



THE SKY IS FALLING

WHEN MEN RULED THE STARS—AND THE STARS RULED MEN!
LESTER DEL REY



The bottom half of the cover features a man and a woman looking upwards with expressions of awe and concern. The background is a dramatic, fiery orange and red sky, suggesting a catastrophic event. A single planet is visible in the upper right of this section.

THE SKY IS FALLING

BY LESTER DEL REY

Dave stared around the office. He went to the window and stared upwards at the crazy patchwork of the sky. For all he knew, in such a sky there might be cracks. In fact, as he looked, he could make out a rift, and beyond that a ... hole ... a small patch where there was no color, and yet the sky there was not black. There were no stars there, though points of light were clustered around the edges, apparently retreating.

I

"Dave Hanson! By the power of the true name be summoned cells and humors, ka and id, self and—"

Dave Hanson! The name came swimming through utter blackness, sucking at him, pulling him together out of nothingness. Then, abruptly, he was aware of being alive, and surprised. He sucked in on the air around him, and the breath burned in his lungs. He was one of the dead—there should be no quickening of breath within him!

He caught a grip on himself, fighting the fantasies of his mind, and took another breath of air. This time it burned less, and he could force an awareness of the smells around him. But there was none of the pungent odor of the hospital he had expected. Instead, his nostrils were scorched with a noxious odor of sulfur, burned hair and cloying incense.

He gagged on it. His diaphragm tautened with the sharp pain of long-unused muscles, and he sneezed.

"A good sign," a man's voice said. "The followers have accepted and are leaving. Only a true being can sneeze. But unless the salamander works, his chances are only slight."

There was a mutter of agreement from others, before an older voice broke in. "It takes a deeper fire than most salamanders can stir, Ser Perth. We might aid it with high-frequency radiation, but I distrust the effects on the prepsyche. If we tried a tamed succubus—"

"The things are untrustworthy," the first voice answered. "And with the sky falling, we dare not trust one."

The words blurred off in a fog of semiconsciousness and half-thoughts. The sky was falling? Who killed Foxy Loxy? I, said the spider, who sat down insider, I went boomp in the night and the bull jumped over the moon....

"Bull," he croaked. "The bull sleeper!"

"Delirious," the first voice muttered.

"I mean—bull pusher!" That was wrong, too, and he tried again, forcing his reluctant tongue around the syllables. "Bull *dossier*!"

Damn it, couldn't he even pronounce simple English?

The language wasn't English, however. Nor was it Canadian French, the only other speech he could make any sense of. Yet he understood it—had even spoken it, he realized. There was nothing wrong with his command of whatever language it was, but there seemed to be no word for bulldozer. He struggled to get his eyes open.

The room seemed normal enough, in spite of the odd smells. He lay on a high bed, surrounded by prim white walls, and there was even a chart of some kind at the bottom of the bedframe. He focused his eyes slowly on what must be the doctors and nurses there, and their faces looked back with the proper professional worry. But the varicolored gowns they wore in place of proper clothing were covered with odd designs, stars, crescents and things that might have been symbols for astronomy or chemistry.

He tried to reach for his glasses to adjust them. There were no glasses! That hit him harder than any other discovery. He must be delirious and imagining the room. Dave Hanson was so nearsighted that he couldn't have seen the men, much less the clothing, without corrective lenses.

The middle-aged man with the small mustache bent over the chart near his feet. "Hmm," the man said in the voice of the first speaker. "Mars trines Neptune. And with Scorpio so altered ... hmm. Better add two cc. of cortisone to the transfusion."

Hanson tried to sit up, but his arms refused to bear his weight. He opened his mouth. A slim hand came to his lips, and he looked up into soothing blue eyes. The nurse's face was framed in copper-red hair. She had the transparent skin and classic features that occur once in a million times but which still keep the legend of redheaded enchantresses alive. "Shh," she said.

He began to struggle against her hand, but she shook her head gently. Her other hand began a series of complicated motions that had a ritualistic look about them.

"Shh," she repeated. "Rest. Relax and sleep, Dave Hanson, and remember when you were alive."

There was a sharp sound from the doctor, but it began to blur out before Hanson could understand it. He fought to remember what he'd heard the nurse say—something about when he was alive—as if he'd been dead a long time.... He couldn't hold the thought. At a final rapid motion of the girl's hand his eyes closed, the smell faded from his nose and all sounds vanished. Once there was a stinging sensation, as if he were receiving the transfusion. Then he was alone in his mind with his memories—mostly of the last day when he'd still been alive. He seemed to be reliving the events, rethinking the thoughts he'd had then.

