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**THE  
MICROSCOPIC  
GIANTS**  
*A Hall of Fame Classic*  
By **PAUL ERNST**

**THE**  
*Mask*  
**OF CIRCE**  
*An Astonishing Novel*  
By **HENRY  
KUTTNER**

SHARE IN CANADA'S FUTURE: BUY SAVINGS BONDS

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# *the MASK of Circe*

By

Henry Kuttner

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Startling Stories*, May 1948.

*Summoned by luring voices from the past, Jay Seward assumes the role of Jason in an epochal journey to the fabulous land of the legends!*

## CHAPTER I

### *Enchanted Seas*

Talbot drew on his pipe and squinted across the campfire at the face of the man who was speaking softly, slowly, the words coming one upon another in the patterns of the strangest tale Talbot had ever heard.

Jay Seward's face was bronze in the flickering firelight. It might have been a mask hammered out of metal, with the tall Canadian pines a background and the moonlight silvering it with strange highlights. They were far away from civilized places, these two, and the tale Jay Seward told might have sounded wildly improbable in more prosaic surroundings. But here and now, it did not seem strange at all. . . .

Jay Seward had been restless all that day, Talbot, who had known him only a week, was more and more aware as time went by that his companion was somehow a haunted man. He seemed to be waiting for something—watching for something. He kept his head turned a little, whatever else he did, so that the sounds of the sea down at the foot of the pine slope were always clear in his ears, as though he expected some other sound than the splashing of the waves.

But it was not until an hour ago, after sunset, sitting by the campfire, that at last he began to talk.

"This isn't real," Seward declared suddenly, glancing around the moon-drenched clearing. "I feel as if I'd stepped back in time a year. I was up here just a year ago, you know. I was a pretty sick man. Then something happened, and—" He did not finish, but you could see his thoughts move off along a familiar trail of remembering.

Talbot said, "It's a good country to get well in." He spoke cautiously, hoping not to break the spell of Seward's thinking. He was very curious about this man; he wanted to hear the tale he felt sure was coming.

Seward laughed. "My mind was sick. And I couldn't stay away from the ocean." He turned his head a little and his nostrils flared as if he tried to draw into his lungs the deepest savor of the salt wind that moved through the pines. A faint thunder of breakers came with it, and Seward stirred restlessly.

"I was drowning," he said simply. "Drowning in an unknown ocean that touched—strange shores. Do you mind if I talk? I think it'll bring everything back clearer—and I want to bring it back. Tonight I don't understand it—tonight something's going to happen. Don't ask me what. If I told you you wouldn't believe me. And I won't make apologies for—for what I *know* happened. I'm not out of my head—I never have been. I *know*—" He paused and laughed, faintly apologetic.

"Go on," Talbot said, drawing on his pipe. "I'd like to hear it, whatever it is."

"If you don't mind a long story, I will. Maybe it'll help." He glanced at the mist wreathing among the pines. "It was like that on Aeaëa," he said. "Always—misty. Veiled."

"Aeaëa?"

"The Isle of the Enchantress." He shrugged impatiently. "All right, I'll tell you."

---

Seward shifted a little so that his back was against a fallen log and his face to the darkness that hid the ocean. In a slow voice he began to talk.

“Three years ago I was in the States, working with a man named Ostrend on a new type of psychiatric research. That’s my line—psychiatry. Ostrend was a wonderful man in his field—*blast him!*”

“It was the sodium pentathol narcosynthesis that started us off—and we went too far. Ostrend was a genius. Before we finished we’d crossed the boundaries of known psychological research and—” Seward broke off, hesitated, and began again.

“Narcosynthesis is a new method of exploring the brain. You know the principle? Under a hypnotic the patient is forced to look back on his own crises, things buried in his unconscious mind—the unpleasant things he doesn’t want to remember consciously. The catharsis usually brings about a cure.

“Ostrend and I went farther than that. I won’t tell you the methods we used. But we were, alternately, our own guinea pigs, and the day we succeeded, I was the specimen on the slide. . . .

“Crises buried in the past—how far back? What I remembered—Ostrend made a transcript of it as he questioned me. I didn’t know what was happening till I woke. But after that the memories came back. Even if I hadn’t read Ostrend’s record, I’d have remembered. A crisis buried far in the past, dredged up out of my subconscious.

“It should have stayed there, buried! Narcosynthesis is a fine and useful psychiatric treatment, but we reached beyond the normal limits. Ancestral memories, transmitted through the genes and chromosomes from my ancestors down through my lineage until I inherited them.

“Latent memories of one of my ancestors—a man who has become a myth. Who may never have existed.

“Yet I know he existed. He lived, in a time and world so long ago that nothing but legends remain now. And he went through a crisis there that was ineradicably impressed on his mind—and buried in his unconscious.

“A memory he passed down to his sons, and his son’s sons.

“A memory of a voyage—in a ship manned by heroes, with Orpheus at the prow. Orpheus, whose lyre could raise the dead—

“Orpheus—who is a myth today. Like the other heroes who went on that great, fabulous voyage—

“My memories went back and back to time’s dawn.

“I was Jason!

“Jason—who sailed in the *Argo* to Colchis and stole the Golden Fleece from the sacred serpent-temple, where scaled Python guarded that shining treasure of the god Apollo. . . .

“The memories did not pass. They stayed with me. I seemed to have two minds. Things I could never have heard or noticed as Jay Seward I heard and saw after that narcosynthetic treatment. The sea called me. I—I heard a voice sometimes. It wasn’t calling Jay Seward. It was calling Jason, Jason of Iolcus, Jason of the *Argo*. And I was Jason. At least, I had his memories.

“Some of them. Shadowy, confused—but I remembered many things from the life of that ancestor of mine. And some of those things, I knew, could never have existed on this old Earth of ours. Not even in the enchanted seas of the Argonauts.

“The conch shell of Triton seemed to summon me. Where? Back to that forgotten past? I didn’t know. . . .

“I tried to get away. I tried to break the spell. It was impossible to continue my work, of course. And Ostrend couldn’t help me. No one could. I came up here as a last resort over a year ago. In the train, out of Seattle, I thought for a while that I’d got away.

“But I hadn’t. Up here, a year ago, I heard that soundless call from the sea—and thought of ghosts and ghostly ships. I was afraid. Terribly afraid. I slept under the pines, and the wind brought to me the crack of sails in the wind, the creak of oarlocks.

“And it brought the sound of a sweet, inhuman voice that called, ‘Jason! Jason of Thessaly! Come to me!’

“That night I answered the call. . . .”

---

I stood on a rocky ledge jutting out above the swirl of waters. My memory was cloudy and confused. I could remember tossing uneasily in my sleeping-bag. I could remember hearing the wild, faint humming of tuned strings and a strange murmur that was not a voice—yet I knew what spoke. It was not the call that summoned Jason by name.

No, this was very different.

I was standing above the water. The fog had come down, smothering and silent. The moon must still have been high, for a silver radiance filtered through the mist, and beneath me washed the sea, dark and filigreed white with foam.

Very dimly I heard the sighing of strings and that alien murmuring from the fog. I knew the murmur. It was—the *Argo’s* keel, speaking in a voice none but a seer could understand.

Something moved out there on the water, hidden by fog. I heard oarlocks creak. Slowly, slowly a shape swam into view. First I saw the great square of the sail, hanging limp against the high mast, and then, shadowy in that unearthly light, I saw the prow sweep toward me.

Out of the fog the ship loomed—driving toward the jut of rock where I stood. One instant it rushed past beneath me, the decks not eight feet away, the mast towering above me as it dipped landward. I saw the oars go up in unison to avoid snapping off against the rock.

There were figures on the benches—on the deck. Unreal figures. One held a lyre. The music swept out from that in rhythmic echoes.

But more urgent still was the wordless voice that bubbled from the *Argo’s* keel as the ship plunged on beneath me.

The memories of Jason surged up in my mind. Coldness and the shuddering sweat that always accompanied that wave of recollection swept chillingly over me. Jason—Jason—I was Jason!

As the ship rushed past I sprang out, with all my strength, toward those ghostly decks sliding away below. They were solid planks I struck. My knees buckled. I fell and rolled, and then sprang up instantly, staring about me.

The shore had already vanished. Only the silver mists surrounded the ship, luminous with moonlight.

Jason? No, I was not Jason. I was Jay Seward—I—

Realization, volition, came back to me terrifyingly.

I knew what it was I had done—or had seemed to do—and I knew this was either a dream, or madness.

## CHAPTER II

### *Mystic Ship*

Beneath my feet the deck felt real. The salt spray tasted of brine; the wind that flung it in my face was a real wind. And yet I knew there was about this incredible ship something wildly unreal.

For I could see the rowers below me, and through them I could see the long pale swelling of the waves. Every muscle of those bending backs was clear as they leaned to the oar-pull, but clear in the way a dream might be in the instant of awakening. The oarsmen did not see me. Their faces were set with the strain of the work they bent to, skillfully driving toward—what goal?

I stood there dazed for a moment, peering about me into the mist, balancing to the roll of the ship with a deftness not my own, as if my body had slipped smoothly into even the physical and muscular memories of another body, as my brain had meshed memories with another brain.

Except for the noises of the ship herself there was no sound around me. I heard the slap of waves against the prow, the creak of timber, the rhythmic song of oars against their locks. I could hear clearly the music of that lyre on the arm of the shadowy figure in the prow. But the men were voiceless.

I remember how the hair lifted on my head when I first saw a translucent warrior throw back his bearded chin and bellow out a song that swept from rower to rower along the benches until the double ranks swayed to a single rhythm and the hand of the lyrist swept his strings to lead them—in silence.

The music I could hear; the men were ghosts.

The sound of my own voice startled me. All my bewilderment and the deep, stirring terrors that had been moving at the back of my brain seemed to crystallize suddenly in the shout I gave.

“Who are you?” I roared at the voicelessly singing oarsmen. “Answer me! Who are you?”

My own voice rolled back to me out of the mist as if from a ghostly sounding-board. “*Who are you—are you—are you?*” And I knew I could no more reply than the oarsmen could. Who was I, indeed? Jay Seward, Doctor of Medicine? Or Jason son of Aeson, King of Iolcus? Or a ghost on a ghostly ship, manned by—what? I shouted again, an angry, wordless cry, and leaped down to the nearest galley bench, reaching to seize the shoulder of the oarsman nearest me.





Slowly Circe lifted the mask with both hands—lifted it free and raised it high  
(CHAPTER III)



Panyr lay back upon the turf and laughed at me, bellowing with merriment  
(CHAPTER IV)

My hand shot helplessly through empty air. The oarsmen sang on.

I don't know how long it was I raged up and down the galley benches, shouting to the heedless singers, dashing my fists through their unreal bodies, trying in vain to wrench the oars from those misty hands that would not yield an inch to all my tugging.

I gave it up at last and climbed back onto the raised central deck, panting and bewildered. The shadowy man at the prow still swept the lyre-strings in a strangely ringing melody, oblivious to me as his companions were. The same breeze lifted my hair and tossed the pale curling beard of the lyrist, but I might have been the ghost and he the reality for all the heed he paid me. I reached for his wrist to halt the music, and his wrist passed through my fingers like the breeze.

I touched the harp. Like the relentlessly plying oars, the harp was real. I could touch it, but I could not move it. Even the strings were rigid to my hand, though they vibrated with wild, strange music to the lyrist's touch.

I said, "Orpheus—Orpheus?" in an uncertain voice, remembering who it was who had stood at the prow of *Argo*, and yet unsure of myself when I spoke his name. For Orpheus, if he ever lived at all, must have been dead for more than three thousand years.

He did not hear me. He played on; the rowers toiled, the ship slid forward through the mist. She at least was real, alive with that strange life all ships share, breathing with the

motion of plank on plank as the seas lifted her. Out of my memories of the past I knew Jason's old love for his ship—Jason's only love, I thought, despite his many lighter loves for womankind. Jason was a strange man while he lived, blind in so many ways, ruthless, ready to betray all who trusted him in his grim pursuit of his goal. But to *Argo* herself he was faithful all his life—and in the end it was *Argo* who slew him.

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Her bubbling voice, not for my ears, spoke mysteriously between the waves and the decks. She was more than ship as she drove on toward—toward whatever end my fate and Jason's had decreed. And then as if the mist itself were answering my wonder, the silvery blindness parted before me and I saw—

Sunlight struck down upon the water and turned it to a dark and dazzling blue. A long row of blinding white breakers dashed themselves high against the marble walls of—an island? A castled island, fortified down to the very brink of the sea, and lifting white towers against a sky as blue as the water. All white and deep dark blue was that scene unveiled before me.

"This isn't out of our time," I thought, staring. "It can't be. This is something seen through the lens of legend—wine-dark waters and encastled shores like something Euripides might have written millenniums ago."

The mists drew farther back, and it was not an island but a long peninsula, walled to the water's edge and separated from the mainland by a mighty wall that reared its bulk like a tower into the blue air. For a moment the scene lay motionless before me, without life, a city of legend.

Then I heard trumpets and there was a sudden stirring along the walls. Voices echoed across the water. The *Argo* swept forward parallel with the shore. I thought the rhythm of the lyre had quickened a little. There was uneasiness in it now, and the oarsmen bent to their work with a swifter stroke.

The trumpets roared louder. I caught the distinct clashing, as of weapons against shields, and suddenly out from beyond the seaward tip of the promontory a blinding vessel swept. She was all gold. The eye could not look upon her directly in that blaze of sunlight. But in my first glimpse before I had to screen my gaze I saw the double rows of oars flashing along her sides as she swept toward us, water foaming away from her dazzling prow.

The music of Orpheus' lyre was a wild alarm now. Rhythm beat fast upon rhythm until the oars of the *Argo* were pumping like the beats of a quickened heart. Swifter and swifter we flew over the water, that tower-walled promontory sweeping away past us and behind us, shouts from the golden ship echoing over the distance between.

She was a bireme, with twice the power of ours, but she was heavier in proportion and the *Argo's* hull slipped over the water with a lightness that touched my heart somewhere at a point where it was Jason's heart answering to the beauty and the swiftness of his beloved ship.

The city fell astern. We were running through mist again, but the outlines of wooded shores and low hills loomed up alongside now and fell behind again as the *Argo* answered the beat of her ghostly rowers. And ever behind us the bellow of horns rolled out upon the fog and the golden ship at our stern blazed even through the mists between us.

It was a close race, and a very long one. Not until nearly at the end of it did I know what our goal was. Then out of the fog the cypress island loomed, low-shored, edged with white beaches, and the dark trees brooding down to the edge of the pale sand. Jason knew the island.

"Aeaea," his memory murmured in my brain. And subtle fears stirred with it. "Aeaea, Island of the Enchantress."

From astern the cries of the pursuers were as loud as they had been at the beginning of the chase, hours ago now. The clashings of their weapons were like the clash of metallic teeth in a dragon's jaws, stretched to devour us. When the golden ship's lookout sighted the cypress trees in the fog he must have signaled for redoubled speed, for I heard the sharp crack of whips, and the blinding vessel fairly leaped forward. She was overhauling us fast, though Orpheus' disembodied lyre screamed out in rhythms that made the pulses pound in answer, and the ghostly oarsmen bent their sinewy backs desperately over the oars.

For one flashing moment the golden ship stood almost alongside, and I could look with half-blinded eyes across her shining decks and see the men in shining armor that matched their ship, straining across the rails and shaking swords and javelins at us.

Then she sprang ahead. There was an instant when the blaze of her blotted out that dark island before us. Suicidally she shot across our bows, and I could see the tense, excited faces of her crew turned toward us, pale against the dazzle of their shining mail.

Orpheus' lyre broke the rhythm of the stroke for one heartbeat. Then the shadowy fingers swept those magical strings and a scream of hatred and vengeance leaped from the lyre. It shrieked like a living thing, like a Fury ravening for the kill.

All around me I saw the voiceless shout of answer sweeping the *Argo's* crew. I saw the bearded heads go back, grinning with effort and triumph, and I saw the brawny backs bending as one in a last tremendous pull that shot their craft forward—forward straight into the golden side looming before us.

For one heartbeat I realized vividly how vulnerable I was—I alone, among all this bodiless crew to whom destruction could mean nothing. *Argo* and I were real, and the golden ship was real, and the ghostly Argonauts were driving us both to what looked like certain doom.

I remember the terrific, rending crash as we struck. The deck jolted beneath me and there was a blaze ahead as if the golden ship were incandescent and flashing into flame with its own brilliance in that moment of disaster. I remember shouts and screams, the clash of weapon on shield, and above it all the wild, shrill keening of lyre-strings swept by no mortal hands.

Then *Argo* fell apart beneath me and the cold seas met above my head. . . .

### CHAPTER III

#### *Temple in the Grove*

A voice was calling through billows of thinning mist. "Jason of Iolcus," it cried very sweetly in my dreams. "Jason of Thessaly—Jason of the *Argo*—waken—waken and answer me!"

I sat up on the pale, cool sand and listened. Waves lapped a shore still marked with the track where I must have dragged myself out of the placid surf. My clothes were stiff with brine, but dry. I must have lain here a long while.

The dark cypress trees rustled secretly together, hiding whatever lay behind them. There was no other sound. No sign of survivors from the golden ship, no sign of the ship itself. The *Argo* I had last felt shattering asunder beneath my feet might have returned with its ghostly crew to the land of ghosts for all I could see of it now. I was alone on the pale sands of Aeaëa, which was the Enchantress' Isle.

"Jason of the *Argo*—answer me, come to me—Jason, Jason! Do you hear?"

The voice had a clear, inhuman sweetness, as if the island itself were calling me by name. And the call was compelling. I found myself on my feet, and swaying a little, without knowing I had risen. The summons seemed to come from between the cypresses directly at my back. I floundered up the sand and plunged into the grove, only partly of my own volition, so sweetly compelling was that cry from the misty depths of the isle.

I could see only a little way ahead, for the fog seemed to hang in veils among the trees. But I thought that I was no longer alone. There was deep silence all around me, but a listening and watching silence. Not inimical—not menacing. Interested—that was it. Detached interest watched me on my way through the mist-drenched grove, eyes that followed me aloofly, not caring, but interested to see what my fate would be.

In that silence punctuated by the dripping of mist and moisture from the trees, and by no other earthly sound, I followed the calling voice through fog and forest, to the very heart of the island.

When I saw the white temple looming against the dark trees I was not surprised. Jason had been here before. He knew the way. Perhaps he knew who called, but I did not. I thought when I saw the face of the speaker, I would not feel surprised either, but I could not picture her yet.

Motion stirred among the pillars of the temple as I crossed the misty clearing. Robed and veiled figures came out from the shadow of the columns and bent their hidden heads in greeting. No one spoke. I knew, somehow, perhaps with Jason's age-old knowledge, that while that voice called from the temple, no one on the island must speak but the Voice itself—and I?

"Jason of Thessaly," the voice was saying in a low, caressing cadence. "Jason, my lover—enter! Come to me, Jason, my beloved."

The robed figures stepped back. I went under the shadow of the portico and into the temple.

Except for the flame that moved restlessly upon the altar, it was dark here. I could see a tall triple image looming up majestic and terrible behind the fire, and even the fire was strange, burning greenish, with a cold flickering cadence, and its motion more like the ceaseless, uneasy twisting of serpents than the warm flicker of ordinary firelight.

The woman before the altar was completely robed, like the others. I thought she moved with an odd sort of stiffness in her concealing garments. At the sound of my foot on the marble she swung around, and when I saw her face I forgot for a timeless moment her curious slowness of movement, and the altar fires, and even the identity of that triple figure above us, whose dark import I knew well.

It was a pale face, inhumanly pale and smooth, like a face of alabaster. There was the purity of alabaster in the long, sloping planes of the cheeks and the modeling of the eye-sockets and the delicately flattened brow. But a warmth burned beneath the smoothness, and the lips were dark red and warmly full. And the eyes burned with a lambent flame as green and strange as the strange fire on the altar.

Black brows swept in a winged arc above them in a look of delicate surprise, and her hair was glossily black, lustrous with purple highlights, dressed elaborately in a stately display of ringlets. But I found that Jason knew that hair unbound, how it fell in a shining black river over shoulders as smoothly curved as the alabaster of her face, and each separate hair of it burning the flesh like a blue-hot wire when he brushed it with his hand.

---

Jason's memories welled up in my brain and Jason's voice filled my throat with Jason's own words in his own Grecian tongue.

"Circe—" I heard myself saying thickly. "Circe, my beloved."

