

The Beast-Jewel of Mars

By V. E. THIESSEN



The city was strange, fantastic, beautiful. He'd never been there before, yet already he was a fabulous legend—a dire, hateful legend.



HE LAY on his stomach, a lean man in faded one piece dungarees, and an odd metallic hat, peering over the side of the canal. Behind him the little winds sifted red dust into his collar, but he could not move; he could only sit there with his gaze riveted on the spires and minarets that twinkled in the distance, far down the bottom of the canal.

One part of his mind said, *This is it, this is the fabled city of Mars. This is the beauty and the fantasy and the music of the legends, and I must go down there.* Yet somewhere deeper in his mind, deep in the primal urges that kept him from death; the warning was taut and urgent. *Get away. They have a part of your mind now. Get away from the city before you lose it all. Get away before your body becomes a husk, a soulless husk to walk the low canals with sightless eyes, like those who came before you.*

He strained to push back from the edge, trying to get that fantastic beauty out of his sight. He fought the lids of his eyes, fought to close them

while he pushed himself back, but they remained open, staring at the jeweled towers, and borne on the little winds the thin wail of music reached him, saying, *Come into the city, come down into the fabled city.*

He slid over the edge, sliding down the sloping sides of the canal. The rough sandstone tore at his dungarees, tore at his elbow where it touched but he did not feel the pain. His face was turned toward the towers, and the sound of his breathing was less than human.

His feet caught a projecting bit of stone and were slowed for an instant, so that he turned sideways and rolled on, down into the red dust bottom of the canal, to lie face down in the dust, with the chin strap of the odd metallic hat cutting cruelly into his chin.

He lay there an instant, knowing that now he had a chance. With his face down like this, and the dust smarting his eyes the image was gone for an instant. He had to get away, he knew that. He had to mount the sides of the canal and never look

back.

He told himself, "I am Eric North, from Earth, the Third Planet of Sol, and this is not real."

He squirmed in the dust, feeling it bite his cheeks; he squirmed until he could get up and see nothing but the red sandstone walls of the canal. He ran at the walls and clawed his way up like an animal in his haste. He wouldn't look again.

The wind freshened and the tune of the music began to talk to him. It told of going barefoot over long streets of fur. It told of jewels, and wine, and women as fair as springtime. These and more were in the city, waiting for him to claim them.

He sobbed, and clawed forward. He stopped to rest, and slowly his head began to turn. He turned and the spires and minarets twinkled at him, beautiful, soothing, stopping the tears that had welled down his cheeks.

When he reached the bottom of the canal he began to run toward the city.

When he came to the city there was a high wall around it, and a heavy gate carved with lotus blossoms. He beat against the gate and cried, "Oh! Let me in. Let me in to the city!" The music was richer now, as if it were everywhere, and the gate swung open without the faintest sound.

A sentinel stood before the opened gate at the end of a long blue street. He was dressed in red silk with his sleeves edged in blue leopard skin, and he wore a belt with a jeweled short sword. He drew the sword from its scabbard, and bowed forward until the point of the sword touched the street of blue fur. He said, "I give you the welcome of my sword, and the welcome of the city. Speak your name so that it may be set in the records of the dreamers."

The music sang, and the spires twinkled, and Eric said, "I am Eric North!"

The sword point jerked and the sentinel straightened. His face was white. He cried aloud, "It is Eric the Bronze. It is Eric of the Legend." He whirled the sword aloft, and smashed it upon Eric's metal hat, and the hatred was a blue flame in his eyes.

WHEN Eric regained consciousness the people of the city were all about him. They were very fair, and the women were more beautiful than music. Yet now they stared at him with red hate in their eyes. An older man came forward and struck at the copper hat with a stick. The clang

deafened Eric and the man cried, "You are right. It is Eric the Bronze. Bring the whips and let him be scourged from the city."

