

**She was the Galaxy's most beautiful whore. He knew that if he
went
to her couch during the time-storm, he, too, would be booking**

PASSAGE TO GOMORRAH

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

EVEN for a lady of the stars, the Lady Berenice was beautiful. Her short blonde hair made Cross think of Martian maize, and her blue eyes, set wide apart in her tanned, oval face, reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. Her tall, Junoesque body put to shame the porno-graphic photographs he had seen of it, cheapened the lurid passages he had read about it; betrayed, as yet, no evidence of her apostasy.

He wondered who her lover was, and why she had refused to reveal him.

When the Jacob's lift hatched levels with the *Pan-dora's* lock, she stepped lightly into the ship beside him. The corporation officer who had accompanied her, handed him her papers, then signaled to the longstarmen below. After a moment the lift and its sole occupant sank from sight.

"How soon do we blast?" the Lady Berenice asked.

She was looking at Cross intently, as though trying to probe beyond the bleak grayness of his eyes. "In about fifteen minutes, my lady," he said.

She nodded, stepped into the ship proper. He sealed the lock and escorted her up the spiral companionway to her cabin.

She paused in the doorway. "I'd like my luggage, please."

"I'll bring it up as soon as we're in *A Priori*, my lady. Right now, I'll have to insist that you strap yourself on the acceleration couch."

He watched as she did his bidding. "You can get up as soon as the 'all clear' signal sounds," he said presently.

She nodded again, not in the least perturbed. He wondered if she'd be equally calm if "acceleration couch" was something more than a hand-me-down term from pre-degravitation days; if she'd be equally composed if she had to contend with 3 or 4 g's, instead of just the temporary instability of blast-off.

She probably would be, he decided. A miscarriage would not affect her banishment to Gomorrah, but it would save her the unpleasantness of having to give birth to a mutant.

He excused himself and headed for the control room.

A Priori drive, once activated, required no supervision except in cases of emergency. The *Pandora* was only a one-passenger-one-pilot job, but Falcon Lines, Inc., had a reputation throughout the civilized sector of the galaxy for fast, efficient service, and even its smallest ships boasted the latest in automatic equipment.

Cross secured the control-room door behind him, made his way leisurely down the spiral companionway to the hold, where the Wine-Women-and-Song longstarmen had deposited the Lady Berenice's luggage. Even in the artificial 1/2 g, the two bags were heavy and he was breathing a little hard when he halted before her door.

He knocked. "Yes?" she answered, her voice muffled by the sound of running water.

"Your luggage, my lady."

The sound of running water ceased, and presently she opened the door. She had wrapped a ship's towel deftly around her torso. It was a white towel that enhanced the hue of her clear, tanned skin. Water glistened on her golden shoulders, ran in twinkling rivulets down her coppery thighs and calves. "Set them inside, please."

Cross complied. She did not move an inch, and his arm, despite his efforts to avoid touching her, brushed her thigh. He withdrew quickly. His arm tingled and his hands were trembling. He kept his eyes averted because he knew what she would read in them. "If you wish anything further, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

"Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori*?"

"A little over four hours, ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"

The question surprised him. Passengers, especially passengers of the Lady Berenice's status, did not usually concern themselves with the exigencies of space travel. They took it for granted, unless otherwise apprised, that such exigencies did not exist. "There is always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we will be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He could not keep his eyes averted forever, and he forced himself to meet her gaze. He was mildly shocked to see that a quantity of her composure had left her, that there was a certain diffidence in the expression on her face.

Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once separated, pure space can be contracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes there is a slight discrepancy, and certain phases of *A Priori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases—or storms if you like—we would lose our awareness of our objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic play-back of our pasts. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not only our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist."

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened before."

"I suppose so, my lady ... Will that be all?"

"Yes—for now."

"I'll be in my cabin ..."

"Cabin" was a euphemism for "cubicle." The cramped compartment adjoining the control room contained a couch, a desk, a small micro-film library and a well-stocked liquor cabinet, but that was about all. Cross opened the cabinet and poured himself a generous brandy. He drank it fast, then he lay down on the couch and tried to sleep. He always slept out the *A Priori* phases of his runs if they were under eight hours, but he had a good idea that he was going to have a hard time sleeping this one out. He was right. The minute he closed his eyes he saw a white towel and a golden sunrise of shoulders; two breath-taking colon-nades of tanned, glistening flesh—There was no sleeping after that.

