

LEIGH BRACKETT



Queen Of The Martians

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plus some short stories

Water Pirate

All the Colors Of the Rainbow

The Secret of Sinharat

The Beast-Jewel Of Mars

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Queen Of the Martian Catacombs

1

For hours the hard-pressed beast had fled across the Martian desert with its dark rider. Now it was spent. It faltered and broke stride, and when the rider cursed and dug his heels into the scaly sides, the brute only turned its head and hissed at him. It stumbled on a few more paces into the lee of a sandhill, and there it stopped, crouching down in the dust.

The man dismounted. The creature's eyes burned like green lamps in the light of the little moons, and he knew that it was no use trying to urge it on. He looked back, the way he had come.

In the distance there were four black shadows grouped together in the barren emptiness. They were running fast. In a few minutes they would be upon him.

He stood still, thinking what he should do next. Ahead, far ahead, was a low ridge, and beyond the ridge lay Valkis and safety, but he could never make it now. Off to his right, a lonely tor stood up out of the blowing sand. There were tumbled rocks at its foot.

'They tried to run me down in the open,' he thought. Tut here, by the Nine Hells, they'll have to work for it!'

He moved then, running toward the tor with a lightness and speed incredible in anything but an animal or a savage. He was of Earth stock, built tall, and more massive than he looked by reason of his leanness. The desert wind was bitter cold, but he did not seem to notice it, though he wore only a ragged shirt of Venusian spider silk,

open to the waist. His skin was almost as dark as his black hair, burned indelibly by years of exposure to some terrible sun. His eyes were startlingly light in colour, reflecting back the pale glow of the moons.

With the practised ease of a lizard he slid in among the loose and treacherous rocks. Finding a vantage point, where his back was protected by the tor itself, he crouched down.

After that he did not move, except to draw his gun. There was something eerie about his utter stillness, a quality of patience as unhuman as the patience of the rock that sheltered him.

The four black shadows came closer, resolved themselves into mounted men.

They found the beast, where it lay panting, and stopped. The line of the man's footprints, already blurred by the wind but still plain enough, showed where he had gone.

The leader motioned. The others dismounted. Working with the swift precision of soldiers, they removed equipment from their saddle-packs and began to assemble it.

The man crouching under the tor saw the thing that took shape. It was a Banning shocker, and he knew that he was not going to fight his way out of this trap. His pursuers were out of range of his own weapon. They would remain so. The Banning, with its powerful electric beam, would take him--dead or senseless, as they wished.

He thrust the useless gun back into his belt. He knew who these men were, and what they wanted with him. They were officers of the Earth Police Control, bringing him a gift--twenty years in the Luna cell-blocks.

Twenty years in the grey catacombs, buried in the silence and the eternal dark.

He recognised the inevitable. He was used to inevitables--hunger, pain, loneliness, the emptiness of dreams. He had accepted a lot of them in his time. Yet he made no move to surrender. He looked out at the desert and the night sky, and his eyes blazed, the desperate, strangely beautiful eyes of a creature very close to the roots of life, something less and more than man. His hands found a shard of rock and broke it.

The leader of the four men rode slowly toward the tor, his right arm raised.

His voice carried clearly on the wind. 'Eric John Stark!' he called, and the dark man tensed in the shadows.

The rider stopped. He spoke again, but this time in a different tongue. It was no dialect of Earth, Mars or Venus, but a strange speech, as harsh and vital as the blazing Mercurian valleys that bred it.

'Oh N'Chaka, oh Man-without-a-tribe, I call you!'

There was a long silence. The rider and his mount were motionless under the low moons, waiting.

Eric John Stark stepped slowly out from the pool of blackness under the tor.

'Who calls me N'Chaka?'

The rider relaxed somewhat. He answered in English, 'You know perfectly well who I am, Eric. May we meet in peace?' Stark

shrugged. 'Of course.'

He walked on to meet the rider, who had dismounted, leaving his beast behind. He was a slight, wiry man, this EP C officer, with the rawhide look of the frontiers still on him. His hair was grizzled and his sun-blackened skin was deeply lined, but there was nothing in the least aged about his hard good-humoured face nor his remarkably keen dark eyes.

'It's been a long time, Eric,' he said.

Stark nodded. 'Sixteen years.' The two men studied each other for a moment, and then Stark said, 'I thought you were still on Mercury, Ashton.'

'They've called all us experienced hands in to Mars.' He held out cigarettes. 'Smoke?'

Stark took one. They bent over Ashton's lighter, and then stood there smoking while the wind blew red dust over their feet and the three men of the patrol waited quietly beside the Banning. Ashton was taking no chances. The electro-beam could stun without injury.

Presently Ashton said, 'I'm going to be crude, Eric. I'm going to remind you of some things.'

'Save it,' Stark retorted. 'You've got me. There's no need to talk about it.'

'Yes,' said Ashton, 'I've got you, and a damned hard time I've had doing it. That's why I'm going to talk about it.'

His dark eyes met Stark's cold stare and held it.

'Remember who I am--Simon Ashton. Remember who came along

when the miners in that valley on Mercury had a wild boy in a cage, and were going to finish him off like they had the tribe that raised him. Remember all the years after that, when I brought that boy up to be a civilised human being.'

Stark laughed, not without a certain humour. 'You should have left me in the cage. I was caught a little old for civilising.'

'Maybe. I don't think so. Anyway, I'm reminding you,' Ashton said.

Stark said, with no particular bitterness, 'You don't have to get sentimental. I know it's your job to take me in.'

Ashton said deliberately, 'I won't take you in, Eric, unless you make me.' He went on then, rapidly, before Stark could answer. 'You've got a twenty-year sentence hanging over you, for running guns to the Middle-Swamp tribes when they revolted against Terro-Venusian Metals, and a couple of similar jobs.

'All right. So I know why you did it, and I won't say I don't agree with you. But you put yourself outside the law, and that's that. Now you're on your way to Valkis. You're headed into a mess that'll put you on Luna for life, the next time you're caught.'

'And this time you don't agree with me.'

'No. Why do you think I near broke my neck to catch you before you got there?' Ashton bent closer, his face very intent. 'Have you made any deal with Delgaun of Valkis? Did he send for you?'

'He sent for me, but there's no deal yet. I'm on the beach. Broke. I got a message from this Delgaun, whoever he is, that there was going to be a private war back in the Drylands, and he'd pay me to help fight it. After all, that's my business.'

Ashton shook his head.

'This isn't a private war, Eric. It's something a lot bigger and nastier than that. The Martian Council of City-States and the Earth Commission are both in a cold sweat, and no one can find out exactly what's going on. You know what the Low-Canal towns are--Valkis, Jekkara, Barakesh. No law-abiding Martian, let alone an Earthman, can last five minutes in them. And the back-blocks are absolutely verboten. So all we get is rumours.

'Fantastic rumours about a barbarian chief named Kynon, who seems to be promising heaven and earth to the tribes of Kesh and Shun--some wild stuff about the ancient cult of the Ramas that everybody thought was dead a thousand years ago. We know that Kynon is tied up somehow with Delgaun, who is a most efficient bandit, and we know that some of the top criminals of the whole System are filtering in to join up. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrod of Callisto Colony--and, I believe, your old comrade in arms, Luthar the Venusian.'

Stark gave a slight start, and Ashton smiled briefly.

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'I heard about that.' Then he sobered. 'You can figure that set-up for yourself, Eric. The barbarians are going to go out and fight some kind of a holy war, to suit the entirely unholy purposes of men like Delgaun and the others.

