

# The Bronze Portal

The  
Bronze  
Portal

Joe Bergeron

Endurian Press

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*For all who look at the stars.*

## Contents

### *The Bronze Portal*

- One: The Light in the Hills— 1
- Two: The Bronze Portal— 12
- Three: The Tower of Sha Totek— 19
- Four: The Road North— 36
- Five: Thunderbird— 49
- Six: The House— 63
- Seven: Town Meeting— 84
- Eight: The Tal— 91
- Nine: The Gloaming— 96
- Ten: The Demon of the Bells— 107
- Eleven: Ring of Fire— 118
- Twelve: The Skye Island— 133
- Thirteen: The Country of the Doomed— 149
- Fourteen: Corridors— 163
- Fifteen: Tigermine— 175
- Sixteen: In the Regions of Ice— 187
- Seventeen: The Grey Portal— 195
- Eighteen: The Battle of the Bronze Portal— 209

### *Star of Ronar— 231*

### *Leonard Ronar: A Brief History— 247*

## Chapter One

### *The Light in the Hills*

*Horns cried somewhere in the distance, thrilling him, calling him on. The air was cold and clean, the wind carrying ice crystals that stung his face. He turned, taking in the great panorama around him: the fantastic pinnacles, the misty valley, the sky surging with an aurora that flowed upward from the horizon like an inverted cataract of jewel-colored water. He felt exalted, exhilarated, alive.*

Blackness then blotted out this splendor. Silence and sullen heat absorbed it. Vast, luminous horizons collapsed into the interior of a small camping trailer.

The dreams of Leonard Ronar were colorful, if elusive, belying the greyness of his appearance and demeanor.

Lately he abandoned his dreams only with reluctance. He'd worked all night, as usual. Now the hands of his clock were converging on noon, which was like four in the morning for someone on his schedule. Sunlight was turning his trailer into a sheet metal oven. Though the windows were shuttered, enough sun leaked through to provide a dim chiaroscuro lighting. A fly buzzed around the cracks of the door, seeking escape.

Despite the heat and the stale, dusty odor, Ronar lay there staring at nothing, feeling no compulsion to rise.

Life on Kitt Peak consisted mainly of gathering data and performing such self-maintenance as was possible and necessary in so austere an environment. A few hours would be enough time to prepare for tonight's observations, a small effort easily deferred. There wasn't much to do in the meantime.

Eventually willing his *ennui* into submission, Ronar swung his legs off the bed and stretched. He couldn't stretch while lying down because the bed was too short. When he stood up he had to crouch to avoid whacking his head on the ceiling.

The trailer was the worst part of working at the Peak, except perhaps for the boredom. If not for his inverted sleeping schedule, he'd have been more comfortable just camping in the open.

The trailer was still superior to the Quonset hut that housed everyone else on the mountain—at least it offered privacy. He flung open the door to admit light and air. Pawing through a pile of clothing, he selected a set of khakis which he deemed clean enough for at least one more wearing. Laundry facilities had yet to make their way to Kitt Peak, and in any event, Ronar was rather indifferent to such things.

Once dressed, Ronar scrubbed his face and teeth at the tiny steel sink and gave himself a quick appraisal in the mirror. Here, he supposed, was a face unlikely to set feminine hearts to fluttering. It was lean, with a rather hard mouth, grey eyes glinting beneath a harsh brow, and thick iron-grey hair in need of combing. His nose, he had to admit, was too fine for his taste: long and narrow, almost delicate, save for the odd Roman bump at the bridge.

Still, he approved of the overall severity of this face. He lifted his razor, stared at it, shrugged, and put it down again. Who was he trying to impress by shaving every day?

Ready for the world, Ronar lurched out into the crisp mountain air. The sun glared overhead like a bright copper rivet, banishing all shadow and stirring up a wind that spent itself trying to wring clouds from the desiccated air. The mountaintop was an unruly garden of granite outcrops bleached white-tan by the Arizona sunlight. It was softened by tough-barked evergreen shrubs, cool and lush compared to the desert growth on the plain far below.

The Peak's raw beauty improved Ronar's mood, though not to the point where the emotion actually registered on his face. All too soon he'd have to descend to Tucson, where he pictured himself explaining to puzzled undergraduates the differences between Mean Solar Time, Universal Time, and Sidereal Time. His stints on the Peak always took on an added glamour from the perspective of his duties at the University.

Ronar paced over to the Quonset hut and threw open the screen door. A partitioned area inside served as a makeshift commissary for the thirty or so people inhabiting the Peak. There a hefty Papago woman served simple meals laden with spices and grease. Ronar sat at a table, solemnly ate a plate of bacon and eggs topped with salsa, went back outside, and commenced killing time. He sat atop a pile of boulders, skimming journals and staring out over the landscape, so pensive and remote a figure that he did not attract the fellowship of those few who noticed him on his perch.

A family of tourists wandered by, their children yelping and cavorting. A tiny blonde girl broke off and approached Ronar, staring up at him as he tried to ignore her.

"What do you look like?" she asked at last.

Ronar felt his face contracting into a frown of perplexity. "I look like this," he said, waving at his face.

"No, I mean without your sunglasses."

Ronar removed the glasses and regarded the girl, who remained silent.

"It's the best I can do," said Ronar, replacing the sunglasses.

"You look mean. Don't you ever smile?"