He swore aloud. Surely she must realize that an ordinary Pilot like himself couldn't afford her. Then

why had she deliberately exhibited her deluxe charms? Why had she deliberately delayed him at the door with so obviously false an excuse as a discussion on the unstable phase of *A priori*? He was certainly not naive enough to think that, just because she was a *fallen* lady of the stars, she would waive her fee. If fourteen years space had taught him nothing else, it had taught him that any extraterrestrial act of love was a business trans-action and nothing more.

Still—

He turned angrily on his side, tried to shut her from his mind. She can go to hell, he thought—

But she didn't. She went to New America, instead. He ac-costed her on a sunny avenue in Little Chicago and they turned, hand in hand, down a narrow street lined with transplanted maples. The sea-son was spring, and the warm air had activated the thermo-statically controlled Hi-Fi's hidden in the foliage, and the air was filled with the singing of robins. After a while they came to a shaded walk that wound up to a secluded cot-tage, and they walked through scented coolness to the door. He noticed, then, that all the while they'd been walking, she'd been wearing nothing but a towel; and it must have been raining, too, despite the sunshine, for her shoulders were glistening with rain-drops, and raindrops twinkled on her long, tanned legs—

He was sitting up on the couch. He was sweating. "I'll be damned!" he said. There was a persistent bell-like sound in his ears, and presently he recognized it as the beeping of the communi-cator. He got up, then, and went into the control room and picked up the neatly typed message which the receiver had emitted:

From: Port Authority, Wine-Women-and-Song, Thais

To: Nathaniel Cross, Pandora

A Priori disturbance reported bulding up in path of your reality-flow. Emerge into normal space at once and await further instructions. Acknowledge.

Cross stared at the words. Was the Lady Berenice clair-voyant? Had she *known* there was going to be a storm?

He hurried toward the con-trol panel. Suddenly he thought of the towel again, the towel and the deliberate shower. He tried to tell him-self that there was nothing unethical in a lady of the stars trying to work off her passage, but it didn't do any good, and his anger kept in-tensifying till it superseded his common sense, till it transformed him from a sea-soned pilot into a frustrated schoolboy. The control panel simply hadn't been designed to be operated by a frustrated schoolboy, and when his fin-gers sought to punch out the pattern that would snap the *Pandora* back into normal space, they punched, instead, a set of symbols sufficiently unintelligible to activate the alarm.

The alarm performed a two-fold function: it alerted authorized persons and, at the same time, it temporarily incapacitated the particular unauthorized person who had triggered it. Cross staggered back against the bulkhead, his fingers tingling from the au-tomatic shock, his body going numb. He slid slowly to the deck, still conscious but unable to move his limbs.

The first wave of the storm struck, and the ship began to shimmer. Lying there, watching the room dissolve around him, he experienced a strange interval of detachment, and he wondered curiously how much he really knew about himself: whether the outrageous mistake he had just made had been the result of his anger, or whether his anger had merely been a trumped-up excuse for mak-ing the mistake; whether the entire action had not resulted from a masochistic desire to participate in the Lady Bere-nice's past. . . .

The tree was much taller than he had thought, and he wished now that he hadn't been in such a hurry to join the club. He had swum the river all right, and he had gone through Devil's Cave without flinching. But you could conquer your fear of water. You could conquer your fear of darkness—

Height was something dif-ferent.

He shinnied a little higher on the trunk, gazed yearning-ly up to the last fork, where the highest limb began its graceful journey into the summer sky. He heard the taunts of the other boys from the meadow

below. They did not think he could make it. In a way, they didn't want him to make it. If he made it, they wouldn't have anyone to pick on till another new boy moved to town.

Well, he'd show them!

He shinned furiously for several seconds, then paused again. He was tired, and his chest hurt. His shins smarted from repeated scraping against the trunk.

He looked up at the fork again. It was quite close now, Perhaps close enough. He reached up with one arm, man-aged to wrap it around the larger of the two limbs. After a moment he reinforced his hold with his other arm. He started to pull his body up-ward, shinnying with his legs. For a while he thought he was going to make it, then his left arm cramped and his right, unable to support his weight, began to slip.

He screamed as he started to fall, but in his desperation he managed to transfer his good arm back to the trunk and keep his legs in position, so that he didn't really fall, he slid, instead, down the trunk to the limb he had left a short time before. He glimpsed the ground, far below, and the height caught up to him once and for all, and he locked his body around the limb and clung there, whimpering.

Presently, he saw one of the other boys start climbing the tree to bring him down, and he heard his new nickname being bandied about on the meadow—

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

"Gee, Dad, are you going on *another* trip?"