It began with the sight of his uncle's face leering at him. Uncle David Arnold Hanson looked like every man's dream of himself and every woman's dreams of manliness. But at the moment, to Dave, he looked more like a personal demon. His head was tilted back and nasty laughter was booming through the air of the little office.

"So your girl writes that your little farewell activity didn't fare so well, eh?" he chortled. "And you come crawling here to tell me you want to do the honorable thing, is that it? All right, my beloved nephew, you'll do the honorable thing! You'll stick to your contract with me."

"But—" Dave began.

"But if you don't, you'd better read it again. You don't get one cent except on completion of your year with me. That's what it says, and that's what happens." He paused, letting the fact that he meant it sink in. He was enjoying the whole business, and in no hurry to end it. "And I happen to know, Dave, that you don't even have fare to Saskatchewan left. You quit and I'll see you never get another job. I promised my sister I'd make a man of you and, by jumping Jupiter, I intend to do just that. And in my book, that doesn't mean you run back with your tail between your legs just because some silly young girl pulls that old chestnut on you. Why, when I was your age, I already had...."

Dave wasn't listening any longer. In futile anger, he'd swung out of the office and gone stumbling back toward the computer building. Then, in a further

burst of anger, he swung off the trail. To hell with his work and blast his uncle! He'd go on into town, and he'd—he'd do whatever he pleased.

The worst part of it was that Uncle David could make good on his threat of seeing that Dave got no more work anywhere. David Arnold Hanson was a power to reckon with. No other man on Earth could have persuaded anyone to let him try his scheme of building a great deflection wall across northern Canada to change the weather patterns. And no other man could have accomplished the impossible task, even after twelve countries pooled their resources to give him the job. But he was doing it, and it was already beginning to work. Dave had noticed that the last winter in Chicago had definitely shown that Uncle David's predictions were coming true.

Like most of the world, Dave had regarded the big man who was his uncle with something close to worship. He'd jumped at the chance to work under Uncle David. And he'd been a fool. He'd been doing all right in Chicago. Repairing computers didn't pay a fortune, but it was a good living, and he was good at it. And there was Bertha—maybe not a movie doll, but a sort of pretty girl who was also a darned good cook. For a man of thirty who'd always been a scrawny, shy runt like the one in the "before" pictures, he'd been doing all right.

Then came the letter from his uncle, offering him triple salary as a maintenance man on the computers used for the construction job. There was nothing said about romance and beauteous Indian maids, but Dave filled that in himself. He would need the money when he and Bertha got married, too, and all that healthy outdoor living was just what the doctor would have ordered.

The Indian maids, of course, turned out to be a few fat old squaws who knew all about white men. The outdoor living developed into five months of rain, hail, sleet, blizzard, fog and constant freezing in tractors while breathing the healthy fumes of diesels. Uncle David turned out to be a construction genius, all right, but his interest in Dave seemed to lie in the fact that he was tired of being Simon Legree to strangers and wanted to take it out on one of his own family. And the easy job turned into hell when the regular computer-man couldn't take any more and quit, leaving Dave to do everything, including making the field tests to gain the needed data.

Now Bertha was writing frantic letters, telling him how much he'd better come back and marry her immediately. And Uncle David thought it was a joke!

Dave paid no attention to where his feet were leading him, only vaguely aware that he was heading down a gully below the current construction job. He heard the tractors and bulldozers moving along the narrow cliff above him, but he was used to the sound. He heard frantic yelling from above, too, but paid no attention to it; in any Hanson construction program, somebody was always yelling about something that had to be done day before yesterday. It wasn't until he finally became aware of his own name being shouted that he looked up. Then he froze in horror.

The bulldozer was teetering at the edge of the cliff as he saw it, right above him. And the cliff was crumbling from under it, while the tread spun idiotically out of control. As Dave's eyes took in the whole situation, the cliff crumbled completely, and the dozer came lunging over the edge, plunging straight for him. His shout was drowned in the roar of the motor. He tried to force his legs to jump, but they were frozen in terror. The heavy mass came straight for him, its treads churning like great teeth reaching for him.

Then it hit, squarely on top of him. Something ripped and splattered and blacked out in an unbearable welter of agony.