The fire leaped upon the altar, casting green highlights upward on her beautiful, terribly familiar face. And I could have sworn that a fire leaped green in her eyes to match it. The shadows in the temple swayed, and emerald flickerings ran shivering over the walls, like the light reflected from water.

She stepped back away from me, toward the altar, putting out both hands stiffly in a strangely awkward gesture of renunciation.

"No, no," she said in that rich, sweet voice. "Not yet—not yet, Jason. Wait."

She turned away from me and faced the image above the flame. And this time I looked at it fully, and let my memories and Jason's together tell me what goddess it was who stood tri-formed in her temple.

Hecate.

Goddess of the dark of the moon, as Diana was the bright goddess of the light of the moon. Hecate, She-Who-Works-From-Afar, mysterious patroness of sorcery about whom only half-truths have ever been known. Goddess of the crossways and the dark deeds, tri-formed to face the three ways at her sacred crossroads. Hellhounds follow her abroad by night, and when the dogs bay, Hellenes see her passing. Hecate, dark and alien mother of Circe the Enchantress.

Circe's robed arms moved about the flames in a ritual gesture. She said, quite softly, "Now he is come to us, Mother. Jason of Iolcus is here again. Surely my task is done?"

Silence. The green light crawled upon the walls, and the goddess' faces looked impassively into nothingness. On the altar in the stillness that followed, the fire sank very low, sank to a soft greenish ember over which the light moved restlessly—coiling—twining slowly.

Circe turned to face me, her robed shoulders drooping. The greenlit eyes met mine and there was infinite sadness and infinite sweetness in her voice.

"It is not the hour," she murmured. "It is not the place. Farewell for a little time, my beloved. I wish—but the hour will not be mine. Only remember me, Jason, and the hours of our love!"

Before I could speak she lifted both hands to her head and moved long fingers across her face. Her head bent and the lustrous curls swung forward to hide her eyes. There was an inexplicable movement.

For the second time I felt the separate hairs lift on my own head. Because I was watching the impossible. I was watching Circe raise her head from her shoulders in both hands, and watching the head come free—



Unceasingly the knotted cudgels of the centaurs smashed down, spreading red death, as we moved on through the golden guards (CHAPTER XII)

It was a mask. It must have been a mask. She lowered it in her hands and looked at me above the lifeless alabaster features, the clustering dark curls. There was something shocking about the eyes that met mine in her altered face, but for the moment I was staring speechlessly at that impossibly severed head. All of it was there, the elaborate curls whose touch I half



remembered, the warm red lips closed on a line of secret, smiling knowledge, the eyes that could burn so green closed, too, behind pale lids and thick shadowy lashes. It had lived and spoken. Now it slept and was only a waxen mask.

Slowly I raised my eyes to the face of the woman who had worn the mask. And I saw gray hair, thin over a gray scalp, weary black eyes netted in wrinkles, a tired and wise and subtly terrified face grooved with the lines of old, old age.

“You are—Jason,” she said in a cracked voice, thin and weary. “But Kronos has shaken the cup till the dice reverse themselves. The same dice, yes—but with new numbers upward.”

Something seemed to click over in my brain as she stood there speaking, so that I heard her words only dimly in the sudden, appalling realization that this was I—Jay Seward—here on an incredible island facing an incredible altar.

Perhaps it was the very matter-of-factness in that tired old voice that wakened me at last to my own predicament.

---

Kronos, she had said. The time-god. Had time swept backward three thousand years? Had the *Argo* really borne me back into the gray mists of the past, to a world that had been legend for all the ages while Hellas rose and crumbled at the feet of Rome? While Rome itself sent out its walking walls across Europe—while Kronos watched the sands trickling through his eternal fingers?

No, it was not the whole answer. Some alien hand had stooped over this world. Strangeness whispered in the earth and waters and wind. Perhaps there is in men’s very flesh a certain buried sense that will warn him when he has left the world from which Adam’s flesh was shaped. For I knew that much.

This was not—Earth.

I remembered briefly how Euripides had closed his terrible story of Medea and Jason, and the lines seemed to ring with prophetic force in my mind now.

—to man strange dooms are given. . . .

And the end men looked for cometh not,

And a path is there where no man thought. . . .

A path that had led me—where? To the Earth of legend, perhaps! A long-forgotten world where the Isle of the Enchantress lay on some mystic Aegean, worshipping the tri-formed goddess.

Until now I had been caught in the grip of forces almost beyond my control. Quite beyond, if you consider that one such force lay across my mind like a spur and a rein combined—Jason’s memories. It was dreamlike. And in that dream it had seemed right to me that I bend to the wind’s will, the wind that filled *Argo’s* sails and carried Circe’s voice to me under the dark cypresses. Man bows always to the thralldom of enchantment, in his superstitious soul. Especially the man of long ago—of now—whose daily life was peopled with the gods and demons of his own fear-wrought imaginings.

Fear.

The word roused me.

I knew quite suddenly what it was that brooded like a thunderous shadow above Jason’s memories. Fear—of what? Why was I there?

Memories of the ancient wisdom of Euripides stirred in my mind again. What had it been that—

—over sundering seas  
Drew me to Hellas, and the breeze  
Of midnight shivered, and the door  
Closed of the salt unsounded water. . . .

I looked around me with suddenly frightened eyes. The green light that crawled upon the altar showed me every detail of Hecate's temple, and every detail was alien. Panic rose in my throat and the floor sloped beneath my feet downward into a black abyss.

I knew with a sudden unanswerable terror that this was impossible. Either I was sane or I was frantically insane, and in either case it was horrible! Nightmare— The old woman's eyes were upon me, and I thought the closed lids of the living head she held flickered to look, too.

I whirled and ran.

Perhaps I ran because I was sane again. Perhaps because the memories of Jason overwhelmed me. I seemed to feel again the planks of the *Argo* shattering beneath me.

Nothing was solid.

Nothing was real.

There was a stirring among the robed figures at the door of the temple. I heard a thin, cracked voice crying behind me,

“Panyr—Panyr! After him!”

And I remember hearing a loud staccato of footsteps ringing hollowly in the still temple. Then I was out among the cypresses and running, running—

What I ran from I don't know. From this fantastic world itself, perhaps, or from Jason. Yes, that was it. I ran from Jason, who clung inexorably to the fabric of my mind, pouring the black blind panic of his fear into my soul. Such fear as we have no name for today!

It was terror that only primitive peoples know, assailed by the vastness of the unknown. A fear like an ecstasy that used to fall upon men in the old days when Pan himself peered out at them, horned and grinning, through the trees.

Panic they called it, because they knew that horned head by name.

I ran toward the distant murmur of the sea. Mist drew its soft veils before me, blurring the way. And behind me, muffled by the pounding of my own feet, I heard the clatter of feet that followed. A clatter like hoofbeats thudding upon turf and stone—after me!

I could feel the aching pound of my heart crashing against my ribs. My breath sobbed between dry lips. I ran blindly, wildly, not knowing where I ran or why—until I could run no more.

Utterly spent at last, I dropped by a bubbling green pool in a little glade where all quiet seemed to dwell. Exhausted with flight and terror, I buried my face in the sward and lay breathing in racking gasps.

Someone—something—came quietly up beside me, and paused.

Within me some last extremity of terror—Jason's terror—bade me cower here in the grass forever, if need be, before I lifted my head and looked the terror in the face. But my own mind, swallowed up in Jason's, roused a little at that, and rebelled. Whatever Jason's experiences in life might have been, Jay Seward knew better than that.

There are no fears in any man's life which cowering can solve.

With an infinite effort, that seemed to crack the rebellious muscles of my neck, I lifted my face so that I could see who stood beside me.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Trust Not a Faun*

Later, I came to know Panyr very well. But he never seemed less strange to me than in that first moment when our eyes met by the pool. The barrier of his alienage always had power to make me pause a little in sheer disbelief. Yet most of him was—human. I think if he had been less nearly human he would have been easier to accept.

Goat-horns and goat-legs—that was the measure of his difference from the rest of mankind. Everything else was normal enough on the surface. Perhaps his bearded face, with the slant yellow eyes and the snub nose, held a wisdom and a queer, malicious kindness unknown to ordinary men. He did not look old. His tangled curls were black and glossy, but his eyes were betraying.

“So now the fear has gone?” he asked in his strangely deep voice, looking down on me with a faint grin. His tone was conversational. He was squatting on his hairy haunches very comfortably and his eyes were at once amused and understanding.

“There’ll be a song to sing about Panyr,” he went on, and suddenly laughed, a flat bray of sound. “Panyr the Mighty. So terrible even the hero Jason flees from him like a frightened boy.”

I watched in silence, swallowing the indignation that swelled in my throat, knowing he had the right to laugh. But at Jason, not at me. Did he know that? He rose on his crooked legs and walked, with an odd, rocking gait, toward the pool, stood looking down at his own reflection thoughtfully.

“My beard wants combing,” he said, scratching it with strong, hairy fingers. “Should I summon a dryad from that olive tree yonder— I wonder, now, Jason. Would you fly in terror from a young dryad, too? Perhaps I’d better not risk it. The pretty thing would weep, thinking you scorned her, and then I would have to console her—and to tell you the truth, Jason of Iolcus, I’m a little tired after the run you gave me.”

I think that from that moment I trusted Panyr—strange product of a strange, lost world. Even when I saw his yellow goat-pupiled eyes glancing toward the wood across my shoulder, saw the look of fleeting satisfaction cross his face. I thought then it was a dryad he watched, his talk had been so casually convincing. Yes, I trusted Panyr, with his snub nose and mocking grin, and those curved horns rising from the tangled curls. Even if the fear had not left me already, I believe Panyr’s words and his smile would have dispelled it.

“Is the fear gone now?” he asked, suddenly quiet and unsmiling.

I nodded. It was curious how completely that panic had drained out of me, perhaps in the catharsis of the chase itself, perhaps in some snapping of the link that had given Jason’s mind ascendancy over mine.

And yet the fear was not gone completely. Far back, deep down, the formless shadow still couched. Jason knew things I did not—yet. And perhaps he had reason for terror. Perhaps soon I too might know it.

Panyr nodded at me as if he had been watching the thought-processes move through my mind. He grinned, flirting his short tail, took a couple of prancing steps beside the water. He glanced down at it.

“Drink,” he said. “You must be thirsty, after all that running. Bathe if you like. I’ll keep guard.”

Guard against what? I wondered, but did not ask. I needed time to marshal my bewildered thoughts.

First I drank, and then dropped my clothing from me and lowered myself into the icy waters. Panyr laughed at my involuntary gasp and shudder. The pool was not large enough for swimming, but I scooped up handfuls of sand and scrubbed my skin until it burned. I was washing away the sweat of fear—of Jason’s fear, not mine.

I was thinking, too. But I found no answer. Not until I had emerged from the pool and was dressed again, and sat down on the moss to look at the satyr searchingly.

“Well,” he said prosaically, “Circe had a fine welcome from her lover. You ran like a frightened hare. I never had much love for Jason, but if you are he—”

I said, “I’m not Jason. I remember Jason’s life, but three thousand years have passed in my world since he died. New nations have risen, new tongues are spoken.” I paused there, startled, realizing for the first time that I was speaking the old Greek with effortless fluency, and with an accent quite different from the one I had learned at the university. Jason’s memories, couched in Jason’s tongue and flowing from my lips?

“You speak well enough,” Panyr said, chewing a grass-blade. He rolled over on his stomach and kicked at the moss with one hoof. “Your world and mine are linked somehow, strangely. I don’t know how, nor do I care, really. There’s little the goat-men do care for.” A gleam showed yellow in his eyes. “Well, a few things. The hunt, and—we’re a free people. The hand of man is never raised against us, now. We walk in any city, in any forest, without harm. I might be a useful friend to you, Jason.”

“I think I may need friends,” I said. “You could begin by telling me what really happened back there in the temple. And why I’m here.”

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Panyr leaned toward the pool and ruffled the waters with one hand. He stared down. “The naiad is silent,” he said with a sideward glance at me. “Well, there are heroes aplenty, and great deeds and mighty gods in the annals of this world. But the heroes are all long dead, and most of the gods with them. We fauns are not gods. Perhaps it’s the weakness in you I like, Jason. You’re no strutting hero. Perhaps it was the way you ran. *Ohé*, by my Father, how you ran! How your heels spurned the earth!” And the faun lay back and bellowed with rather embarrassing merriment.

I could not repress a grin. I knew what a picture I must have made, fleeing through the forest. “You may have many days of laughter ahead of you, then,” I said. “Judging from what I’ve seen of this world of yours, I expect I may do a good deal of running.”

Panyr’s shouts redoubled. Finally he sat up, wiping his eyes and still chuckling. “A man who can laugh at himself—” he said. “The heroes never knew how. Perhaps it means you’re not a hero, but—”

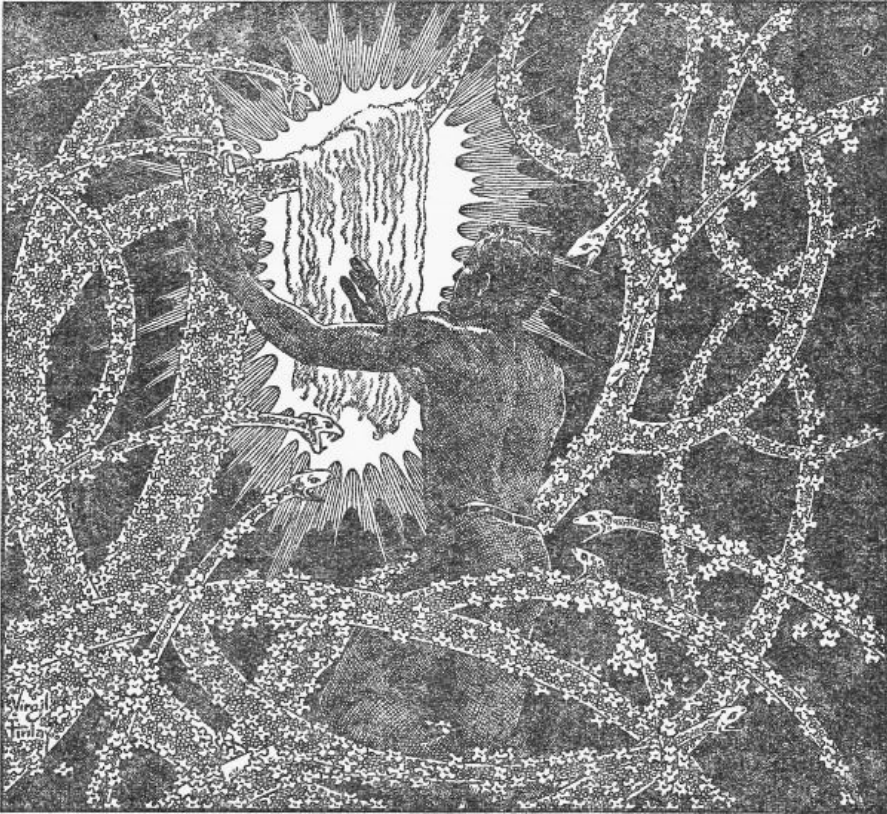
“Of course,” I interrupted him. “When I have a little more knowledge and a weapon of some sort, in that case, others may do the running.”

“That too I like,” Panyr said.

“What was it that really happened in the temple?” I demanded, tired of circumlocutions. “Was the priestess Circe? Or was it a mask?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? I never wore it! I only know that since the first Circe died, whenever the priestess who prays in her name wears it, that priestess speaks with the same

age-old voice and looks out with the same eyes that Odysseus once knew. When she lifts the mask, she is herself—as you saw. But something in the mask remains alive and haunted by an old, old love and an old hate—something that was Circe once and cannot rest. Because of Jason. You tell me what it was—or ask me no more questions.”



Hanging among the serpent-branches burned the Fleece (CHAPTER XIII)

“I don’t know what it was!” I said despairingly.

“You’re here, though.” He scratched the curls at the root of his left horn and showed his teeth in a grin. “You’re here, and I think for a purpose. A pity you chose the wrong time to answer the Circe’s summons. If it had been I, I’d have answered when she was forty years younger. She was a pretty thing in those days. Oh, not for me. There are dryads enough to keep Panyr busy. But if the Circe had called me as she called you, I’d have come sooner. Or later. If the young Circe were alive, now, it might be worth your while to find her.”

“The young Circe?” I echoed.

“You saw how old the Old Circe is. Drawing very near her end, if you ask me. I was a young buck when Hecate’s curse was laid on Jason, and I’ve seen many Circes come and go since then. I forget how many—one loses count after one’s old friends go. As for the newest Circe—well, she was worth the seeing. But the priests of Helios slew her three days ago.” He cocked his horned head and grinned at me.

“You don’t seem to care very much,” I said. “Helios—what’s that?”

“Apollo’s fortress, the golden city, where they worship the Ram with fire and blood. There’s an old war between Hecate and Apollo. Legend said it could never have been lost or won until the *Argo* brought Jason back—which is why you’re here, I suppose. Wars between gods are not for me, but I hear the rumors.”

“You talk as if Circe had remembered Jason for a long while,” I said slowly, trying to sort out a modicum of sense from his rambling. “The truth is that she’ll never rest until she reaches him again through—through me? Then that summons you speak of must have been unanswered for a long time.”

“A very long time. The lives of many priestesses who wore the Mask and called in Circe’s name. While the memories of the dead Jason slept, perhaps, deep in the minds of many generations in your own world. Until somehow, something awoke in you.”

“But what do they want of me?”

“Hecate had a plan. I think it meant marching on Helios. But the plan hinged on Jason, and she was not sure. She knew the old Jason, and she must have seen him running sometime in the past!”

“You know Hecate’s plans so well,” I said bluntly. “Are you a priest of hers?”

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He laughed and slapped a furry thigh half in derision. “A priest—Panyr? I lived here before the first Circe came. I remember Circe herself, and Odysseus and all his swine. I’ve met Hermes walking over this very grass, not touching it, you understand, just skimming over the tips of the blades.” His yellow eyes half closed and he sighed. “Well, those were great days. That was before the mists came and the gods went, and all things changed.”

“Tell me what they want of me—do you know?” I asked without much hope of information. It was difficult enough getting the basic matters straight, without following up every lead he offered me, grinning in his curly beard. His mind seemed to leap from subject to subject with goatlike agility.

But when he wanted to be clear, he could be. This time he chose to answer.

“Jason swore an oath before Hecate’s altar, long ago,” he said obliquely. “He broke the oath. Do you remember that? He went to Circe afterward, to ask a favor of her. That was the real Circe, of course, when she still lived. Something strange happened between them. No one understands that, except perhaps yourself. What was it that set Circe on fire for you? What was it made her hate you as hotly as she loved you? Hecate’s curse and Circe’s love and hate have not died to this day. I think your coming will round the circle out and you may have difficult deeds to do before you’re free again, There’s one thing to remember—unless you find the young Circe, you’ll know no peace.”

“The young Circe? But—”

“Oh, yes, the priests of Helios slew her. I told you that.” He grinned again and then sprang suddenly to his feet, hoofs clicking briskly together. His eyes glanced across my shoulder toward the trees.

“You have an urgent engagement just now,” he told me, looking down into my eyes with an expression I could not read. “If you’re Jason and a hero, you have my heartiest blessing. If you’re not—well, I’d like you better, but your chances are worse. Let me give you two more words of wisdom before I go.”

He bent down, and his yellow gaze caught mine with a compelling stare. “Without the young Circe,” he said, “you’ll never know peace. Remember that. As for the other thing—” He sprang suddenly away from me with a goatish bound, his tail twitching. Over one bare

brown shoulder he gave me a parting grin. “As for the other thing,” he called, “—never trust a goat-man!”

It was too late. He meant it to be too late. Even as a shock of tardy alarm shot through me and I tried in vain to turn and rise in one motion on the slippery grass, I caught the flash of golden armor directly at my side, a blade poised overhead between me and the misty sky.

Panyr had done his work well. His laughter, his rambling talk had very efficiently covered any sounds that might have come to me in warning from behind. I had time for one dazzling glimpse of a man above me and of others crowding in at his back.

Then the sword fell. . . .

A long period of darkness followed, and then I became aware of voices speaking nearby.

“—turned the flat of your blade? You should have killed him!”

“Kill Jason? You fool, what would the high priest say?”

“If he’s Jason, all Apollo asks is his quick death.”

“Not yet. Not until the young Circe—”

“The young Circe died on Apollo’s altar three days ago.”

“Did you see it? Do you believe all you hear, young fool?”

“Everyone knows she died—”

“Does Jason know? Phrontis wants him alive, because of her. We’re to let him escape, do you understand that? He must be let free and unharmed when we get ashore. I know my orders.”