The man drew back the stick and struck again, and Eric's back took fire with the blow. The crowd chanted, "Whips, bring the whips," and fear forced Eric to his feet. He fled then, running on the heedless feet of panic, outstripping those who were behind him until he passed through the great gates into the red dust floor of the canal. The gates closed behind him, and the dust beat upon him, and he paused, his heart hammering inside his chest like a great ball clapper. He turned and looked behind to be sure he was safe.

The towers twinkled at him, and the music whispered to him, "Come back, Eric North. Come back to the city."

He turned and stumbled back to the great gate and hammered on it until his fists were raw, pleading for it to open and let him back.

And deep inside him some part of his mind said, "This is a madness you cannot escape. The city is evil, an evil like you have never known," and a fear as old as time coursed through his frame.

He seized the copper hat from his head, and beat on the lotus carvings of the great door, crying, "Let me in! Please, take me into the city."

And as he beat the city changed. It became dull and sordid and evil, a city of disgust, with every part offensive to the eye. The spires and minarets were gargoyles of hatred, twisted and misshapen, and the sound of the city was a macabre song of hate.

He stared, and his back was chill with superstitions as old as the beginning of man. The city flickered, changing before his eyes until it was beautiful again.

He stood, amazed, and put the metal hat back on his head. With the motion the shift took place again, and beauty was ugliness. Amazed, he stared at the illusion, and the thought came to him that the metal hat had not entirely failed him after all.

He turned and began to walk away from the city, and when it began to call he took the hat off his head and found peace for a time. Then when it began again he replaced the hat, and revulsion sped his footsteps. And so, hat on, hat off, he made his way down the dusty floor of the canal, and up the rocky sides until he stood on the Martian desert, and the canal was a thin line behind him. He breathed easily then, for he was beyond the range

of the illusions.

And now that his mind was his own again he began to study the problem, and to understand something of the nature of the forces against which he had been pitted.

The helmet contained an electrical circuit, designed as a shield against electrical waves tuned to affect his brain. But the hat had failed because the city, whatever it was, had adjusted to this revised pattern as he had approached it. Hence, the helmet had been no defense against illusion. However, when he had jerked the helmet off suddenly to beat on the door, his mental pattern had changed, too suddenly, and the machine caught up only after he had glimpsed another image. Then as the illusion adjusted, replacing the helmet threw it off again.

He grinned wryly. He would have liked to know more about the city, whatever it was. He would have liked to know more about the people he had seen, whether they were real or part of the illusion, and if they were as ugly as the second city had been.

Yet the danger was too great. He would go back to his ship and make the arrangements to destroy the city. The ship was armed, and to deliver indirect fire over the edge of the canal would be simple enough. Garve North, his brother, waited back at the ship. If he knew of the city he would have to go there. Eric must not take a chance on that. After they had blasted whatever it was that lay in the canal floor, then it would be time enough to tell Garve, and go down to see what was left.

The ship rested easily on the flat sandstone area where he had established base camp. Its familiar lines brought a smile to Eric's face, a feeling of confidence now that tools and weapons were his again.

He opened the door and entered. The lock doors were left open so that he could enter directly into the body of the ship. He came in a swift leap, calling, "Garve! Hey, Garve, where are you?"

The ship remained mute. He prowled through it, calling, "Garve," wondering where the young hothead had gone, and then he saw a note clipped to the control board of the ship. He tore it loose impatiently and began to read. Garve had scrawled:

Funny thing, Eric. A while ago I thought I heard music. I walked down to the canal, and it seemed like there were lights, and a

town of some sort far down the canal. I wanted to investigate, but thought I'd better come back. But the thing has been in my mind for hours now, and I'm going down to see what it is. If you want to follow, come straight down the canal.

Eric stared at the note, and the line of his jaw was white. Apparently Garve had seen the city from farther away, and its effect had not been so strong. Even so, Garve's natural curiosity had done the rest.

Garve had gone down to the city, and Garve had no shielded hat. Eric selected two high explosive grenades from the ship's arsenal. They were small but they packed a lot of power. He had a pistol packed with smaller pellets of the same explosive, and he had the hat. That should be adequate. He thrust the bronze hat back on his head and began walking back to the canal.