'Half a world is going to be raped, blood is going to run deep in the Drylands--and it will all be barbarian blood spilled for a lying promise, and the carrion crows of Valkis will get fat on it. Unless, somehow, we can stop it.'

He paused, then said flatly, 'I want you to go on to Valkis, Eric--but as

my agent. I won't put it on the grounds that you'd be doing civilisation a service. You don't owe anything to civilisation, Lord knows. But you might save a lot of your own kind of people from getting slaughtered to say nothing of the border-state Martians who'll be the first to get Kynon's axe.

'Also, you could wipe that twenty-year hitch on Luna off the slate, maybe even work up a desire to make a man of yourself, instead of a sort of tiger wandering from one kill to the next.' He added, 'If you live.'

Stark said slowly, 'You're clever, Ashton. You know I've got a feeling for all planetary primitives like those who raised me, and you appeal to that.'

'Yes,' said Ashton, 'I'm clever. But I'm not a liar. What I've told you is true.'

Stark carefully ground out the cigarette beneath his heel. Then he looked up. 'Suppose I agree to become your agent in this, and go off to Valkis. What's to prevent me from forgetting all about you, then?'

Ashton said softly, 'Your word, Eric. You get to know a man pretty well when you know him from boyhood on up. Your word is enough.'

There was a silence, and then Stark held out his hand. 'All right, Simon—but only for this one deal. After that, no promises.' 'Fair enough.' They shook hands.

'I can't give you any suggestions,' Ashton said. 'You're on your own, completely. You can get in touch with me through the Earth Commission office in Tarak. You know where that is?'

Stark nodded. 'On the Dryland Border.'

'Good luck to you, Eric.'

He turned, and they walked back together to where the three men waited. Ashton nodded, and they began to dismantle the Banning. Neither they nor Ashton looked back, as they rode away.

Stark watched them go. He filled his lungs with the cold air, and stretched. Then he roused the beast out of the sand. It had rested, and was willing to carry him again as long as he did not press it. He set off again, across the desert.

The ridge grew as he approached it, looming into a low mountain chain much worn by the ages. A pass opened before him, twisting between the hills of barren rock.

He traversed it, coming out at the farther end above the basin of a dead sea. The lifeless land stretched away into darkness, a vast waste of desolation more lonely even than the desert. And between the sea-bottom and the foothills, Stark saw the lights of Valkis.

2

There were many lights, far below. Tiny pinpricks of flame where torches burned in the streets beside the Low-Canal--the thread of black water that was all that remained of a forgotten ocean.

Stark had never been here before. Now he looked at the city that sprawled down the slope under the low moons, and shivered, the primitive twitching of the nerves that an animal feels in the presence of death.

For the streets where the torches flared were only a tiny part of Valkis. The life of the city had flowed downward from the cliff-tops,

following the dropping level of the sea. Five cities, the oldest scarcely recognisable as a place of human habitation. Five harbours, the docks and quays still standing, half buried in the dust.

Five ages of Martian history, crowned on the topmost level with the ruined palace of the old pirate kings of Valkis. The towers still stood broken but indomitable, and in the moonlight they had a sleeping look, as though they dreamed of blue water and the sound of waves, and of tall ships coming in heavy with treasure.

Stark picked his way slowly down the steep descent. There was something fascinating to him in the stone houses, roofless and silent in the night. The paving blocks still showed the rutting of wheels where carters had driven to the marketplace, and princes had gone by in gilded chariots. The quays were scarred where ships had lain against them, rising and falling with the tides.

Stark's senses had developed in a strange school, and the thin veneer of civilisation he affected had not dulled them. Now it seemed to him that the wind had the echoes of voices in it, and the smell of spices and fresh-spilled blood.

He was not surprised when, in the last level above the living town, armed men came out of the shadows and stopped him.

They were lean, dark men, very wiry and light of foot, and their faces were the faces of wolves—not primitive wolves at all, but beasts of prey that had been civilised for so many thousands of years that they could afford to forget it.

They were most courteous, and Stark would not have cared to disobey their request.

He gave his name. 'Delgaun sent for me.'

The leader of the Valkisians nodded his narrow head. 'You're expected.' His sharp eyes had taken in every feature of the Earthman, and Stark knew that his description had been memorised down to the last detail. Valkis guarded its doors with care.

'Ask in the city,' said the sentry. 'Anyone can direct you to the palace.'

Stark nodded and went on, down through the long-dead streets in the moonlight and the silence.

With shocking suddenness, he was plunged into the streets of the living.

It was very late now, but Valkis was awake and stirring. Seething, rather. The narrow twisting ways were crowded. The laughter of women came down from the flat roofs. Torchlight flared, gold and scarlet, lighting the wineshops, making blacker the shadows of the alley-mouths.

Stark left his beast at a serai on the edge of the canal. The paddocks were already jammed. Stark recognized the long-legged brutes of the Dryland breed, and as he left a caravan passed him, coming in, with a jangling of bronze bangles and a great hissing and stamping in the dust.

The riders were tall barbarians--Keshi, Stark thought, from the way they braided their tawny hair. They wore plain leather, and their blue-eyed women rode like queens.

Valkis was full of them. For days, it seemed, they must have poured in across the dead sea bottom, from the distant oases and the barren deserts of the back-blocks. Brawny warriors of Kesh and Shun, making holiday beside the Low-Canal, where there was more water than any of them had seen in their lives.

They were in Valkis, these barbarians, but they were not part of it. Shouldering his way through the streets, Stark got the peculiar flavour of the town, that he guessed could never be touched or changed by anything.

In a square, a girl danced to the music of harp and drum. The air was heavy with the smell of wine and burning pitch and incense. A lithe, swart Valkisian in his bright kilt and jewelled girdle leaped out and danced with the girl, his teeth flashing as he whirled and postured. In the end he bore her off, laughing, her black hair hanging down his back.

Women looked at Stark. Women graceful as cats, bare to the waist, their skirts slit at the sides above the thigh, wearing no ornaments but the tiny golden bells that are the peculiar property of the Low-Canal towns, so that the air is always filled with their delicate, wanton chiming.

Valkis had a laughing, wicked soul. Stark had been in many places in his life, but never one before that beat with such a pulse of evil, incredibly ancient, but strong and gay.

He found the palace at last—a great rambling structure of quarried stone, with doors and shutters of beaten bronze closed against the dust and the incessant wind. He gave his name to the guard and was taken inside, through halls hung with antique tapestries, the flagged floors worn hollow by countless generations of sandalled feet.

Again, Stark's half-wild senses told him that life within these walls had not been placid. The very stones whispered of age-old violence, the shadows were heavy with the lingering ghosts of passion.

He was brought before Delgaun, the lord of Valkis, in the big central

room that served as his headquarters.

Delgaun was lean and catlike, after the fashion of his race. His black hair showed a stippling of silver, and the hard beauty of his face was strongly marked, the lined drawn deep and all the softness of youth long gone away. He wore a magnificent harness, and his eyes, under fine dark brows, were like drops of hot gold.

He looked up as the Earthman came in, one swift penetrating glance. Then he said, 'You're Stark.'

There was something odd about those yellow eyes, bright and keen as a killer hawk's yet somehow secret, as though the true thoughts behind them would never show through. Instinctively, Stark disliked the man.

But he nodded and came up to the council table, turning his attention to the others in the room. A handful of Martians--Low-Canallers, chiefs and fighting men from their ornaments and their proud looks--and several outlanders, their conventional garments incongruous in this place.

Stark knew them all. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrodd of Callisto Colony--and Luhar of Venus. Pirates, thieves, renegades, and each one an expert in his line.

Ashton was right. There was something big, something very big and very ugly, shaping between Valkis and the Drylands.