"Sure thing," her father said, looking up from his open suitcase.

"But—but you just got back."

His face looked funny, the way it always did after he and mother had been mouth-fight-ing—as though he wanted it to look one way and his mus-cles wanted it to look a totally different way, and he had had to settle for an expression halfway in-between. "Sorry, Berenice, have to go again."

"But—"

"Now, don't cry, darling. Please don't cry."

But she cried anyway, she had to. What else could you do when you'd planned all spring for the halcyon summer days and the treks through the woods, the fishing and the campsite, the little fire burn-ing brightly and your father sitting beside you in the se-rene summer night?

He was on his knees and he was holding her close, and now his face made her think of one of those balloons with faces painted on them that you blew up and twisted into different shapes, only not quite the same, because bal-loons couldn't cry—

"I'll write you, darling. Be a good girl now, and mind your mother."

The other boys were stand-ing on the corner, waiting for him to pass. He gripped his galactic geography book tight-ly and he held his mouth firm, and he made his legs behave as though he wanted them to keep right on walking, as though the thought of flight was remote from his thoughts. . "Here comes Eberhardt Cross!"

"Hi, Eberhardt!"

"Climb any trees lately, Eberhardt?"

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

He kept right on walking. If he stopped it would be worse. They wouldn't settle for mere words then—and there were five of them, and he was only one, and not much of a one at that.

But he thought: I'll show them. I'll show them if it takes me the rest of my life!

"Come in," her mother said, and the tall, handsome man stepped out of the summer night and into the scented living room. "I'm so glad; you could drop by ... Run out and play now, Berenice, like a good little girl. You've been cooped up in the house all day. . . ."

Miss Tenthyear's android eyes beamed brightly as she assumed her lecture-posture by the desk. "Our final subject for today, class," she said, "will be the story of Captain Alexander Eberhardt.

"Your mothers and fathers have probably mentioned his name many times, and they've probably told you about how he piloted the first spaceship to the moon, had a nervous breakdown after he crashed

there, and babbled for days over the world-wide radio hook-up, begging for some-one, anyone, to save him. All of this is true, and Captain Eberhardt, in the eyes of the public, has never been considered a credit to his countrymen. But the bravest of men can collapse when sufficient pressure is applied, and Captain Eberhardt actually died a hero's death. We are all of us merely human, and we should keep this in mind when we pass judgment on our fellow men—"

He was conscious of the other kids looking at him out of the corners of their eyes, and he kept his own eyes focused on his desktop. *Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross*, he could hear them calling him after the bell had sounded, after Miss Tenthyear had retired to her case behind the desk and had turned herself off. And he could hear his own voice now, his own voice deep inside him, silently shouting the old re-frain, but with something added this time: "I'll show 'em! Space is a tree, in a way. Space is a tremendous tree reaching up into infinity, and I'll climb as high into it as I can get and I'll laugh back down at them in their silly suburban houses and I'll gather a handful of stars and throw them down to Earth like shining acorns. . . ."

Her tears had smeared the purple ink, making the passages of the letter illegible. But she had read them once, and once was enough to tell her that her father was never coming back, that his promises were the same old lies, his cheerful phrases the same old cliches, she had read a dozen—a hundred—times before.

How strange that she should remember him so well after eight interminable years, that she should still want him to come back. She had been a gawky girl of 10 when he had gone away for the last time; now she was a worldly young woman of 18—old enough, surely, to be above such child-ish needs as parental attachments—

She heard the doorbell ring downstairs, and the sound of male voices on the doorstep, and she knew her mother was in business again. She got up from her vanity and went over to the window and looked out at the summer night. There was an apple tree growing beside the house and the apple tree was in blossom. She turned off the electronic screen, reached out and broke off a nearby bough. She held it to her nostrils, rejoicing in the sweetness and the purity of the blossoms.

She raised her eyes and saw the summer stars pulsing in the black immensity of the sky. She picked out the patterns of the constellations—the long straggling line of Scorpius, the riotous burgeoning of Sagittarius, the tetrahedron of Libra, the filmy blur of Coma Berenices . . . Subtly, what she breathed and what she saw, what she needed and what she had been denied, blended into a single impression, and she thought: A lady of the stars—that's what I'll be. A lady of the stars . . . And she saw herself, brightly-gowned and glamorous, stepping from star to star, the legions of her lovers following worshipfully behind her. She paused on a global cluster and glanced disdainfully down to the blue-green mote of Earth, and she thought contemptuously of her prosaic mother carrying on her petty assignments in her petty parlor, of her father absconding again and again from reality; then she laughed, and leaped lightly to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, where the Emperor of the Universe humbly awaited her. . . .

