thinking.

The doors of the Altar were open and the tiny forms of Mani and Kiryla went pacing into the black maw beyond them, dragging silver chains.

Trenton swung from the saddle; found Drayatha already standing, her green eyes alive and flaring with triumph. Her long fingernails dug into the raked flesh of his forearm. She quivered with excitement, with fulfillment. She breathed, "Soon, Trenton. Soon you will be all mine. No longer milksop, made of water. But steel--unbreakable! A man a woman can worship!"

Trenton grinned, strode past her toward the Altar. His blood was pounding. The hunter and the looter in him flamed high, like red tongues licking up the remnants of a paper meal. The Earth-part of him was receding fast, fading and dying under those scarlet fires.

His snake-embroidered cloak swung from his shoulders. His beam-gun holster slapped on his thigh. His boots made soft splat-splats on the hard tiles of the Altar-steps.

Drayatha was at his elbow, following; her perfume fragrant. They lumbered in her shadow, brow black as moon's spaceside. The doors swung shut behind them.

Inside the Altar was a low, roomy chamber that was bare of everything but the blazing, incandescent cube that hung a foot above the oval hollow in the center of the room. It was glass and yet not glass, tangible visibility and supernal brilliance, yet intangible nothingness that might have been pure energy. It gave off streamers of white luminescence, streamers that blinded.

Drayatha told him, "It is Time, Trenton. Time harnessed into space! Held there by magnetic flows! It broadcasts energy, throws it off as a spacevox radio sending set hurls high frequencies. Our weapons and motors are geared to its pulse. It gives us all our strength. Your strength, Trenton. Look on it. That too is--yours!"

His!

The looter in him laughed in wild delight. The greatest thing in all the universe, his to share with this red witch at his side! To Time with those who opposed him. To Time with them! Let them be swept along the flow as he had been. Let them-

His face shone with the pride in him. He moved forward, where Mani and Kiryla were chained.

And stopped!

The door was opening again. A single figure stood there for moment, advanced step by step into the room. His sandaled feet rang hollowly. Trenton saw his brown eyes blazing, saw the thin white cheeks.

Drayatha screamed, as the brown eyes regarded her.

Mani was sobbing, "You have come! Come as you promised! I have waited patiently. . . . thought you had forgotten!"

I did not forget. Alone, I could do nothing. I have not the strength to undo this work. I am dying...where I came from, I am already dead! I must use stronger bodies to undo my work. . . .a body like Trenton's!"

Drayatha put out a hand, caught at Trenton's shoulder. Her fingers locked in the stuff of his cloak. She whimpered, "Kill him, Trenton. Kill him!"

His hand fell to his beam-gun, drew it slowly from the ornate holster.

The man said, "Kiryla! Help me. You and Drayatha are the keys to this man's psyche. You are catalysts, *human catalysts!* He veers like a leaf between your two poles. Good and--evil!

"Kiryla!"

IT WAS A cry of despair that swelled up from the man's throat as the beam-gun steadied on him. It had in its keening wail all the hopes of a tortured heart. It touched the golden girl's heartstrings, made them vibrate. She lifted her head, looked at Trenton.

"No!"

Just a whisper that faded into the air. But it held his finger. Drayatha shook him, "Kill him! Kill! Kill! He would prevent your taking all this as yours, Trenton. He would keep me from you. Trenton!"

His fingers tightened on the trigger again. But now Kiryla was moving forward, her chains making a chinking sound on the hard floor. She came in front of Trenton, locked her blue eyes with his even as her fingers locked his fingers. Drayatha whirled. "Theg--kill him. You kill him, Theg!"

The bearded giant gave a roar, sprang forward, huge hands spread. And Kiryla touched Trenton's forehead and eyes with her cool white fingers and her voice was liquid honey as she breathed, "Save him Trenton, Do not let Theg kill him."

Trenton sprang. He met the giant in midair with a titantic[sic] thud. Then they were rolling, twisting, turning on the floor. Fists hammered and battered. A knee drove into a rib, splintered it. A nose mashed on a blackbearded face, to run red blood across lips and chin. The pain of his broken rib was agony; but Trenton broke free and clubbed his fists into the face of the giant. His knuckles came away with blood on them. Theg slammed him with an elbow, knocking him offstride; was leaping, kicking at his groin with lashing foot.

Trenton twisted, went down. His hand shot out, closed on Theg's throat. The giant doubled up, tore loose. He rolled over, came up with beam-gun. He was triggering it as Trenton dove under the greenish blast, grappling for the gun-hand.

Kiryla was screaming. Mani gave a cry of despair. And rising loud and vibrant in the locked chamber of the Time Altar, Drayatha's triumphant laughter!

"No need to fight, Trenton. Theg! No need to fight. Your task is done!"

But they did not hear him. The blood lust was on them. Sobbing, panting, cursing, They sought to free the arm that Trenton was turning, turning slowly and inexorably, back in on They.

The arm gave with a snap.

And with a convulsive move, They's finger touched the trigger, depressed it. A beam of greenish power slammed out of the beam gun, hit They in face and chest and throat; ate up flesh and bone and sinew.