But that was only a quick, passing thought in Stark's mind.

It was on Luhar that his attention centred. Bitter memory and hatred had come to savage life within him as soon as he saw the Venusian.

The man was handsome. A cashiered officer of the crack Venusian Guards, very slim, very elegant, his pale hair cropped short and curling, his dark tunic fitting him like a second skin.

He said, 'The aborigine! I thought we had enough barbarians here without sending for more.'

Stark said nothing. He began to walk toward Luhar.

Luhar said sharply, 'There's no use in getting nasty, Stark. Past scores are past. We're on the same side now.'

The Earthman spoke, then, with a peculiar gentleness.

'We were on the same side once before. Against Terror-Venus Metals. Remember?'

'I remember very well!' Luhar was speaking now not to Stark alone, but to everyone in the room. 'I remember that your innocent barbarian friends had me tied to the block there in the swamps, and that you were watching the whole thing with honest pleasure. If the Company men hadn't come along, I'd be screaming there yet.'

'You sold us out,' Stark said. 'You had it coming.'

He continued to walk toward Luhar.

Delgaun spoke. He did not raise his voice, yet Stark felt the impact of his command.

'There will be no fighting here,' Delgaun said. 'You are both hired mercenaries, and while you take my pay you will forget your private quarrels. Do you understand?'

Luhar nodded and sat down, smiling out of the corner of his mouth at

Stark, who stood looking with narrowed eyes at Delgaun.

He was still half blind with his anger against Luhar. His hands ached for the kill. But even so, he recognised the power in Delgaun.

A sound shockingly akin to the growl of a beast echoed in his throat. Then, gradually, he relaxed. The man Delgaun he would have challenged. But to do so would wreck the mission that he had promised to carry out here for Ashton.

He shrugged, and joined the others at the table. Walsh of Terra rose abruptly and began to prowling back and forth.

'How much longer do we have to wait?' he demanded. Delgaun poured wine into a bronze goblet. 'Don't expect me to know,' he snapped. He shoved the flagon along the table toward Stark.

Stark helped himself. The wine was warm and sweet on his tongue. He drank slowly, sitting relaxed and patient while the others smoked nervously or rose to pace up and down. Stark wondered what, or who, they were waiting for. But he did not ask.

Time went by.

Stark raised his head, listening. 'What's that?'

Their duller ears had heard nothing, but Delgaun rose and flung open the shutters of the window near him.

The Martian dawn, brilliant and clear, flooded the dead sea bottom with harsh light. Beyond the black line of the canal a caravan was coming toward Valkis through the blowing dust. It was no ordinary caravan. Warriors rode before and behind, their spearheads blazing in the sunrise. Jewelled trappings on the beasts, a litter with curtains

of crimson silk, barbaric splendour. Clear and thin on the air came the wild music of pipes and the deep-throated throbbing of drums.

Stark guessed without being told who it was that rode out of the desert like a king.

Delgaun made a harsh sound in his throat. 'It's Kynon, at last!' he said, and swung around from the window. His eyes sparkled with some private amusement. 'Let us go and welcome the Giver of Life!'

Stark went with them, out into the crowded streets. A silence had fallen on the town. Valkisian and barbarian alike were caught now in a breathless excitement, pressing through the narrow ways, flowing toward the canal.

Stark found himself beside Delgaun in the great square of the slave market, standing on the auction block, above the heads of the throng. The stillness, the expectancy of the crowd were uncanny...

To the measured thunder of drums and the wild skirling of desert pipes, Kynon of Shun came into Valkis.

3

Straight into the square of the slave market the caravan came, and the people pressed back against the walls to make way for them. Stamping of padded hooves on the stones, ring and clash of harness, brave glitter of spears and the great two-handed broadswords of the Drylands, with drumbeats to shake the heart and the savage cry of the pipes to set the blood leaping. Stark could not restrain an appreciative thrill in himself.

The advance guard reached the slave block. Then, with deafening

abruptness, the drummers crossed their sticks and the pipers ceased, and there was utter silence in the square.

It lasted for almost a minute, and then from every barbarian throat the name of Kynon roared out until the stones of the city echoed with it.

A man leaped from the back of his mount to the block, standing at its outer edge where all could see, his hands flung up. 'I greet you, my brothers!'

And the cheering went on.

Stark studied Kynon, surprised that he was so young. He had expected a grey-bearded prophet, and instead, here was a brawny-shouldered man of war standing as tall as himself.

Kynon's eyes were a bright, compelling blue, and his face was the face of a young eagle. His voice had deep music in it--the kind of voice that can sway crowds to madness.

Stark looked from him to the rapt faces of the people--even the Valkisians had caught the mood--and thought that Kynon was the most dangerous man he had ever seen. This tawny-haired barbarian in his kilt of bronze-bossed leather was already half a god.

Kynon shouted to the captain of his warriors, 'Bring the captive and the old man!' Then he turned again to the crowd, urging them to silence. When at last the square was still, his voice rang challengingly across it.

'There are still those who doubt me. Therefore I have come to Valkis, and this day--now!--I will show proof that I have not lied!'

A roar and a mutter from the crowd. Kynon's men were lifting to the

block a tottering ancient so bowed with years that he could barely stand, and a youth of Terran stock. The boy was in chains. The old man's eyes burned, and he looked at the boy beside him with a terrible joy.

Stark settled down to watch. The litter with the curtains of crimson silk was now beside the block. A girl, a Valkisian, stood beside it, looking up. It seemed to Stark that her green eyes rested on Kynon with a smouldering anger.

He glanced away from the serving girl, and saw that the curtains were partly open. A woman lay on the cushions within. He could not see much of her, except that her hair was like dark flame and she was smiling, looking at the old man and the naked boy. Then her glance, very dark in the shadows of the litter, shifted away and Stark followed it and saw Delgaun. Every muscle of Delgaun's body was drawn taut, and he seemed unable to look away from the woman in the litter.

Stark smiled very slightly. The outlanders were cynically absorbed in what was going on. The crowd had settled again to that silent, breathless tension. The sun blazed down out of the empty sky. The dust blew, and the wind was sharp with the smell of living flesh.

The old man reached out and touched the boy's smooth shoulder, and his gums showed bluish as he laughed.

Kynon was speaking again.

'There are still those who doubt me, I say! Those who scoffed when I said that I possessed the ancient secret of the Ramas of long ago--the secret by which one man's mind may be transferred into another's body. But none of you after today will doubt that I hold that secret! 'I, myself, am not a Rama.' He glanced down along his powerful frame, half-consciously flexing his muscles, and laughed.

'Why should I be a Rama? I have no need, as yet, for the Sending-on of Minds!'

Answering laughter, half ribald, from the crowd.

'No,' said Kynon, 'I am not a Rama. I am a man like you. Like you, I have no wish to grow old, and in the end, to die.' He swung abruptly to the old man.

'You, Grandfather! Would you not wish to be young again--to ride out to battle, to take the woman of your choice?'

The old man wailed, 'Yes! Yes!' and his gaze dwelt hungrily upon the boy.

'And you shall be!' The strength of a god rang in Kynon's voice. He turned again to the crowd and cried out.

For years I suffered in the desert alone, searching for the lost secret of the Ramas. And I found it, my brothers! I hold their ancient power. I alone--in these two hands I hold it, and with it I shall begin a new era for our Dryland races! 'There will be fighting, yes. There will be bloodshed. But when that is over and the men of Kesh and Shun are free from their ancient bondage of thirst and the men of the Low-Canals have regained their own--then I shall give new life, unending life, to all who have followed me. The aged and lamed and wounded can choose new bodies from among the captives. There will be no more age, no more sickness, no more death!'