"But don't you see?" his father said. "Space is for mis-fits. A normal man simply doesn't give up his rights as an Earth citizen, his right to marry and have children, just for the privilege of traveling to far-off places."

Cross shifted uncomfortably on the front steps. It was a clear night in August, and the stars were so bright and close that they seemed to brush the topmost branches of the maples lining the suburban street.

"Think about it, Nate," his father went on, puffing self-righteously on his suburban pipe. "You're still young. You're only 19. Why don't you wait for a while—a year, any-way. Maybe you'll change your mind by then."

Cross shook his head. "No," he said. "You don't understand. It's something I have to do . . . Something . . . I . . . have . . . to . . . do...."

Cross massaged his limbs, got slowly to his feet. The control room had regained solidity, but he was not fooled. The *Pandora* had merely reached the relatively stable center of the storm—the eye—and any

attempt to throw her back into normal space now would tear her apart, along with everything and everyone on board, and the resultant particles, both inanimate and animate, would be scattered irretrievably throughout the space-time continuum. Suddenly he remembered his passenger, remembered her apprehension about time storms. He hurried toward her cabin, telling himself that it was his responsibility to be with her during the danger period, that it was his duty to protect her; and all the while he told himself, he knew that he was lying in his teeth, that there was no danger—only the embarrassment of having to share one's most intimate experiences with another—and that his presence was totally uncalled for.

She opened the door at his knock. One look into her eyes told him that she had been expecting him; one glance at her magnificent body, bereft, now, even of a towel, told him that he had to have her, no matter what the cost.

She drew him into the room and closed the door, and suddenly he knew that this was no ordinary business transaction, that she wanted him as desperately, almost, as he wanted her. He tried to understand, and a glimmering of the truth touched him; then he felt the warmth of her flesh, and then the moistness of her mouth on his, and he seemed to melt, to dissolve, even as the room dissolved around him — the room and the ship and the present. . . .

"Before approving your application, I'm required to brief you," the male interviewer for Camellias, Inc., said. "We don't want any of our future ladies of the stars to look back some day and accuse us of coercing her into Camellia-activity ... Do you know anything about the profession at all?"

"A little," Berenice said, nervously.

"A very little, I suspect. . . First of all, you must erase from your mind whatever detrimental associations you may have with your future calling. The ancient attitude towards prostitution still prevails on Earth, and probably will continue to prevail for centuries to come; but in space, even a common house-worker is a respected individual, while a full-fledged lady of the stars is the equivalent of a princess or a president's daughter. The 'World's Oldest Profession' has become the 'Galaxy's Noblest Profession'.

"Cosmic radiation, undistilled by the Earth's atmosphere is quite a different proposition from the distilled radiation which has bombarded mankind since birth. Prolonged exposure to it causes certain genetic changes in both male and female chromosomes. Interplanetary travel, thanks to *A Priori*, occasioned only relatively brief periods of exposure; but inter-stellar travel is something else. Even with *A Priori*, the journeys between the stars sometimes require weeks, even months. As a result, no woman can ever enter inter-stellar space without first forfeiting her function as a woman—unless she wants to give birth to a mutant, or, to call a spade a spade, a monster.

"You are probably familiar with the Earth Council's famous Dual Decision of two generations ago: the decision to confine all interstellar personnel, during their sojourn on Earth, to the port areas; and the decision to set aside Polaris 2 as a haven for the monsters that had already been born and for those that might yet be born. But, however commendable it might have been in other respects, the Dual Decision evaded the most vital aspect of the problem—the need of men in space for the women they could no longer have.

"There was only one solution, and it was obvious from the first. But it was a solution which a sex-conscious, sex-ridden, sex-frightened, sex-bewildered people, whose various religious credos classified sex, per se, as a sin, could not accept—except by degrees.

"The first free lance ladies of the stars were of French, Swedish and Japanese descent. They were followed by most of the other racial strains. Eventually their numbers increased to a point where the Earth Council could no longer ignore their activities and was forced either to combat the star-wide spread of the profession, or to legalize it and to encourage it to function along with the time-honored lines of private enterprise. Legalization was inevitable, but still, had it not been for the lobbyists, it might have been irreparably delayed. I am proud to say that the founder of Camellias, Inc., was one of the most articulate and influential of those lobbyists, and it was probably due more to his efforts than to the

efforts of the others, that the Prostitution Act of 2340 finally became a reality.