“All the same, if—”

“Hold your tongue and do as you’re told. That’s all you’re fit for.”

“What I say is, we shouldn’t trust that faun. If he betrayed Jason, won’t he betray us too? Everyone knows you can’t trust a faun.”

“Believe me, my lad, the faun knew what he was doing. In the long run I think he works for Hecate. Perhaps Hecate herself wills us to capture this Jason. That’s not our affair. The ways of the gods are outside human understanding. Be silent now. I think this Jason is stirring.”

“Shall I give him another thwack to keep him quiet?”

“Put your sword away. Is that the only use of heads? Be silent or I’ll crack yours.”

I rolled over blindly on a hard surface that rose and fell gently. For one nostalgic moment I had a feeling of terrible longing, a hopeless yearning for the ghostly ship of Thessaly that had sunk beneath me in these strange waters. Jason, mourning for his lost *Argo*.

This was not the *Argo*, but it was a ship. And as my mind came back to me, burdened with the memories of Jason’s mind, I heard in the wind the far, faint braying of trumpets, not Triton’s conch, but a brazen crying, importunate and menacing.

I opened my eyes. Bright golden decks blazed around me. Two men in dazzling mail, silhouetted against the blue sky, watched me disinterestedly. There must have been a second galley following the *Argo*, I thought in confusion. One we had rammed and sank, but there was this ship still in waiting offshore.

One of the men above me lifted a quizzical eyebrow and met my eyes.

“We’ll be in Helios in half an hour,” he said. “I wouldn’t be in your shoes for a good sum, Jason of Iolcus.”

## CHAPTER V

### *Priests of Apollo*

Veiling mists parted, and for the second time I looked on Helios—Helios, burning with beauty, bright as the ardor of the sun-god himself. Trumpets called from its walls. I heard the bireme's overseer shout, whips cracked and the ship leaped forward toward the golden quays of Apollo's city.

Roughly my bright-mailed guardians hurried me down the gangplank to the pier. Anger was rising in me, perhaps the beginnings of rebellion, but I was too interested just now to protest. The city was a strange and fascinating place, lifting behind its bright walls in a series of multifomed roofs.

For a moment a familiar shivering and the icy sweat of Jason's memories swept me—the locked door in my mind opened and Jason's thoughts surged in. I thought, there will be darkness upon Helios soon.

The sound of trumpets shattered that foreboding. Shrill and high from the towering walls it rang. And Jason's fear walked with me as I stepped forward toward the gateway to Apollo's citadel.

Greek the city was—but more than Greek, too. Somewhere along the line of its culture it had turned a little away from the classic foundations, and there were hints of strange and fascinating newness blending with the familiar Greek simplicities of design.

Nowhere was this clearer to the eye than in the great golden temple in the heart of Helios. Gold it could not be, I told myself, unless the transmuting of metals was one of these people's secrets, but gold it seemed to the eye, as the galleys had been golden, dazzling, impossible to look at except obliquely. Three hundred feet high those glittering walls loomed, straight and unadorned except by their own brilliance. I did not need to be told that this was a god's house—Apollo the Sun.

Strangely, we did not move directly toward that shining building. The streets were thronged and narrow. Strange faces stared at me. And then, suddenly, I was no longer in the custody of the bireme's mailed men.

Their firm grip had vanished from my elbows. The street lay crowded and impersonal before me. For this instant I was free to run, if I chose to run. But remembering those voices overheard in the daze of my awakening, I stood still, rapid thoughts moving through my brain.

I was tired of being a pawn in the hands of these unknown forces. They thought I was wholly Jason, with Jason's full memories. They thought I knew where to run. Well, I did not know.

"Hanged if I'll play into their hands," I told myself angrily. "Let them take over, for I don't know the rules of the game! They want me to run. Well, we'll see what they do if I won't run. I want a talk with this high priest of theirs. I'll wait and see."

So I stood motionless while the crowd eddied around me, curiously glancing at my strange clothing as they passed. And in a moment or two I saw a gold-helmeted head peering at me from around the corner of a building. Almost laughing—for this game had its ridiculous side—I crossed the street toward him. Another soldier stood behind him.

"Let's go on to the temple," I said calmly. "I want a talk with this—Phrontis, did you call him? Will you lead, or shall I?"



The man scowled at me. Then a reluctant grin creased his face. He shrugged and pointed me on toward the looming walls of Apollo's golden house. In silence we three trudged toward it through the crowds.

We went up a ramp where a great gate creaked solemnly open to admit us. We passed through a doorway like a chasm in the gold. Then we were hurrying along hallways broad as city streets, and as crowded with courtiers and priests and men in armor that was pure gold to look at. No one noticed us. Jason's coming to Helios was apparently secret from these busy throngs.

Many races moved among the tall Greeks here, Nubians, Orientals in jeweled turbans, slave girls in bright tunics, young acolytes to priesthood, every age and condition of humanity seemed to swarm in the golden halls—from slim, pale Scythian courtesan to black-bearded Persian fighting-man.

We turned down what would have been an alleyway had these great streets been open to the sky, moved rapidly among more furtive denizens of the temple, and my guides paused before a grilled door, while the elder drew the hilt of his dagger across the grill, swiftly, twice over, making the iron ring with a sharp, vibrant music.

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Without a sound of hinges the door swung open. A violent shove upon my back thrust me stumbling forward. I got my footing again in a dim place inside, hearing the clang of the door behind me.

Then a girl's voice murmured, "Will my lord please to follow me?"

I looked down. A little Nubian girl with the silver collar of a Helot clasped about her slim, dark neck was smiling up at me, her teeth very bright in her pretty, polished-ebony face. She wore a turban and brief tunic of pale blue, and her feet were bare and ankleted with silver bells. She looked like someone's pampered servant, as she no doubt was. There was faint impudence in her smile, and she had a pretty, delicate face. Behind her another girl, golden-skinned and slant-eyed above her slave collar, watched me in silence.

"This way, my lord," the Nubian murmured, and went tinkling away down the dim hall. The other girl bent her head to me and fell in at my heels as I turned to follow.

There was only darkness at the end of the hall. No door, no hangings, no wall, but darkness like thick mist. My small guide paused before it and looked up at me with a gleam of teeth and eyes in the dimness.

"My lord will await the high priest of Apollo," she told me, "here in the high priest's private chambers. Will my lord please to enter?" And she put out a silver-braceleted arm and—drew back the darkness.

It was mist, but it folded away to her touch like cloth. No, not to her touch. I looked closer to be sure. It seemed to retreat beneath her hand, so that her gesture was like a command that it draw back—and it did. I walked forward under an opening torn in the dark by her gesture. Light poured softly through from beyond. I paused on the threshold.

The room before me was Greek again, but with a difference. White columns ringed the room, with darkness hanging between them like the darkness at the portal through which I had passed. Overhead were clouds, pale, billowing clouds faintly rosy as if touched by the first hint of sunset or dawn. Slowly, drowsily they were moving, and between them now and then I caught glimpses of a blue mosaic ceiling in which points of brilliance glittered like stars.

The floor was mossily green and gave a little underfoot. There were divans in the room, low tables, chests carved with scenes from familiar legends, for the most part, though a few

were unknown to me in subject and detail. A brazier glowed in the center of the room, sending out a fresh, aromatic fragrance.

I thought, the priest of Apollo does himself very well, and turned to look for the little slave girls who had brought me here. But I was alone. I wasn't even sure which dark-hung interval between the pillars had admitted me.

There was sudden music in the air. I looked around sharply at that thrill of unseen strings, and saw the darkness flow apart across the room, and a familiar horned head grinned at me through the opening.

As I stared I saw one sardonic, goat-yellow eye close in a slow wink. Then the faun laughed, glanced back across his shoulder, and said:

"Well, this is the man. At least, he's the one the Circe named Jason."

"Good," a new, deeper voice said. "The Circe should know, at least. Well—so this is Jason!"

Through the rift in the darkness came Panyr and, behind him, a tall, golden-haired man, one who might have stepped out of some antique myth. He looked like a demi-god—tall, strongly-made, with sleek muscles that rippled under his thin golden tunic, and blue eyes that held in them something faintly disturbing. A tinge of lambent radiance seemed to linger on his tanned skin, almost luminous, almost as though the sun-god himself, radiant Apollo, stood before me.

"This is Phrontis," the faun said. "I'll leave you with him. For a while, at least." He moved nimbly toward the pillars and the darkness parted to engulf him.

Phrontis went without haste to a couch, nodded toward another near him, and dropped down casually. He stared at me as I found a seat.

"Jason," he said lingeringly. "I suppose we are enemies, then. At least, our gods are enemies. Whether or not there's sense in it, is not for me to say. However, at the moment, there are no gods in this room—I hope. So drink with me while we talk."

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From behind his couch he brought a crystal vase, filled with yellow wine, sipped, and passed the goblet to me. I drank long and thirstily. Then I put it aside and took a deep breath.

"I haven't said I'm Jason," I told Phrontis.

He shrugged. "Well," he said disarmingly, "I am a young priest, as priests go. It's an accident that I hold the power that I do. There's much I don't know—and that may be to your advantage. The young are skeptical. Ophion, now—he is the real priest of Apollo, and he's very dangerous to you. Because he believes in the gods."

"You do not?"

"Why, yes," he said, smiling. "But I don't think they are gods, except to men like us. Is there wine left? Good." He drank. "Now, Jason, let us talk for a while like sensible men. Ophion is tortured by superstition, and he is justified enough. I have studied. It's true that there are things I don't understand—the ghostly ship, for example—but nevertheless it is only at the temple festivals that I fall on my face before Apollo. Here, in this private apartment, we can talk and question. For example, why didn't you escape when you were given every chance?"

"The ignorant are blind," I said. "And the blind don't run without making certain there are no gulfs in their path."

He watched me. "The ghostly ship sailed by Helios today, and two of our biremes gave chase. One of them brought you back. There are prophecies and legends and warnings—too

many of them! When Jason returns, it is said, a curse will either be lifted or redoubled. It's cryptic. Very much so. But if a man questions the gods, he's apt to be blasted with a thunderbolt. Which is an excellent way to discourage criticism." Phrontis chuckled, and shrugged again. "Well, this is not the sanctum or the altar chambers. You wear strange clothes. Generations have passed since the first Jason. I know you are not that one. Who are you?"

How could I explain? I looked at him dumbly, and he laughed and proffered the wine-vase again.

"I'm a student of science as well as of theology," he said. "Let me hazard a guess. There is another world somewhere in time and space, the world from which you came. You are of Jason's seed. Jason must have been of your world, originally. And you have Jason's memories, as the soul of the first Circe dwells in the Mask, and enters whichever Circe happens to serve the goddess in Aeaëa."

"You know that?" I asked. "Then you're the first one I've met here with any semblance of civilization. You're right, I think. But I'm still a blind man. I don't even know where I am."

"Nature tends toward the norm," he said. "This is my own theory, but I think it's accurate. By its own standards, your world is the normal one. Call it the positive pole in the time-stream. There are variants in your world, but they don't last long. Mutants are born; miracles happen, but not often, and they pass quickly. For they are the norm of *this* world—the negative pole in the time-stream.

"As for how these two worlds meet—to know that, we must be able to comprehend dimensions beyond our scope. Perhaps the course of your world's time is like a winding stream, while ours runs straight as a canal. And sometimes the two streams intersect. One such intersection, I know, came generations on generations ago for us. How long ago for you?"

"Jason lived three thousand years ago," I said.

"As long in our world," he said. "Three thousand years ago the two worlds intersected as the time-streams crossed. We have legends of the *Argo's* voyage but I think that voyage took place on both our worlds, yours and mine. They mingled for a while then. Look, now. I've said your world is the positive norm. Whenever too many negative concepts are built up there, the time-streams intersect, and an exchange takes place. Your—mutants—are drained off into my world, as our positive concepts are drained into yours, to strike the balance. Do you understand?"

I had a glimmering—the principle of the simple electromagnet. Positive force building up at one pole till polarity was reversed. Yes, I thought I could understand the principle. It was not basic logic by any means, but I could visualize a cosmic seesaw, continually rising and falling whenever the twin worlds crossed in that cosmic stream of time.

Phrontis spoke. "The gods are dangerous enough, but—well, they simply have non-positive powers, less limited in this world than in yours from which they may originally have come." He glanced toward the columns. "I hear Ophion, the high priest. He's still called that, though I perform most of his duties for him, since Apollo accepts only perfection in his priests. Ophion was injured some while ago.

"Listen, Jason who is not Jason. Ophion will speak to you. Remember, he has served the god for a long while and is superstitious. Use your judgment. I wanted to talk with you first, because I shall be high priest soon, and I prefer science to theology. Ophion believes in flaming thunderbolts to solve his problems. I have other ideas. We're both sensible men—so remember what I've told you."

He smiled and stood up as the darkness parted between two pillars, and a man hobbled awkwardly into the room.

Hephaestus—Vulcan! Vulcan, who was flung from Olympus by his father Zeus and lamed by that titanic fall. This man was godlike—and fallen too.

Within him glowed the same golden, luminous quality that seemed to permeate Phrontis, but it was the light of beauty permeating a crumbled Praxilitean marble, hinting at the original perfection despite the ruinous attacks of time.

It was not time alone that had marked Ophion's face, though. I thought that the attack had, somehow, come from within. As for his appearance, he might have been Phrontis' brother, but a brother who was not only older, but sadder, and afraid.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Echoes of the Past*

Ophion stood there, stooping a little, his heavy shoulders bent forward. His eyes were blue like Phrontis', but deeper, a winter sky as Phrontis' eyes were the summer sky. Lurking in those depths was a knowledge that Phrontis, for all his skeptical wisdom, did not have.

He said slowly, "You could not wait for me, Phrontis?"

"I've saved you trouble," Phrontis answered. "There'll be no need to waste your time in elementary questioning now. Jason knows all that is necessary for him to know."

"He is Jason?"

Phrontis waved toward the pillars. "The faun Panyr has said so."

Ophion turned to me. His voice was disinterested, as though he recited by rote.

"Listen, then," he said, "There has always been war between Apollo and the dark goddess Hecate. Long ago Jason stole the Golden Fleece, Apollo's special treasure, and fled to the protection of Hecate, on Aeaea's isle. Because the Circe loved Jason, she aided him. Then Jason died, or passed, or vanished, and the war went on. There was a prophecy that when Jason came again, he would be as a sword against Apollo in Hecate's hand. So—we will break that sword now."

He studied me.

"There is also the matter of the Circe. She is Hecate's arm, as you were to be her sword. Till the Circe dies and the Mask is broken, Hecate has power. And the war between Hecate and Apollo must never be allowed to reach the point where Apollo must fight the dark goddess on her own ground. Never yet—" His voice sank. "At least, only once has Apollo turned his dark face upon this land. He is lord of the eclipse, as he is also lord of the bright sun. But once, it is told, Apollo walked in Helios during the eclipse—the Helios on whose ruins we have built this new city.

"There will be an eclipse of the sun soon. You must die before then. But your death alone will not be enough. For Jason died, and now has come again. Hecate's arm must be destroyed as well.

"The Mask—and the Circe—they must be destroyed forever, so there will be peace under Apollo."

Silence brimmed the room. Phrontis broke it, "Still you have not told Jason what he is to do."

Ophion moved suddenly, shivering where he stood. Those deep, strange eyes moved from Phrontis to me.

I said, "Why was I supposed to make my escape from your soldiers?"

But Ophion did not speak. Phrontis said, "Why not tell him? He's no fool. Perhaps we can bargain."

Ophion remained silent, and the younger priest, after a brief pause, seemed to make up his mind.

"Well, Jason, here's the reason. We wanted you to escape so you could lead us to the young Circe. You can still do that. If you can, you need not die. Is that true, Ophion?"

"It is true," the priest said somberly.

I thought mockery showed briefly on Phrontis' face. "So we can bargain, perhaps, Jason. Life is better than death, after all—no?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not," I said. "I don't know who the devil the young Circe is. Why not look for her on Aeaëa? I last saw Circe there."

"That is the old Circe, the one on Aeaëa." Phrontis answered. "Not for years has she held the goddess. She isn't strong enough. You see, when the Circe dies, the Mask is handed on to another priestess—the next Circe. With the Mask goes the power of Hecate. So the Circe of Aeaëa is very old, and if it should come to a clash between glorious Apollo and the dark goddess, a strong arm will be needed, and a newer, younger priestess—such a one is the new Circe, the next inheritor of the Mask."

"We had her here in Helios."

I said suddenly, "I've heard of that. You killed her."

"We did not kill her," Phrontis said. "She escaped. She could not have left the city; we have excellent guardians at the walls. So, because the web of fate is weaving toward a certain pattern, because Jason has returned, we must find the young Circe and kill her. If she lives to wear the Mask, then through her and through you, Hecate can make war on Apollo, and the time of the eclipse is too close for comfort. You had better bargain with us, Jason. Who can fight against the gods?" But his voice was unctuous, and he stole a quick glance at the oblivious Ophion.

I said, "I can't lead you to this Circe of yours. If you don't know where she is, I'm sure I don't."

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The priest stared at me keenly, then smiled.

"There is one who does know," Phrontis said. "In a temple like this rumor runs faster than winged Hermes. Already I know very well that news of Jason's coming is buzzing in certain quarters of the city. You have only to wait. Sooner or later—and sooner, if I know Helios—word will get to you of what to do next. Where to go. Then—" He lifted expressive golden brows.

When I did not speak, he went on smoothly. "Then you come to me. Or send word. We will give you quarters here in the temple, on the outskirts, where messengers can reach you without too much difficulty. Very pleasant quarters, my friend. You need not be lonely while you wait. We have many accomplished slaves who—"

"Whose greatest accomplishment is spying," I suggested. "Well, suppose I agree? Suppose I find this girl for you? What then?"

His blue eyes dwelt speculatively on mine. As clearly as I saw the eyes I saw the thought behind them—a sharp sword or an arrow in the back was what Phrontis was thinking. I could tell that, he was so much closer to my own civilization than anyone else here on this alien world!

All he said was, "A reward worth working for, if you ask it. What is it that you desire most, Jason?"

"The truth!" I said with sudden anger. "The one thing no one here can give me! I'm sick of all these evasions and half-truths and the lies you tell so easily when you promise rewards. I know what reward I'd get!"

Phrontis laughed. "Fair enough. Jason always got his value out of a man. All right, then this much truth—I'll confess it would be easiest to kill you once we have our hands on the young Circe. Naturally I thought first of that. But since you have sharper eyes than most, then

I suppose I must swear some oath I dare not break, to give you assurance. What besides truth, then, do you ask of us?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, an intolerable wave of longing for peace from this dilemma rolling over me. To be free, to go back to my own world unburdened by the chaotic memories that too-deep probing had unloosed upon my mind—that was what I wanted above everything else in life. Freedom from the memories of Jason!

I said it in a suddenly choked voice. "And if you could do that," I finished. "I think I'd find that girl for you if I had to tear down the city bare-handed. Can you set my mind free?"

Phrontis pinched his lower lip and looked at me narrow-eyed. Slowly he nodded, and I thought I saw other purposes, devious and subtle, take shape on his face.

"Since you ask it, I can," he said. "I'll swear that on the altar of Apollo himself, and may the Ram trample me under his burning hoofs if I fail you. Once you're free of Jason, we'd have no reason to wish you harm. You'd be no danger to us then. Yes, you shall have freedom if you find us the girl."

Ophion woke from his brooding to stare at us, a question on his lips. I saw a swift, wordless sign pass between Phrontis and the old priest. Ophion did not know that I was not Jason, but would Phrontis tell him so?

I did not care. I sighed, a deep, tired sigh. Perhaps it was wrong of me to promise. The girl had done me no harm. And yet I was not obligated to her or to Hecate or to anyone in this strange half-world of legend. I'd been drawn here against my will, cast headlong into danger not of my making, pulled this way and that as a pawn between warring people and warring gods. But I was no pawn. I was Jay Seward, free born and no tool for another hand to wield.

"Then I'll find her and deliver her to your men," I said. "I don't swear by any gods, because it isn't our custom in my land. But I give you my promise. You can depend on it."

Phrontis nodded briefly and rose.

"I believe you," he said. "I know the truth in a man's voice when I hear it. Remember your promise and I'll keep to mine. I must consult Apollo's oracle on this matter. When I return, we'll make our final plans. Will you wait for me here?"

I nodded. He gave me a half-salute of parting, and turned toward the way by which he had come. Ophion paused, looking at me with a long, troubled stare. Once he caught his breath to speak, but he shut his lips on the unuttered words and turned toward Phrontis, who held the curtain of the darkness open for him.