"Of course I—" Ronar broke off, realizing he was snapping at the child. "Yes. I smile from time to time."

"I wish you would. What are you reading?"

"It's about variable stars."

"What are valuable—variable stars?"

Ronar closed his book and addressed the girl with greater attention. "Stars that vary greatly in brightness. Sometimes they're very bright indeed, while at other times they're not very bright at all."

"Oh. You know what? Sometimes my daddy says that about me when he sees my report card."

Without really intending to, Ronar laughed.

"That's a little better," said the girl, smiling.

"I'm sure your daddy is very proud—"

At that moment the girl's father strode up, looking wary and put-out.

"Guess what, Daddy? I'm a variable star."

"That's nice, baby. Come on now. I'm sure this man is very busy."

Ronar remained silent as the father and daughter returned to their brood.

When Ronar wanted to show kindness to his fellow men, he did so by staying away from them, especially when he was in such an odd mood as now. An inexplicable dissatisfaction chafed in his chest and throat. When the sun finally declined he returned to the commissary for a solitary dinner of chili and tortillas. The radio blared out tinny, cloying ballads from some Mexican station. Ronar got up to tune in a news broadcast, ignoring the cook's half-stifled annoyance. He caught a story about the newest Soviet Sputnik to alarm the Western world.

Ronar was amused by the announcer's prattle about man's "conquest of space". So far, he reflected, mankind had conquered space to a lesser extent than a nearsighted swimmer paddling in the surf had conquered the sea. He shook his head and went back outside, neglecting to re-tune the radio to suit the cook, which earned him a glare to which he was oblivious.

As evening approached, Ronar marched toward the 84-inch dome, a dazzling white-gold hemisphere on the southernmost edge of the summit. Ronar disapproved of the look of the new dome with its hangar-like equipment bay on the south side and a squarish aluminum entrance gallery which offered tourists a glimpse of the instrument. It lacked the classic simplicity and beauty of the Palomar dome. He glanced to the east, where loomed the colossal inverted checkmark of the McMath solar telescope, the other major instrument on the Peak. Its design, though modernistic, was stark and unadorned enough to please him.

Ronar entered the observatory, confronting another family of tourists with their noses pressed against the viewing window. They looked at him rather sheepishly.

"Aren't we — supposed to be in here?" asked the wide-eyed mother.

Ronar became aware that he might be frowning at them for no good reason. He tried to reshape his expression into a smile, an effort as successful as all his other forced smiles, as he could see by the dismay in their faces.

"No. That is, yes. You're supposed to be in here. Sorry. Thank you."

Ronar sighed and turned away. So much for public relations... He escaped into the shadowy interior of the dome.

He did not linger at the telescope. Sunset found him on the catwalk that circled the big dome. He wore a beat-up green parka against the imminent chill.

Ronar's hands rested on a unique binocular that hung from his neck. Made in Germany during the war, it was a prototype incorporating the most advanced features of its time. The body was machined from aluminum brushed to a snow-like whiteness. The lenses glinted sapphire blue. The glass was unusually large—only Ronar's big hands kept it from appearing impractical.

Ronar leaned against the dome, staring moodily to the south at remote mountains whose summits were divided between rich golden sunlight and blue shadow. In the lush evening light they seemed citadels of mystery, inviting him to approach via the

paths he blazed with his eyes.

It had been a long time since he'd had a chance to lose himself in the wild. True, there were day hikes and weekend trips when he found the time, but nothing he'd done in the past ten years compared with the adventures of his youth: the winters in the Colorado Ski Patrol; his participation in the Olympics of 1936, his curious return visit to Germany in 1941; and of course his boyhood discovery of Comet Ronar, an event which had set him on the road to Kitt Peak.

It hadn't worked out as he'd imagined as a boy. The grand romance of astronomy had been buried beneath the adult concerns of surviving calculus, writing a dissertation, finding a job, gaining tenure, grading examinations, and publishing regularly. His love of astronomy had not diminished, but something was missing. His restlessness, made more poignant by the sunset and the distant mountains, overwhelmed even his anticipation of the superb starry night to come.

Something had to change. How had it taken him so many years to realize that?

Something in the distance caught his eye.

Far off, near the summit of some nameless peak, a star of reflected sunlight danced in the unsteady air, a fiery point redder than the sunlight itself. It wavered in the silence, a lonely, beckoning wonder.

Ronar caught his breath, captivated by its mystery and beauty. He raised the binocular, but it revealed nothing more, only brightened the glare until his eyes watered.

Something tentative moved in his mind, like a call just beyond the range of conscious hearing, so fleeting it faded almost before he became aware of it.

He lowered the lenses and stared bare-eyed at that far-off glimmer. Unfamiliar feelings welled up within him. Suddenly he was a man of sadness and loneliness, rather than the self-sufficiency that had defined him up to now. He felt a pang of nostalgia, as though this remote flicker were signaling the end of his old life, or unlocking the door to a new one.

As the sun declined, the reflection began to dim, until it died with a final blood-red beam.

Ronar shuddered and released his breath. Blinking, he took a moment to weigh the emotions that had been so unexpectedly aroused. Unable to make much sense of them, he shook his head to dismiss them. But the feelings lingered, a mark on his mind and spirit.

He pulled a compass from his pocket and took a bearing on the place where the reflection had flickered out moments before.