Dave Hanson came awake trying to scream and thrusting at the bed with arms too weak to raise him. The dream of the past was already fading. The horror he had thought was death lay somewhere in the past.

Now he was here—wherever here was.

The obvious answer was that he was in a normal hospital, somehow still alive, being patched up. The things he seemed to remember from his other waking must be a mixture of fact and delirium. Besides, how was he to judge what was normal in extreme cases of surgery?

He managed to struggle up to a sitting position in the bed, trying to make out more of his surroundings. But the room was dark now. As his eyes adjusted, he made out a small brazier there, with a cadaverous old man in a dark robe spotted with looped crosses. On his head was something like a miter, carrying a coiled brass snake in front of it. The old man's white goatee bobbed as he

mouthed something silently and made passes over the flame, which shot up prismaticly. Clouds of white fire belched up.

Dave reached to adjust his glasses, and found again that he wasn't wearing them. But he'd never seen so clearly before.

At that moment, a chanting voice broke into his puzzled thoughts. It sounded like Ser Perth. Dave turned his head weakly. The motion set sick waves of nausea running through him, but he could see the doctor kneeling on the floor in some sort of pantomime. The words of the chant were meaningless.

A hand closed over Dave's eyes, and the voice of the nurse whispered in his ear. "Shh, Dave Hanson. It's the Sather Karf, so don't interrupt. There may be a conjunction."

He fell back, panting, his heart fluttering. Whatever was going on, he was in no shape to interrupt anything. But he knew that this was no delirium. He didn't have that kind of imagination.

The chant changed, after a long moment of silence. Dave's heart had picked up speed, but now it missed again, and he felt cold. He shivered. Hell or heaven weren't like this, either. It was like something out of some picture—something about Cagliostro, the ancient mystic. But he was sure the language he somehow spoke wasn't an ancient one. It had words for electron, penicillin and calculus, for he found them in his own mind.

The chant picked up again, and now the brazier flamed a dull red, showing the Sather Karf's face changing from some kind of disappointment to a businesslike steadiness. The red glow grew white in the center, and a fat, worm-like shape of flame came into being. The old man picked it up in his hand, petted it and carried it toward Dave. It flowed toward his chest.

He pulled himself back, but Ser Perth and the nurse leaped forward to hold him. The thing started to grow brighter. It shone now like a tiny bit of white-hot metal; but the older man touched it, and it snuggled down into Dave's chest, dimming its glow and somehow purring. Warmth seemed to flow from it into Dave. The two men watched for a moment, then picked up their apparatus and turned to go. The Sather Karf lifted the fire from the brazier in his bare hand, moved it into the air and said a soft word. It vanished, and the two men were also gone.

"Magic!" Dave said. He'd seen such illusions created on the stage, but there was something different here. And there was no fakery about the warmth from the thing over his chest. Abruptly he remembered that he'd come across something like it, called a salamander, in fiction once; the thing was supposed to be a spirit of fire, and dangerously destructive.

The girl nodded in the soft glow coming from Dave's chest. "Naturally," she told him. "How else does one produce and control a salamander, except by magic? Without, magic, how can we thaw a frozen soul? Or didn't your world have any sciences, Dave Hanson?"

Either the five months under his uncle had toughened him, or the sight of the bulldozer falling had knocked him beyond any strong reaction. The girl had practically told him he wasn't in his own world. He waited for some emotion, felt none, and shrugged. The action sent pain running through him, but he stood it somehow. The salamander ceased its purring, then resumed.

"Where in hell am I?" he asked. "Or when?"

She shook her head. "Hell? No, I don't think so. Some say it's Earth and some call it Terah, but nobody calls it Hell. It's—well, it's a long—time, I guess—from when you were. I don't know. In such matters, only the Satheri know. The Dual is closed even to the Seri. Anyhow, it's not your space-time, though some say it's your world."

"You mean dimensional travel?" Dave asked. He'd seen something about that on a science-fiction television program. It made even time travel seem simple. At any event, however, this wasn't a hospital in any sane and normal section of Canada during his time, on Earth.

"Something like that," she agreed doubtfully. "But go to sleep now. Shh." Her hands came up in complicated gestures. "Sleep and grow well."

"None of that hypnotism again!" he protested.

She went on making passes, but smiled on him kindly. "Don't be superstitious—hypnotism is silly. Now go to sleep. For me, Dave Hanson. I want you well and true when you awake."