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Music faded softly on the air as the dark closed behind them. I dropped back on my couch and stared at the mist resettling in their wake, wondering what I should do next. Not that there was much I could do, here! I looked about the room, finding no answer. Overhead the rosy clouds rolled slowly, formless and chaotic as my thoughts.

Could I trust Phrontis? There had been subtle scheming in his eyes when he swore to help me, and it might be that what I asked for would not be what I got. And the girl, the young Circe. Conscience nagged at me when I thought of her. I was not Jason—I had no duty to Circe, masked or unmasked, But—

"Jason—Jason of Iolcus—beloved, do you hear me?"

The words were so clear they might have rung out through the silent room, but I knew they had not. I knew they echoed only in the haunted chambers of my own skull. The shuddering and the chill sweat came over me again, and I was Jason.

Very clearly I could see the lovely, familiar, green-eyed face of the Enchantress-Mask, bending above Hecate's flame. I knew that face well—I had loved it once and seen hatred and helplessness upon those pale features, exquisitely moulded of living alabaster. Love and hatred mingled—why? Why? Not even I knew, and I was Jason, Aeson's son, lover of many women but never Circe—lord of the lost *Argo*. My heart turned within me when I thought of the ship. (*Argo*, my own, my swift and beautiful!)

"Jason, come back to me," the sweet, faraway voice was calling through my brain. "Jason, beloved, you must not betray me."

Now I could see that wonderful white face very clearly, very close to mine, the dark crimson mouth lifted, the long, inhumanly smooth planes of cheek and brow radiant with impossible beauty. The eyes were green fire, green embers smouldering beneath the shadow of her lashes. I remembered from long ago.

"Jason, breaker of vows, murderer and thief—my mother Hecate commands me and I hate you! But Jason, look at me. *Jason, who are you?* Jason, when these spells of madness are on you and another man looks out of your eyes—Jason, who is that man?"

Who could it be but myself, Jason of Iolcus? I felt the surge of long-remembered anger as I met her searching gaze. Circe, enchantress, lovely and beloved, why do you deny me? Why do you cling to me only to demand an answer I cannot give you? Forget this dream of yours and thrust me back no longer. There is no one here but Jason, who desires you.

"Jason, who is that man I glimpse in the moments of your madness, when you are no longer Jason?"

Rage swept over me again—strangling rage that this woman of all women should resist the irresistible Argonaut, this one woman whom I desired more strongly because she would not embrace me like other women, but held me off and cried out her answerless question over and over again. There is no woman alive or dead whom I would not put aside to follow my lovely ship, my *Argo*, my beautiful galley. But Circe, who will not have me, must learn not to deny Jason of Iolcus!

Madness? What was this madness she spoke of? How did she know about those shadows of dizzy bewilderment that could sweep now and again over the clouded mind of even the hero Jason, moments when the brain thickened in the skull and another man's memories moved like madness through my own?

*Crash!* My mind split with a thunder of the brain louder than a lightning-stroke. Pain danced in my skull shudderingly for one desperate moment, and I knew.

I was Jason! I was Jay Seward! I was both men together! And I had for one terrible glimpse looked through the mind of Jason three thousand years dead, and through the cloud of his madness, and through a rift in the cloud.

And seen, as in a sudden mirror—my own face!

Then the rift closed. Then the memory faded. Jason was gone, leaving me half-empty and shaking with weakness in the solitude of my brain. But I knew a little more, a little clearer.

So Jason, too, had been troubled as I was troubled, with the mysteries of a double mind. In his skull, as in mine, the double memories moved. How and why I did not know. Perhaps I would never know. But some inexorable bond linked us over the hundreds of generations, we two out of all the countless lives between us shared a single chain of the mind. He had not understood. How could he? To him these thoughts of my distant era must have seemed sheer insanity. To me, at least, the names of Jason and *Argo* and Circe were familiar. But as for him



—no wonder rage and fear swept over him when the recollection was forced upon him unbidden.

And Circe had known. Circe with her powers over magic and the mind—she alone, perhaps, had sensed the stirring of mystery in the thoughts of this man who desired her, this man she hated and had reason to hate. But this man who gave her at odd times glimpses of another man she did not hate. A man she did not hate at all!

Panyr's words came back to me. "Something strange happened between you. What was it that set Circe on fire for you? What was it made her hate Jason?"

Could it be possible that the enchantress of three thousand years past had looked through Jason's eyes as through a lens, and met mine and— No! It sounded incredible to say, "She loved me." And yet could it be the only answer? What answer fitted better the puzzles that had confronted me in this world? Why else should she call me back?

Only through Jason could she call. Only through her Mask and the priestesses of the Mask.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Slave-Girl's Plea*

Music shrilled softly through the air, I came to myself with a jolt. I had not been here. I had stood with Jason in Circe's palace, clasping her lovely, unresponsive body in my arms and trying in vain to evade her searching eyes. I had stood again in Hecate's temple on Aea hearing the sweet voice calling me, "Jason, beloved!" But if my suspicion were right, it was not Jason she meant. She had no name to use except Jason, but the man she spoke to was—

A soft hissing of breath sounded. I turned, to see that between two pillars the shroud of darkness had parted, and a glistening ebon face above a silver collar was watching me. It was the face of the little Nubian slave-girl. I saw her eyes shift as she glanced around the room. Then she slipped between the columns, soft-footed, and came toward me across the mossy carpet.

"I was listening," she said. "I heard your promise." Oddly, she had changed. The servility was no longer in her voice nor the delicate impudence on her face. I looked at her more closely this time, seeing the fine modeling of her features, the tilt of her nose, the soft redness of her small mouth. Arrogance was on that face now, but it was no less a pretty face, and it did not look like the face of one who had for very long been a slave.

I had no time for further thought on the matter, for the girl stepped back one step, braced herself on her bare feet, and swung up her silver-ringed arm. Her hand caught me flatly across the face.

The crack of her blow was loud in the quiet room. Caught off balance, I fell back on the divan and sat there gaping up at her in utter amazement. In that instant a number of half-coherent thoughts raced through my mind.

"She's a messenger from Circe's people," I told myself. "She heard me promise—it was clever of them not to wait. Phrontis won't expect to hear from them until he's settled me in my new quarters. This was the time for them to speak now, fast, before he expects it. But why?"

My cheek stung where that angry blow had caught it. I lowered the hand that had risen automatically to touch the spot. Then my mind stopped working altogether as I stared at my blackened palm.

Moving like an automaton, I touched my cheek again and looked at the fresh smear that came off on my fingers.

I looked at the girl. Her eyes were wide. She was looking in terror at my face. She turned up the palm that had struck me and we both stared at her streaked pink flesh where the moisture of the clenched hand had made that dark pigment run.

Her eyes rose again to mine, stretched wide in fright and dismay. My arm shot out. I seized her wrist below the silver bracelet and rubbed the moist palm with mine. It turned whitely rosy beneath my touch.

Still gripping her wrist, I drew the back of my hand across my own cheek, wiping away the dark paint her blow had left. Her eyes did not swerve from mine. She was breathing fast, but she did not speak a word.

"How long were you going to wait before you told me?" I asked.

She caught her breath. "I—I don't know what you mean. I only—"

“You heard my bargain with Phrontis,” I said harshly. “You came in to punish me if you could. What was the plan? Lead me out somewhere on a pretext of finding the Circe, and push me off the wall when you saw your chance?” I let her wait a moment, her eyes hoping desperately that I had finished, before I said deliberately, “Maybe you never did mean to tell me who you are.”

She wrenched at her wrist futilely. “Let me go,” she said in an angry whisper. “I don’t know what you mean.”

It was a gamble. I had nothing to lose by it, and a great deal to gain, and some instinct deeper than reason told me I was right.

“You’re the young Circe,” I said.

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Her eyes searched mine frantically, hoping to find uncertainty there. The longer she delayed her denial, the surer I grew.

I went on in a confident voice, “You couldn’t have escaped the sacrifice without help from inside the temple. That stands to reason. And if they haven’t found you in the city, for all their searching, the logical answer is that you weren’t there. You’ve been here under their noses all along—here with whoever it was that helped you from the first. The best hiding-place is the most dangerous, and you’ve found it. Who helped you?”

She shook her turbaned head violently. “I’m not! It isn’t true! Oh, let me go—let me go!” Hysteria sounded in her voice, and I saw the tears beginning to gather along her lower lids.

I said, “Careful! Remember that paint runs when it’s wet.”

She paused in her struggle, looking at me uncertainly. “Does that matter now?” she asked, still in her desperate whisper. “Aren’t you going to give me up?”

I hesitated. I’d promised Phrontis, yet—

“Come over here,” I said. “Sit down. No, here!” I laughed and dropped to the sofa, pulling her down ungently so that she fell across my knees. It was a loverlike embrace I held her in, but my hand was firm upon her wrist. I knew if I once let her go I’d never see her again in a guise I could be so sure of recognizing. And I was not yet sure which side I meant to play on.

“Don’t fight me—you’re all right,” I said. “Now we can talk without looking suspicious if Phrontis comes back. And we have a lot of talking to do, my girl. Circe—do I call you that? Or have you a name of your own?”

“I—I’m Cyane,” she told me, leaning quite motionless in my arms now and looking up at me with steady, lustrous eyes, hazel like running water in the sun and ringed by lashes that cast a velvety shadow on her cheeks. I was trying to picture her without the dark body-paint and remembering Panyr’s words about her.

“Cyane?” I repeated. “All right, tell me your story now, and do it fast before Phrontis comes. How did you escape the sacrifice? Who helped you? Is there someone here you can trust?”

“Not you!” she said, a spark coming into the hazel eyes very near mine. “I—don’t know whom I can trust. I heard you promise Phrontis to betray me, and I—I came to you just now to beg your help, in spite of what you told the priest.”

“You plead forcefully,” I said, rubbing my cheek.

She turned her shoulder to me. “Well, I found I couldn’t stoop to that. Instead of going on my knees to you, the thought of it—that knowledge that you had sworn to betray me—very well! I slapped you! It’s been three days now in the temple, and I’ve had nearly—nearly all I can stand. I don’t care much what happens!”

A tremor shook the slender, darkly painted body across my knee. She bit her soft under-lip and drew a deep breath. "I'll tell you, because I must. Maybe if you hear the story—but I'm not going to ask you to help me! It was one of the priests who set me free."

"Phrontis?" I asked her quickly.

She shook her head. "I don't know. In the temple, at the time of sacrifice, all priests look alike. And I was—frightened."

"Tell me."

"I was lying across the altar, under the gold cloth, waiting," she said almost quietly, her eyes going unfocused as she looked back upon that terrifying memory. "I could hear them coming. There was music and singing. And then someone in a priest's robes came out from behind the altar and unlocked the golden shackles that are chained to the altar. I was too dizzy to speak. He hurried me through a little door and into an anteroom, and a woman waited there with slave-trappings and a pot of paint. No one said anything.

"Before the paint was dry on me I could hear through the wall the commotion when they found the altar empty. The priest slipped out. I think—" She hesitated. "No, I know he went to bring another girl for the sacrifice. A slave. They put my insignia on her and the word went out that I had died. But rumors move fast in a place like this.

"Since then I've had a room in the slave quarters. Eight of us tend these apartments, where the highest ranks among the priesthood live. The rumor went out that they were bringing a man from Aeaëa and I came. I thought it might be someone smuggled in to help me. But when I listened—" She writhed in my arms so that she faced me fully, and her eyes were grave.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "When you made that promise, you meant to keep it."

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I could have lied to her. I didn't. "Yes," I said quietly. "I meant to keep it." I shifted her on my knee, taking a firmer grip on her wrist. "Tell me one thing more," I said. "Who am I?"

She shook her head, her gaze unswerving on my face. "I don't know."

"How long did you listen to what Phrontis and I were saying?"

"Only from your bargaining. I—I lost my head then. I'd counted so much on your coming here to help me. Perhaps if I'd pleaded with you instead of striking you—" She waited, but I didn't answer. Sighing, she went on: "Well there are those in the city who would help me if I could reach them, but how much they could do—I don't know. Hecate's domain is smaller than Apollo's. That, perhaps, is what their war is about, though I'm not sure. And I must get free—I must! The mother-goddess needs me, and the Circe who rules now is too old to fight."

"And you? What could you do, if you were there again?"

"On Aeaëa, you mean?" she said, with dignity. "Myself, I could do little. But with the Mask of Circe, and the power of Hecate, I think I could face Apollo himself!"

A little breeze of chill seemed to me to move briefly through the room as she spoke. There were powers in leash here at which I could only guess, even through Jason's memories. This girl knew more than I about too many things.

I considered what she had said. An idea was beginning to take vague shape in my mind. "The city's well guarded, is it?" I asked her.

She gave me a grim little smile. "So well guarded that I was surprised when I thought even Hecate herself had managed to smuggle in an envoy to help me. There's war between the gods. You can guess from that how closely Helios' walls are watched."

"If I should decide to help you," I said, "what chance have we of escaping?"

I felt her slender body droop in my arms. “So little chance,” she told me, “that I might as well have died on Apollo’s altar. I was a fool to strike you. Even if you would, you couldn’t help me now. And you won’t. You promised Phrontis.”

Yes, I had given my word to the priest, which might have been a mistake. I wasn’t sure now. It had been easy enough at the time, when I remembered how I was being pushed, pawn-like, about the board of a war-game here. But at this moment, holding the young Circe in my arms, watching her thick lashes shadow the eyes like sunny brook-water, it was a different matter entirely to think of giving her up to Phrontis and the altar.

But I had to do one thing or the other. I had to make up my mind. I thought, is there any hope of helping her? But there was none. I knew too little. Jason, whose memories moved so bewilderingly through my mind when I did not want them, had nothing to offer out of his age-old store of knowledge now in the hour when I needed his help most.

I thought with sudden desperation, Give me the answer, Jason! Help me if you can! And deliberately I made my mind blank.

There was—no Jason. There was, in reality, no subtle, untrustworthy ghost of the old hero hovering in my brain. Only his buried memories lay there, deep under incredibly many layers of superimposed lives. But between that age-old mind and mine so close an affinity existed that I could tap his memories, and he—strangely, magically, out of that past which was his future—had completed the time-cycle by tapping mine. Whether or not that was the true answer I did not know. I could only accept it and search with all my mind’s strength for the aid I needed.

Dimly it began to come. The room faded around me. I locked my grip around Cyane’s wrist and waited. . . .

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A word, a picture, swam uncertainly to light and submerged again. Fiercely I dredged after it. A glow, something brilliantly golden, infinitely precious. Something Jason had fought for and won long ago. Something with a secret in it Jason could tell me, if I searched his memories deeply enough.

Golden—gleaming—hanging on a strange tree in a strange, dangerous place—  
“The Fleece!” I heard my own voice saying in surprise. “The Golden Fleece!”

A violent wrench at my hand startled me out of my daze. I heard a gasp and the thud of bare feet on the floor. I blinked in bewilderment at Cyane, my captive a moment before, now standing a dozen feet away and looking at me with wide, angry eyes.

“Jason!” she whispered. Her teeth showed white against the darkness of her painted face in a grimace of amazement and revulsion. “You must be Jason! I might have guessed it! Who but Jason would choose so wrong a time to answer the summons of thousands of years!”

I scrambled to my feet, the sweat of my remembering still cold upon me, my mind not yet steady as Jason’s memories ebbed away. Ebbed? Not wholly. There was anger in my brain to answer Cyane’s anger, and I think it was Jason who voiced a soundless cry to me.

“Catch her, you fool! Don’t let her get away!”

She must have seen something of the thought in my face, for she danced away from me backward as I stumbled toward her, my hands out.

“Wait,” I said. “There’s something! I think I know a way.”

She laughed scornfully. “Trust Jason? Medea trusted him—Creusa trusted him, and Queen Hypsipyle and how many others? But not Cyane!”

I felt smooth words bubbling up in my mind like water in a fountain, soothing arguments, phrases bland as oil. But as I Caught my breath to speak, the air shivered around us to the music of an unseen harp, and behind Cyane I saw the darkness between two pillars open like a rift in thunderclouds.

“Cyane?” Phrontis’ voice said. “Who speaks of Cyane?”

Tall and golden, he came through the darkness into the room. There were priests behind him, peering curiously across his shoulder. Cyane spun to look, then wheeled again, her eyes imploring me in the smooth dark face.

It seemed to me that my mind turned over upon itself, spilling every crowding thought into utter confusion. Lightning-flashes of plot and counterplot darted through it. Phrontis’ eyes rested inquiringly upon mine.

“This is Cyane,” I heard myself saying calmly. “The slave-girl here. Catch her—quick!”

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Hecate Speaks*

I followed Phrontis down a golden corridor in silence. My mind was still in turmoil, but the foremost among the thoughts that seethed in it now was the prospect of surcease—soon—in another hour at most. Phrontis had promised me. For I followed him to the room where the ceremonies of freeing my mind from Jason’s would begin.

I was still Jason in part. I could still feel the bubbling up of smooth, easy phrases that offered solace to the conscience of Jay Seward. I hated that subtle, plausible brain intruding itself upon mine. And yet—were these arguments he offered me wholly wrong? Was it Jay Seward or Jason the Betrayer, who voiced them?

“What else could I do?” I asked myself futilely as I followed Phrontis. “We were in a hopeless spot as we stood. No escape possible, and Hecate’s fate depending on our escape. Whether I mean to fight on her side or not doesn’t matter now. I’m not sure about that. Hecate was a dark goddess, one of the underworld deities, queen of sorceries and black magic. Apollo, at least, is the sun-god—bright daylight against enchantments and night time. You can’t judge them on those merits—it’s pure legend and may mean nothing. But what else have I to judge them by?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. As things stood, there was only one thing I could do and it was a blow struck equally in favor of both sides. I won Phrontis’ trust. That’s worth a lot, because he seems to be very nearly in full charge here. Now he’ll work with me. But I did more than that, because somebody powerful in Helios released Cyane.

“Somebody had a plot in motion when he did it. By this act, I’ve thrown that plot off balance. And any shift in balance just now is good for it may mean help to us; it can’t mean any more danger than we were in already—if I’m working for Hecate. If this unknown priest’s plans are disarranged, something will come of it and since I’m in Phrontis’ confidence now, maybe I can watch for the moment and turn it to my own ends.”

But was it Jason who reasoned thus smoothly? I couldn’t forget Cyane’s eyes on my face as they dragged her from the room. Many women, I knew, must have looked at Jason of Iolcus in such a way, after he had betrayed them. But for Jay Seward it had not been so easy to stand by. Still, if I’d jumped to her defense all that Jay—or was it Jason—had gambled on this desperate throw would be lost and wasted. No, better to let her go with the priesthood—go as far as the altar if need be, while I let chance mature Jason’s plans.

We paused before a sun-blazoned door. Phrontis pushed it open and nodded me in, following silently. The room within was star-shaped. Golden curtains cut off the five corners, and a tall man was just lowering the last curtain as I entered. He turned and I looked into the ravaged face of Ophion, the high priest. He limped forward to confront me.

“Son of Jason,” he said in a quiet voice, “you go to stand before Apollo. The room beyond this is a part of his holiest sanctum. You will look into the Eye of Apollo, and the memories you hate will drop from you as you look.” He hesitated, his fine brow wrinkling a little. But before he could speak further, Phrontis had moved past him and touched a latch in the far wall.

The peak of the star-shaped room opened outward like a comet’s tail and I was looking into an infinity of interreflecting silver walls. Phrontis’ hand on my shoulder urged me

forward. Half in a daze, I walked forward.

“Ophion will guide you from outside,” Phrontis’ voice said from behind me. “He must serve as high priest, since technically I am still an acolyte. But I’ll stand with him to learn. Are you ready, Son of Jason?”

I was not ready. Oddly, now that the moment was upon me, I felt strangely reluctant to give up those memories that had been torture whenever they came, yet which had promised me knowledge and power I might badly need before I left Helion—if I ever left it alive.

But Phrontis did not wait for my answer. There was a soft rush of displaced air in the room, and when I turned with belated swiftness I was alone. The shining walls had slipped back into place and I saw no way out. Mistrustfully I looked about the room.

It was small. But I could feel the—the power—that quivered and vibrated here from wall to silvery wall, latent unknown forces that might move into life at any moment. There was more power in focus here, I thought, than in the whole city of Helios outside.

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From the faceted ceiling dim light shot down in a webwork of interlacing rays, ghostly and radiant. The floor sloped down to a shallow depression at the center where a milky hemisphere, four feet across, lay like a pool of opalescent water. The walls were mirror-silver.