THE return back to the city would always live in his mind as a phantasmagora, a montage of twisted hate and unseemly beauty. When he came again to the gate he did not attempt to enter, but circled the wall, hat on, hat off, stiff-limbed like a puppet dancing to the same tune over and over again. He found a place where he could scale the wall, and thrust the helmet on his head, and clawed up the misshapen wall. It was all he could do to make himself drop into the ugly city.

He heard a familiar voice as he dropped. "Eric," the voice said. "Eric, you did come back." The voice was his brother's, and he whirled, seeking the voice. A figure stood before him, a twisted caricature of his brother. The figure cried, "The hat! You fool, get rid of that hat!" The caricature that was his brother seized the hat, and jerked so hard that the chin strap broke under Eric's chin. The hat was flung away and sailed high and far over the fence and outside the city.

The phantasm flickered, the illusion moved. Garve was now more handsome than ever, and the city was a dream of delight. Garve said, "Come," and Eric followed down a street of blue fur. He had no will to resist.

Garve said, "Keep your head down and your face hidden. If we meet someone you may not be recognized. They won't be expecting you from this side of the city."

Eric asked, "You knew I'd come after you?"

“Yes. The Legend said you’d be back.”

Eric stopped and whirled to face his brother. “The Legend? Eric the Bronze? What is this wild fantasy?”

“Not so loud!” Garve’s voice cautioned him. “Of course the crowd called you that because of the copper hat and your heavy tan. But the Elders believe so, too. I don’t know what it is, Eric, reincarnation, prophesy, superstition. I only know that when I was with the Elders I believed them. You are a part of a Legend. You are Eric the Bronze.”

Eric looked down at his suntanned hands and flexed them. He loosened the explosive pistol in its holster. At least he was going to be a well armed, well prepared Legend. And while one part of his mind marveled at the city and relaxed into a pleasure as deep as a dream, another struggled with the almost forgotten desire to rescue his brother and escape. He asked, “Who are the Elders?”

“We are going to them, to the center of the city.” Garve’s voice sharpened, “Keep your head down. I think the last two men we passed are looking after us. Don’t look back.”

After a moment Garve said, “I think they are following us. Get ready to run. If we are separated, keep going until you reach City Center. The Elders will be expecting you.” Garve glanced back, and his voice sharpened, “Now! Run!”

They ran. But as they ran figures began to converge upon them. Farther up the street others appeared curving off their flight.

Garve cried, “In here,” and pulled Eric into a crevice between two buildings. Eric drew his gun, and savagery began to dance in his eyes. The soft fur-muffled sounds of pursuit closed in upon them.

Garve put one hand on Eric’s gun hand and said, “Wait here. And if you value my life, don’t use that gun.” Then he was gone, running deer-like down the street.

For an instant Eric thought the ruse had succeeded. He heard cries and two men passed him running in pursuit. But then the cry came back. “Let him go. Get the other one. The other one.”

Eric was seen an instant later, and the people of the city began to converge upon him. He could have destroyed them all with his charges in the gun, but his brother’s warning shrieked in his ears: “If you value my life don’t use the gun.”

There was nothing he could do. Eric stood quietly until he was taken prisoner. They moved

him to the center of the wide fur street. Two men held his arms, and twisted painfully. The crowd looked at him, coldly, calculatingly. One of them said, “Get the whips. If we whip him he will not come back.” The city twinkled, and the music was so faint he could hardly hear it.

There was only one weapon Eric could use. He had gathered from Garve’s words that these people were superstitious.

He laughed, a great chest-shattering laugh that gusted out into the thin Martian air. He laughed and cried in a great voice, “And can you so easily dispose of a Legend? If I am Eric of the Legend, can whips defeat the prophesy?”

There was an instant when he could have twisted loose. They stood, fear-bound at his words. But there was no place to hide, and without the use of his weapons Eric could not have gone far. He had to bluff it out.

THEN one of the men cried, “Fools! It is true. We must take no chance with the whips. He would come back. But if he dies here before us now, then we may forget the prophesy.”