The sun had set, but Ronar was in no hurry to enter the dome. Trailing the sun was a crescent moon, which must also set before the sky would be dark enough for his purposes. He remained on the catwalk, pondering that strange reflection, staring at the darkening hills as if he hoped it might flare up again.



Ronar stood in darkness while electric motors opened the dome's slit. The interior

was lit by the dimmest of red lights, allowing the telescope's general form to be discerned. It was a steely clockwork thing, a thing of gears, wheels, trusses, and pylons. The mirror's short focal length gave the entire instrument a compact look belying its impressive light gathering power.

Tonight the telescope was equipped to photograph galaxies which he'd already spectrographed in the previous nights. By measuring their red shifts he could estimate their distances. With enough of these measurements he could piece together a picture of the distribution of galaxies in the universe.

Standing by the wall, Ronar called out to the night assistant, unseen in the small control room at the side of the dome. "Hector. Please slew to the first object. Do you have the coordinates?"

"I do. Are you clear of the telescope?"

"I'm clear."

"Stand by for slewing."

With a buzzing sound the telescope swept from its parked position to its first target, a remote galaxy cluster high in the sky. The dome rotated to follow, clacking and booming on its track.

"On target, Dr. Ronar?"

Ronar went to the finder, an instrument considerably larger than any he had possessed as a youth. He peered up into the eyepiece, pushing aside the stepladder, which was needed only by astronomers of lesser height.

"On target. I'll prepare for the exposure."

"Roger."

Ronar shot an annoyed glance toward the control room. The jargon of the nascent space program was only the latest fad to muddy his native, and favorite, language.

A small motor hummed and clicked as it moved the telescope to track the stars. Ronar sat in an adjustable chair beneath the guiding eyepiece and looked up into it. He saw a red-lit reticle and a single star. Barely visible in the rest of the field were the dim flecks of galaxies peering back at him from a chilling distance.

"I have a guide star. Stand by." Ronar fiddled with the buttons on the hand paddle to place the star on the crosshairs of the reticle. "All right, douse the reds."

The interior of the dome settled into an inky blackness, making the strip of deep grey sky seen through the slit look bright by comparison. Ronar peered into the eyepiece and watched until he was satisfied that the telescope was tracking well.

"I'm beginning the exposure. Three hours." There was a click. Now the beam of focused starlight was falling onto the glass photographic plate that would record its secrets.

For the next three hours Ronar was almost glued to the eyepiece. Then came a brief break to reset the telescope to the next object, beginning the whole cycle again.

Guiding was tedious. He had only to watch the guide star, and when it wandered from the crosshairs nudge it back with a touch of the buttons. It was hardly a task requiring his full attention. He'd learned to cope by allowing his mind to rove through waking dreams.

Tonight came the image of that flickering red light in the hills.

After nine hours and three successful exposures, with the onset of twilight not far off, Ronar decided to end the evening with a bit of self-indulgence, a special reward for his diligence.

“Hector. One final object. Slew to twelve hours fifty-four minutes, plus twenty one degrees fifty seven minutes.”

“All right. Are you clear, Dr. Ronar?”

“I’m clear.”

Ronar heard the sigh that came from the control booth. He had gone into what Hector and his colleagues called “inch-and-a-quarter mode”. When the telescope stopped moving, Ronar wrestled the plate holder free of the mounting brackets. A faint finger-drumming came from the control booth. Replacing and realigning the camera was a delicate job that Hector or one of the other technicians would have to undertake in the morning. But, that was what they were being paid for, thought Ronar.

Ronar screwed a small fitting into the telescope’s back plate. With this focusing adapter in place, he inserted an amateur astronomer’s eyepiece with its inch-and-a-quarter barrel. The barrel was scratched and marred, but the lenses of this relic of his boyhood were lovingly maintained and unblemished. Ronar perched himself on the observing stool and applied his eye to the glass.

After hours of guiding, he felt the need to really *look* at what he was studying. Somehow it made the whole exercise seem less academic, more real.

Tonight he’d chosen to view the Black Eye Galaxy in Coma Berenices. Centered in the dark grey circle of the eyepiece field, it was a softly luminous ellipse, bright in the center where the suns were most tightly massed, partly obscured by the curious feature which gave it its name, a dark patch of cosmic dust superimposed against it. It stared back at him with a mystic impersonality.

Ronar’s glance was worthless scientifically, but still, it seemed to him, important to real understanding. Ancient starlight falling on the seven-foot mirror was directed into his eye, able to impress itself upon his consciousness across such a gulf of miles and years. That was worth the occasional reminder.

These quaint practices irritated some of his colleagues, who felt that the time of giant telescopes should not be spent so frivolously. Or so he had heard. No one had ever voiced these complaints directly to his face.



The following evening found Ronar on the catwalk again, keeping an uneasy eye on the sky, the sun, and the hills. His observing program would probably come to a halt tonight. Rafts of high clouds covered most of the sky, wave clouds and mare’s tails of icy cirrus. The forecast called for the passage of a quick front.

But it wasn’t the prospect of losing a night’s observing that bothered Ronar. He was concerned that the clouds would prevent a second view of the mysterious reflection that had so caught his imagination. He watched fretfully as diffuse cloud-shadows

crept over the distant mountains.

He heard the door swing open, then footsteps on the catwalk's steel deck. He glanced down and to the side; there stood Stanley Cohen, an astronomer from North Carolina, studying the sky with wan hope.