A rippling, shivering sigh from the crowd. Eyeballs gleaming in the bitter light, mouths open on the hunger that is nearest to the human soul.

'Lest anyone still doubt my promise,' said Kynon, 'watch. Watch--and I

will show you!'

They watched. Not stirring, hardly breathing, they watched.

The drums struck up a slow and solemn beat. The captain of the warriors, with an escort of six men, marched to the litter and took from the woman's hands a bundle wrapped in silks. Bearing it as though it were precious beyond belief, he came to the block and lifted it up, and Kynon took it from him.

The silken wrappings fluttered loose, fell away. And in Kynon's hands gleamed two crystal crowns and a shining rod.

He held them high, the sunlight glancing in cold fire from the crystal.

'Behold!' he said. 'The Crowns of the Ramas!'

The crowd drew breath then, one long rasping Ah! The solemn drumbeat never faltered. It was as though the pulse of the whole world throbbed within it. Kynon turned. The old man began to tremble. Kynon placed one crown on his wrinkled scalp, and the tottering creature winced as though in pain, but his face was ecstatic.

Relentlessly, Kynon crowned with the second circlet the head of the frightened boy.

'Kneel,' he said.

They knelt. Standing tall above them, Kynon held the rod in his two hands, between the crystal crowns.

Light was born in the rod. It was no reflection of the sun. Blue and brilliant, it flashed along the rod and leaped from it to wake an answering brilliance in the crowns, so that the old man and the youth

were haloed with a chill, supernal fire.

The drumbeat ceased. The old man cried out. His hands plucked feebly at his head, then went to his breast and clenched there. Quite suddenly he fell forward over his knees. A convulsive tremor shook him. Then he lay still.

The boy swayed and then fell forward also, with a clashing of chains.

The light died out of the crowns. Kynon stood a moment longer, rigid as a statue, holding the rod which still flickered with blue lightning. Then that also died.

Kynon lowered the rod. In a ringing voice he cried, 'Arise, Grandfather!'

The boy stirred. Slowly, very slowly, he rose to his feet. Holding out his hands, he stared at them, and then touched his thighs, and his flat belly, and the deep curve of his chest.

Up the firm young throat the wondering fingers went, to the smooth cheeks, to the thick fair hair above the crown. A cry broke from him.

With the perfect accent of the Drylands, the Earth boy cried in Martian, 'I am in the youth's body! I am young again!'

A scream, a wail of ecstasy, burst from the crowd. It swayed like a great beast, white faces turned upward. The boy fell down and embraced Kynon's knees.

Eric John Stark found that he himself was trembling slightly. The Valkisian wore a look of intense satisfaction under his mask of awe. The others were almost as rapt and open-mouthed as the crowd.

Stark turned his head slightly and looked down at the litter. One white

hand was already drawing the curtains, so that the scarlet silk appeared to shake with silent laughter.

The serving girl beside it had not moved. Still she looked up at Kynon, and there was nothing in her eyes but hate.

After that there was bedlam, the rush and trample of the crowd, the beating of drums, the screaming of pipes, deafening uproar. The crowns and the crystal rod were wrapped again and taken away. Kynon raised up the boy and struck off the chains of captivity. He mounted, with the boy beside him. Delgaun walked before him through the streets, and so did the outlanders.

The body of the old man was disregarded, except by some of Kynon's barbarians who wrapped it in a white cloth and took it away.

Kynon of Shun came in triumph to Delgaun's palace. Standing beside the litter, he gave his hand to the woman, who stepped out and walked beside him through the bronze door.

The women of Shun are tall and strong, bred to stand beside their men in war as well as love, and this red-haired daughter of the Drylands was enough to stop a man's heart with her proud step and her white shoulders, and her eyes that were the colour of smoke. Stark's gaze followed her from a distance.

Presently in the council room were gathered Delgaun and the outlanders, Kynon and his bright-haired queen--and no other Martians but those three.

Kynon sprawled out in the high seat at the head of the table. His face was beaming. He wiped the sweat off it, and then filled a goblet with wine, looking around the room with his bright blue eyes.

'Fill up, gentlemen. I'll give you a toast.' He lifted the goblet. 'Here's to the secret of the Ramas, and the gift of life!'

Stark put down his goblet, still empty. He stared directly at Kynon.

'You have no secret,' said Stark deliberately.

Kynon sat perfectly still, except that, very slowly, he put his own goblet down. Nobody else moved.

Stark's voice sounded loud in the stillness.

'Furthermore,' he said, 'that demonstration in the square was a lie from beginning to end.'

4

Stark's words had the effect of an electric shock on the listeners. Delgaun's black brows went up, and the woman came forward a little to stare at the Earthman with profound interest.

Kynon asked a question, of nobody in particular. 'Who,' he demanded, 'is this great black ape?'

Delgaun told him.

'Ah, yes,' said Kynon. 'Eric John Stark, the wild man from Mercury.' He scowled threateningly. 'Very well--explain how I lied in the square!'

'Certainly. First of all, the Earth boy was a prisoner. He was told what he had to do to save his neck, and then was carefully coached in his part. Secondly, the crystal rod and the crowns are a fake. You used a simple Purcell unit in the rod to produce an electronic brush discharge. That made the blue light. Thirdly, you gave the old man

poison, probably by means of a sharp point on the crown. I saw him wince when you put it on him.'

Stark paused. 'The old man died. The boy went through his sham. And that was that.'

Again there was a flat silence. Luhar crouched over the table, his face avid with hope. The woman's eyes dwelt on Stark and did not turn away.

Then, suddenly, Kynon laughed. He roared with it until the tears ran.

'It was a good show, though,' he said at last. 'Damned good. You'll have to admit that. The crowd swallowed it, horns, hoof and hide.'

He got up and came round to Stark, clapping him on the shoulder, a blow that would have laid a lesser man flat.

'I like you, wild man. Nobody else here had the guts to speak out, but I'll give you odds they were all thinking the same thing.'

Stark said, 'Just where were you, Kynon, during those years you were supposed to be suffering alone in the desert?'

'Curious, aren't you? Well, I'll let you in on a secret.' Kynon lapsed abruptly into perfectly good colloquial English. 'I was on Terra, learning about things like the Purcell electronic discharge.'

Reaching over, he poured wine for Stark and held it out to him. 'Now you know. Now we all know. So let's wash the dust out of our throats and get down to business.'

Stark said, 'No.'

Kynon looked at him. 'What now?'

'You're lying to your people,' Stark said flatly. 'You're making false promises, to lead them into war.'

Kynon was genuinely puzzled by Stark's anger. 'But of course!' he said. 'Is there anything new or strange in that?'

Luhar spoke up, his voice acid with hate. 'Watch out for him, Kynon. He'll sell you out, he'll cut your throat, if he thinks it best for the barbarians.'

Delgaun said, 'Stark's reputation is known all over the system. There's no need to tell us that again.'

'No.' Kynon shook his head, looking very candidly at Stark. 'We sent for you, didn't we, knowing that? All right.'

He stepped back a little, so that the others were included in what he was going to say.

'My people have a just cause for war. They go hungry and thirsty, while the City-States along the Dryland Border hog all the water sources and grow fat. Do you know what it means to watch your children die crying for water on a long march, to come at last to the oasis and find the well sanded in by a storm, and go on again, trying to save your people and your herd? Well, I do! I was born and bred in the Drylands, and many a time I've cursed the border states with a tongue like a dry stick.