The crowd murmured and a second voice cried, “Get the sword, get the guards, and kill him at once!”

Eric tensed to break away but now it was too late. His captors were alert. They increased the twist on his arms until he almost screamed with the pain.

The crowd parted, and the guard came through, his red silk clothing gleaming in the sun, his sword bright and deadly. He stopped before Eric, and the sword swirled up like a saber, ready for a slashing cut downward across Eric’s neck.

A woman’s voice, soft and yet authoritative, called, “Hold!” And a murmur of respect rippled through the crowd.

“Nolette! The Daughter of the City comes.”

Eric turned his gaze to the side and saw the woman who had spoken. She was mounted upon a black horse with a jeweled bridle. She was young and her hair was long and free in the wind. She had ridden so softly across the fur street that no one had been aware of her presence.

She said, “Let me touch this man. Let me feel the pulse of his heart so that I may know if he is truly the Bronze one of the Legend. Give me your hand, stranger.” She leaned down and grasped his hand. Eric shook his arms free, and reached up and

clung to the offered hand, thinking, "If I pull her down perhaps I can use her as a shield." He tensed his muscles and began to pull.

She cried, "No! You fool. Come up on the horse," and pulled back with an energy as fierce as his own. Then he had swung up on the horse, and the animal leaped forward, its muffled gallop beating out a tattoo of freedom.

Eric clung tightly to the girl's waist. He could feel the young suppleness of her body, and the fine strands of her hair kept swirling back into his face. It had a faint perfume, a clean and heady scent that made him more aware of the touch of her waist. He breathed deeply, oddly happy as they rode.

After five minutes ride they came to a building in the center of the city. The building was cubical, severe in line and architecture, and it contrasted oddly with the exquisite ornament of the rest of the city. It was as if it were a monolith from another time, a stranger crouched among enemies.

The girl halted before the structure and said, "Dismount here, Eric."

Eric swung down, his arms still tingling with pleasure where he had held her. She said, "Knock three times on the door. I will see you again inside. And thank your brother for sending me to bring you here."

Eric knocked on the door. The door was as plain as the building, made of a luminous plastic. It had all the beauty of the great gate door, but a more timeless, more functional beauty.

The door opened and an old man greeted Eric. "Come in. The Council awaits you. Follow me, please."

Eric followed down a hallway and into a large room. The room was obviously designed for a conference room. A great table stood in the room, made of the same luminous plastic as the door of the building. Six men sat at this conference table. Eric's guide placed him in a chair at the base of the T-shaped table.

There was one vacant seat beside the head of the T, and as Eric watched, the young woman who had rescued him entered and took her place there. She smiled at Eric, and the room took on a warmth that it had lacked with only the older men present. The man at her right, obviously presiding here looked at Eric and spoke. "I am Kroon, the eldest of the elders. We have brought you here to satisfy ourselves of your identity. In view of your danger in the City you are entitled to some sort of

explanation." He glanced around the room and asked, "What is the Judgment of the elders?"

ERIC caught a faint nod here, a gesture there. Kroon nodded as if in satisfaction. He turned to the girl, "And what is your opinion, Daughter of the City?"

Nolette's expression held sorrow, as if she looked into the far future. She said, "He is Eric the Bronze. I have no doubt."

Eric asked, "And what is this Legend of Eric the Bronze? Why am I so despised in the city?"

Kroon answered, "According to the Ancient Legend you will destroy the city. This, and other things."

Eric gaped. No wonder the crowd had shown such hatred. But why were the elders so friendly? They were obviously the governing body, and if there was strife between them and the people it had not shown in the respect the crowd had accorded Nolette.

Kroon said, "I see you are puzzled. Let me tell you the story of the City. The City is old. It dates from long ago when the canals of Mars ran clear and green with water, and the deserts were vineyards and gardens. The drought came, and the changes in climate, and soon it became plain that the people of Mars were doomed. They had ships, and could build more, and gradually they left to colonize other planets. Yet they could take little of their science. And fear and riots destroyed much. Also there were those who were filled with love for this homeland, and who thought that one day it might be habitable again. All the skill of the ancient Martian fathers went into the building of a giant machine, the machine that is the City, to protect a small colony of those who were chosen to remain on Mars."