Against his will, his eyes closed, and his lips refused to obey his desire to protest. Fatigue dulled his thoughts. But for a moment, he went on pondering. Somebody from the future—this could never be the past—had somehow

pulled him out just ahead of the accident, apparently; or else he'd been deep frozen somehow to wait for medical knowledge beyond that of his own time. He'd heard it might be possible to do that.

It was a cockeyed future, if this were the future. Still, if scientists had to set up some, sort of a religious mumbo-jumbo....

Sickness thickened in him, until he could feel his face wet with perspiration. But with it had come a paralysis that left him unable to move or groan. He screamed inside himself.

"Poor mandrake-man," the girl said softly. "Go back to Lethe. But don't cross over. We need you sorely."

Then he passed out again.

II

Whatever they had done to patch him up hadn't been very successful, apparently. He spent most of the time in a delirium; sometimes he was dead, and there was an ultimate coldness like the universe long after the entropy death. At other times, he was wandering into fantasies that were all horrible. And at all times, even in unconsciousness, he seemed to be fighting desperately to keep from falling apart painfully within himself.

When he was awake, the girl was always beside him. He learned that her name was Nema. Usually there was also the stout figure of Ser Perth. Sometimes he saw Sather Karf or some other older man working with strange equipment, or with things that looked like familiar hypodermics and medical equipment. Once they had an iron lung around him and there was a thin wisp over his face.

He started to brush it aside, but Nema's hand restrained him. "Don't disturb the sylph," she ordered.

Another semirational period occurred during some excitement or danger that centered around him. He was still half delirious, but he could see men working frantically to build a net of something around his bed, while a wet, thick thing flopped and drooled beyond the door, apparently immune to the attacks of the hospital staff. There were shouting orders involving the undine. The salamander in Dave's chest crept deeper and seemed to bleat at each cry of the monstrous thing beyond the door.

Sather Karf sat hunched over what seemed to be a bowl of water, paying no attention to the struggle. Something that he seemed to see there held his attention. Then he screamed suddenly.

"The Sons of the Egg. It's their sending!"

He reached for a brazier beside him, caught up the fire and plunged it deep into the bowl of water, screaming something. There was the sound of an

explosion from far away as he drew his hands out, unwet by the water. Abruptly the undine began a slow retreat. In Dave's chest, the salamander began purring again, and he drifted back into his coma.

He tried to ask Nema about it later when she was feeding him, but she brushed it aside.

"An orderly let out the news that you are here," she said. "But don't worry. We've sent out a doppelganger to fool the Sons, and the orderly has been sentenced to slavery under the pyramid builder for twenty lifetimes. I hate my brother! How dare he fight us with the sky falling?"

Later, the delirium seemed to pass completely, but Dave took no comfort from that. In its place came a feeling of gloom and apathy. He slept most of the time, as if not daring to use his little strength even to think.

Ser Perth stayed near him most of the time now. The man was obviously worried, but tried not to show it. "We've managed to get some testosterone from a blond homunculus," he reported. "That should put you on your feet in no time. Don't worry, young man we'll keep you vivified somehow until the Sign changes." But he didn't sound convincing.

"Everyone is chanting for you," Nema told him. "All over the world, the chants go up."

It meant nothing to him, but it sounded friendly. A whole world hoping for him to get well! He cheered up a bit at that until he found out that the chants were compulsory, and had nothing to do with goodwill.

The iron lung was back the next time he came to, and he was being tugged toward it. He noticed this time that there was no sylph, and his breathing seemed to be no worse than usual. But the sight of the two orderlies and the man in medical uniform beside the lung reassured him. Whatever their methods, he was convinced that they were doing their best for him here.

He tried to help them get him into the lung, and one of the men nodded encouragingly. But Dave was too weak to give much assistance. He glanced about for Nema, but she was out on one of her infrequent other duties. He sighed, wishing desperately that she were with him. She was a lot more proficient than the orderlies.

The man in medical robe turned toward him sharply. "Stop that!" he ordered.

Before Dave could ask what he was to stop, Nema came rushing into the room. Her face paled as she saw the three men, and she gasped, throwing up her hand in a protective gesture.

The two orderlies jumped for her, one grabbing her and the other closing his hands over her mouth. She struggled violently, but the men were too strong for her.

The man in doctor's robes shoved the iron lung aside violently and reached into his clothing. From it, he drew a strange, double-bladed knife. He swung toward Dave, raising the knife into striking position and aiming it at Dave's heart.