Headless, the blood-spurting trunk of the once-bearded giant toppled forward. Trenton, choking, fell aside, stood on wide-parted feet, driving breath into his lungs with dry sobs.

Mani and Kiryla knelt by the man with the brown eyes. Trenton saw his arm and shoulder were gone. He remembered that wild blast he himself and swung under; remembered Kiryla screaming and Drayatha laughing.

Mani was saying, "We will destroy the Altar. Kiryla will control Trenton. Rest easy. . . .go back. . . .go back. . . ."

The man on the floor was fading, shimmering there as if composed of dust motes in a sunbeam, and was gone.

Kiryla threw back her mane of yellow hair, looked up at Trenton.

"Who was he?" Trenton asked hoarsely.

Mani said, "You did not know? That was Nannar-kir! Aie, the man who built the Alter! He built it, but he wanted it destroyed. For after it was built and sealed, he chanced by accident in his last days to find that one of his equations was wrong. That if Time were used too long as a power source, those delicate balances between time and space and the Magnetic flows would be destroyed. And once they were gone, all matter would go with them in a final holocaust!

"He came to destroy the Altar. Came--and found his strength not enough! Remember, he was dying! He was weakened with old age and sickness. He tried, and failed. He had to find someone to do his task. He chose--you, Trenton. You were neither Min-dir nor Llinana-kir. You had no prejudices, no hate of one and love for the other. You were the alien element that would have no objection to smashing the Altar."

TRENTON DREW air into his lungs. Strength was creeping back into his muscles, into his big frame.

Mani went on, "He came to me, enlisted my aid. I learned from him that you were on the other side of the Blotch. I sent Kiryla for you. I wanted you to stay with us until the Altar opened. Then you could have

entered, have done what was needed...and all danger to your world and ours would be gone forever!"

Trenton licked his lips. Destroy the Altar? That godlike thing with which he could rule the universes? Unite Earth and Min-dir in the greatest empire Time had ever seen? He said hoarsely, "I can't do it!"

Drayatha laughed softly. She stood before the brilliance of the flowing white flame. It outlined the beauty of her body, threw a white aura around the crimson hair that framed her red-lipped face.

Mani rose wearily to his feet. He looked at Drayatha, and his voice grew cold and hard. "You! If it had not been for you, Trenton would have destroyed the Altar long ago. If it were not for that red lure of your witch-beauty, there would be peace on our planet."

The old man moved forward, slowly. Drayatha lifted a hand. She held Trenton's discarded beam-gun. "Another foot and you die, old one."

Mani stopped. He went on dispassionately, "If you die, Kiryla and Trenton will rule this world together. They will destroy the Altar, remove all danger to his world and ours. He will be locked here, unable to return to his own Earth, but he will have Kiryla..."

Mani leaped.

He drew on all the strength in his ancient body, made himself a human catapult to cross that ten feet of space. Drayatha's beam-gun was spitting green fire, but he was slamming into her, toppling her backwards even as he died.

Trenton shouted, leaped forward, staggered. The pain on his snapped ribs shot scalpels of agony through him.

He would not have been in time. For one long moment, Drayatha and what was left of Mani poised motionless there, on the crest of that blinding brilliance. Streamers of white energy flared up around her, caressing, stroking, laving her in their radiance. Her hair sparkled redly. Her body arched, arms lifted to Trenton. Her green eyes were wide, calling, luring, summoning... And then-

There was only the timeless white brilliance, suspended in midair.

Drayatha was gone. Mani was gone.

Kiryla lifted the beam-gun from Theg's dead hand. She walked toward the Altar, lifted the gun. She depressed the trigger.

Green fire met white, locked with it, licking, probing. The white fire grew verdant, and the green flared white. They formed a single high

tongue of iridescence . . . and winked out.

The room was dark. Trenton heard the beam-gun clatter to the floor, heard Kiryla walk toward him. She touched his hand with hers, led him with her toward the doors.

Sunlight blinded them for an instant. Kiryla threw back her yellow mane, stared up at him with probing blue-eyes. She whispered, "You loved her, Trenton?"

"No...yes! I--I don't know. One part of me did, the part they made in the psychiatric chambers. The other part . . . the way I am now . . . "

"Yes, Trenton?"

"Kiryla...there is no one but you. You know that."

She flung white arms about his neck. Her lips were smooth and sweet, cool and comforting. She hid her face against his chest, whispered, "We will make a new world, here. You and I. . . Do you mind never going back to Earth?"

"No, of course not. I am happy with you. We'll work together unite Min-dir and Llinana-Kir into a great empire."

Faintly and from far away, so deep inside him that he thought it must be his own thought, a voice called. *Aiee, Trenton! Her lips are cool but mine are hot. She will comfort, but I will provoke! Find me Trenton. Come looking for me in the time flow. You can do it. In the model of the Altar....back in Min-dir City, in the Temple! I will be waiting. Somewhere in space, somewhere in time . . . for you, Trenton!*

He shook himself, took Kiryla's hand and went down the steps, toward the palace. He needed Kiryla to forget the other side of him. She could make him forget--if she were strong enough.

But--was she?

The End