'Stark, you should know the workings of the barbarian mind as well as I do. The men of Kesh and Shun are traditional enemies. Raiding and thieving, open warfare over water and grass. I had to give them a rallying point--a faith strong enough to unite them. hem. Resurrecting the Rama legend was the only hope I had.

'And it has worked. The tribes are one people now. They can go on and take what belongs to them--the right to live. I'm not really so far out in my promises, at all. Now do you understand?'

Stark studied him, with his cold cat-eyes. 'Where do the men of Valkis come in--the men of Jekkara and Barakesh? Where do we come in, the hired bravoos?'

Kynon smiled. It was a perfectly sincere smile, and it had no humour in it, only a great pride and a cheerful cruelty.

'We're going to build an empire,' he said softly. 'The City-States are disorganised, too starved or too fat to fight. And Earth is taking us over. Before long, Mars will be hardly more than another Luna.'

'We're going to fight that. Drylander and Low-Canaller together, we're going to build a power out of dust and blood--and there will be loot in plenty to go round.'

'That's where my men come in,' said Delgaun, and laughed. 'We low-Canallers live by rapine.'

'And you,' said Kynon, "the hired bravoos", are in it to help. I need you and the Venusian, Stark, to train my men, to plan campaigns, to give me all you know of guerrilla fighting. Knighton has a fast cruiser. He'll bring us supplies from outside. Walsh is a genius, they tell me, at fashioning weapons. Themis is a mechanic, and also the cleverest thief this side of hell--saving your presence, Delgaun! Arrodd organised and bossed the Brotherhood of the Little Worlds, which had the Space Patrol going mad for years. He can do the same for us. So there you have it. Now, Stark, what do you say?'

The Earthman answered slowly, 'I'll go along with you--as long as no harm comes to the tribes.'

Kynon laughed. 'No need to worry about that.'

'Just one more question,' Stark said. 'What's going to happen when the people find out that this Rama stuff is just a myth?'

'They won't,' said Kynon. 'The crowns will be destroyed in battle, and it will be very tragic, but very final. No one knows how to make more of them. Oh, I can handle the people! They'll be happy enough, with good land and water.'

He looked around then and said plaintively, 'And now can we sit down and drink like civilised men?'

They sat. The wine went round, and the vultures of Valkis drank to each other's luck and loot, and Stark learned that the woman's name was Berild.

Kynon was happy. He had made his point with the people, and he was celebrating. But Stark noticed that though his tongue grew thick, it did not loosen.

Luhar grew steadily more morose and silent, glancing covertly across the table at Stark. Delgaun toyed with his goblet, and his yellow gaze which gave nothing away moved restlessly between Berild and Stark.

Berild drank not at all. She sat a little apart, with her face in shadow, and her red mouth smiled. Her thoughts, too, were her own secret. But Stark knew that she was still watching him, and he knew that Delgaun was aware of it.

Presently Kynon said, 'Delgaun and I have some talking to do, so I'll bid you gentlemen farewell for the present. You, Stark, and Luhar--I'm going back into the desert at midnight, and you're going with me, so

you'd better get some sleep.'

Stark nodded. He rose and went out, with the others.

An attendant showed him to his quarters, in the north wing. Stark had not rested for twenty-four hours, and he was glad of the chance to sleep.

He lay down. The wine spun in his head, and Berild's smile mocked him. Then his thoughts turned to Ashton, and his promise. Presently he slept, and dreamed.

He was a boy on Mercury again, running down a path that led from a cave mouth to the floor of a valley. Above him the mountains rose into the sky and were lost beyond the shallow atmosphere. The rocks danced in the terrible heat, but the soles of his feet were like iron, and trod them lightly. He was quite naked.

The blaze of the sun between the valley walls was like the shining heart of Hell. It did not seem to the boy N'Chaka that it could ever be cold again, yet he knew that when darkness came there would be ice on the shallows of the river. The gods were constantly at war.

He passed a place, ruined by earthquake. It was a mine, and N'Chaka remembered dimly that he had once lived there, with several white-skinned creatures shaped like himself. He went on without a second glance.

He was searching for Tika. When he was old enough, he would mate with her. He wanted to hunt with her now, for she was fleet and as keen as he at scenting out the great lizards.

He heard her voice calling his name. There was terror in it, and N'Chaka began to run. He saw her, crouched between two huge

boulders, her light fur stained with blood.

A vast black-winged shadow swooped down upon him. It glared at him with its yellow eyes, and its long beak tore at him. He thrust his spear at it, but talons hooked into his shoulder, and the golden eyes were close to him, bright and full of death.

He knew those eyes. Tika screamed, but the sound faded, everything faded but those eyes. He sprang up, grappling with the thing...

A man's voice yelling, a man's hands thrusting him away. The dream receded. Stark came back to reality, dropping the scared attendant who had come to waken him.

The man cringed away from him. Delgaun sent me. He wants you--in the council room.' Then he turned and fled.

Stark shook himself. The dream had been terribly real. He went down to the council room. It was dusk now, and the torches were lighted.

Delgaun was waiting, and Berild sat beside him at the table. They were alone there. Delgaun looked up, with his golden eyes.

'I have a job for you, Stark,' he said. 'You remember the captain of Kynon's men, in the square today?'

'I do.'

'His name is Freka, and he's a good man, but he's addicted to a certain vice. He'll be up to his ears in it by now, and somebody has to get him back by the time Kynon leaves. Will you see to it?'

Stark glanced at Berild. It seemed to him that she was amused, whether at him or at Delgaun he could not tell. He asked, 'Where will I find him?'

'There's only one place where he can get his particular poison--Kala's, out on the edge of Valkis. It's in the old city, beyond the lower quays.' Delgaun smiled. 'You may have to be ready with your fists, Stark. Freka may not want to come.'

Stark hesitated. Then, 'I'll do my best,' he said, and went out into the dusky streets of Valkis.

He crossed a square, heading away from the palace. A twisting lane swallowed him up. And quite suddenly, someone took his arm and said rapidly.

'Smile at me, and then turn aside into the alley.'

The hand on his arm was small and brown, the voice very pretty with its accompaniment of little chiming bells. He smiled, as she had bade him, and turned aside into the alley, which was barely more than a crack between two rows of houses.

Swiftly, he put his hands against the wall, so that the girl was prisoned between them. A green-eyed girl, with golden bells braided in her black hair, and impudent breasts bare above a jewelled girdle. A handsome girl, with a proud look to her.

The serving girl who had stood beside the litter in the square, and had watched Kynon with such bleak hatred.

'Well,' said Stark. 'And what do you want with me, little one?'

She answered, 'My name is Fianna. And I do not intend to kill you, neither will I run away.'

Stark let his hands drop. 'Did you follow me, Fianna?'

'I did. Delgaun's palace is full of hidden ways, and I know them all. I was listening behind the panel in the council room. I heard you speak out against Kynon, and I heard Delgaun's order, just now.'

'So?'

'So, if you meant what you said about the tribes, you had better get away now, while you have the chance. Kynon lied to you. He will use you, and then kill you, as he will use and then destroy his own people.' Her voice was hot with bitter fury.

Stark gave her a slow smile that might have meant anything, or nothing.

'You're a Valkisian, Fianna. What do you care what happens to the barbarians?'

Her slightly tilted green eyes looked scornfully into his.

'I'm not trying to trap you, Earthman. I hate Kynon. And my mother was a woman of the desert.'

She paused, then went on sombrely, 'Also, I serve the lady Berild, and I have learned many things. There is trouble coming, greater trouble than Kynon knows.' She asked, suddenly, 'What do you know of the Ramas?'

'Nothing,' he answered, 'except that they don't exist now, if they ever did.'