"This whole city is a machine?" Eric asked.

"Yes, or the product of one. The heart of it lies underneath our feet, in caverns beneath this building. The nature of the machine is this, that it translates thought into reality."

Eric stared. The idea was staggering.

"This is essentially simple, although the technology is complex. It is necessary to have a recording device, to capture thought, a transmuting device capable of transmuting the red dust of the desert into any sort of material desired, and a construction device, to assemble this material into the pattern already recorded from thought." Kroon

paused. "You still doubt, my friend. Perhaps you are thirsty after your escape. Think strongly of a tall glass of cold water, visualize it in your mind, the sight and the fluidity and the touch of it."

Eric did so. Without warning a glass of water stood on the table before him. He touched the water to his lips. It was cool and satisfying. He drank it, convinced completely.

Eric asked, "And I am to destroy the City?"

"Yes. The time has come."

"But why?" Eric demanded. For an instant he could see the twinkling beauty as clearly as if he had stood outside the walls of this building.

Kroon said, "There are difficulties. The machine builds according to the mass will of the people, though it is sensitive to the individual in areas where it does not conflict with the imagination of the mass. We have had strangers, visitors, and even our own people, who grew drunk with the power of the machine, who dreamed more and more lust and greed into existence. These were banished from the city, and so strong is the call of the city that many of them became victims of their own evilness, and now walk mindlessly, with no thought but to seek for the beauty they have lost here."

Kroon sighed. "The people have lost the will to learn. Many do not even know of the machine. Our science is almost gone, and only a few of us, the dreamers, the elders, have kept alive the old knowledge of the machine and its history. By the collected powers of our imagination we build and control the outward appearance of the city.

"We have passed this down from father to son. A part of the ancient Legend is that the builders made provisions for the machine to be destroyed when contact with outsiders had been made once again, so that our people would again have to struggle forward to knowledge and power. The instrument of destruction was to be a man termed Eric the Bronze. It is not that you are reborn. It is just that sometime such a man would come."

Eric said, "I can understand the Bronze part. They had thought that a spaceman might well be suntanned. They had thought that a science to protect against this beautiful illusion would provide a metal shield of some sort, probably copper in nature. That such a man should come is inevitable. But why Eric. Why the name Eric?"

For the first time Nolette spoke. She said quietly, "The name Eric was an honorable name of the ancient fathers. It must have been their thought

that the new beginning should wait for some of their own far flung kind to return."

Eric nodded. He asked, "What happens now?"

"Nothing. Dwell here with us and you will be safe from our people. If the prediction is not soon fulfilled and you are not the Eric of the Legend, you may stay or go as you desire."

"My brother, Garve. What about him?"

"He loves the city. He will also stay, though he will be outside this building." Kroon clasped his hands. "Nolette, will you show Eric his quarters?"

ERIC followed Nolette through a hallway to a well furnished room. Walking behind her, the graceful sway of her walk reminded him of the touch of her waist as he held it earlier when they rode, and he felt the blood racing through his veins. He was tempted to seize her shoulder, turn her, and take her in his arms.

She indicated the room with a gesture. "You will be comfortable here, and you have only to wish strongly for food or drink. If your wishes do not conflict with those of the elders they will come into being."

Eric asked, "And is this true of any wish? Suppose for instance I wished for—you."

She looked at him steadily, "That would depend on the nature of your wish. If you wished to take me as your wife the elders would approve."

Eric looked at her. He had hardly known her two hours. Yet the madness of the moment made him rash, and he asked, "And what of your wishes, Nolette?"

She said, "I am the Daughter of the City, and a virgin. If the Legend is to be fulfilled I would be wed before I die."

He took a step forward and reached out to take her in his arms, but she slipped away, saying quietly, "Not now. I will go away and let you think. When you have decided call me in your mind, and the machine will let me know." She smiled briefly, and left him alone in the room.