I waited, my heart thumping. There was utter silence here. The shafts of dim radiance streamed down in columnar patterns. And after a moment or two it seemed to me they were growing brighter.

The milky hemisphere in the floor was beginning to shine with a cold, ice-bright radiance, and a hint of gold was creeping into that crepuscular glow. Still the silence held. The Eye of Apollo dimmed. The columns of light dimmed with it.

They waned and waxed again, brighter. This time the golden shining was unmistakable. Like the slow pulse of a heart of cosmic light the Eye faded—brightened—dimmed once more.

Faster and faster the changes came. The walls reflected a throbbing series of golden flashes. I saw my own image leaping into clarity and vanishing again, rhythmically, as the sun-shafts blazed down from above.

They flickered like lightning, and suddenly the whole room was an intolerable glare of gold, so blinding I could not face it.

I flung up an arm to shield my closed eyes. Behind the lids colors swam confusingly, like boiling clouds. And then, incredibly, the clouds seemed to part and a face looked through them into the depths of my brain.

It seemed to me that every cell of my body retracted instinctively away from that sight. I was aware of a hideous cold crawling through every nerve and muscle as if my flesh itself recoiled by an instantaneous motion deeper than reflex before the beauty of that Face—

Apollo’s face.

I was looking upon a god.

Many legends surviving to my own time and world had hymned Apollo’s beauty. But it was not human beauty. The face had all the lineaments of human likeness, but the beauty in it transcended any human beauty as the sun transcends candlelight. There are no words in any language to tell you how he looked—or how that godlike splendor repelled the eye that gazed upon it.

He regarded me with remote interest, aloof as all gods must be from human endeavors. I was no more than a ripple upon the surface of divine thoughts incomprehensible to any mind



but his. And behind him I was very dimly aware, in no more than a flash of consciousness, of vast golden things looming impossibly high into a golden sky. A god's world!

A god?

I remembered Phrontis' sceptical cynicism. Ophion believed in the supernal beings, but did Phrontis? Could this terrible beauty be only human, after all? Or more than human, but less than divine?

All that went through my mind in the space of one heartbeat, while the Face gazed with cold indifferent interest into mine, through the barrier of my closed lids.

I opened my eyes again. The room was incandescent with light. It seared the eyes. And it was more than light. The galactic energies of the sun itself seemed to pour through body and brain. The power of—of—

The word eluded me. Veils were slipping one by one from my mind in that burning bath. And behind those veils was something that shone brighter than the Eye of the Sun God.

The last veil burned and was gone. . . .

We three stood on a hilltop—Circe and Jason and a great, strange, shadowy figure at our backs. We faced a distant brightening in the air, and fear brimmed in me like wine in a cup. I knew who it was that stood behind me—and she was no goddess. Men called her Hecate.

But in the weeks he had spent on Aeaea, Jason came to learn what truth lies behind the clouded altars.

Circe—priestess of Hecate.

The dark goddess herself—mightily armed.

And I, Jason, son of Aeson, armored in that unimaginably strange thing named the Golden Fleece.

We three stood waiting for coming battle—waiting for Apollo. . .

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It was long ago—three thousand years ago. Part of my mind knew that. But the living part of my mind just now dwelt in that forgotten past which was sweeping back upon me in wave after wave of memory. Jason's memory. Each veil of it, I thought, relived in a flash and torn aside forever.

*Argo* cleaving the purple Aegean water—the dark groves of Aeaea—the faces of many women.

*Argo*, my own, my swift and beautiful.

What was any woman to me? What was Circe, or Hecate herself, or this monstrous battle between those people called gods—who were not gods? True, I had sworn an oath—

But Jason had broken oaths before.

We came to Aeaea three weeks ago, to the white temple and the lovely Enchantress who dwelt there among her half-human beasts.

Medea and I, traveling overland to be cleansed of blood-guilt and to wait the coming of the *Argo*. But there were storms that year, and *Argo* did not come. And while we waited on that strange isle in the Adriatic where Circe wrought her spells, dim, unreal days and nights went by. There was something strange in the very air of the island, as though Aeaea hovered on the edge of the veil that hides another world.

Slowly, during the long summer evening, Jason's thoughts turned from Medea, who was a well-known story now, and lingered upon Circe, the Enchantress. I knew from the first that she had been watching me, not for my own sake, though I did not guess it then, but for another reason—for the sake of another man.

I have a double mind. Always I have had that. Perhaps I was born to it, perhaps it developed in the days when I was a student under the wisdom of Charon, the Centaur. But sometimes another man, a ghost from some unknown Hades, looks through Jason's eyes and speaks with his tongue. Not often. But on Aeaëa it happened more often than I liked, and Circe lingered near me while the madness had reign in my mind, her strange ember-green eyes hot upon mine.

Mine? No, that other man's. He was that nameless ghost who shared Jason's brain.

And—a new look began to come into the green gaze. I had seen that look on a woman's face often enough to know what it implied. Well, it was nothing new to Jason that a woman should love him. But uneasiness nagged at me beneath the complacency. There was something here I did not understand.

The weeks were long before the *Argo* came. And before that happened, Circe spoke to me of Hecate, and Hecate herself stepped down from her altar. . . .

We had been drinking wine together in the cool summer evening, Circe and I. After awhile she said to me,

"I have a message for you, Jason—a message from the goddess."

I considered that. The wine was in my head. I wondered if the goddess herself had looked upon me and found me good. Perhaps that was what lay behind the strangeness I had sensed. And legend told of many times before now when a goddess stooped to bestow her favor on a mortal.

Circe said abruptly, "Come with me," and I rose and followed her with a sense of pleasant anticipation. . . .

The goddess spoke to me with Circe's tongue. I did not like what she said. It had a dreamlike quality and I was not sure I believed all of it. There are things too strange even for a goddess to convey.

"Two souls dwell in your body, Jason. One will not know life for three thousand years. He would know the truth of my words better than you, who are still half-savage. Hellas will be only a memory to him, and new nations will rule his world. That man, Jason—not yourself—is the man Circe has so foolishly allowed herself to love.

"Well, I cannot control love. But I wish she might have been born three thousand years from now."

I was afraid. But there was a dizziness in my brain and I thought that—other—that dweller—listened with passionate intensity. I thought he understood.

"Two worlds intersect in this time, Jason. One you know. The other world is my own. In it are those you know as gods and goddesses, but we are not divine. Natural forces made us as we are—the mutation of natural laws."

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She was not speaking to me as much as to the other Jason—the man yet unborn—who listened with my mind—the man Circe loved.

Well, perhaps I could use him, I thought, and devious ideas began to shape themselves in my brain.

"Those two worlds intersect at this time and place. It is possible to move from one to the other, where the veil is thinnest. At such places, on Aeaëa, temples are raised with gateways, doors that open both ways.

"Apollo's temple on Helios is a gateway too. Apollo and I are sworn enemies. He has powers that to you seem godlike, but he is no god. The powers are normal powers, for Apollo

has mastered principles of science you have not yet learned. To you they seem magical, as my powers seem necromantic. Yet I am no goddess either, though my powers transcend, in a way, time and space.

“We were born long ago, Apollo and I and the others. You have your legends of our lives. Now the twin worlds touch and we can pass from one to another, until the time-streams swing apart again. Then we will pass on beyond your knowledge, and perhaps other gods, or beings like gods, will take our place among mankind. But we ourselves work out our destinies in this farther world no man can enter—without armor.”

The voice hesitated. Then it went on more strongly. “I need a man of your world to aid me, Jason. Armed as I could arm him, such a man could win a rich reward of me. I could change your life from its predestined patterns, which are not happy ones. And I think destiny meant you to come to me at this hour, because you know that armor I have in mind for you.

“The Golden Fleece, Jason. The Fleece is armor against Apollo. It was made by another—called him god—whom Apollo slew. Hephaestus, you name him. A man who wears the Fleece can stand against even great Apollo.

“Because we have transcendent powers, Apollo and I can not meet in battle as ordinary warriors do. Only under the certain rare conditions can we meet. The time is ripe now, and I need you, armed with the Fleece, to act as my sword against my ancient enemy. Will you aid me, Jason?”

I did not answer. I was thinking, double-minded, of all she had said. As for the Fleece—I was no fool. I knew it was more than the skin of an ordinary ram. I had held it in my hands and felt the power that trembled among those shining folds. I had taken it from the temple tree in Colchis where it hung guarded by what legend called never-sleeping Python. I knew how much of truth there was in that story, and how much of falsehood.

Boldly I said, “And what of Circe, goddess?”

Through Circe’s lips the goddess said wearily, “She fancies she loves the man she sees beyond you. I have promised my aid to you both. If you swear to help me in my battle, then Circe and Jason, of the double mind, shall share love together—”

Strangely, eerily, Circe’s own voice broke in upon the words of the goddess as she spoke through Circe’s lips.

“But I am no immortal, Mother! I shall grow old and die long before the new Jason—the one I love—is born again upon earth!”

The goddess said in her own voice, “Peace, child, peace! There shall be a Mask made for you, a dwelling place for the soul of Circe. Each priestess who serves me through the generations shall wear it at my altar and you will live again in each of them until Jason comes again.”

And so, in the end, we swore an unbreakable vow together before Hecate’s altar. Jason’s mind was troubled, unsure of his own rewards and unsure of their values. But he had no choice. When a goddess commands, mortals dare not refuse if they value their futures. We swore.

And afterward, Hecate trained me in the uses of the armor made by a god, for gods alone to wear. Often enough my spirit quailed within me as I had glimpses of the world beyond Hecate’s altar, where the gods are so much mightier than men know.

Harnessed demons from Hades I saw—chained Titans shouting in their iron prisons—flames from Olympus lancing through monstrous forests.

Machines, Jason, only machines! The product of another world, another science, another race—not gods.

I did not enter that world. I looked upon it through strange windows Circe opened for me. My other self saw things there that I did not understand.

I had not forgotten the *Argo*. But she did not come, and I waited and worked, learning the ways of the Fleece, shuddering whenever I thought of the hour when I must use it.

## CHAPTER IX

### *Radiance of Death*

Clothed in the Fleece, I the first Jason, went to meet Apollo.

High upon Aeaëa rises a treeless hill overlooking the blue bay. There, where the veil was thinnest between this world and the world of the gods, Hecate came to us in a web of shadow. I saw her, dimly. She was strange beyond telling, she was far more than human, but she did not rouse in my flesh that instant revulsion which Apollo evoked. They were very different, these two beings.

Circe stood beside me. I wore the Fleece. And before us the air brightened in a dazzling ring, and within it I saw the Face begin to form.

Feebly I began the ritual that would activate the Fleece. I knew I must, and yet I was not sure I could. For fear was a blindness and a sickness in me, and that terrible Face swept nearer and all my body seemed to shrivel with the revulsion of its presence.

Automatically I did as I had been trained to do. But a cloud hung before my eyes and my brain was not my own. And then, through a rift in that cloud, I saw below me in the harbor the one thing I had loved with a true, unselfish passion—*Argo*, my lovely ship.

*Argo!* When I saw her, I knew suddenly that I cared nothing for Hecate or Circe or all the gods in Olympus. What was I doing here, sick with terror, fighting another's battles, while *Argo* lay there in the edge of the water waiting for me?

I ripped off the Fleece. I turned and ran. Flickering lightning and thunders raged behind me on the hill, but I paid no heed to them. Only when a mighty voice rang out behind me from the height did I pause for a moment.

"Run, coward—run for your life!" the goddess cried after me. "There will be no escape for you, however far you run. Living or dying, your oath still binds you. One day you will come back. One day in the far future you will walk the earth again and answer my summons. There is one oath you can never break. Circe will wait until you return, and I will wait.

"Go, Jason—go to the doom I could have saved you from. Go to the one thing you love and wait for its blow to slay you! Go, take your kingdom and die."

I ran on. Hecate may have spoken again, but I did not hear any more, for there was laughter on the hilltop now, ringing golden above the thunder of the battle. And the sound of it made my heart shrink and my body recoil from its beauty and dreadfulness. Apollo was laughing as I ran. . . .

Veil by veil the memories slipped from my mind. The shining light bathed me. But there was a troubling whisper floating through that golden silence. A voice I knew—urgent, summoning.

I dismissed it. I let the veils slip away. Apollo's light was not the burning blaze of the sun; it was clear and cool, pellucid as crystal water and calm as Lethe.

A veil caught, ripping into tatters. Through it I saw the curve of goat-horns and anxious yellow eyes.

"Jason—Jason!"

But the peace of forgetfulness was yawning for me now and I would not answer. I sank into the shining emptiness that was the Eye of Apollo. Infinite peace washed over me. . . .

“Jason—Jason!” It was Panyr calling, but I would not answer. What had I to say to Panyr, who was so nearly on the verge of Lethe myself? Let him keep to his troubled world and leave me to my peace. . . .

“Jason! Waken or die!”

The words meant nothing. Or—no, they had meaning, but not to me. They threatened someone unknown, someone named Jay Seward, who was—

Myself!

Jay Seward—not Jason. Not superstitious Jason who had betrayed vow after vow. Jay Seward, who had betrayed only Cyane.

From far away I heard my own voice calling. “Panyr—Panyr! Help me!”

“I can’t!” the flat faun-voice cried from far away. “You must come to me.”

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I was blinded by the golden light. But I could move—I had to move. Stiffly, out of a nightmare, I forced my muscles to life. I felt myself stir—I was walking!

My hands touched a surface so smooth I could not be sure it was really there. They slipped, touched again—

“Push the door,” Panyr’s voice called out of the blinded dream. “Push hard! Jason, you’re at the door! Open it! Quick!”

The surface sank away beneath my thrust. And then hairy hands seized mine and dragged me forward. Sight returned to me. We stood in the star-shaped antechamber where I had left Ophion and Phrontis. There was a strange odor in the air—acidic, choking. The smell of blood.

I had no time for that now. I was looking into Panyr’s eyes, and seeing relief and anxiety there. The sweat of effort was still on his half-human face and he was grinning wryly. I wanted to ask him questions, but my breath still came too unevenly for that. So I stood there motionless, facing the closed wall through which I had just come, waiting for speech to return to me.

By that time my thoughts had coalesced into something like a definite pattern. “Well,” I said at last, “let’s have it. What happened?”

“Simple enough,” he told me with a great sigh, lifting one hand to push the sweat-soaked black curls from his forehead. “I knew the danger of Apollo’s Eye. I couldn’t get in while the two priests were watching, but a few minutes ago, as soon as they left, I was able to come in.”

“But why?”

Instead of answering, he bent forward to peer deeply into my eyes. “You’ve changed,” he said slowly. “Something happened—what? Are you—Jason?”

“I’ve seen Jason clearly,” I said. “Clear enough to know I’m not he. I am someone else. Just as three thousand years ago the Jason you knew had a double mind.”

He nodded soberly. “I remember that. Well, are you Jason enough to break your pledges still? Do you know now which side you fight on?”

Apollo’s beautiful, hideous face swam before my eyes. I controlled a violent shudder of sheer revulsion.

I heard myself saying:

“On Hecate’s—if I can rid the world of Apollo!”

Panyr nodded again. “This time you’ll mend the broken oath, then? Well, you returned to us none too soon! I wasn’t sure I was doing the right thing when I saved you just now, but perhaps it was fortunate.” He shrugged. “When we first met on Aea, the Circe knew you

must come to Helios, so I kept you waiting until the men from Helios could capture you. That was strategy. And the Circe knew you had to meet Cyane here in the temple.

“But after that, I acted on my own initiative. Being half a god is sometimes an advantage. Humans laugh at me, but not even the priests of Apollo dare harm a faun. So I can walk freely where I will. Does that suggest anything helpful to you? Call on me if you will, Son of Jason, and this time you can trust a faun!”

“You’re up to your old tricks again, evading the question,” I said. “As for your offer—thanks. I’ll remember it. But first, tell me what’s happened!”

“Phrontis tricked you, of course. You must have expected that. The Eye of Apollo is not a thing to tamper with lightly. Your memories were being stripped from you, layer by layer. In the end—nothing! You would have lost your very soul. When a man looks into Apollo’s Eye, his own eyes are darkened forever.”

“So Phrontis still feared and distrusted me that much!” I said grimly. “Well, now he has reason to fear me! Thanks to you, Panyr. I thought, though—” I glanced around uncertainly, “I thought Phrontis and Ophion were to be here for a ceremony of some sort while I—”

Panyr’s short laugh interrupted me. “You heard me say I waited until it was safe to enter. Safe! I’m still sweating! By Bacchus, I—”

“The priests!” I reminded him impatiently. “Where are they?”

“One of them’s right behind you,” he said strangely.

Startled, I whirled. It speaks eloquently for the physical and mental state I was still in that I had not until that moment looked farther around the room, or wondered about the all-pervading smell of blood.

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A man in golden robes lay sprawled upon the floor by the entrance, face down upon a lake of bright crimson that was still wet and looked to be spreading a little as I watched.

“Ophion,” Panyr murmured. “No, it’s no good now. You can’t help.”

“Phrontis?” I asked. The faun nodded.

“Or, in a way, yourself,” he added. “You killed him as surely as Phrontis drove the blade, when you betrayed Cyane back into their hands.”

“Ophion was the priest who saved her from sacrifice!” I said.

“Surely you might have guessed. Phrontis guessed. But Ophion was still master and he had to act deviously. He used you for that. Perhaps you knew, or sensed it, and in your own turn used him. I’m not sure yet about you. But once Cyane was betrayed, Ophion had to act again.”

The faun looked down at the motionless body, his face expressionless. “I thank the gods we fauns are proof against weaknesses like love,” he said. “It can lead to dreadful things. It can lead a man like Ophion to—this, for instance.”

“He loved her?”

Panyr shrugged. “He did—or thought he did. Ophion was a doomed man from the moment of his crippling. Apollo accepts no imperfect priests. He couldn’t hope to live beyond the Hour of the Eclipse, which comes very soon now. Then Apollo would—reject—him and Phrontis would be master in Helios. So it didn’t much matter what he did—a week early, a week late. You see? I think, at such a time, a man reaches out blindly for human love. Perhaps it was his instinct to save Cyane in propitiation to the Fates, that he himself might in turn be saved. Who knows? Death and love play odd games with mankind. I’m glad we fauns never know either.”

“Why did Phrontis kill him just here and now?” I asked, breaking in upon his rambling.

“To stop him from saving you,” was Panyr’s surprising answer. “I think Ophion reasoned that if anyone alive could help Cyane now, it must be the Son of Jason. It’s true you had betrayed her, but he must have hoped you did it only to save her in the end. You came from Hecate. He counted on that. And without you there was no hope at all. So he tried to halt the progress of your madness before it was too late.”

“And failed?”

“And died,” Panyr corrected me. “Phrontis laughed and came away then, to leave you to your madness. And I got in at last, barely in time. So now you know.”

“Where’s Cyane now?”

“Imprisoned. Safe for the moment. Phrontis will use her for the sacrifice when the Hour of the Eclipse strikes. Very soon now.”

“How soon?”

“To know that you’ll have to ask Phrontis. He keeps the sacred hours and minutes.”

“I’ll ask him,” I said. “Can you lead me to him now?”

Panyr’s bearded jaw dropped. “What!” he demanded. “You must be mad! Phrontis will—”

“He’ll tell me what I want to know, I think. You asked me if I had changed, Panyr. The answer is—yes.” I grinned at him, conscious of a surge of assurance such as I had never known before. That strange, alien light which had bathed my brain had left an aftermath of clarity, as though I had just now awakened from a long, dim dream. I knew now many of the answers that were veiled before. I no longer walked blind in shadows.

“You lived on Aeaea in the time of the first Jason,” I said, “but I wonder if you know the reason the Golden Fleece is so powerful.”

I saw his momentary hesitation. “The Fleece? It’s powerful, yes. No doubt there are many reasons why.”

“I know them,” I said. “The Fleece is something like a machine. The first Jason thought it sheer magic, but in my world, in my time, I’ve studied the sciences you call enchantments. I’ll tell you this, Panyr—the Mask must be brought to Helios.”

“It’s never left Aeaea.”

“But the soul of the first Circe lives in it. Circe, like Jason, must come again before the cycle is completed, if this deadlock between your gods is ever to be broken.”

Panyr looked at me with a dubiety that gradually faded. Suddenly he grinned.

“You speak like a hero,” he said ironically. “In the Hour of the Eclipse your remarkable courage may go out with the sun, but I promised my aid and you shall have it. Come, I’ll take you to Phrontis. And may Hecate help you!”