"Well, Leonard, I'd hoped that your loss might be my gain. But I can see there won't be much astronomy done on this mountain tonight."

"Probably not," said Ronar shortly. Just now he had no desire for company.

Cohen was small, his balding head reaching the level of Ronar's biceps. He'd recently lost several observing nights to a spell of bad weather, and was hanging around hoping to make up some of that lost time. His work in stellar spectroscopy could proceed under poorer skies than Ronar required.

Ronar stiffened. A dim gleam of reflected sunlight had appeared in the mountains somewhere out beyond Baboquivari. His companion forgotten, Ronar stared at the light. It was much dimmer than it had been yesterday, even though a lucky gap in the clouds was shedding full illumination on the area. With the sun sliding southward in its descent toward winter, the angle of the reflection was changing; the beam now almost missed the dome. No doubt the reflection was visible from this spot for only a few evenings each year.

He became aware of Cohen, whose puzzled glance shifted between Ronar's intense gaze and the flicker of light that was its target.

Grudgingly, almost against his will, Ronar muttered, "What do you make of that, Stanley?"

Cohen waved his hand toward the horizon. "That out there? That glint? Some kind of reflection. What do you make of it, Leonard?"

"A reflection. Nothing more."

Cohen shrugged.

Ronar wanted to take a second compass bearing, but he didn't want to call that much attention to his interest in the light. For some reason, this was something he wished to keep to himself. The reflection soon disappeared, leading Ronar to relax a trifle.

The two men watched the deepening twilight for a while longer. The moon was hazily visible through the clouds.

Cohen stretched and said, "I guess it'll be an early night for me. Have to try to find something to do until I can fall asleep. Maybe I'll just drive into Tucson. I've heard you can have a good time there if you know where to go."

Ronar only grunted in answer. If Cohen was hinting for company he got little satisfaction.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow." Cohen turned and ambled away.

As the darkness gained strength, a fresh wind swept thickening clouds across the sky. Ronar left the dome and picked his way among rocks and scrubby trees, finally alighting on his favorite boulder. From this vantage Ronar gazed into the south, where not one speck of light marred the blackness. The strange loaf-like peak of Baboquivari, sacred to the Papago, was lost in the night. Somewhere to the right of it, and well beyond it, was the anonymous hill that bore a tantalizing secret.

For long hours Ronar sat there, pondering his strange restlessness, his turmoil, his sudden desire to feel the miles reel by beneath his feet. He had little patience for the vagaries of others, and still less for his own. All he'd ever wanted was to be an astronomer, or so he'd told himself repeatedly. Well...now he was an astronomer. He was accomplished, respected. What more did he want out of life?

Something more.

He considered his desire to seek out the mystery of the light in the hills. No doubt the thing had some mundane cause. If he found it, he would feel like a fool, hypnotized like a magpie by the glitter of sunlight off...

*Off what?*

By midnight his plan was made.

He spent the rest of the night in peaceful sleep, wrapped in blankets beneath the windy sky.



Dressed in hiking boots and khaki fatigues, Ronar stepped from the trailer into the sunlight. His eyes mirrored the heavy iron color of the thunderstorm in the west. The rising wind whipped his hair. The front had passed, promising clear skies after the thunderstorms blew themselves out.

On his back was a pack stuffed with hiking essentials. With the binocular slung around his neck he set off with a long, rapid stride for the south face of the mountain.

Only as he drew abreast of the dome did it occur to him that some might think him erratic were he to simply disappear. He brought up short, looking over his shoulder. The storm backed the dome like a field of ink, briefly thinned by submerged flashes of lightning.

After a moment's thought Ronar turned aside and trotted up the walkway. He entered the dome and stood quietly, allowing his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Presently the structure of the telescope became visible.

The instrument stood idle, slumbering in cool shadows. Night was its natural environment; daylight must be held at bay until the sun and its concealing glare had gone. Then the dome could be opened to reveal the contents of the night. Ronar looked at the great reflector with sudden appreciation, even a bit of reverence.

Beyond the telescope was a desk. There sat Dr. Cohen, poring over the densely printed columns of a star catalog. Ronar walked up and stood over him.

"Stanley."

Cohen started, sending charts and papers skittering over the desktop. He looked up at Ronar, grabbed the reflector of his gooseneck lamp, moving the cone of light up a broad, flat torso, seemingly into the upper reaches of the dome before finally reaching Ronar's face.

"Leonard!" Cohen fumbled with his glasses. "Why are you wearing that costume? You—seem to be equipped for a lengthy expedition."

"It's good news for you, Stanley. Fine night coming up. Put it to good use."

Cohen blinked. “You’re...giving up your time on the telescope?”

“Yes. I’m going on a hike. Should be back in five days, maybe four. I’ll be seeing you.”

With that, Ronar turned on his heel and set out for the exit, feeling Cohen’s stare on his back. He got halfway out the door before Cohen cried, “Leonard, wait! What are you talking about?” He caught up with Ronar and put a hand on his arm.

Ronar halted at the threshold and looked down at Cohen, feeling a mix of irritation and embarrassment.

“It’s only a hike. Not—a big deal.”

“A hike. Leonard, your telescope time has been scheduled for the better part of year. How can you just wander off and abandon it?”