Eric was hardly aware of his actions as he seated himself in the comfortable chair. He fumbled about for his pipe. He must not be a fool. Perhaps if he thought quietly, and smoked, he could decide if this was a dream, if he had gone quietly mad in his space ship, and had been the victim of hallucinations. The chair was real to his touch, his pipe was gone, and he remembered leaving it in the navigators section of the ship upon his earlier

return. The memory seemed real enough. He wished for his pipe again, and realized that now he held it in his hand.

This was no mirage. He tamped tobacco created by the machine from Red Martian dust into the bowl of the pipe, and the smoke was as fragrant as ever. He could see how such luxury would stagnate a race. As the smoke curled around him he knew that two hours or two years were not important, and he knew what he wanted. He wished for Nolette.

She came into the room, watching him quietly, suddenly shy. He said, "It has come to me that I love you. Will you do me the honor to become my wife?"

She said, "Yes, Eric. Oh! Yes!" and came running to him. Her kiss had all the passion of his own.

An hour later she slipped from his arms, saying, "I must go and talk with the elder dreamers. We must be married today, at once. We have so little time. We must be husband and wife tonight." She slipped softly from the room.

Eric watched her, marveling at his luck. He suddenly remembered that he had not seen his brother since he had arrived at the house of the elder dreamers. He wondered where Garve was, and wanted to talk to him. Perhaps if he thought strongly enough the machine would get the message thought to Garve. He concentrated.

Ten minutes later Garve walked into the room. He said, "I thought I heard you calling. How'd you make out with the dreamers?"

"Well enough. Don't think me mad, Garve, but Nolette and I are to be married, tonight."

Garve's face grew red, then as white as river sand. He said bitterly, "I should have let them kill you in the street, but how could I? After all we are brothers."

"You love her, too."

"No! But I love this city. It is paradise, and now you will destroy it."

Eric said, "The Legend again! Everyone believes it. Yet it is but a prediction. In time such a man as the Legend had to come, and some day one more greedy than myself may destroy the city. Perhaps I will refuse to carry out the destruction."

Garve laughed, a bitter cynical laugh. He cried, "You fool! How can you help yourself? Everyone believes you are the Bronze one and the machine will make that come true. How can you defeat the machine?"

Eric was staggered by a logic he had not even considered.

"Piece by piece," Garve said, "the prediction is coming to pass. Now you are to wed Nolette, and that too is a part of the Legend."

"That was predicted?"

"Yes. And that is not the end." Garve's voice was as sharp as the bite of a whip. "Do you know what else you will do?"

"No!" A thin horror seeped slowly into Eric's mind.

"You will destroy the Daughter of the City."

Eric's eyes were wide. He shuddered and cried, "NO! NO!"

Garve's face took on the glint of madness. He said, "But I will stop you. I'll stop you if I have to kill you." He turned and strode bitterly from the room.

HORROR was still fresh in Eric's mind when Nolette returned. "All is ready," she said. "Come now, my husband-to-be."

Eric followed her into the chamber of the elder dreamers. Kroon stood at the doorway and greeted him as he entered. He said, "One cannot fight the truth, so we have consented to this marriage. Will you join hands?"

The ceremony was simple, but beautiful, much like an Earth wedding, with the city making music that was beautiful beyond belief. But all the time Eric listened his mind was working, and by the time he had kissed his bride at the end of the ceremony he knew what he had to do. He walked back to their room with his arm around her waist, and his resolve weakened with each step.

Yet when he reached the room he had the will to say, "I must leave you for a time. When I return our life together will begin." He kissed her again, and said, "It will not be long."

He broke away, and left her. When he reached the hallway he felt once in his pocket to be sure the explosive grenades were still there. So far the machine had controlled his destiny. So far the very belief of the dreamers in his destiny had brought the predictions to pass. Very well now, he would destroy the machine, but not at the request of the dreamers. He would do it now, before there was time to consummate the horrible part of the prediction. Then he would come back to Nolette and his honeymoon.