Fianna gave him an odd look. 'Perhaps they don't. Will you listen to me, Earthman from Mercury? Will you get away, now that you know you're marked for death?'

Stark said, 'No.'

'Even if I tell you that Delgaun has set a trap for you at Kala's?'

'No. But I will thank you for your warning, Fianna.'

He bent and kissed her, because she was very young and honest. Then he turned and went on his way.

5

Night came swiftly. Stark left behind him the torches and the laughter and the sounding harps, coming into the streets of the old city where there was nothing but silence and the light of the low moons.

He saw the lower quays, great looming shapes of marble rounded and worn by time, and went toward them. Presently he found that he was following a faint but definite path, threaded between the ancient houses. It was very still, so that the dry whisper of the drifting dust was audible.

He passed under the shadow of the quays, and turned into a broad way that had once led up from the harbour. A little way ahead, on the other side, he saw a tall building, half fallen in ruin. Its windows were shattered, barred with light, and from it came the sound of voices and a thin thread of music, very reedy and evil.

Stark approached it, slipping through the ragged shadows as though he had no more weight to him than a drift of smoke. Once a door banged and a man came out of Kala's and passed by, going down to Valkis. Stark saw his face in the moonlight. It was the face of a beast, rather than a man. He muttered to himself as he went, and once he laughed, and Stark felt a loathing in him.

He waited until the sound of footsteps had died away. The ruined houses gave no sign of danger. A lizard rustled between the stones, and that was all. The moonlight lay bright and still on Kala's door.

Stark found a little shard of rock and tossed it, so that it make a sharp snicking sound against the shadowed wall beyond him. Then he held his breath, listening.

No one, nothing, stirred. Only the dry wind sighed in the empty houses.

Stark went out, across the open space, and nothing happened. He flung open the door of Kala's dive.

Yellow light spilled out, and a choking wave of hot and stuffy air. Inside, there were tall lamps with quartz lenses, each of which poured down a beam of throbbing, gold-orange light. And in the little pools of radiance, on filthy furs and cushions on the floor, lay men and women whose faces were slack and bestial.

Stark realized now what secret vice Kala sold here. Shanga--the going back--the radiation that caused temporary artificial atavism and let men wallow for a time in beasthood. It was supposed to have been stamped out when the Lady Fand's dark Shanga ring had been destroyed. But it still persisted, in places like this outside the law.

He looked for Freka, and recognized the tall barbarian. He was sprawled under one of the Shanga lamps, eyes closed, face brutish, growling and twitching in sleep like the beast he had temporarily become.

A voice spoke from behind Stark's shoulder. 'I am Kala. What do you wish, Outlander?'

He turned. Kala might have been beautiful once, a thousand years ago as you reckon sin. She wore still the sweet chiming bells in her hair, and Stark thought of Fianna. The woman's ravaged face turned him sick. It was like the reedy, piping music, woven out of the very heart of evil.

Yet her eyes were shrewd, and he knew that she had not missed his searching look around the room, nor his interest in Freka. There was a note of warning in her voice.

He did not want trouble, yet. Not until he found some hint of the trap Fianna had told him of.

He said, 'Bring me wine.'

Will you try the lamp of Going-back, Outlander? It brings much joy.'

'Perhaps later. Now, I wish wine.'

She went away, clapping her hands for a slatternly wench who came between the sprawled figures with an earthen mug. Stark sat down beside a table, where his back was to the wall and he could see both the door and the whole room.

Kala had returned to her own heap of furs by the door, but her basilisk eyes were alert.

Stark made a pretence of drinking, but his mind was very busy, very cold.

Perhaps this, in itself, was the trap. Freka was temporarily a beast. He would fight, and Kala would shriek, and the other dull-eyed brutes would rise and fight also.

But he would have needed no warning about that--and Delgaun

himself had said there would be trouble.

No. There was something more.

He let his gaze wander over the room. It was large, and there were other rooms off it, the openings hung with ragged curtains. Through the rents, Stark could see others of Kala's customers sprawled under Shanga-lamps, and some of these had gone so far back from humanity that they were hideous to behold. But still there was no sign of danger to himself.

There was only one odd thing. The room nearest to where Freka sat was empty, and its curtains were only partly drawn.

Stark began to brood on the emptiness of that room.

He beckoned Kala to him. 'I will try the lamp,' he said. 'But I wish privacy. Have it brought to that room, there.'

Kala said, 'That room is taken.'

'But I see no one!'

'It is taken, it is paid for, and no one may enter. I will have your lamp brought here.'

'No,' said Stark. 'The hell with it. I'm going.'

He flung down a coin and went out. Moving swiftly outside, he placed his eye to a crack in the nearest shutter, and waited.

Luhar of Venus came out of the empty room. His face was worried, and Stark smiled. He went back and stood flat against the wall beside the door.

In a moment it opened and the Venusian came out, drawing his gun as he did so.

Stark jumped him.

Luhar let out one angry cry. His gun went off a vicious streak of flame across the moonlight, and then Stark's great hand crushed the bones of his wrist together so that he dropped it clashing on the stones. He whirled around, raking Stark's face with his nails as he clawed for the Earthman's eyes, and Stark hit him. Luhar fell, rolling over, and before he could scramble up again Stark had picked up the gun and thrown it away into the ruins across the street.

Luhar came up from the pavement in one catlike spring. Stark fell with him, back through Kala's door, and they rolled together among the foul furs and cushions. Luhar was built of spring steel, with no softness in him anywhere, and his long fingers were locked around Stark's throat.

Kala screamed with fury. She caught a whip from among her cushions--a traditional weapon along the Low Canals--and began to lash the two men impartially, her hair flying in tangled locks across her face. The bestial figures under the lamps shambled to their feet, and growled.

The long lash ripped Stark's shirt and the flesh of his back beneath it. He snarled and staggered to his feet, with Luhar still clinging to the death grip on his throat. He pushed Luhar's face way from him with both hands and threw himself forward, over a table, so that Luhar was crushed beneath him.

The Venusian's breath left him with a whistling grunt. His fingers relaxed. Stark struck his hands away. He rose and bent over Luhar and picked him up, gripping him cruelly so that he turned white with

the pain, and raised him high and flung him bodily into the growling, beast-faced men who were shambling toward him.

Kala leaped at Stark, cursing, striking him with the coiling lash. He turned. The thin veneer of civilisation was gone from Stark now, erased in a second by the first hint of battle. His eyes blazed with a cold light. He took the whip out of Kala's hand and laid his palm across her evil face, and she fell and lay still.

He faced the ring of bestial, Shanga-sodden men who walled him off from what he had been sent to do. There was a reddish tinge to his vision, partly blood, partly sheer rage. He could see Freka standing erect in the corner, his head weaving from side to side brutishly.

Stark raised the whip and strode into the ring of men who were no longer quite men.

Hands struck and clawed him. Bodies reeled and fell away. Blank eyes glittered, and red mouths squealed, and there was a mingling of snarls and bestial laughter in his ears. The blood-lust had spread to these creatures now. They swarmed upon Stark and bore him down with the weight of their writhing bodies.

They bit him and savaged him in a blind way, and he fought his way up again, shaking them off with his great shoulders, trampling them under his boots. The lash hissed and sang, and the smell of blood rose on the choking air.

Freka's dazed, brutish face swam before Stark. The Martian growled and flung himself forward. Stark swung the loaded butt of the whip. It cracked solidly on the Shunni's temple, and he sagged into Stark's arms.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Stark saw Luhar. He had risen and

crept around the edge of the fight. He was behind Stark now, and there was a knife in his hand.