"The Egg breaks," he intoned hollowly. It was a cultured voice, and there was a refinement to his face that registered on Dave's mind even over the horror of the weapon. "The fools cannot hold the shell. But neither shall they delay its breaking. Dead you were, mandrake son, and dead you shall be again. But since the fault is only theirs, may no ill dreams follow you beyond Lethe!"

The knife started down, just as Nema managed to break free. She shrieked out a phrase of keening command. The salamander suddenly broke from Dave's chest, glowing brighter as it rose toward the face of the attacker. It was like a bit from the center of a star. The man jumped back, beginning a frantic ritual. He was too late. The salamander hit him, sank into him and shone through him. Then he slumped, steamed ... and was nothing but dust falling toward the carpet. The salamander turned, heading toward the others. But it was to Nema it went, rather than the two men. She was trying something desperately, but fear was thick on her face, and her hands were unsure.

Abruptly, Sather Karf was in the doorway. His hand lifted, his fingers dancing. Words hissed from his lips in a stream of sibilants too quick for Dave to catch. The salamander paused and began to shrink doubtfully. Sather Karf turned, and again his hands writhed in the air. One hand darted back and forward, as if he were throwing something. Again he made the gesture. With each throw, one of the false orderlies dropped to the floor, clutching at a neck where the skin showed marks of constriction as if a steel cord were tightening. They died slowly, their eyes bulging and faces turning blue. Now

the salamander moved toward them, directed apparently by slight motions from Sather Karf. In a few moments, there was no sign of them.

The old man sighed, his face slumping into lines of fatigue and age. He caught his breath. He held out a hand to the salamander, petted it to a gentle glow and put it back over Dave's chest.

"Good work, Nema," he said wearily. "You're too weak to control the salamander, but this was done well in the emergency. I saw them in the pool, but I was almost too late. The damned fanatics. Superstition in this day and age!"

He swung to face Dave, whose vocal cords were still taut with the shock of the sight of the knife. "Don't worry, Dave Hanson. From now on, every Ser and Sather will protect you with the lower and the upper magic. The House changes tomorrow, if the sky permits, and we shall shield you until then. We didn't bring you back from the dead, piecing your scattered atoms together with your scattered revenant particle by particle, to have you killed again. Somehow, we'll incarnate you fully! You have my word for that."

"Dead?" Dave had grown numbed to his past during the long illness, but that brought it back afresh. "Then I was killed? I wasn't just frozen and brought here by some time machine?"

Sather Karf stared at him blankly. "Time machine? Impossible. Of course not. After the tractor killed you, and you were buried, what good would such fantasies be, even if they existed? No, we simply reincarnated you by pooling our magic. Though it was a hazardous and parlous thing, with the sky falling...."

He sighed and went out, while Dave went back to his delirium.

III

There was no delirium when he awoke in the morning. Instead, there was only a feeling of buoyant health. In fact, Dave Hanson had never felt that good in his life—or his former life. He reconsidered his belief that there was no delirium, wondering if the feeling were not itself a form of hallucination. But it was too genuine. He knew without question that he was well.

It shouldn't have been true. During the night, he'd partially awakened in agony to find Nema chanting and gesturing desperately beside him, and he'd been sure he was on the verge of his second death. He could remember one moment, just before midnight, when she had stopped and seemed to give up hope. Then she'd braced herself and begun some ritual as if she were afraid to try it. Beyond that, he had no memory of pain.

Nema came into the room now, touching his shoulder gently. She smiled and nodded at him. "Good morning, Sagittarian. Get out of bed."

Expecting the worst, he swung his feet over the side and sat up. After so much time in bed, even a well man should be rendered weak and shaky. But there was no dizziness, no sign of weakness. He had made a most remarkable recovery, and Nema didn't even seem surprised. He tentatively touched foot to floor and half stood, propping himself against the high bed.

"Come on," Nema said impatiently. "You're all right now. We entered your sign during the night." She turned her back on him and took something from a chest beside the bed. "Ser Perth will be here in a moment. He'll want to find you on your feet and dressed."

Hanson was beginning to feel annoyance at the suddenly cocksure and unsympathetic girl, but he stood fully erect and flexed his muscles. There wasn't even a trace of bedsoreness, though he had been flat on his back long enough to grow callouses. And as he examined himself, he could find no scars or signs of injuries from the impact of the bulldozer—if there had ever