Ronar shrugged. “I already have most of the data I need. I just need to clear my head. Need to move a little. Need to *live*.” Ronar blinked, taken aback by the vehemence of his own statement.

Cohen stared at him in mystification. “But don’t you have classes to teach before then?” he asked quietly.

“Hmm.” Ronar considered that for a moment. “Hell. I’ll tell the university I’ve taken a sabbatical.” He cracked a smile, even uttered a quick laugh. If only it were that simple...

But it *was* just that simple, if he really wanted it to be.

“I really don’t give a damn.”

He turned again, stepping out into the sunshine, bounding down the stairs, a bemused Cohen following in his wake.

The dome was perched on the steep southern face of the mountain. Cohen glanced down the precipice and back at Ronar, apparently drawing the inference that Ronar meant to descend that way rather than via the road.

But Ronar now felt no great hurry to depart. He leaned against a boulder that seemed only precariously rooted to the mountaintop. He smelled electricity in the air as the thunderstorm approached. The wind gained strength, rushing up the face of the mountain, lofting ravens which then folded their wings to slip back down into another up-draft.

Ronar looked along the ridge to the great stone thumb of Baboquivari, twelve miles away. Beyond it, the mountains of Mexico looked like nearby hillocks in the clear desert air.

Feeling oddly unsettled, he turned to his colleague. “Stanley, you’re more familiar with my work than most. How would you assess its quality?”

Cohen seemed ill-prepared for this non sequitur. He shrugged and loosened his collar despite the falling temperature.

“It has always been excellent—purposeful, methodical, a very real contribution to the field. You’ll have real influence on our ideas of large-scale structures.”

“But would you call it a work of genius?”

Cohen fiddled with his tie as he thought that over. “Well, no, I could not honestly call it that.”

Ronar nodded, a little wistfully, a little ruefully. "I know. Yet I stay with astronomy because I love it. It's the highest calling I know—no pun intended. My research may not be revolutionary, but I have hopes for it, and I'll continue it however I can. Don't worry; science hasn't lost me yet."

Cohen paused, then extended his hand with a curiously moist look in his eye. "You've quite a reputation in our field, Leonard...even aside from your work." He flashed a quick, embarrassed smile. "Now it seems there's more to you than I may ever get a chance to discover. Goodbye, Leonard. Without you, life will be less of an enigma, and a little less intriguing."

Ronar looked at him with wry perplexity. "You're overreacting. I'll be back." But even as he spoke the words he wondered if they were true. They shook hands solemnly.

Ronar turned and started down the slope, leaping from rock to rock with natural athletic grace.

Now the thunderstorm loomed over half the sky. A steel-blue shadow enveloped the mountain. Ronar scrambled down steep faces of bare rock, heading toward the sheets of rain that swept across the desert.



Cohen stood looking after him for a while, the wind whipping his thin hair and throwing dust in his eyes. When the first fat drops splattered against his glasses he turned and retreated into the dome.

That evening, as he stood on the catwalk watching the sunset, he spied a fleeting glint of reflected light in the hills, and frowned as if at some great mystery.



After the initial difficult descent, Ronar worked his way toward the west and Horseshoe Ridge. From there the ridge line extended south toward Baboquivari. Trails left over from the days of the Civilian Conservation Corps were overgrown but usable. The country was pleasant, green with scrub oak. Ronar opened his stride and made good progress.

The sun went down as Ronar approached the monolith of Baboquivari. The crescent moon provided enough light to let him continue for a while before the darkness grew too deep. He lit no fire as he camped at the foot of Baboquivari. The mountain belonged to the Papago, and their god Ee-Ee-Toy was said to inhabit the caves at its summit. Ronar felt no threat from the god, but the Indians might object to a white man camping so near their sacred place. Better to leave the darkness undisturbed.

Ronar lay back, wrapped in his sleeping bag against the chill. Coyotes whined somewhere in the arroyo down below. He could barely make out the shapes of kangaroo rats as they scampered at his feet.

The sky was thick with stars, crusted with stars, powdered with and shivering with

stars. The Milky Way arched overhead like a bridge of pale frost. Ronar let his eyes rove over constellations that studded its smoky glow with scattered points of brilliance. Cygnus the swan took wing along the Milky Way's starry cirrus; beside it gleamed the delicate harp of Lyra. Farther south, astride the great dark rift that intruded into the star mist from the west, flew Aquila, the eagle.

The stars gave him the peace to let him find sleep.

Deep in the south, Mars stood near to Antares, two dire red beacons in the heart of the Scorpion.

## Chapter Two

### *The Bronze Portal*

The next afternoon Ronar traversed a pass a few miles from the Mexican border. A few final peaks rose up ahead. The Quinlan Range, of which Kitt Peak and Baboquivari were the high points, was petering out. Behind him, Kitt Peak was a trapezoid of purple haze on the horizon, while Baboquivari loomed tall and enigmatic at much closer range.

Lacking a map, Ronar was limited to compass-based dead reckoning on his trek to the mystery mountain. But he wasn't worried—the landmarks were distinctive enough that he was sure he could find the way.

A largely sedentary life had taken its toll on his endurance. He'd managed to find time to hike and explore around Tucson, but not often enough, and seldom farther than fifteen or twenty miles at a time. In the past few years, his annual pilgrimages to the Rockies had left him with sore muscles and blistered feet. Now he was sweaty, thirsty, sunburned, and tired. He berated himself for ever having let indolence and inertia reduce him to such a state, and vowed to take whatever steps were necessary to prevent it in the future.