Hampered by Freka's weight, Stark could not leap aside. As Luhar rushed in, he crouched and went backward, his head and shoulders taking the Venusian low in the belly. He felt the hot kiss of the blade in his flesh, but the wound was glancing, and before Luhar could strike again, Stark twisted like a great cat and struck down. Luhar's skull rang on the flagging. The Earthman's fist rose and fell twice. After that, Luhar did not move.

Stark got to his feet. He stood with his knees bent and his shoulders flexed, looking from side to side, and the sound that came out of his throat was one of pure savagery.

He moved forward a step or two, half naked, bleeding, towering like a dark colossus over the lean Martians, and the brutish throng gave back from him. They had taken more mauling than they liked, and there was something about the Outlander's simple desire to rend them apart that penetrated even their Shanga-clouded minds.

Kala sat up on the floor, and snarled, 'Get out.'

Stark stood a moment or two longer, looking at them. Then he lifted Freka to his feet and laid him over his shoulder like a sack of meal and went out, moving neither fast nor slow, but in a straight line, and way was made for him.

He carried the Shunni down through the silent streets, and into the twisting, crowded ways of Valkis. There, too, the people stared at him and drew back, out of his path. He came to Delgaun's palace. The guards closed in behind him, but they did not ask that he stop.

Delgaun was in the council room, and Berild was still with him. It

seemed that they had been waiting, over their wine and their private talk. Delgaun rose to his feet as Stark came in, so sharply that his goblet fell and spilled a red pool of wine at his feet.

Stark let the Shunni drop to the floor.

'I have brought Freka,' he said. 'Luhar is still at Kala's.'

He looked into Delgaun's eyes, golden and cruel, the eyes of her, dream. It was hard not to kill.

Suddenly the woman laughed, very clear and ringing, and her laughter was all for Delgaun.

'Well done, wild man,' she said to Stark. 'Kynon is lucky to have such a captain. One word for the future, though--watch out for Freka. He won't forgive you this.'

Stark said thickly, looking at Delgaun, 'This hasn't been a night for forgiveness.' Then he added, 'I can handle Freka.'

Berild said, 'I like you, wild man.' Her eyes dwelt on Stark's face, curious, compelling. 'Ride beside me when we go. I would know more about you.'

And she smiled.

A dark flush crept over Delgaun's face. In a voice tight with I fury he said, 'Perhaps you've forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in this barbarian, this creature of an hour!'

He would have said more in his anger, but Berild said sharply, 'We will not speak of time. Go now, Stark. Be ready at midnight.'

Stark went. And as he went, his brow was furrowed deep by a

strange doubt.

6

At midnight, in the great square of the slave market, Kynon's caravan formed again and went out of Valkis with thundering drums and skirling pipes. Delgaun was there to see them go, and the cheering of the people rang after them on the desert wind.

Stark rode alone. He was in a brooding mood and wanted no company, least of all that of the Lady Berild. She was beautiful, she was dangerous, and she belonged to Kynon, or to Delgaun, or perhaps to both of them. In Stark's experience, women like that were sudden death, and he wanted no part of her. At any rate, not yet.

Luhar rode ahead with Kynon. He had come dragging into the square at the mounting, his face battered and swollen, an ugly look in his eyes. Kynon gave one quick look from him to Stark, who had his own scars, and said harshly, 'Delgaun tells me there's a blood feud between you two. I want no more of it, understand? After you're paid off you can kill each other and welcome, but not until then. Is that clear?'

Stark nodded, keeping his mouth shut. Luhar muttered assent, and they had not looked at each other since.

Freka rode in his customary place by Kynon, which put him near to Luhar. It seemed to Stark that their beasts swung close together more often than was necessary from the roughness of the track.

The big barbarian captain sat rigidly erect in his saddle, but Stark had seen his face in the torchlight, sick and sweating, with the brute look still clouding his eyes. There was a purple mark on his temple,

but Stark was quite sure that Berild had spoken the truth--Freka would not forgive him either the indignity or the hangover of his unfinished wallow under the lamps of Shanga.

The dead sea bottom widened away under the black sky. As they left the lights of Valkis behind, winding their way over the sand and the ribs of coral, dropping lower with every mile into the vast basin, it was hard to believe that there could be life anywhere on a world that could produce such cosmic desolation.

The little moons fled away, trailing their eerie shadows over rock formations tortured into impossible shapes by wind and water, peering into clefts that seemed to have no bottom, turning the sand white as bone. The iron stars blazed, so close that the wind seemed edged with their frosty light. And in all that endless space nothing moved, and the silence was so deep that the coughing howl of a sand-cat far away to the east made Stark jump with its loudness.

Yet Stark was not oppressed by the wilderness. Born and bred to the wild and barren places, this desert was more kin to him than the cities of men.

After a while there was a jangling of brazen bangles behind and Fianna came up. He smiled at her, and she said rather sullenl, 'The Lady Berild sent me, to remind you of her wish.'

Stark glanced to where the scarlet-curtained litter rocked mg, and his eyes glinted.

'She's not one to let go of a thing, is she?'

'No.' Fianna saw that no one was within earshot, and then said quietly, 'Was it as I said, at Kala's?'

Stark nodded. 'I think, little one, that I owe you my life. Luhar would have killed me as soon as I tackled Freka.'

He reached over and touched her hand where it lay on the bridle. She smiled, a young girl's smile that seemed very sweet in the moonlight, honest and comradely.

It was odd to be talking of death with a pretty girl in the moonlight.

Stark said, 'Why does Delgaun want to kill me?'

'He gave no reason, when he spoke to the man from Venus. But perhaps I can guess. He knows that you're as strong as he is, and so he fears you. Also, the Lady Berild looked at you in a certain way.'

'I thought Berild was Kynon's woman.'

'Perhaps she is—for the time,' answered Fianna enigmatically. Then she shook her head, glancing around with what was almost fear. 'I have risked much already. Please—don't let it be known that I've spoken to you, beyond what I was sent to say.'

Her eyes pleaded with him, and Stark realised with a shock that Fianna, too, stood on the edge of a quicksand.

'Don't be afraid,' he said, and meant it. 'We'd better go.'

She swung her beast around, and as she did so she whispered, 'Be careful, Eric John Stark!'

Stark nodded. He rode behind her, thinking that he liked the sound of his name on her lips.

The Lady Berild lay among her furs and cushions, and even then there was no indolence about her. She was relaxed as a cat is,

perfectly at ease and yet vibrant with life. In the shadows of the litter her skin showed silver-white and her loosened hair was a sweet darkness.

'Are you stubborn, wild man?' she asked. 'Or do you find me distasteful?'

He had not realised before how rich and soft her voice was. He looked down at the magnificent supple length of her, and said, 'I find you most damnably attractive--and that's why I'm stubborn.'

'Afraid?'

'I'm taking Kynon's pay. Should I take his woman also?'

She laughed, half scornfully. 'Kynon's ambitions leave no room for me. We have an agreement, because a king must have a queen--and he finds my counsel useful. You see, I am ambitious, too! Apart from that, there is nothing.'

Stark looked at her, trying to read her smoke-grey eyes in the gloom. 'And Delgaun?'

'He wants me, but...' She hesitated, and then went on, in a tone quite different from before, her voice low and throbbing with a secret pleasure as vast and elemental as the star-shot sky.

'I belong to no one,' she said. 'I am my own.'

Stark knew that for the moment she had forgotten him.

He rode for a time in silence, and then he said slowly, repeating Delgaun's words, 'Perhaps you have forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in me, the creature of an hour.'

He saw her start, and for a moment her eyes blazed and her breath was sharply drawn. Then she laughed, and said, 'The wild man is also a parrot. And an hour can be a long time--as long as eternity, if one wills it so.'