## CHAPTER X

### *High Priest's Bargain*

Just an hour later Phrontis was pouring me out another cup of wine. He pushed it across the table, watching me. He thought I was a good deal more intoxicated than I was. This wine was weak stuff compared with the fiery baptisms I remembered from my own world.

"I know. You needn't repeat it," I said. "No one ever looked into the Eye of Apollo before and came out sane. Well, I'm from another world. I don't bear you any grudge for the attempt. You'd have killed me if you could, because you were safer with me dead. But I'm not dead. And the balance has shifted now."

He nodded. "Perhaps."

"You don't want this war between Apollo and Hecate to come to a climax, do you?"

"No. It might be disastrous. If things remain as they are, I look forward to a long and pleasant life." He was quite frank about it.

"And you don't believe in the gods. Well, I don't either. And I'm in a position to know. Still, your long, pleasant life may be very short and disagreeable if Apollo and Hecate meet."

He poured himself more wine. "Well?"

"They can't meet as we do. Only under certain conditions can they fight at all, and with certain weapons." I paused, sipping. Phrontis leaned forward, his face eager. I had hooked him but he wasn't landed yet! I reminded myself— Careful, careful! He's no fool, this logical priest of Apollo!

"If those tools could be smashed," I said, and sipped again.

"That was my plan," he told me flatly. "To smash you and Cyane, make you useless to Hecate."

I laughed and turned my cup so the golden wine cascaded to the floor.

"The lives of men! Do you think Hecate can't find other tools? Lives are easily replaced, but there are weapons that can't be. The gods are somewhat more than human—they do have great powers. But not without their tools.

"They could fashion new tools."

"No. The Mask was made by Hephaestus, whom Apollo killed. This world would be safer for us both without it."

"Yes," he said, studying the spilled wine. "Yes, perhaps."

"Not for me, you're thinking. Oh yes, my life can be destroyed too. That thought's in your mind. But what would you have to gain? Look now, Phrontis." I leaned forward, laying my hand on his shoulder. "We're men, not half-gods or gods. But we're clever men. Let these so-called gods fight their battles in their own way, so long as they refrain from dragging us into their squabbles. In my world there is a vast store of knowledge that I could make very useful to you."

He nodded thoughtfully. He was not yet convinced.

"You won't kill me," I said with a confidence I was far from feeling. "And later—I'll be too useful for you to think of it." I must make him think me pliable, as pliable as the old Jason. Already he believed me a little drunk. I waited patiently.

After a time he said, "What is the Mask?"

“I believe it’s an artificial brain, in effect. I have no language to describe it to you in your tongue. In mine, we’d call it something like a radioatomic colloid, perhaps, that once was imprinted with the thought-patterns and the character-matrixes of the original Circe.” I picked up an image from a nearby table, a figure of a centaur, moulded from clay that had been glazed and fire-kilned. I showed Phrontis a fingerprint on it.

“The mark of the artisan’s finger. Perhaps the sculptor died long ago, but this part of him lives on. Do you understand?”

“Fingerprints, yes,” he said. “But thoughts! Are thoughts real things?”

“They are real,” I told him. “They are patterns of energy that can be recorded, as we’ve done in my world. The mind of the first Circe lives in the Mask, which is as I say, a machine. The Circes who worship Hecate are ordinary women. The goddess comes to them only when they wear the Mask.”

I paused, watching him. Then, “The Fleece,” I said slowly, “is a machine too—no more. If that could be destroyed as well—”

Phrontis looked up sharply. His eyes were piercing on mine.

“What do you know about the Fleece?”

I shrugged. “A little. Enough.”

His laugh was faintly ironic. “Much or little, it doesn’t matter now. Do you think we haven’t tried to destroy the Fleece?”

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I watched and waited. After a moment he went on. “We know the Fleece is a danger to Apollo. How? Well, only the gods know how. But many high priests for many generations have sought the secret of destroying it. All of them failed. Which is why it hangs in an inaccessible place, guarded to keep meddlers away! What we can’t destroy, we can at least keep safe.”

“Perhaps I know how to get rid of it,” I said carelessly. “We’ll discuss that another time. As for the Mask, now—”

“Oh, the Mask. I read your mind, my friend. You want to be sent to Aeaea to fetch it.”

I looked as confused as I could. It wasn’t difficult. “No one else could be sure of bringing it back,” I said. He laughed, and I stood up suddenly. “Get it yourself, then! Go to Aeaea, if you dare, and ask Hecate to surrender the Mask to you! Remember this, Phrontis—I’ll work with you, but I’m no tool. I’ve told you one way to get the Mask. Now think of a way yourself, or admit you can’t. And don’t keep me waiting too long!”

I stared at him long enough to make my point, then sat down and drank more wine.

Presently he nodded. “Very well, go to Aeaea,” he said. “I’ll put a ship at your disposal. Meanwhile, you are my friend and guest. I’d rather be friend than enemy to you, Son of Jason.”

“You’ll find it more profitable,” I warned him.

He smiled. “I’d thought of that, of course. Yes, we shall be good friends.”

He lied very gracefully.

Panyr was right. I had changed in Apollo’s sanctum. The memories of Jason no longer troubled me. But I had not lost the memories—no, I had found them now. I could draw on them at will. And no longer was I shaken by Jason’s unstable emotions.

As for the Eye of Apollo—it was indeed a clever gadget!

Mnemonic probing is nothing new. The being called Apollo, or his priest-scientists, had developed a device highly specialized for psychic probing. Carried too far, it could strip away

a man's memories, leaving him helpless as a child. But I had been stopped in time.

I had gained from the experience all the value of a complete mental catharsis, the basic principle of psychiatric treatment. It was the narcosynthetic treatment that had started this trouble for me, and it was the equivalent of narcosynthesis, in a totally alien world, that had cured me, but leaving me definitely on the spot in that alien world.

Many points were not yet clear. By no stretch of the imagination could I logically explain the method by which I had come here. The *Argo* was dust long ago—or was it, after all? The people of Helios knew it, but as a ghost-ship with a ghostly crew.

I could not answer that question, so I put it aside for awhile. There were other questions more immediately urgent, and those I could answer. My double mind, the fact that Jason had sometimes held away in the mind of Jay Seward was not inexplicable now, though it involved space-time concepts that were revolutionary enough.

In effect, I think, it was schizophrenia, though by no means as simple at that. Perhaps the real answer lay in the first Jason's split personality, whose secondary quality had been—myself, or my counterpart, three thousand years ago. One half of Jason was shifty and facile—the half history remembers. The other was troubled with conscience and the dominant Jason thrust it down out of sight. But there was a clear and definite pattern to that hidden half of his mind, a pattern that recurred three thousand years later in myself.

For undoubtedly, I thought, I was a lineal descendant of Jason, of Iolcus. It had been almost infinitely diluted by the intervening blood-lines, but the matrix was there and the matrix did recur. Stranger things have happened in the mysterious ways of inheritance. The same face, the same traits, the same mental make-up can duplicate themselves identically in a man's great-great-great descendants. As mine had duplicated Jason's submerged half.

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The genes and chromosomes, after the thousands of years, recreated the other half of Jason's double mind; a mental matrix through which I slipped back to the unforgotten, the unforgettable memories that science hints lie buried in us all.

I think Phrontis' analysis of these two worlds was accurate enough. This one was negative as our familiar one was positive. Our world trends toward a norm; this one trended away from it. Perhaps the old Greek maps of their known world were more accurate than we think today, though they showed it flat and malformed, surrounded by an Ocean-Stream that poured constantly over the brink into infinity. Perhaps *Argo* sails an Ocean-Stream like that, inexplicable to human minds. *Argo, Argo!*

I put that thought out of my brain firmly. Jason's emotions no longer swayed me. I had Apollo to deal with. He and Hecate and the fauns and their kind were normal enough on this world, though their counterparts had not survived on ours when the time-stream parted.

I did not know why Apollo and Hecate warred or why no other gods seemed to matter any longer. Where had they gone, and why? And why did only these two remain behind? Whatever the answers, I felt quite sure this was no idle Olympian squabble such as legends record. They would have perfectly understandable, logical motives, once I discovered what they were.

Super-powerful, yes—by our standards, but vulnerable to the right weapons. Still, I thought with grim amusement, not even gods like these could survive an atomic bomb!

I didn't even have a revolver. I didn't need one. With the Mask and the Fleece, I'd be ready. . . .

Panyr's hoofs clicked softly behind me in the corridor as I stood thinking outside Phrontis' door. I smelled the musky fragrance of him and heard his breathing at my ear. I looked up. He was grinning.

"Now what?" he asked.

I squared my shoulders instinctively. The wine was buzzing faintly in my head, but I knew what I had to do. "The Fleece," I said.

Panyr's gaze was dubious. "Do you know what a dangerous thing that is? Have you seen the Fleece?"

"I want to. Now."

The old faun shrugged. "All right. Come along."

Busy priests looked at us curiously as I followed Panyr's twitching goat-tail and clicking hoofs through the temple. But word must have gone out from Phrontis that I was to be indulged—within limits at least—for no one tried to stop us.

A great many preparations seemed to be in progress. We left the private quarters and entered again the thronging public rooms, wide and busy as city streets, and I saw worry and strain on every face, dread, perhaps, as the Hour of the Eclipse drew nearer. I had almost forgotten that. Certainly it would have to enter into my plans.

Twice we saw herds of noisy sheep and cattle being driven into enclosures where attendants with paint-pots gilded their hoofs and horns and hung their necks with wreaths for the sacrifices. The temple was full of the smell of incense being hurried in burning pots through the halls, slaves with armloads of spotless robes, with baskets spilling fresh flowers, with great pots of fragrant oil, all of them jostling one another on their errands and all a little pale and tending to start at sudden noises. Anxious eyes watched the sky from every window as they passed.

The Hour of the Eclipse was approaching, and no one in Helios seemed very happy about it.

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After a devious journey Panyr led me up a winding stair and paused at last before a shutter in the high blank wall of a corridor far away from the noises of the more frequented chambers. He laid a hand on the shutter and looked at me doubtfully, hesitating.

"You still don't trust me," I said. "Is that it?"

He met my eyes steadily, and his voice was very serious when he said, "Trust and faith aren't words to be bandied lightly. I'm old, Jason—very old. I know a trust that fails in one lifetime may, in the end, be well kept. When the acorn falls, it thinks the oak has broken faith. But when an oak forest covers the land—"

His voice deepened, and I thought I heard in its timbre a primal strength, a vast vitality drawn from the earth itself.

"Also, I who am half a god, can wait to watch the acorn grow into the forest. I see more than you think. It may be that my plans have nothing to do with yours or it may be otherwise. You die in a few dozen years, but what you do now may change a world five thousand years from now. And I shall see that world, Jason—twin-souled Jason! It may be that I am using you and others as well, to shape a world you will never know."

"That may be," I said. "Until I look on the Fleece—how can I help anyone?"

He grinned. "All right, you think me garrulous. Perhaps I am. I have all the time in the loom of Clotho so I can afford to spin out my thoughts. But look on the Fleece if you must. And be careful how you stare!" He shrugged and pulled the shutter back.

Daggers of golden light gushed through the opening, splashed upon the farther wall, filled the hallway with blinding brilliance. Panyr stepped back, shielding his eyes.

“You look if you like,” he said. “It’s not for me.”

I couldn’t, at first. My eyes had to adapt to that dazzling light and even then it was only by squinting and shading my face with both hands that I got a painful glimpse of what lay beyond the shutter.

There is a garden in the Temple of Helios where the flowers of Apollo burn the eyes that behold them. There is a garden where roses of white fire blaze among leaves of flame, dripping droplets of molten sunlight upon a floor of fire. In the center of that garden stands a tree.

Legend records that the Golden Fleece hangs on a tree guarded by an unsleeping dragon. How much less than truth was in the legend I could see as my eyes adjusted to that aching glare. It was an allegory, indeed, but the truth was far stranger than the legend.

I saw the Fleece. It was hard to focus on in all that blaze of shimmering fire, but I could make out the shape of it vaguely, pure gold, burning like the flowers with an unconsuming flame. I could see the ringlets of its pelt, white-hot, delicately curling wires that stirred slightly when the tree stirred.

There was no python in the garden, no scaled guardian. The tree itself was the dragon.

I saw the sluggish writhing of its boughs, gold-scaled, flexible, sliding over one another in an endless, sleepless stirring. There were no leaves, but every limb was tipped with a flat triangular head that watched unwinkingly in the glare of the burning garden.

I fell back into the comparative dimness of the passage, hands to my eyes. Panyr laughed. “Go in and take it if you like,” he said ironically. “But don’t ask me to gather up your ashes for Circe. Not even a half-god could walk in that garden now. Do you still want the Fleece?”

“Later,” I said, wiping the moisture that welled to my smarting eyes. “Later, not yet.” Panyr laughed, and to stop the derision I said, “I mean it. I know how to get the Fleece when I need it, and when the right time comes I’ll take it. Meanwhile the Mask of Circe will have to come to Helios. Phrontis is sending a ship for me to get it. Will you go, or shall I?”

Panyr reached out and slid the shutter closed. In the dimness it seemed to me his yellow eyes were faintly luminous as they searched mine. A vague uncertainty sounded in his voice when he answered me.

“Perhaps you know your own plans. Perhaps you don’t. Only a fool would go to Aeaëa to rob Hecate of Circe’s mask. Do you think you won’t be torn apart by Circe’s beasts and half-beasts before you’ve passed the beach?”

“I wasn’t last time.”

“True,” he said, studying me. “Well, no weapons must be carried onto the sacred soil of Aeaëa. If you go armed, you won’t have a chance. And a sword wouldn’t help you against the beasts anyway. It’s not my game. Play it yourself and pray for success.”

I nodded. “Before the eclipse,” I told him, “you’ll see the Mask in Helios.” Privately I could only hope that was the truth.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Aid From Hecate*

Gently the golden boat grated its keel on Aeaea's sand. Oarsmen in golden garments leaped out to drag it up the beach and I stepped for the second time down upon the pale, cool strand of Circe's isle.

Fog hung here, as always, veiling the cypresses. I could hear the dripping of moisture among the trees. I thought eyes were watching me there, but I saw no sign of motion. My heart beat a little unevenly as I plowed my way up through the loose sand. Behind me the men from Helios watched in silence. I could expect no help from them. Aeaea was forbidden territory to Apollo's devotees, and they had a healthy respect for the arts of the Enchantress.

I entered the cypress woods alone.

A voice shouted from far away as my foot touched the edge of the mossy grass where the beach ended. It was a hollow, echoing voice, as if the trees themselves were speaking.

"He comes—he co-o-o-mes," the voice cried distantly. And a shivering stirred the trees around me and ran outward until the cypresses moved as if in a strong wind. But there was no wind, and the mist still hung heavy around me, hiding whatever lay beyond.

The crying of the hollow voice went on, but there were other voices in answer before I had gone a dozen steps. Wordless shouts, in voices that sounded half bestial and half human. And I was aware of the deep drumming, more felt than heard, that means hoofs approaching at a gallop. I went grimly on toward the center of the island where I knew the temple stood.

The hoofbeats thundered nearer and nearer. In the fog the sound was confusing, disoriented. I could not tell if it came from one side, or from all sides. There were rustlings in the underbrush beneath the higher sighing of the trees in that wind I could not feel. Then I stopped short and my flesh crawled with sudden horror at the sound of a high, flat, laughing scream almost at my side. It might have been cat or human, or both. It might have been sobbing or laughter, or both. It set my teeth on edge as I stared around in the dimness.

And then thundering hoofbeats were upon me and the world turned upside down. I gasped and floundered suddenly in midair, catching my breath against the rush of air as I was swept sidewise through space, strong arms spinning me effortlessly aloft, strong hoofbeats pounding rhythmically beneath me as the forest rushed past.

Laughter, cold and inhuman, sounded in my ear. With a violent wrench I got my head around to see what it was that held me. I was looking into a man's face, into flat-pupiled yellow-brown eyes with that same indefinable touch of the beast in them that dwelt in Panyr's. The man spun me away from him again, laughing his cold, whinnying laughter, and I knew incredulously that this was no human. From the waist up he was man; from the waist down he was horse. With a shudder I remembered the wild savagery of the centaur tribes.

The shrieking, catlike cry came again, and the centaur's laughter rose in crescendo to meet it. I was whirled higher in the air and pitched suddenly free. The hoofbeats swept away into the fog as I hurtled head over heels toward the screaming that was cat and human at once.

Mossy ground received me. Bruised and breathless, I rolled over twice and was somehow on my feet again, panting, wishing ardently for weapons. A lithe shape, darkly mottled, rose up in my very face, great arms outstretched and gleaming with claws like sabers.

I looked into a wild, demented face that was neither human nor feline, but much of both. Then the figure lurched upon me in an embrace like a bear or a man; I felt the cold brush of the claws past my cheek and the velvety power that poured along that slick, hard body as we grappled.

Hoofs clicked on rock and beyond the mottled shoulder I saw horned faun-heads flash jeering past, saw a flung rock hurtling by my head. The wind in the cypresses had risen to a roar—except that there was no wind. I knew it was the dryads of the trees, ready to defend their isle with falling boughs if need be. There was a hiss of seething water from somewhere nearby, where the oreads of the fountains lashed themselves into a mounting frenzy as the whole sacred isle of the goddess rose in its anger to repel me.

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Locked in each other's arms, the tiger-thing and I crashed struggling to the moss. I knew I must not let go of it long enough for those terrible claws to double beneath me for the disemboweling stroke, and I strained the writhing, velvety thing to me in a desperate embrace. It screamed in my very ear, a deafening, terrifying sound that ripped my nerves as the claws were striving to rip my flesh. I shivered with an involuntary spasm, felt my hold slip upon that muscular, snakelike body, felt it writhe away from me—heard the gasp of snarling, triumphant laughter in my ear.

“Jason—Jason beloved—do you hear me? Jason—come!”

The sweet, distant crying was as clear as if there were no roar of trees or shrieking of wild voices here in the forest. Effortlessly it rose above them. “Jason—Jason, come to me!”

With a sobbing breath the tiger body relinquished mine, rolled away. I got to my feet unsteadily, stared gasping around the clearing. There was a soundless flash of motion, and the mottled body of that which had been both beast and human vanished into the fog and the trees. The fauns' brown shaggy limbs pranced and were gone with a click of hoofs and a chatter of angry voices. The trees sighed and were silent.

“Jason—beloved—come!”

Through a silence that echoed and rang in my dazed ears I stumbled inland toward that sweet, calling voice.

There was no one in the clearing where the temple stood. No robed figures moved among the pale pillars in the fog as I went slowly up the marble steps and into the dimness within.

No priestess stood before the altar. Hecate's tri-formed image rose shadowy in its alcove above the unlighted altar. But light there was. No fire burned where the green flames had crawled before, but a green glow still hovered at Hecate's feet—for the Mask of Circe stood empty on the altar.

I paused involuntarily. And the Mask spoke again.

“Jason, beloved—come forward.”

The eyes were closed. The hair lay in coils and serpentine tendrils spread out upon the altar, hiding the white neck. The face was as lovely and inhuman as before, its smooth planes pale as alabaster, and glowing faintly with a greenish inward flame. Beneath the closed lids a thin line of fire glinted, as of banked embers within the Mask.

“Jason,” the red lips murmured, and when they parted, green light glowed from within where that which had been Circe still dwelt waiting for Hecate's promise to be kept over three thousand years.

The eyes were closed, and yet in some indefinable way I knew she could see me, and perhaps see my mind and thoughts as well. I drew a long breath and said in a voice that

sounded startlingly loud in this eerie silence:

“Jason’s memories no longer rule me. I’m here again because I rule them now. I’m here to offer my help to Hecate if she hopes to conquer Apollo in the hour of the eclipse.”

Stillness, ringing in my ears for a long moment. The Mask’s lips parted at last on a line of green fire, and the sweet, distant voice said. “What do you ask of me, Jason?”

“The Mask,” I said.

The green glow mounted and veiled the tri-formed goddess. The Mask faded and was gone, hidden by that eerie light. After a time a voice came again, not quite Circe’s, and not quite a voice, but ringing unmistakably in my mind.

It said, “The Mask is useless without the priestess, son of Jason. You know that.”

I nodded. “Yes, I do know that. But if I asked for the priestess too—to mend a vow I broke long ago—”

“You were frightened of me then,” the voice whispered. “Your face was white whenever you stood before Hecate’s altar. Now you have found courage somewhere.”

“Or knowledge,” I said. “Jason believed in gods. I do not.”

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There was a pause. Then, very strangely, something like laughter.

“Son of Jason who betrayed me—I do not believe in gods either. But I do believe in certain other things, such as vengeance!” Now the soundless voice hardened.