Despite these discomforts, Ronar enjoyed his walk. The Sonoran landscape was silent about him, harsh and elemental, a tawny wilderness in which even the sheep of the Desert People found too little nourishment to be worth the effort.

The day had turned hazy. A diffuse sun hovered in the western sky, its rays bathing the mountains with a smoky afternoon glow. As Ronar scrambled around a fin of rock, he saw at last the peak he'd studied with such care from the observatory. It was neither tall nor distinctive, but to Ronar it had the look of a numinous place, a look enhanced by the silence of the desert. He scanned its flanks with the binocular, but its secrets did not yield to so easy a probe.

With a mixture of anticipation and self-deprecation Ronar tramped forward to begin his climb, skirting a low rise that stood between him and his destination. Again he was sure his search would end in anticlimax, with the discovery of some bit of shiny trash—an old icebox, a wrecked pickup, or the windows of an abandoned shepherd-er's hut. He hesitated, suddenly unwilling to confront this inevitable disappointment, which threatened to dash hopes so vague he could not even name them.

Well—as long as he was here, he might as well continue, farce or no. What did he have to lose?



Dusk lay thick and purple on the land. The moon was a pale crescent floating in the rosy western afterglow.

He had found nothing, not a bit of glass, not a scrap of tin.

The northern flank of the mountain was gentle, with sparse vegetation, easy to climb and search. He had crossed and recrossed it until the sun was set and he knew every

major rock on its slope.

He sank down to sit on one of the smaller boulders, located at what should be the very spot from which the reflection had shone, as near as he could tell. Could his goal lie on one of the neighboring mountains? No: from the observatory, he had noted tilted strata that marked the correct slope, and this was it.

He looked past the nearby swell of land, into the distance to Kitt Peak. The observatory dome was a barely visible nub on its rim. He chuckled. Suddenly he laughed, a sound like cobblestones clattering down the slope.

Well, he'd had his little adventure. He'd told Stanley he'd be back in four or five days, a good estimate as it turned out.

Trying to ignore the persistent spark of disappointment within him, he opened a can of beans, scooped them cold into his mouth, then spread his blankets in the dusk and lay down. Another night or two of freedom...and then...and then...

Sometime during the night, with Orion sprawled on the eastern horizon, Ronar awoke suddenly, sat up and said "What?"

But the dream that had prompted this had already escaped him. He lay back and soon slept again.



In the morning he was packed and ready to travel within five minutes. Still chagrined, he strode straight downhill, determined to at least see some different scenery by taking a different route back.

As he approached the base of the hillock that lay just north of the "mystery mountain", he noticed the remains of a trail leading up it. It was rather wide, but nearly invisible from age and disuse. Curious, he decided to follow it. It was rutted in spots, as though carts or wagons of some kind had once used it. The track continued up the slight rise, switchbacking in the steeper sections. Ronar kept his eyes cast downward, looking for any sign of recent use, but finding none.

The sun rose into a sky brushed with streamers of bright golden cloud.

The slope leveled out; he'd reached the summit. He encountered some upended slabs of granite. Engraved on their surfaces were old petroglyphs, including a large and impressive Man-in-the-Maze. Here the old road or path disappeared in grass and scrub.

Ronar straightened up, perplexed, and took a drink from his canteen.

There was something odd about the light. A reddish glow filled in the shadows on his hand.

He turned to the left. Tucked in among the narrow standing stones was something that glared in the morning sun.

He dropped the canteen, his gaze alternating between the glare, the distant observatory, and the mountain he had thought was his destination. How had he made such a mistake? Of course: from the observatory, this hillock appeared superimposed against the more distant mountain. From a distance, the two appeared merged, the lesser height

blending into the greater.

Heart pounding, Ronar approached the goal of his journey.

He did not understand what he was seeing.

All he could determine was that it was cubical in outline, about fifteen feet on a side, and made of copper or bronze.

And that it was impossible.

Ronar circled it slowly, keeping a wary distance.

The side he was facing was, in itself, comprehensible enough. It was the entrance to a tunnel, stretching into a distance not penetrated by the twilight. The walls angled in somewhat, giving the impression of a squared-off funnel narrowing away into the darkness.

The trouble was, the other three sides looked exactly the same. Four openings, all leading inward at right angles to each other, all vanishing into the distance—all in a fifteen-foot cube.

Cold awe burned in Ronar's breast. Here was something beyond the experience of mankind as he knew it. Step by step, he approached the anomaly, put out his hand and touched it. It was old, weathered; flakes of verdigris came off on his fingers.

Here was proof that human thought had missed major aspects of possibility, had not yet uncovered whole branches of fundamental knowledge. Were he to walk away right now, never to return, his view of reality had already been forever changed.

The doorways beckoned. Ronar picked up a pebble and pitched it into one of the dark gates. It traveled a long way before hitting with a dull *clank*, somewhere within the cube's paradoxical depths. What about the top? He lobbed a chunk of malachite onto it. It struck nothing. No sound ever reached him from that stone.

It was obvious and unavoidable that he must explore this thing at once. For all he knew, it might fade like mist at the next sunrise. Or maybe it appeared only once per century, like Brigadoon, or maybe once every hundred million years.