"The creation and maintenance of an interstellar red light system was a complex undertaking, but we need not go into it here. You'll be adequately schooled in our history at our Martian convent, provided, of course, that you decide to join us. There are, however, two important details which I must call to your attention.

"The first is our caste system. The convents, which the various corporations have set up on Mars, have a common standard, based upon aptitude, personality and technique-achievement, that each prospective lady of the stars must attain in order to graduate. The degree to which she excels in these qualities, together with her physical qualifications, determines her classification, which in turn determines the rates she is allowed to charge for her future services.

"The second is pregnancy. Upon leaving Earth, you will be given a Farbes and Doniger contraceptive-field, guaranteed for life by its manufacturers. *Keep it with, you at all times.* There is no excuse for any lady of the stars to suffer the ignominy of giving birth to a monster. The Earth council has granted us, and the other corporations, the right to banish all our pregnant personnel, together with their lovers, to Polaris 2, and has permitted us to give the planet the much more appropriate name of 'Gomorrah'.

"As soon as you leave Earth, you will be required to take bi-monthly physicals. Don't try to avoid them; I assure you that you'll be apprehended immediately. However, you'll have nothing to worry about—provided you *keep your field with you at all times.* Do you have any questions?"

Berenice shook her head. "No. No questions."

"Then I assume that you still wish to become a lady of the stars."

She wanted to run away, and then she remembered that she was running away. She nodded. Numbly. Miserably. "Yes," she said.

The interviewer beamed. "Splendid!" he said. "Your rating on the aptitude test was very high, and Camellias, Inc., will be delighted to welcome you into its fold ..."

"So you want to be a space-man," the captain of the *Per-seus* said. "What makes you think that stowing away on board my ship is going to help you?"

"Well," Cross said, "you can't very well take me back to Earth, so you'll have to do something with me, and I understand that most ships are short-handed."

"Maybe I can't take you back to Earth personally, but I can throw you in the brig till we reach our first port and *send* you back to Earth. And you wouldn't be able to get out of the quarantine area as easily as you got in, I can assure you of that. You'd be stuck there for the rest of your life as a longstarman."

"Not if I stowed away on another ship," Cross said.

The captain glowered at him for a moment, then: "Why in hell didn't you apply for a berth legally?"

"I couldn't raise the bond," Cross said.

"You mean you were too impatient to go to work long enough so that you could raise it, don't you?"

"That's about the size of it ... I understand that ship masters have ways and means of getting around such matters."

A dark cloud settled on the captain's face and for a while it looked as though a storm were going to break. Presently, however, the sun broke through and the cloud faded away. "It so happens that I *am* short-handed," he said. "In the galley."

Cross brightened. "That's all right," he said. "I've got to start somewhere."

"Report to Obronski on the after deck . . . Ever operate a refuse disposal unit?"

"No, sir."

"You'll learn. . . "

"For God's sake," a drunken space marine said "You act like you never saw a real he-man before. You afraid of me, or something? Come on, smile!"

Her shoulders had touched the wall of the convent's recreation room, and she knew she could delay

no longer. She forced herself to relax, forced a warm smile to her lips. "No," she said softly. "I'm not afraid."

The space marine's eyes grew more glazed than ever. "Thash good," he said. "Thash what I wanted to hear." He stepped closer to her, his arms outstretched, his face grotesque with lust.

She waited till he had nearly touched her, then she moved in without warning, brought her knee up sharply and, when he doubled forward, chopped him viciously on the back of the neck with the edge of her palm. He dropped, writhing, to the floor, and she proceeded to kick him deftly with her pointed shoes. She did not stop till he lay still, till the tips of her shoes were crimson, and then she stood, sick and trembling, in the harsh fluorescent light.

"Excellent!" the female instructor said, entering the room. "A splendid performance, Berenice. It may seem cruel, at first, to employ real victims in our exercises, but there's no other way to learn to defend yourself effectively—and beasts like this marine here are just the sort creatures that forget, in their drunkenness, the inflexible rules of our profession, and the sanctity of a lady of the stars. We did not invite him here, you remember. We merely left the force-fence deactivated long enough for him to enter of his own accord, the door ajar, the light burning, so he could see it."

Berenice shuddered. She saw the ecstatic expression on the instructor's ancient, raddled face and she remembered that she herself would be an instructor some day—or a house-mother or a liaison lady—when her beauty had dimmed and her flesh had lost its firmness and not even the low-est longstarman would want it. She shuddered again. "Isn't—isn't that an invitation, in a way?" she asked.