“So. I can speak to you without words because you have been close to Hecate, in your memories. But I can do no more than that. Without a priestess to give me vital energy, I cannot leave my own place and help you. The Circe is old—too old to give me that strength. If I drew upon her, she would die.

“Nevertheless there may be a way. If you can force or trick Apollo into going to the secret place where I dwell, I can war with him. Matters do not stand as they did three thousand years ago, son of Jason. But since you will keep your vow this time—you say—then you may have the Mask. For I am tired of strife. If this ends in my own destruction, I do not care much. But it should end now.”

The glow brightened.

“Phrontis tricked you. When will the eclipse begin?”

“Not for two days,” I said, but my throat dried as I said it. Two days!

“Phrontis lied to you. The eclipse begins—now. Phrontis holds Cyane, who is unprotected; he holds her for a supreme sacrifice, if need be, to make Apollo turn his dark face away from Helios. As for you—three biremes wait half a league away from Aeaea, to seize you and take the Mask—and destroy it. The crew of the ship that brought you here has similar orders.”

I said, “If I could dodge them, get to Helios somehow—”

“There is only one road that will get you there in time. That way lies through my world, a world beyond this one as this is beyond your own. Now—”

The green flames washed out from the alcove. They touched me—rippled beyond me. I was caught in the emerald glow.

I saw a shadow—shadow of Circe—shadow of the Mask.

The old priestess stood beside me, wearing the Mask.

And then the light tightened about us like a net, lifted us, bore us away. . . .

“See with my eyes.”

The light-veils shifted, parted. . . .

“Hear with my ears.”



I heard the shrieking of wind, the creak of cordage, the booming of sails. . . .

“Hate with my hate!”

The three biremes of Helios tacked on the dark sea, their golden splendor dimmed. A shadow crept across the purple sky. Stars were gleaming wanly, stars that never shone on earth.

They passed and were gone. I smelled the hot, sweet reek of blood, heard the bellowing of oxen, saw the flash of the golden knives as they slit shaggy throats.

Helios!

The golden city wailed its terror to the darkening sky! Slowly, slowly, across the blazing disc of the sun there crept an arc of darkness. It thickened. And Helios faded, dimmed, its bright lustre paling as the eclipse marched across the sun’s face.

A balustrade protruding from the clifflike towers of the temple. Panyr stood there, his horned head thrown back, his beard jutting stiffly forward, while the goat-yellow eyes searched the sky.

“Jason!” he called to me.

The vision passed. My sight swept on, into the heart of the temple, into enormous vaulted rooms thronged with worshippers, filled with the wail of prayers and the smell of blood.

Into a chamber I had not seen before, I went. It was walled with black. A single shaft of pure white light blazed down on an altar, where lay a figure completely shrouded by a golden cloth.

Against the wall a circle of light stood, a quarter darkened now, a lambent sun, darkening with eclipse as the sun above Helios was darkened.

Priests of Apollo stood about the altar, masked with the golden disc that concealed their features. One of them held a knife, but he hesitated, glancing again and again at the pseudo-sun upon the wall. I thought: Phrontis will not kill Cyane unless all else fails, unless Apollo of the Eclipse comes to Helios. For Cyane, heir to the Mask of Circe, is the supreme sacrifice that might appease the sun god.

The other priests chanted, and from some distant place came the chant of a great multitude in strophe and answering antistrophe.

Then came the voice of Hecate: “There is no door in Helios for us to enter. It is too late.”

And Circe’s voice, mingled with that of the old priestess.

“There is a way, Mother. The ancient temple to you beyond the gates. That altar still stands.”

“Yet the gates of Helios are too strong.”

“Call your people! And let Hecate break the walls!”

## CHAPTER XII

### *Battling Beasts*

Dimly I had a glimpse of Panyr on his balcony, under the darkening sky. He seemed to be listening. Then suddenly he brought up a ram's horn to his lips and sent shout after brazen shout echoing from its mouth.

Summoning—what?

Panyr's horn called. But I thought that Hecate, too, was voicing a command, and her voice reached ears that the faun's horn could not. The air grew darker. But the temple torches flamed brighter and brighter as the eclipse swept softly across the land. The golden city was fading—never, I thought, to shine bright again beneath Apollo's sun!

The summons of Panyr roared forth. The call of Hecate shrilled across the crags and forests. From cavern and grove, from their woodland lairs around Helios, on swift-racing feet, the centaur-people of Hecate galloped down on the golden city!

Now the earth was solid beneath me again. The green fires shuddered, sank, and were gone. I stood with the old priestess in the midst of a moss-covered circle of rounded stones, on a forested hillside. One verdigrised boulder, larger than the others, was in the center of the circle, and on this the emerald flame still hovered.

Through the Mask the Circe spoke to me.

"Circe's old altar, without worshippers now, but still a door she can open from one world to the next."

Nor was this magic either, I told myself firmly, trying to keep a sane grip on reality in the midst of this nightmare rising like a storm about me. A—a machine, not necessarily a complicated affair of levers and pistons and vacuum tubes, but one of the simplest—a block of radioactive material buried in the altar stone, perhaps a source of power, or an anchor to hold Hecate here.

But the cold logic of science faded before this rout out of ancient legend. The oak boughs above us swayed and whispered in the gathering dark. The sun was half eclipsed now. And all about us was low, inhuman laughter, the clattering of hoofs, the flat, alien stare of beast-eyes.

Trembling down the wind came the crying of Panyr's horn. The Mask of Circe turned to me. The Circe gestured, called a command. I was seized in huge arms and tossed upon the broad back of a centaur.

Again the Circe shrilled an order.

The beast-army stirred into motion like an enormous pool sweeping down under the drag of a current pulling it into a single channel. Now the boughs flashed past above me. I saw gnarled hands reaching up, ripping improvised clubs from the oaks as we swept beneath. The insane beast-laughter shouted.

Darker, darker grew the air as the eclipse rushed relentlessly across the sun.

A sword-hilt was thrust into my grip. It was too heavy to be wielded except two-handed. I tried desperately to keep my seat and hold the sword at the same time. Some of the centaurs, I saw, had weapons like mine, but others held things like sickles, bright-bladed, and most of them had ripped their own cudgels from the trees.

We burst from the forest and thundered down a long slope. Far distant lay the sea, with the dimmed golden ships of Helios riding beyond the marble quay. Alien stars flamed across the

black sky. Helios lay beneath us.

The inhuman roaring of the centaurs mingled with the thunderous beat of their hoofs as the horde avalanched down on Apollo's citadel!

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We swung across a broad, paved road and swept past it through fields of flax that lay silver as a shining lake in Our path. The wind shifted, bringing to our ears the wailing of the city's people. And down the channels of air shouted Panyr's trumpet, mindless and wordless as the voice of Pan himself, a summons that stirred raging fires deep within my blood, ancient, primal fires waking to life as the faun sounded his summons.

Jason, son of Aeson, give me your strength!

From somewhere, from the lost memories of Jason or from the faun's horn, strength came, perhaps flowing into me from that monstrous beast-body I gripped between my knees. The musky, hot reek of the herd stung my nostrils. A cold wind began to blow from the sea, and the wailing cry of Helios was drowned by the centaurs' roaring.

No longer sun-bright, no longer blazing with supernal brilliance, Helios couched dark and immobile under the black sky.

We thundered past titan gates, closed now, but higher than six men's height. We swept up to the wall itself lowering far above our heads, and now we could not see into the city. But we could hear. We could hear chanting.

"Turn thy face from us, great Apollo.

"Turn the terror of thy dark face from Helios!

"Walk not in our streets, nor stoop above our temple. . . .

"Come not to us, Apollo, in the Hour of thine Eclipse!"

The centaurs had halted. A hundred feet away loomed the golden walls. I looked for the Circe—saw her, no longer riding a centaur, but walking—walking steadily toward the city.

I tried to swing one leg free to dismount, but a powerful arm came back to halt me.

"Wait," the centaur said, thickly in his beast-voice. "Wait."

"Circe!" I called.

She did not look back. Suddenly I knew what she meant to do. Only Hecate's power could unlock Helios to us now, and the old priestess could not summon forth the goddess, and live.

It was growing darker, darker. The centaurs stirred uneasily, their voices fell silent. I could see only a white shadow moving away from us in the gloom. But about the Masked head a lambent greenness played.

Ceaselessly the faun's horn cried from darkened Helios. Then it too fell silent. There was only the cry of that wailing chant:

"Turn thy face from Helios,

O dark Apollo!"

Circe's white shadow flung out its arms. And now in the silence, above the crying from the temple, a thin sound began to shrill. Higher and higher it rose, pitched closer and closer to the margin of perception, and then higher still. It was a sound as no mortal throat could form, but I knew from whose throat it came—Circe's white inhuman throat, Circe's red mouth.

The sound tore at my nerves and shuddered in my bones. It was no human voice—that voice of Hecate!

The golden walls shimmered with sudden motion in the gloom. I saw the same shudder run over them that was moving in my bones. But more violently and still more violently.

A lance of dark lightning seemed to leap across the gold. A crack appeared in the walls of Helios. Another black bolt shot out to cross it, and then another. The high walls of Apollo's city were shaking, crumbling away.

And still the voice shrilled on.

From base to top of the wall a thick black serpent seemed to run. There was low thunder groaning below the keening of that unearthly supersonic voice. Vibration, I thought. No magic, simply vibration. It can break glasses or bring down bridges if you find the tonic chord. And I remembered Jericho!

With a long, low, rumbling crash the wall crumbled. Billows of golden dust rolled up in clouds.

A centaur thundered forward and stooped in full gallop to sweep the Circe up in his arms. She lay motionless, the Mask's black curls streaming in the dimness.

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The crashing of the wall subsided into diminishing rumbles like sullen thunder. The centaurs began to move toward the wall. But it was a barrier no longer. Riven from base to top, it opened a wide gate for us now to pass into the golden city.

The crying of the faun's horn summoned us through the gap. We stampeded in a wild, shouting surge through the wall and into a street filled with wailing throngs, but their bodies made no barrier for the centaurs' murderous hoofs. I saw the dulled glimmer of golden armor. The soldiers of Helios, filling the street, marched toward us in orderly ranks, phalanx upon phalanx.

Well-disciplined, these men, but what armor could withstand the bone-cracking smashes of the centaurs' hoofs?

Unceasingly the knotted cudgels smashed down. Unceasingly the scythes of the centers mowed a red harvest and reaped—death. The great swords swung like monstrous flails among the armored guards. And the creatures fought as horses fight, rearing, kicking, crushing in cuirass and helmet with savage, half-mindless fury.

We fought not without our own losses. The golden swords swung too, and I heard the wild, high beast-screams of hamstringed centaurs going down in a struggling heap among half a dozen soldiers, fighting furiously to the last stroke of a Helios sword.

But my own mount fought unscathed. And from his back I fought too, blind and breathless, seeing nothing but the next helmed face to swing at and the next soldier that went down—and the man beyond him stepping forward into his place.

Until at last we were on the temple steps, surging up irresistibly against the golden hordes that barred our path. But now it was fighting in the dark. Overhead only a steady, lambent ring marked the sun's corona.

We were inside the gate. We were storming up the long steps toward the encastled tower. And I saw Panyr's bearded face watching us from an out jut of the temple wall. I shouted at him and he lifted his horn high in recognition.

"Come up!" he called to us, barely audible above the uproar. "Come up to me here!"

My centaur heard. I felt his mighty body gather itself beneath me and we seemed to flow up the steps through suddenly riven ranks of the gold-mailed defenders, parted helplessly before the centaur's dripping sword. From his back I dealt with those he missed.

Panyr waved an urgent arm toward the base of the out jut where he stood.

“There’s a door down there,” he shouted. “Guarded—but I’ll meet you inside if you can get through. Zeus, what a battle!” He grinned and vanished.

I did not need to urge my centaur forward. We plunged around the curve of the wall and the grille of a barred door stood before us, shining within with the armor of the defenders. My centaur laughed, a brutish whinny of sound, and rose on his hind feet, I clung to the sweating human waist, feeling the terrific jolt that racked us both as his front hoofs smashed against the grille.

The gateway buckled. The centaur danced backward, came down to all-fours, reared again. I heard the shrill scream of his inhuman laughter, felt a worse jolt than before, and the gateway burst open before us.

Before I was off his back four men lay dying on the floor and the centaur’s hoofs and sword dripped bloodily. He was laughing in a half-crazy voice, hysteria and savagery mingling terrifyingly.

Then Panyr’s hoofs clicked on the floor and he came around a bend of the corridor and hailed us. The centaur cried out in no human language, and Panyr replied, laughing with excitement, breathless, beckoning us on.

Thrice we met guards, and each time my sword and the centaur’s terrible arsenal of weapons triumphed. Panyr himself took no part in the conflict. He stood back, watching and waiting, until we made our kill. Then we went on again.

And so we came, at last, to the garden where the Python guarded Apollo’s Fleece.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *Power Unleashed*

No time was left, now, for more than a glance through the shutter that closed the garden. For footsteps echoed down the corridor behind us, running hard, and the clatter of mail and weapons. From the distance came the roar of the battle around the temple walls, and above it the wailing of that infernal chant, and the darkness still seemed to be deepening over everything.

But I scarcely knew it. I had forgotten the battle and the oncoming danger behind us, and even the uncanny night-time of the Eclipse in which I must fight a battle with the gods. For the Garden of the Fleece lay before me—

And it had changed. I laid my hand on the shutter and pushed it wide. I set a knee on the sill and bent my head through the low window, and in a half-dream, scarcely knowing what I did, I stepped down into the magical garden.

That carpet of flowers that had blazed like molten stars no longer burned so blindingly. For this was the Hour of the Eclipse. They still burned, but with a curious, sickly flame that made me shrink at the thought of wading through them.

But wade I must. For there in the center of the garden swayed the tree that legend called Python, sluggish, half-asleep in the deepening darkness of the Eclipse. The great eyes of the serpent-branches turned slowly to watch me, the scaled bodies turned—slowly, slowly, like serpents in a nightmare.

Hanging among them burned the Fleece.

Then from the window behind me a sudden tumult burst. I heard Panyr shout, and I heard the wild, screaming laughter of the centaur, and the thud of his hoofs on flesh. A wave of gold-mailed men came pouring through the broad low window—and the fight was on again.

I would not have avoided it if I could. For I knew now the secret of the Python-Tree. I knew the one thing that would cast enchantment on it, as Medea had done for the other Jason, long ago.

So I stumbled back among the palely burning flowers toward the tree, swinging up my dripping sword. Across the heads of the oncoming soldiers I saw the centaur flounder across the sill and come down clumsily among the flowers, both hands gripping his weapon and the savage joy of combat in his half-animal face.

Then he struck my attackers from behind in the same moment I rushed them from the front, and for a timeless while after that, I was aware of nothing but the clash of blades and mailed bodies around me, and the desperate need to keep those golden swords away from me and to kill as many as I could.

Partly the presence of the tree helped me. My flesh crawled at the nearness of sluggish heads that stirred and lifted with hideous avidity whenever I stepped within their reach. The soldiers feared them too, and it was their fear that must have saved me from being cut down a dozen times over as we fought. For I was no hero of ancient Greece now, only Jay Seward fighting in the ghastly, pallid light of those drowsing flowers and praying that the goddess watched and could delay her hour until I was ready.

But I had no shield to protect me, and as we struggled to and fro among the burning blossoms, my blood mingled with that of the guards. And the centaur fought like a demon.

There was silence except for the thud of blows and our heavy panting as we struck and stumbled and struck again—and the flowers of Apollo drank our blood.

Blood soaked the golden ground. The headless body of a guard collapsed, spouting a crimson stream. Avidly the flowers held out their cups. Avidly the petals stirred as they drank.

Among the roots of the tree the blood flowed and sank. And slowly, slowly the serpent heads sank too, grew lethargic, swayed and drooped as the fight raged on about those reptilian branches.

Three thousand years ago Jason tricked Medea into brewing a magic potion that would send the Python into a charmed slumber. I had seen with Jason's eyes, and I knew what the potion was. Stripped of its mystic herbs and incantations, the potion was—blood.

Even so, it was only in the Hour of the Eclipse that any human could approach this near to the tree, through the incandescence of the garden. But the right moments of the right hour were with us now, and time itself seemed to fight today for Hecate.

The Python-Tree drank and drank. Slowly it seemed to fall into a drowsy ecstasy of vampirism as its half-reptilian roots sucked up the liquor we spilled from our living bodies.

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I watched and waited my time. And at last, in a moment, while by common consent my opponents and I paused to draw a panting breath, I sprang suddenly backward toward the tree. The guardsman lifted his sword and plunged forward—and then suddenly hesitated, eyeing the sluggish serpents. But I did not hesitate. I knew the time was running desperately low.

The lowest branches of the tree were scaly to my grasp. I swung up among them, got a knee over the thick golden limb, clambered upward, clutching the scaled branches that writhed slowly under my hands.

Slowly the serpent-heads curved around toward me, sluggish with the blood-feast. If I had had time to think, I must have been too congealed with horror to move. But my eyes were on that shining, incredible thing glittering with a thousand lights even now, in the full glow of the garden.

I reached out an unsteady hand. I touched the Golden Fleece.

Astride a writhing branch, I lifted it from its age-old limb. A shimmering ripple of glory flowed across the Fleece as it shook in my hands, vibrant, alive, incredible.

I swung it across my shoulders like a cloak. It clung there, needing no fastening.

It was alive.

And until this moment I had been dead flesh!

Only dead guardsmen were left when I came down from the tree. All the living had fled. The centaur watched me warily, his eyes showing white like a frightened horse. Even Panyr kept a safe distance. And the flowers at my feet withered and crisped to burned embers as I walked among them.

I never knew the principle of the Fleece. Those ringlets of delicate golden wire might have been antennae, picking up energy from some unknown source, energy that poured into my body and mind and flooded me with miraculous power. Hephaestus, greatest craftsman of an inhumanly great race, had made the Fleece, and though it was a machine, it superseded a machine as the human brain supersedes the simple colloid which is its basic structure. What form of physio-psychic symbiosis made its operation possible I never understood.

I wondered if my body and mind could bear this overload long enough. For it was dangerous to wear the Fleece, but more dangerous not to, at this point. And that flooding

ecstasy which the wearing of it poured through me made even the danger a delight No man has lived at all, I thought, who has not worn the Fleece!

I went back through the window into the temple hall. Panyr stood back for me; the centaur floundered again across the sill and followed at a distance, warily, like a skittish horse. I had almost forgotten them. The walls gave back the glowing of the Fleece and sang faintly with an echo of its power.

We came out of the corridor into an enormous hall, deafening with the tumult of battle. The centaur-army had plunged this far in its invasion, and the hall was a battlefield.

But a field that parted before me and fell silent as I strode forward wrapped in the Golden Fleece. A cry of terror swept the crowd when they saw me, but I scarcely heard it. All I could hear was the faint, thin singing of the Fleece's ringlets, pouring power through my brain and body.

I followed Panyr on and on, through great rooms filled with carnage and which fell silent as we came. I think we left peace, behind us everywhere, for when these struggling masses saw the Fleece, they knew the time for human conflict had ended. The power had passed from them and it was the gods now who must meet in the final battle for supremacy.

We came at last to the threshold of that chamber I had seen through Hecate's eyes.

It was dim now—very dim, and full of the voices and the ceaseless swaying motion of the praying throng. Against the black walls the golden robes of the priests glowed dully. I saw the masks they wore—round sun-discs, featureless, hiding every face behind the enigmatic symbol of Apollo. And the discs glowed too, casting a strange, dim light over the crowd.

Apollo's sun-circle on the wall was no longer as I had seen it in my vision, a half-eclipsed disc. Now it was a flickering ring, like the corona in the dark sky above Helios. The Eclipse was complete.

"Turn thy dark face from us, O Apollo," the swaying throng wailed endlessly. "Look not upon Helios in the dark of the Eclipse."

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On the altar beneath the sun-corona a golden cloth lay moulded to the curves of the body it shrouded. Cyane, I thought, waiting the sacrifice. And the hour of the sacrifice must be very near—must be almost upon us.

The priests were moving and bending in ritual gestures. I knew Phrontis by his height, though the sun-disc masked his face. The chant went on, but it was rising to a climax now as the moment when blood should flow to Apollo drew near.

I stepped across the threshold.

Little rippling flashes of light flared out from the Fleece and eddied through the dark air of the temple like ripples though water. And for a heartbeat the chanting ceased and there was deathly silence in the sanctum of the sun-god. Every face turned. Even the faceless discs of the priests lifted.