But he doubted that. Its surroundings were undisturbed. It stood mute and impassive, as much a part of its environment as the rocks and the sage.

Ronar broke handfuls of twigs from a nearby creosote bush. He tied them to a long stick of tesota wood and struck a match to it. With this torch in hand, he turned to face the black gape of the Portal.

He entered the dusty bronze corridor, the sound of his footsteps echoing around him. A few paces took him beyond the cube's fifteen-foot outer dimension. Where he walked now, he could not say.

He detected no reaction to his presence, no sign of danger, no sign indeed that anything larger than a lizard had come this way in years. Nevertheless, a feeling of wrongness began to bother him as he advanced. He came to an abrupt halt as he realized what the trouble was.

Despite the evident narrowing of the tunnel, it seemed no smaller here than it had at the entrance. But how could that be? Looking ahead, it was clear that the walls, ceiling, and floor were indeed converging at a moderate but obvious angle.

He looked back and started in surprise. Though he'd come no more than a hundred

paces—three hundred feet at most—the opening, as well as he could make it out in the last light of dusk, looked at least three times farther away.

Ronar accepted this with a subdued laugh. He measured the tunnel's width by pacing it off, and continued on.

Soon it was apparent that the shaft was indeed changing in size; it was growing. Unless he were shrinking—he couldn't dismiss the possibility, but it did strike him as unlikely.

As he walked, the walls and ceiling gradually receded into the gloom. The echo of his footsteps took longer to reach him, then died away completely.

The torch burned brightly at first, but faded as the twigs blackened and fell away, leaving only the smoldering tesota stick.

Now he could no longer see the walls at all. Turning, he discovered he couldn't see the entrance anymore, either.

Ronar stopped short. The thought of wandering without landmark or guidepost in this dusty dark void was unappealing. An uneasy feeling rose up in his gut, overwhelming his desire to explore further.

He retraced his steps, following the barely perceptible track he'd left in the dust and litter on the bronze floor. But ten minutes passed without the reappearance of the entrance.

Impatiently, he left his path and angled off to the left, planning to find the wall and follow it outside.

After another half hour, he had to admit that not only had he lost the opening, but the walls themselves.

His world was a circle of weak torch light glimmering on an infinite plane of bronze. His own shadow, long and distorted, was the only moving thing within his vision. All else was blackness and silence.

Ronar swayed. He had rarely been lost before; this experience redefined the concept. He was dizzy, disoriented. His sense of balance found no reference points in the emptiness around him. He fought off the feeling by concentrating on his feet planted on the floor.

Belatedly he thought of the compass in his pocket. The general direction to the exit should be East, since he'd entered with the glow of sunrise at his back. He took out the compass and held the torchlight close, but the needle wandered aimlessly, indicating nothing more than the steel knife sheathed at his hip when he brought it near.

Having no better plan, he chose a random direction and walked as straight a line as he could manage. Stealth seemed pointless, so he lengthened his stride to cover the maximum distance before his torch gave out entirely. He could only hope this was a meaningful action. His mind offered the image of an ant marching around and around the rim of a jar until it dropped from exhaustion. Was he as incapable of understanding and escaping his situation as the ant?

The torch failed at last. He flung it away. The motion fanned its embers into spiraling red stars that vanished when it clattered down some distance away. He walked on.

The radium face of his watch told him that hours passed in this way. But could he

believe it? Perhaps this place distorted time as much as distance. Perhaps he'd really been here just a few seconds, or had toiled through many years.

It was interesting, he reflected, to be in a situation where such fanciful thoughts were actually apropos. He had to admit, they provided a certain giddy exhilaration that partially compensated for the fear.

Ronar thought he'd seen blackness before, in the space between the stars. But here was a darkness more absolute than any he'd ever imagined. He thought back to mysterious moonless nights of his boyhood, when a favorite game had been to walk alone in the woods without a light, guided by nothing but a dim strip of sky between the branches overhead. Now that same strip of sky would seem to him like a blazing highway.

Ronar's other senses reached out, trying to compensate for the futility of vision. But they revealed little—only a faint musty odor, and the echoless beat of his footsteps. When he called out, the darkness blotted up the sound with oppressive finality.

Suddenly his foot caught on something that clattered away with a dry, brittle sound. He danced to keep his balance and managed to stay on his feet. His heart pounded in reaction to this unexpected break in his half-dazed, robot-like march.

He found a match in his pocket and struck it. The flare-up revealed a skeleton, now disarrayed, wrapped in a few scraps of Indian dress. Ronar thought he recognized the style as Apache, a tribe that had not walked the hills outside this place for fifty years.

In the brief light, he bent down and lifted the skull, regarding it solemnly.

"Old warrior," he whispered. "Where did you think you were wandering? In the land beyond Death? As good a theory as any. Maybe you were surprised to find you could die there, too."

The match went out. Ronar set the skull down and resumed his course, wondering if he would be able to avoid joining the Indian in his rest.

At last he noticed a change. The floor was sloping upward, gradually steepening as he went on. After interminable hours of wandering, any change seemed promising. He proceeded directly up slope. Now at least he had a goal—he would climb until either he escaped, or dropped. Resolved on this, he charged ahead like some walking machine.

He needn't have worried about the floor flattening out again. By the time he'd climbed a thousand feet the way had gotten quite steep indeed. The slope seemed to increase by a few degrees with every hundred feet he went forward. His pack threatened to pull him over backwards. He had to lean well forward to balance it.