"Of course not!" the instructor said. "Come, we'll call his ship and have him removed. He should be sober by the time he gets out of sick bay—if he ever does...."

"But where are the mon-sters?" Cross asked, leaning over the rail of the observation platform and gazing across the tarmac.

"There's a settlement of them on the other side of the mountains," Obronski said. "They're not permitted inside the port area."

"And we're not permitted outside—"

"That's right. So forget about them."

"But there must be some way to see them."

"Sure, there is. If you had your own ship you could land near the settlement. But the port authority would be pretty tough on you if you got caught. Besides, why should you want to see them? I know I wouldn't."

"I guess I wouldn't either," Cross lied.

He lowered his eyes, idly watched the payload of fallen ladies of the stars filing out of the lock, accompanied by their lovers.

"I keep wondering," Obronski said. "You'd think they'd have more sense."

"Who?"

"The ladies of the stars, who else? They've got the whole galaxy at their fingertips and they go and let some space bum knock them up! Why?"

"Maybe they fall in love," Cross said.

"Love!" Obronski spat. "You've got a lot to learn, boy, even if you did make Second Mate on your fourth run. There's no love in space, and the only woman you'll ever have is the one you've got money enough to pay for!"

"Sure, I know," Cross said. He raised his eyes from the gangplank, looked out across the tarmac to where the rum-pled hills formed green and purple preludes to the majestic line of mountains. I wonder what they're really like, he thought . . . Some day I'll find out.

"The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho presents his compliments, my lady," the house-mother said. "He was quite intrigued by her lady-ship's film sequence and begs the honor of her company."

"For how long?" the Lady Berenice asked wearily.

"For tonight only. He is leaving Wine-Woman-and-Song in the morning."

"Very well."

The house-mother withdrew, and after a moment the Lady Berenice heard the lift door sigh closed. She sat down to wait, wondering if she would hate this one as much as she had hated all the others, if she would hate herself tomorrow as much as she had hated herself on all the other tomorrows.

Presently, she heard the lift door sigh open, and then footsteps in the corridor. The knock—

She got up and opened the door. The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho was in his late nineties, touped, and refurbished to pass for a man of fifty. He was a far cry from the Emperor of the Universe. The Lady Berenice repressed a shudder. "Come in," she said.

New Tokyo was off the beaten path of the regular runs, but his new job with Falcon Lines took him to many of the out of the way places. He walked through the narrow streets of Kakuen, past the tile facades of the enchanting houses, past the foyers where the mama sans sat, wearing their timeless smiles. Pretty kimonoed girls leaned out over low balconies, laughing down with starlight in their hair.

He remembered a passage he had read a long time ago, when he was a cabin boy on the *Perseus*, and he welcomed the words into his mind, let them flow softly through his thoughts—

I am lonely with the loneliness that comes to all men in womanless ships, whether they be ships at sea or ships in space; and if there be no woman to greet me when my ship reaches continent or planet, then I shall be lonely beyond all loneliness, beyond all capacity to endure ...

A girl standing on the balcony just above caught his eye, perhaps because of the way the starlight touched her face, perhaps because of her wistful smile. He paused in the street, in the cool night, looking up at her. Her hair was black, and deftly piled to an elaborate coiffeur. Her eyebrows made him think of birds in flight. She touched her breast. "Hisako," she said softly, and he went back to the foyer he had just passed and told the mama san whom he wanted.

She could tell by the coldness of her cheeks that her face had gone white, and she could tell by the look in the examiner's eyes that it would be futile to protest his indictment, that no matter what she said, Gomorrah was going to be her next;—and last— port of call.

But the charge was so monstrous, so untrue, that she *had* to dispute it. "You must be mistaken," she said. "I can't possibly be—be that way!"

"Who is your lover?" the examiner asked coldly.

"But I have no lover. I'm trying to tell you that. I've *always* used my field!"

The examiner shrugged. "Be a fool and protect him then, if you want to. I should think, though, that you'd want to expose him, that you'd want him to share the responsibility."

"But I'm *not* protecting him. There simply isn't any such person. You *must* be mistaken, or else my field is defective."

"I've been in this business a long time," the examiner said. "I don't make mistakes. And I've never heard of a defective field." He opened the door. "Book passage to Gomorrah for the Lady Berenice and confiscate her C-field," he told his assistant. "And put her in custody till her ship leaves."

