

Half an hour later . . .

Forty-Seven

When Andrea came to join them on the patio, Tim was still investigating the mannequin's controls

"Where's Howard?" he asked.

She sat down at the table and patted the chair beside her. When he was seated, she said: "Howard and I talked things over, Tim, and he feels he has one more lead that's worth pursuing. While he does that, we thought you might like to stay here with me."

Tim blinked and looked around doubtfully. "Here?"

"Yes. I think you'd like it a lot. What do you think, Samson? Do you think Tim would like it?"

"Oh, yes! We'll have a lot of fun!"

Seeing that Tim was still doubtful, Andrea said, "Of course, you can go back to Runnell if you'd rather. Though I have to tell you that the house is as empty as when you left it."

"How do you know that?"

"Howard called. Still no answer. But if you'd rather not part with Howard, I'll certainly understand."

"Oh, it isn't that. I'd like to stay here, I think. But . . ."

"But what?"

Tim frowned down at the table. "Are you sure you want me to stay? You don't even know me."

Andrea laughed. "Don't worry about that at all. I'm a good judge of people, Tim. I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't sure."

"Well . . . all right. That sounds fine."

She stood up and held out her hand. "Let's take a walk together. There's someone else I want you to meet."

He looked back at the house. "Can I say goodbye to Howard first?"

"He's already on his way, Tim. It isn't as though he's leaving forever. I'm sure he'll be back as soon as he can be."

"Okay," Tim said thoughtfully.

"See you later, Tim," Samson squawked.

Hand in hand, they walked down into the low hills ranging to the west.

When they reached the crest of a hill about a mile from the house, Andrea released Tim's hand and said:

"You can go on by yourself from here."

Tim looked up at her doubtfully. "Go on by myself?"

Andrea nodded.

"To where?"

She smiled. "Just keep going."

He watched her turn away and head back down the hill. Then he shrugged and went on. Coming around a huge square block of rock, he nearly stumbled over a man sitting in the dust. He stepped back and blinked down at him.

The man was dressed in jeans and a casual shirt, but Tim's father would have had no difficulty in recognizing him as the man he'd known in Las Vegas as Pablo. Turning his dark bull-like face up to Tim, he gave him a solemn welcoming nod.

Tim spent a full minute exploring the man's eyes. As he'd seen once before, a universe of mysterious life seemed to move in their depths.

"What happened to your horns?"

The man smiled and tapped his temple. "They're in here. I only bring them out to frighten little boys."

"I wasn't frightened."

"I know, Tim. That's why you're here now."

Tim sat down beside him in the shadow of the rock, clasped his hands around his knees, and gazed out into the hills that rolled endlessly before them. After perhaps half an hour had passed, Tim asked:

"Was it you who . . . arranged all this?"

Pablo thought for a while before answering. "Tim, your father left you in order to find something

he wanted. Something he wanted but wasn't strong enough to have. He became . . . lost. Your mother followed him and she too became lost."

"That's not exactly an answer. Is it?"

"Your father and mother followed their own promptings, Tim. I don't know what more to tell you."

His face expressionless, Tim continued to stare at the distant horizon.

"What is it you most deeply want, Tim? Do you want to go back home and school with the other boys? If that's what you want, I promise you shall have it. You mustn't stay here if your heart yearns for the small, humdrum world you left."

Tim said nothing.

"Think, Tim. Tell me what you want."

"I don't know what I want."

"Look here, Tim." Pablo opened his hand and in the shadow of the rock Tim saw a column of sunlight standing in his palm. In it a swarm of sparks gamboled in a swirling dance.

"Motes of dust," Tim whispered.

Pablo shook his head. "A world, Tim. You can visit it, if you like." He closed his hand and the column of light vanished. "That's only one world. There are many others I can open to you. If you want it."

His stomach tingling with apprehension and delight, Tim nodded to show that he understood.

As the sun mounted, the shadow in which they were sitting gradually shrank and disappeared.

"We must remember to find you a hat," Pablo said with a smile. He got to his feet and stood gazing off toward the western horizon. Without turning, he said: "You know that the people you've grown up among say we're evil— Andrea and I, and others of our kind. Don't you, Tim?"

"I guess so."

"Do you understand *why* they say we're evil?"

"No. "

"It's because they know we belong entirely to *this* world."

"You *belong* . . . ? I don't understand."

"You don't belong to this world, do you, Tim?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"This world of matter isn't your true home. Isn't that what they tell you, Tim? They say this world is just a way station on your journey—a testing ground. Your true home is elsewhere—in heaven—far, far from here, utterly beyond the soiling touch of matter. Isn't that what the people of your kind teach their children?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"They teach you that this world is trash: corrupt, vile, unwholesome, malign."

"True."

"Then you should be able to understand why they believe we're evil. Since we belong *entirely* to this world, it follows that we too are corrupt, vile, unwholesome, and malign."

"Yes, I see."

"The God worshiped by your kind is nothing like us, Tim. He's remote and sublime, unsullied by the world. He'd have you think of us as 'strange gods,' but it's He who is the stranger, sequestered beyond the farthest galaxy, beyond matter itself. A cosmic absence: silent, unresponsive, indifferent—but hungry for adoration. Do you understand?"

"I guess so."

He turned to the boy with a smile. "I must warn you, Tim: If you decide to stay, you will become as we are—unredeemably sullied by the world."

Tim returned the smile uncertainly, wondering if he was being teased.

"I won't press you for your choice, Tim. There's no hurry at all. Spend a few days getting your bearings. See how you feel about relinquishing the past—and all the dreams you once had for your life."

Pablo paused to look around. "Get to know this place."

"Is this a special place?"

"Every place is a special place, Tim." He stood for a moment, blinking down at the ground. "Let me show you something," he said, turning to descend the hill toward the west. After heading at a diagonal halfway up the next, he abruptly stopped and sat down in the dust. When Tim was seated beside him, he pointed at something a few feet away and said: "What do you think of that?"

The boy blinked at it. It was a slender, sickly-looking cholla cactus about ten inches high, listing to one side as if it were about to expire from sunstroke.

Tim looked at Pablo doubtfully. "Do you mean the cactus?"

Pablo shook his head. "It's not a cactus. Spend some time in its company. Get to know it well—so well that you forget its name. On the day you can look at it without thinking *This is a cactus*, it will speak to you. It will tell you a secret forgotten among most of your kind for thousands of years—a secret that will forever change the way you see the world."