Then a hushed murmuring swept the worshipers. The priests froze in their places. All but Phrontis. There was no need to see his face beneath the mask he wore. I knew how it must have convulsed with rage and terror as he sprang for the altar with one long bound, his hand going out for the sacrificial knife.

I thought the moment was not quite ripe for that sacrifice, but Phrontis could not wait any longer. He would disrupt the ceremony if need be, but he knew Cyane must die—quickly, before Hecate came for her priestess. He seized the knife. He braced himself with one hand upon the altar, swung the blade high.



Briefly it shone like a bright star in the light-ripples from the Fleece, a star that trembled and shook. From all that packed chamber there came no sound at all.

Not until that moment did I know how much the Fleece could do. Involuntarily I had started forward, throwing out one hand to stop the fall of the blade, futilely, as if my arm could reach Phrontis' wrist and halt it—

And the wrist did halt. Between my hand and his, a lance of power seemed to stretch. I felt the strong golden energy of the Fleece pour through me and I knew that among all human creatures I was a god myself now—godlike in power, godlike in the destroying violence of the Fleece.

Among gods? Well, there was time enough to test that.

Phrontis' face was hidden, but I could almost feel the panic-stricken stare behind it as he found he could not move his lifted hand. I saw the quiver of muscles beneath his robe as he strove in vain to break the frozen rigidity which the Fleece had locked upon him at the command of my miraculously augmented will.

I moved forward warily, not sure how long the spell would hold him. The throng drew back on each side, leaving me a broad aisle. I came to the altar.

Phrontis and I faced each other, for an instant motionless, across Cyane's gold-shrouded body. I wished I could see his face. I put out my hand and tossed the golden altar cloth aside.

Cyane's eyes were open, but drowned in a drugged sleep. I think she did not see me. Golden fetters locked her to the block, wrist and ankle, as she had lain once before waiting the knife.

I wound the chains about my hand and snapped them like straws. And above the metallic sound of their breaking, I heard the low thunder of hoofbeats approaching down the hall outside.

I turned to look. The centaurs were coming. And the foremost held the Mask of Circe in his two outstretched hands. The eyes were closed and I think it slept. But from lids and closed lips faint lines of green fire gleamed. Circe waited to be freed.

In a deathly silence the centaurs wound their way down the aisle that had just opened to let me by. Their hoofs fell muffled upon the floor of Apollo's sanctum. They were terrible, blood-splashed figures, still panting from the heat of combat, red drops falling with soft splashes to the floor as they paced slowly forward to restore the Mask of Circe from the dead priestess to the living one.

I saw Phrontis quiver with a long, convulsive shudder. He was still frozen as the power of the Fleece had caught him, knife poised above Cyane. But I knew he watched through the sun-disc across his face, and I knew the frantic emotions that must fill him as he saw all but the last of the old prophecies come true—the Fleece in Helios, the Mask and the Circe here at the sun-god's altar. There remained now only the fulfillment of the last prophecy.

The centaur circled me, still holding the Mask upon his outstretched hands. He paced to the head of the altar, where Cyane lay.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *End of a God*

Sternly I was watching Phrontis. Now I let my hand fall, that had stricken him motionless from the full width of the temple away. And his hand fell with it, the knife clattering to the floor, very loud in that breathless silence. He lifted a trembling arm and pulled down the sun-disc so that it hung across his chest. Above it his eyes met mine.

I saw incredulous horror there, pure terror convulsing that clever face. He had not shared the superstitions of his fellows. Cold logic had solved his problems—until now. But logic and science had failed him alike in this moment and I thought I could see the shattering apart of the whole fabric that had been Phrontis' mind.

From the crowd a gasping cry went up. I turned. Cyane was rising from the altar. Cyane?

The inhuman beauty of Circe's Mask watched us, nimbused with green flame, alive, enigmatic.

And then above us all, from that corona of dim fire above the altar, the blinded sun-symbol of Apollo, a gush of sudden, intolerable heat burst forth. And with it a sound—a sound like Olympian laughter.

Phrontis swayed. I saw the look of terror change upon his face, leap into a veritable madness of new fear.

"No!" he gasped. "Apollo—no!" And almost automatically he broke into the chanting I had interrupted. "Look not upon us, O Apollo, in the Hour of the Eclipse."

The people took it up, and there was urgency in their voices now. This was no ritual prayer, but a vital cry of importuning:

"Turn thy face away, Apollo! Look not upon us in thy dark hour!"

And Apollo heard—and laughed!

I remembered what Panyr had told me of another Eclipse in which the god had looked upon his people, and none lived to say what the aspect of his dark face might be. These people were doomed to know and never to tell the tale.

Laughter rang from the darkened disc, louder and more dreadfully. And heat poured forth from it, black heat like black, invisible water, filling up the temple with an intolerable flood. Heat without light, and in it, strangely, a core of pure cold that touched only the mind.

Behind me the centaurs wheeled. I heard the low thunder of their hoofs beating out a rising tumult as they clattered from the room through the terrified crowd. Echo upon echo rolled from the ceiling and through the halls outside as they fled.

The herd was racing from doomed Helios. The priests were scattering. The people were scrambling and fighting to be free. Now even Panyr turned away, with one last long glance of the yellow goat-eyes into mine in farewell.

Only Circe and I remained—and Phrontis facing us across the altar. He had been so sure of himself. He had scorned to kneel before a god he knew was no god. But he did not know enough. Apollo was still not divine, but his powers were so far above human powers that to Phrontis now he must seem truly the god men called him.

Still that terrible heat poured out of the darkened sun-circle. And now a Face began to take shape within it. I could not look. I knew that Face in the glory of its sun-brightness, and even

then it was too dreadful in its beauty for me to look upon. But Apollo's dark face— No, not even when I was armored in the Fleece would I gaze upon that sight!

Circe moved to my side, walking smoothly, surely, haloed in green light. I heard her voice, very sweet, not Cyane's voice but the Enchantress herself speaking as she had spoken three thousand years ago.

"Hecate," she called. "Mother Hecate!"

And the goddess heard, and answered. For a pool of green light began to glimmer at our feet—began to shimmer and rise.

We stood as if in a pool of translucent water, permeated and surrounded. It seemed to rise within us as well as all about us, cool and fresh, drowning out the heat. I saw Phrontis beyond the altar. He faced the sun upon the wall. He looked Apollo in the face.

Revulsion seemed to make his very flesh crawl upon his bones, as my flesh had crawled. I saw the terrible shudders sweeping him—I saw him fall to his knees, groveling in utter abnegation before the god he had scorned. All logic and intellect stripped away, he knelt shivering before a sight no human flesh could face and remain unaltered.

"Turn thy dark face from Helios," I heard him sob the old chant that could not help him now. "Look not upon us—in the Hour—of thine Eclipse—" His voice faltered, strangled, went on in broken rhythms.

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Behind us now the thunder of the centaurs' retreat had passed. But the screaming of all Helios had risen to a crescendo that penetrated even these sacred walls. Phrontis in that frightful torrent of unseen fire began to shrivel as he knelt.

"Stoop not above our temple."

He could not tear his blinded gaze from that Face which even I dared not look upon. Burning, blackening in the full blaze of it, he croaked his useless plea.

"Come not to us—Apollo—not to us—not—"

The voice was stilled. The golden sun-mask melted upon his chest, the golden robes blacked and fell to cinders. Phrontis was no longer there—only a shriveling shape of blackness before Apollo's dark, laughing Face.

And all around us Helios itself was dying.

For Apollo poured out the black, lightless violence of his sun-heat in an invisible torrent that not flesh and blood, not metal nor stone could resist. And I thought I knew why. Hecate stood with us before Apollo's altar, and that flood was focused upon her—upon us—the enemies of the sun.

He meant to consume us in that fearful torrent if it meant consuming all Helios too.

The green pool of radiance held us still. Apollo's might beat in vain about us. But I felt the floor shudder in that bath of flame. The temple, the city, even the earth beneath the city, shivered in the pouring energy that must be violent enough, almost, to smash the atom itself asunder.

A mounting thunder of sound spread through Helios, a shaking bellow of stone upon stone, metal shrieking upon metal, as Helios began to fall.

When a people die, the voice of their agonies is a sound no brain that hears it could ever forget. We heard those cries as Apollo's people fell before the violence of his power. But when a city dies—no language spoken by human creatures could tell of the death-roar of its passing.

Stone and steel screamed in their dissolution. Wall roared down upon wall and roofs crashed deafeningly, incredibly, in long, thundering echoes upon the defenseless heads of their

builders. Earth itself shuddered and cracked beneath the titanic murdered city. Helios fell as Olympus itself might fall, in cataclysmic chaos.

But we were not in Helios. We were no longer in this middle world of legend but in a place of inconceivable strangeness. The green light clouded around us, and when it thinned again we stood in the unknown world of the gods!

Jason had caught glimpses of this place, three thousand years ago. He had not understood. And though I understood a little more clearly what it was I gazed on, I knew that no human mind could entirely comprehend the vast and godlike scope of this domain.

There were things around me that my eyes could not quite see. Enormous structures—mighty colossi that dwarfed anything man might build—and were machines. Vast golden things rose into the golden sky so many thousands of feet that human eyes could not see all their heights. The topless towers of Ilium, I thought confusedly.

Machines they were, but at once too complicated and far too incredibly simplified for human minds to grasp. A race of demigods had built them, for the purposes of their own strange, alien kind.

A dead race! For the machines were silent. The mightiest science that ever existed, I thought, had gone down into the eternal silence of oblivion.

There were traces of what must have been battle on some of those mountainous golden walls. Some stood half in ruins, their mysterious shining interiors open to the uncomprehending gaze. And some were smashed beyond all likeness to their originals. I wondered what titanic battle of the gods had raged here, and what its outcome was, millenniums ago.

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A soundless wind carried us weightlessly through that fantastic city. And far away, but coming toward us, a shining thing moved.

Hecate spoke in my mind.

“We go to meet Apollo,” the voice said quietly. “He or I must be destroyed. And the Son of Jason must know the reason why, so that this time he may not be tempted to fling down his armor and flee.

“If you fail me now, you must know the price of failure.

“I will tell you the secret of Apollo.

“The time-streams crossed between two worlds more than seven thousand years ago. For awhile the twin worlds were one. And at that time our race was born—the race mankind called gods. They were not gods. They were mutations from human stock, born with strange powers, capable of a greater knowledge and a greater science than man could understand. Not all of us, but enough. Legends name them—Zeus and Aphrodite, Hera, Ares, Pluto, Hephaestus—Hecate.

“When the time-streams parted, our race moved on to the middle world, where Helios stood. We grew in power and knowledge. And in the end, we made this farther world, a place of our own, in an artificial space-time, where we were not bound by the laws of any planet.

“Here we built and here we rose to a summit of power that no race before or since has ever known. I was one of them, though not the greatest and not altogether of their blood. Even in the days of legend, the gods of Greece had little heed for mankind. Even then they were moving toward their Olympian goal, away from the world of Earth. But Hecate worked more closely with the sons of man. Necromancy and enchantment were my skills, and I needed men and women to help me. So when the race moved on, I lingered.

“And when the final battle came, I was not among the slain.

“You see, we knew we were not gods. We knew death must come for us some day, and we wished to create a race that could mount on our shoulders to a pinnacle higher than even we had ever dared to dream. So there were many experiments. Many trials. Some were partly successful. We made the centaurs, the satyrs and fauns, and the children of wood and stream. They were nearly immortal, but failures because of their taint of the beast.”

The voice faltered, because now that soundless wind had swept us toward a high hill towering dimly in the golden air, and upon its height the glow that was Apollo stood waiting.

I thought I knew the hill. I had stood on it before—or Jason had.

This was that bare height upon Aeaëa where the veil between two worlds hung thinly, where, once before Apollo and Hecate had met in combat—and Jason fled.

Running, I had heard Apollo’s terrible laughter ringing down the heights of the sky behind me. I heard it again, now. I looked through the heart of that golden blaze and saw Apollo’s Face.

It was supernally beautiful. It was supernally horrible. My flesh crawled upon my bones again with the same sort of revulsion, in infinitely less degree, that many men feel in the presence of certain earth-things—snakes or spiders—that mysteriously outrage some instinct deep within us all.

Apollo was such an outrage. To the eye he was godlike, beautiful, superhumanly glorious. But something in the very soul rejected him. Something in my brain shuddered away from him, cried voicelessly that he should not be, should not exist or walk the same world as I or share the same life.

Hecate’s voice took up her tale again in my mind. But I think I knew the secret of Apollo, intuitively, in my bones and nerves, even before she put it into words in my brain.

“So we tried again,” she was saying. “In the half-gods we had failed. So we put aside living flesh and made Apollo.”

I knew. Something in human flesh can guess when that which it confronts should not be alive. Some buried vanity, perhaps, that cries out against the aliveness of outrageously non-human things.

Apollo was too beautiful to be human. Too terrible to wear flesh. I knew before Hecate put the thought in my mind. Apollo was a machine.

“In our vanity we made our own destruction,” Hecate’s voice said sadly in the depths of my brain. “For our beautiful Apollo was no failure—and no success. Our desires, like our race, sprang from human roots. But this being we created shares no desires of ours. By the standards of our race and yours, he is not sane. Or perhaps it’s we who are insane—before the terrible sanity of the machine.

“We made him too strong. And he destroyed us. There was a mighty battle long ago, a battle that raged for millenniums, but in the end—you see. All of my kind are dead now except—Hecate. And Apollo walks among the ruins of our world.

“Well, he must die. Before he slew the last of the gods—Hephaestus, our greatest artisan—the Fleece was woven for Apollo’s destruction. It can slay him. He knows that. But no god—no one of my race dares wear the Fleece. Death I do not fear—but death while Apollo lives would mean final defeat for all my people dreamed. I cannot die while our last deed lives on unchecked.

“So you wear the Fleece, Son of Jason. You know what you must do.”

Yes, I did know.

I glanced once at Circe—the inhuman loveliness of that alabaster face, red-lipped, long, green-burning eyes meeting mine, and then I turned away from her toward Apollo.

## CHAPTER XV

### *Music From the Sea*

Quickly, for one flashing instant I saw his Face again, beautiful as a machine is beautiful, cold, swayed by emotions I had no name for because until this moment I had never looked upon the emotion of a machine—a living machine that sees its doom approach.

I went forward one step—two—and then the Face dissolved in a glare that was like looking straight into the heart of the sun itself. Apollo called down the ravening violence out of heaven to shield himself against me and I felt the terrible heat of it swallow me up in a bath of freezing flame.

I smiled to myself. I knew that was a two-edged weapon—if I could endure the heat a moment longer. For I knew how to use the Fleece as Hephaestus meant it to be used—and Apollo the Machine was doomed before it.

Hephaestus must have delved deep into the secrets of the electron and the sources of energy. Apollo, being machine, could be destroyed by a machine, and the Fleece was simply that. Apollo was not alive as flesh lives—he drew his life from the source of solar energy, tapping the sun itself for the tiniest fraction of its strength, which was still enough to consume cities in one breath if he chose to release a part of it upon mankind.

But he drew upon the sun continuously. It poured its golden stream through him in a ceaseless torrent, the excess power dissipating harmlessly into the shining air of this superworld.

The Fleece could seal all that power inside him. And not even Apollo could contain such a pouring flood for long. Hecate, I think, drew her own strength from some such source, which was why she dared not wear the Fleece against Apollo. Only a human could wear it, and live to cast it off again.

As I cast it off.

It quivered against my shoulders one last moment, the delicate ringlets of golden wire shivering all around me. Then I touched it and it clung obediently to my grasp as Hephaestus made it to cling so very many generations ago. This machine obeyed as Apollo the Machine could not and must die because of it.

I stripped the Fleece from my shoulders—spun it out away from me in midair—sent it flying across the dazzling space I could not look into without blindness.

Burning gold though the Fleece was, it looked black in that blaze. Without Hecate's mist enfolding us, I know we must both be vaporized into mist in that incredible crucible of fire which Apollo had called down from the sun itself for protection.

As the super-race in its efforts had created its own doom, so Apollo the Machine created his when he called forth that terrible fire. And so, I think, does every living thing, even though it may live by grace of energy from the sun itself, like Apollo.

The Fleece struck and clung. For an unthinkable instant the full violence of that tiny sun-fraction upon which he drew poured down into the beautiful machine that had been a god. Poured down—and built within him an unspilling pool of power.

Apollo for that moment was a vessel that held the sun itself, and in such fire as that, nothing could endure for longer than the flash of a second.

How can I say what happened then? How can I describe in any human tongue how it was Apollo died?

I remember Circe's lovely pale face close to mine for one spinning instant, the deep red lips parted on a cry I could not hear. I remember how the hill we stood on seemed to vanish from underfoot and the sky above us turn to flame.

And then I was floundering in salt water. . . .

I was alone, and misty gray waves tossed me over and over, strangling, helpless. I went down twice, far down. I felt naked without the power the Fleece had poured into me, and weak as a child with the reaction from that tremendous battle.

But just as I thought I could fight no more against the engulfing waves, I heard a whispering, bubbling rush very near me, and something lifted me up—a great wave, or perhaps inhuman hands.

I could breathe again, and beneath me was a solid deck that rose and fell with the motion of the water.

Music sang in my ears. I heard the creak of oars and the whine of cordage in the wind, and the slap of water against a familiar prow.

With an almost intolerable effort I lifted myself on one arm. Ghostly in the gray mist I saw the Argonauts bending to their oars, and heard the lyre of Orpheus singing in the fog.

I could not remember even falling back upon the deck after that. I remember nothing at all—nothing at all. . . .

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The campfire had died hours ago. Mist was creeping down through the pines, and when Seward's voice paused, the only sound was the soft washing of the sea.

Talbot said softly, "And then?"

"And then—I was lying on a beach, and it was night," Seward said. "There were lights in the distance. Somehow I got that far before I passed out again. I was in a little town on the Oregon coast." He shrugged. "It could have been hallucination. How I got from this spot down to Oregon overnight I can't understand. A plane could do it, but why the devil—No, I'm not skeptical any more. I know it wasn't hallucination."

Talbot said, "Well, we've gone far enough into the sciences to realize how little we know. Everything that you tell about is theoretically possible, I suppose—super-race and all. All but the *Argo*."

Seward nodded. "And yet," he said, "the odd thing is that *Argo* is the one thing I'm surest of. It's more real to me than Hecate or Aeaea, or even—Cyane."

Talbot said gently, "Cyane?"

Seward shook himself with an impatient motion. "It isn't over," he said. "Cyane—Circe—one woman or two, I don't know. But there was a promise at the start of it all, and the promise wasn't kept. So I can't rest. I can't settle down to anything in this world. I know it isn't over yet, you see. Unless Hecate died, too.

"Well, an adventure like that happens only once to a man. Or—if he had two lives—then perhaps twice. I don't know. I know it wasn't hallucination. I know I'm not insane because I remember it so clearly. And I know Hecate will fulfill her promise, some day, some day. . . ."

He shrugged and rose. "I've talked enough. It'll be dawn soon. I'm tired."

Talbot lay sleepless for a long time, staring up at the stars among the pine tops and thinking. He thought of Jason and of Jay Seward, and of the origins of names and men. *Argo*,



plowing the misty seas, warden of those waters that lap nameless shores. Warden of the seas—  
Sea-ward—Jay Seward—

He slept. . . .

The faint echo of music woke him just before dawn. It was very dark here among the trees. And he was alone. He felt that uncannily in the blackness as he sat up, ears straining for another echo of the distant music. It came. Talbot got up and took a step toward the echoing sound.

It came from the water. He walked slowly down the slope, past Seward's empty sleeping bag, listening and watching the dark for signs of another moving figure that answered, too, to distant music.

Far ahead of him he thought he heard a splashing above the ceaseless lap of waves on the shore. It was too distant to be sure. Talbot broke into a run and this time he called:

"Seward! Seward, where are you?"

Only silence and the sea replied.

He ran until the sand of the water's edge slowed his footsteps, and the waves rolled in where he halted to stare out across the dark water. Something moved there—a dim shape, long and slender, lying upon the water like—a ship? He never knew. The fog closed in too fast, and only the sea spoke.

Then a ripple of wordless music floated back along the wind, and Talbot shouted once more, for the last time: "*Jason! Jason!*"

There was no answering cry. The shadow in the mists glided away and was itself only mist. Talbot stood silent, watching, listening for an answer that would never come. The gray fog closed down, billow upon billow, and there was nothing left but darkness and the slow, soft sound of the moving sea.

[The end of *The Mask of Circe* by Henry Kuttner]