"Passage for one?"

The examiner looked at the Lady Berenice. "Well?"

She returned his gaze defiantly. "One," she said.

The evangelist had set up his portable pulpit just outside the spaceport, and Cross wandered over to the fringe of the crowd to listen. The *Pandora* didn't have clearance till tomorrow, and his passenger wouldn't be coming on board till shortly before blast-off. In a way, he was glad of that. He had always felt guilty about escorting fallen ladies of the stars to Gomorrah, and this time it would be worse, for, on his last stop there, he had visited the settlement beyond the mountains and seen the monsters . . .

The evangelist was an emaciated young man with dark, tortured eyes. As he talked, he waved his arms and paced back and forth. The night sky of Thais arched incongruously above him, and the ithyphallic structures of Wine-Women-and-Song formed an ironic backdrop for his imprecations.

"They brazenly walked the streets of Earth, and now they brazenly walk the streets of the new

worlds—and you, you scum, you dregs of hu-manity, fawn at their feet like dogs, waiting for their meretricious favors, waiting for the contemptible privilege of spending your hard-earned dollars in order to experience the appetites they feed but never satisfy—"

"How do *you* know?" someone in the crowd shouted.

There was a scattering of laughter, but the evangelist continued, unperturbed: "I tell you that happiness does not lie in such lascivious pursuits, that nothing but misery can result from consorting with the ladies of the stars! They have come to you, not to heal your loneliness, but to deprive you of your earnings your respect, your—"

"But at least they came!" the heckler shouted again. "That's more than you can say for the women sitting self-righteously in their suburban houses back on Earth patting themselves on the back for having given birth to the children they were afraid *not* to have!"

"But let me ask you this," the evangelist said, singling out his antagonist and pointing at him with his finger. "*Why* did they come?"

"First I'll tell you why *we* came," the heckler answered. "We came because we were basically insecure and needed to prove to others that we were something more than they thought us to be, and thereby prove to ourselves that we are something more than what we really are. And yet, for all our bravado, we remain mere men, terrified, in our hearts, of the abysses we claim to have conquered, alone, afraid, unwanted—Now is it wrong for a woman feel the same as a man, to have the same frustrations, the same needs? And is it wrong if she fulfills herself in the only way modern society left open for her, especially when by so doing she supplies a factor without which there could be no space travel, no raw materials for the stay at homes on Earth to turn into mechanical gadgets, ornate wigwams and four-wheel golden calves—"

"But they're prostitutes!" the evangelist screamed. "*Prostitutes!*"

"Sure, they're prostitutes—to you, and to the people on Earth. But to us, they're women, the only women we can ever know, can ever have. And if you must have something to condemn, then condemn the prostitution corporations, for they—and they alone—are responsible for the loveless efficiency of their products!"

"Prostitutes—"

An ugly murmur began in the crowd, rose swiftly into a roar. Cross felt himself being drawn into the maelstrom, heard his own voice blending with the voices of the others. He saw the whiteness of the evangelist's face, saw the silhouette of the descending police copter, and then the frightened figure on the shak-ing pulpit fumbling for the lowered rope ladder. When he was firmly secured on the ladder, and the copter was rising, the evangelist shook his fist at the mob he had created, shouting: "Armageddon is on hand, and every sinning one of you, every glorified street-walker and her lover, shall perish in the flames!"

There were some things you knew without quite knowing how you knew them, and the moment she had seen him standing in the lock of the *Pandora* she had known that he was the one.

But it was impossible, she had kept telling herself. Ut-terly impossible. And then, after escorting her to her cabin, he had mentioned *A Priori*, and she had remembered a spaceman telling her once that, in *A Priori*, almost *anything* was possible, and that, during an *A Priori* storm, *everything* was possible.

She still didn't quite understand, standing in the shower now, the misted spray gently bombarding her skin. But she had acted, and would continue to act, on the assumption that what the spaceman had told her was true, and on the additional assumption that the impossible would be less impossible if she cooperated with it. She felt perfectly justified in what she was doing and in what she intended to do: after all, even a monster was entitled to a father, and anyway, what was going to happen had already happened weeks ago.

"Yes?" she answered, when the knock sounded on the door.

"Your luggage, my lady."

She turned off the shower and wrapped the ship's towel she had selected earlier, around her body.

Then she crossed the room and opened the door.

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of her, but his lean face remained impassive. "Set them inside, please," she said.

It was impossible for him to avoid touching her, and the contact, according to every-thing she had been taught, should have precipitated the first advance. It did not. He withdrew hurriedly, keeping his eyes averted.