Stubborn as he was, he had to admit it was hard going. He'd already walked at least thirty miles since yesterday afternoon. Soon though there was no more question of continuing upward. The floor was pitched as steeply as the roof of a house. Ronar was in danger of slipping and falling blindly downhill. He would have to retreat.

Moving carefully, he began to crab-walk to the right, searching for a gentler slope on which to resume his ascent. But the tilt increased in that direction too. Forced onto hands and knees, he crawled back to the left.

With a sickening feeling of unreality, he realized the angle was now steeper to the

left as well. It was nearly forty five degrees, a wall as much as a floor. He flattened out, fighting off the vertigo that threatened to rob him of all sense of orientation. He seemed to taste the metallic flavor of the slick bronze beneath him—after all, his face was pressed up tightly against it. Sprawled there, striving to master himself, he tried to think things through.

Gingerly, he began to creep downward, sticking as close to the bronze as he could.

It was worse than useless. The slope was steeper in every direction. Wherever he was at any given moment was the flattest part. He tried to envision a surface whose shape could account for that, but his mind only swam with topological absurdities.

Clinging as much by force of will as by the friction of his body, Ronar grew keenly aware of the capacity of the hard rubber toes of his boots to grip the metal, and how very near they were to letting go. Sweat soaked him, lubricating his arms and palms.

He shook with a hard, ironic laugh, though he knew it might send him sliding. How had he gotten into this unbelievable mess? Hiking out of idle curiosity, he'd wound up clinging like a fly to an incomprehensible wall lost in some insane extradimensional space.

He began to mutter to himself. "Students, leave your papers on the desk as you leave. I hope they're more carefully thought out than your last batch. A late paper means a reduction of one full letter grade. Bad math means failure."

He chuckled. He had to admit it—this situation made teaching undergraduates look pretty damn good.

He saw two alternatives. He could stay where he was until he could no longer maintain the muscular tension that held him against gravity. Or he could get it over with and let the bizarre topology of this place have its way with him.

"To hell with this." Seeing nothing to be gained by remaining, he decided to take his chances. Lifting his feet and palms, he skidded down into limitless night.

The Carrollesque logic of the place did not disappoint him. In seconds, he lost contact with the wall completely, and simply fell through space.

It didn't occur to him to scream or panic. He simply fell, and after a while it didn't seem so fearsome. He discovered he could control his speed, either diving like a falcon or spreading himself on the cushion of the wind to slow down. He must have long since reached terminal velocity, but he couldn't remember what that was for a human body—over a hundred miles per hour, he was sure. He'd been falling so long he was surprised the air pressure hadn't increased from the loss of altitude. But he noticed no difference. At least his ears weren't popping.

That was one minor mystery to add to the multitude.

There was no sign of the wall. No matter how Ronar reached, rolled, or twisted, he found only pitch-colored nothingness around him.

His fate had two possible extremes. He might make an abrupt landing in the next millisecond, or he might fall eternally. Between those was a whole range of possibilities. He doubted he'd end up in the center of the Earth, or anything as mundane as that. This miraculous structure must have been built for a purpose. If it turned out to be a mere pitfall for stray, wandering humans, he would be intensely disappointed in the

essential rationality of the universe.

In the midst of these musings, Ronar became aware of a subtle change. The wind seemed a little louder, a little more turbulent. Something was nearby, deflecting his wind stream, reflecting its sound.

Ronar tentatively put out his hand. At first he found nothing, but then, reaching farther, his fingers encountered and were seared by a vertical surface racing by at high speed. He jerked back his hand and stuck his fingers in his mouth.

More prudently this time, he took a pencil from his pocket and touched its point to the smooth metal face that whispered by so swiftly.

The wall was coming back. Very gradually, it was angling away from the vertical. Ronar used the pencil to monitor its progress as it came ever nearer. Eventually he allowed it to come into contact with the seat of his pants. He was very careful about this—on such a slide, at such a speed, if he so much as touched the bronze with his boot heels he'd go flying end over end.

The slope continued to decrease. Soon gravity was actually holding him to the surface rather than merely keeping him in its vicinity. The bronze was smooth, but his speed was great, resulting in friction that toasted the seat of his pants. He leaned back to let the pack take some of the punishment, and even dared to drag his heels a little.

The cosmic luge-run began to flatten out faster. Ronar shed so much speed that G-forces weighed him down, like a pilot coming out of a loop. He had momentum to spare. The slide began to seem as interminable as the fall. But the slope was now more like a floor than a wall. Finally, inexorably, almost grandly, he slid to a stop.

Ronar sat for a moment longer to collect himself. He felt shaky and light-headed when he stood up. Having just free-fallen a distance he could not guess, he decided to forgive himself the weakness. He started forward with an unsteady, lurching gait. The floor flattened out completely within a few hundred feet.

He halted and drew in a sharp breath. Far ahead, just at the limit of vision, glimmered a tiny, dim square of light. He stared at it warily, uneasily, not even thinking to raise the binocular to confirm what his naked eyes were promising.

Shaking his head to clear it, he stepped forward. Soon it was obvious that he had indeed found a way out. But he did not breathe easily as he approached the exit. He didn't know what to expect. In fact, he hardly dared to expect anything at all.

Thus he was not totally surprised to step forth and behold above him the strange constellations of an alien world.