He ran along the hallways, always going down

when he found a stairway, always seeking the central area below that had been indicated by Kroon in their first talk. And when at length he came out into a large room, with a maze of delicate electronic apparatus below, he knew he had arrived, and he pulled the grenade from his pocket.

Yet before he pulled the safety release he could not but marvel a moment at the intricate science below him. Much was familiar, and much was unintelligible.

As he stood he was seized from behind, and he twisted to find he was caught in the hate-strengthened grip of his brother. Pain lanced through his arm, and Garve gritted, "Drop it." Eric dropped the grenade, and it fell between them. Eric was suddenly glad that the safety had not been pulled, and then he was fighting savagely with his brother.

He was older, and wiser in the dirty tricks of fighters from the planets. After a time he was able to set himself, and bend forward. Where Garve had been behind, now he was flung up, over Eric's back in a sprawling arc. He fell, teetered for an instant, and then crashed into the delicate heart of the machine below. Glass tinkled, and a flare lit the room. Eric closed his eyes, afraid to look. Garve must have been electrocuted.

ERIC opened his eyes to find the room subtly changed. It was roughly the same, but the walls were a rough sandstone, and the glamour was gone. He heard sounds, and saw Garve struggling up from the wreckage below. Both of them knew it was ended. The machine was beyond repair.

Garve paused. He said, "It's over now. I suppose in a year or two I shall forget this. I am going away. Until I can forgive you I shall stay away. God grant you peace, for you have lost more than I." Garve's steps echoed hollowly on the stone corridor and he disappeared in the distance.

Eric stood quietly. There was no happiness in him, only a nameless fear brought on by his brother's words, a fear that he had forgotten something.

Then suddenly he knew what it was. He remembered the ugly city. When he came out of the corridor, out of this building, the city would be a foul sty again. And the people, he had not seen the people, but they would no doubt be horrible. Nolette, his wife—he could not let himself think of how she would look. It seemed Garve was right and

the final prediction had come true. All was finished, even the Daughter of the City had been destroyed.

He began to move up out of the subterranean room and back to the city. He reached the outer door, and did not even pause to look for Nolette, but set his teeth, and stepped out into the city.

And there he was surprised. Here was no ugly city, only a very normal, ordinary one, with ordinary persons going about the streets, blinking at the changes. The lines of the city were still there, but the jeweled panes were ordinary glass.

Eric tried to understand. Then suddenly he recalled his hatred of the city when he had been cast out, his subconscious thoughts of it as evil. He had taken off the helmet, and for an instant he had been out of contact with the elders, disoriented. In that instant the city had shown him his own concept of ugliness. That ugly city was as unreal as the fantastically beautiful one created by the elders.

Eric turned, and went back into the building, looking for Nolette.

He found her, standing with Kroon in the great room, before a table which was only laminated wood. She was a slender girl, gray eyed, pleasant to look at, but without the beauty and the music and the witchery of her counterpart.

She said quietly, "It is finished, Eric, and we are not the two who married. It is finished, and the dream is ended."

Eric said only, "Yes," watching her.

She said, "I release you from the marriage. It will be a memory for us both, a wonderful dream that ended before it was consummated, a dream cut short too soon."

Eric asked, "What will you do?" Her voice was hardly changed, and watching her he felt an odd pleasure. There was no wild racing of his blood, yet his interest was awakening.

She said, "Go away, I suppose, as far as I can from this place."

He liked the way she was taking this. No dramatics, no tears.

He said, "I could take you back to Earth as a passenger. You might like Earth." He felt oddly eager as she considered.

And then suddenly, he could not wait, and the words came tumbling out. "Nolette," he said, "you must come with me. I do not know how it will be with us yet. But somehow I feel that if we stay together things will be good."

He waited for her decision, half afraid, half smile widened. "A girl must follow her husband. eager, and then saw a slow smile break the Even I know that." seriousness of her eyes.

Eric reached out and took her hand. "The ship is She said gently, "If that is what you wish." The waiting," he said. "Let's go home."