"If you wish anything fur-ther, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

At first she was bewildered. Then, suddenly, she remembered that he was only a pilot, and that a lady of the stars was probably as far beyond his aspirations as she was beyond his pocketbook.

Some of her recently acquired assurance left her. "Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori*?"

"A little over four hours—ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"

"There's always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we'll be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He raised his eyes, finally, and looked directly into hers. An expression of surprise touched his face. Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once sepa-rated, pure space can be con-tracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes there is a slight discrepancy, certain phases of *A Priori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases—or storms, if you like—we would lose our awareness of pure objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic playback of our past. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist.

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened yet."

"I suppose so, my lady ... Will that be all?"

"Yes, for now."

"I'll be in my cabin ..."

After he had gone she closed the door but did not lock it, then she let the towel slip to the floor and went over and lay down on the couch. He would be back, she knew—there was no other answer— and when he returned she would welcome him the way she had welcomed all the others—

No, not quite the same, she thought, frowning. He was, after all, the father-to-be of her child-to-be, her—her mon-ster-to-be. But, child or mon-ster, it was—would be—his flesh and blood as well as hers, and that, she realized sudden-ly, was something quite unique—and quite strangely wonderful.

She was disconcerted, at first, when the walls of the room began to shimmer, not because she had doubted that there would be a time storm, but because she had expected him to be in her arms when it broke. Then she remembered something else she had heard about time storms.

Like hurricanes, they had eyes. ...

Cross stirred on the couch, sat up. The storm was over and gone. The Lady Bere-nice's eyes were closed. Her breathing was soft, almost imperceptible. Her face, be-reft now of all the hardness and the cynicism civilization had Imposed upon it, was like a little girl's.

He knew her, now, almost as well as she knew herself—

And she—she knew him al-most as well as *he* knew *him-self*—

As he sat there, watching her, a feeling of tenderness he had never known before came over him, and then he thought —But she's a lady of the stars—

And then—But she's a woman, too, the only kind of woman I can ever know, or have—the mother of my child-to-be—

And then—She tricked me. She knew, she must have guessed—

And then—No, she had no more free will, really, than I did. There is no free will in an *A Priori* storm, any more than there is decency or com-*passion* or love in a civiliza-tion created and maintained by opportunists—

And then—But this—this may be love, and if it isn't love, could it not be turned into love, under the right cir-cumstances, in the right en-vironment—

On Gomorrah?—

"Gomorrah, my lady." Her bags were packed and setting just inside the door.

She picked one up and he took the other. She was wearing a white morning dress, and her hair made him think more than ever of Martian maize, but her eyes no longer reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. The ice lakes of Frigidia never melted ...

She followed him down the spiral companionway to the open lock. He heard her gasp when she looked out over the unexpected vista of fields and farmhouses, of hills and woods and rivers. "But this can't be Gomorrah," she said "Where—where's the space-port?"

"On the other side of the mountains," Cross said. "They will be coming for us soon, and well have to go back and go through all the red tape ports are noted for. But first, I wanted you to see the monsters."

She lowered her eyes to the fields surrounding the ship, her face pale. Presently he heard her gasp again, and then he heard the whir of the children's wings and their gay morning laughter. "Why— why they aren't monsters at all," she said. She gazed wide-eyed at the sight before them.

"Their parents and their parents' parents are..." Cress said. "At least in the eyes of the Earth Council and the prostitution corporations. But then, I suspect that even a bluebird would seem like a monster to *tyrannosaurus rex* . . . You see, the mutation required three generations for completion—a possibility that the Earth Council failed to take into consideration."

"But why don't they take it into consideration now? Why should such a marvelous mir-acle as this be kept secret?"

"The corporation lobbyists are a powerful group—and you can imagine what a de-velopment like this could do to their business. Not only that, I suspect that they have an inherent fear of angels. But it's only a matter of time before the Earth Council will be forced to act, and in the meantime, the 'monsters' will have an opportunity to de-velop a society of their own."

The first Gomorrite, a pretty, blue-eyed girl with cupid-wings, landed lightly in the lock. "Welcome to Gomor-rah," she said.

The Lady Berenice reached out and took her hand. "Why —she's adorable!"

"She is, my lady," Cross said. "All of them are."

"Stop calling me 'my lady!'" Then: "Will—will my great-grandchildren look like that?"

"*Our* great-grandchildren will, my la— My—Bere-nice. . . ."

THE END