'Yes,' said Stark, 'I have often thought so, waiting for death to come at me out of a crevice in the rocks. The great lizard stings, and his bite is fatal.'

He leaned over in the saddle, his shoulders looming above hers, naked in the biting wind.

'My hours with women are short ones,' he said. 'They come after the battle, when there is time for such things. Perhaps then I'll come and see you.'

He spurred away and left her without a backward look, and the skin of his back tingled with the expectancy of a flying knife.

But the only thing that followed him was a disturbing echo of laughter down the wind.

Dawn came. Kynon beckoned Stark to his side, and pointed out at the cruel waste of sand, with here and there a reef of basalt black against the burning white.

'This is the country you will lead your men over. Learn it.' He was speaking to Luhar as well. 'Learn every water hole, every vantage point, every trail that leads toward the Border. There are no better fighters than the Dryland men when they're well led, and you must prove to them that you can lead. You'll work with their own chieftains--Freka, and the others you'll meet when we reach Sinharat.'

Luhar said, 'Sinharat?'

'My headquarters. It's about seven days' march--an island city, old as the moons. The Rama cult was strong there, legend has it, and it's a sort of holy place to the tribesmen. That's why I picked it.'

He took a deep breath and smiled, looking out over the dead sea bottom toward the Border, and his eyes held the same pitiless light as the sun that baked the desert.

'Very soon, now,' he said, more to himself than the others. 'Only a handful of days before we drown the Border states in their own blood. And after that...'

He laughed, very softly, and said no more. Stark could believe that what Berild said of him was true. There was a flame of ambition in Kynon that would let nothing stand in its way.

He measured the size and the strength of the tall barbarian, the eagle look of his face and the iron that lay beneath his joviality. Then Stark, too, stared off toward the Border and wondered if he would ever see Tarak or hear Simon Ashton's voice again.

For three days they marched without incident. At noon they made a dry camp and slept away the blazing hours, and then went on again under a darkening sky, a long line of tall men and rangy beasts, with the scarlet litter blooming like a strange flower in the midst of it. Jangling bridles and dust, and padded hoofs trampling the bones of the sea, toward the island city of Sinharat.

Stark did not speak again to Berild, nor did she send for him.

Fianna would pass him in the camp, and smile sidelong, and go on. For her sake, he did not stop her.

Neither Luhar nor Freka came near him. They avoided him pointedly,

except when Kynon called them all together to discuss some point of strategy. But the two seemed to have become friends, and drank together from the same bottle of wine.

Stark slept always beside his mount, his back guarded and his gun loose. The hard lessons learned in his childhood had stayed with him, and if there was a footfall near him in the dust he woke often before the beast did.

Toward morning of the fourth night the wind, that never seemed to falter from its steady blowing, began to drop. At dawn it was dead still, and the rising sun had a tinge of blood. The dust rose under the feet of the beasts and fell again where it had risen.

Stark began to sniff the air. More and more often he looked toward the north, where there was a long slope as flat as his palm that stretched away farther than he could see.

A restless unease grew within him. Presently he spurred ahead to join Kynon.

'There is a storm coming,' he said, and turned his head northward again.

Kynon looked at him curiously.

'You even have the right direction,' he said. 'One might think you were a native.' He, too, gazed with brooding anger at the long sweep of emptiness.

'I wish we were closer to the city. But one place is as bad as another when the khamsin blows, and the only thing to do is keep moving. You're a dead dog if you stop--dead and buried.'

He swore, with a curious admixture of blunt Anglo-Saxon in his Martian profanity, as though the storm were a personal enemy.

'Pass the word along to force it--dump whatever they have to to lighten the loads. And get Berild out of that damned litter. Stick by her, will you, Stark? I've got to stay here, at the head of the line. And don't get separated. Above all, don't get separated!'

Stark nodded and dropped back. He got Berild mounted, and they left the litter there, a bright patch of crimson on the sand, its curtains limp in the utter stillness.

Nobody talked much. The beasts were urged on to the top of their speed. They were nervous and fidgety, inclined to break out of line and run for it. The sun rose higher.

One hour.

The windless air shimmered. The silence lay upon the caravan with a crushing hand. Stark went up and down the line, lending a hand to the sweating drovers with the pack animals that now carried only water skins and a bare supply of food. Fianna rode close beside Berild.

Two hours.

For the first time that day there was a sound in the desert.

It came from far off, a moaning wail like the cry of a giantess in travail. It rushed closer, rising as it did so to a dry and bitter shriek that filled the whole sky, shook it, and tore it open, letting in all the winds of hell.

It struck swiftly. One moment the air was clear and motionless. The next, it was blind with dust and screaming as it fled, tearing with demoniac fury at everything in its path.

Stark spurred toward the women, who were only a few feet away but already hidden by the veil of mingled dust and sand. Someone blundered into him in the murk. Long hair whipped across his face and he reached out, crying 'Fianna! Fianna!' A woman's hand caught his, and a voice answered, but he could not hear the words.

Then, suddenly, his beast was crowded by other scaly bodies. The woman's grip had broken. Hard masculine hands clawed at him. He could make out, dimly, the features of two men, close to his.

Luhar, and Freka.

His beast gave a great lurch, and sprang forward. Stark was dragged from the saddle, to fall backward into the raging sand.

7

He lay half-stunned for a moment, his breath knocked out of him. There was a terrible reptilian screaming sounding thin through the roar of the wind. Vague shapes bolted past him, and twice he was nearly crushed by their trampling hooves.

Luhar and Freka must have waited their chance. It was so beautifully easy. Leave Stark alone and afoot, and the storm and the desert between them would do the work, with no blame attaching to any man.

Stark got to his feet, and a human body struck him at the knees so that he went down again. He grappled with it, snarling, before he realised that the flesh between his hands was soft and draped in silken cloth. Then he saw that he was holding Berild.

'It was I,' she gasped, 'and not Fianna.'

Her words reached him very faintly, though he knew she was yelling at the top of her lungs. She must have been knocked from her own mount when Luhar thrust between them.

Gripping her tightly, so that she should not be blown away, Stark struggled up again. With all his strength, it was almost impossible to stand.

Blinded, deafened, half strangled, he fought his way forward a few paces, and suddenly one of the pack beasts loomed shadow-like beside him, going by with a rush and a squeal.

By the grace of Providence and his own swift reflexes, he caught its pack lashings, clinging with the tenacity of a man determined not to die. It floundered about, dragging them, until Berild managed to grasp its trailing halter rope. Between them, they fought the creature down.

Stark clung to its head while the woman clambered to its back, twisting her arm through the straps of the pad. A silken scarf whipped toward him. He took it and tied it over the head of the beast so it could breathe, and after that it was quieter.

There was no direction, no sight of anything, in that howling inferno. The caravan seemed to have been scattered like a drift of autumn leaves. Already, in the few brief moments he had stood still, Stark's legs were buried to the knees in a substratum of sand that rolled like water. He pulled himself free and started on, going nowhere, remembering Kynon's words.

Berild ripped her thin robe apart and gave him another strip of silk for himself. He bound it over his nose and eyes, and some of the choking and the blindness abated.

Stumbling, staggering, beaten by the wind as a child is beaten by a strong man, Stark went on, hoping desperately to find the main body of the caravan, and knowing somehow that the hope was futile.

The hours that followed were nightmare. He shut his mind to them, in a way that a civilised man would have found impossible. In his childhood there had been days, and nights, and the problems had been simple ones--how to survive one span of light that one might then struggle to survive the span of darkness that came after. One thing, one danger, at a time.

Now there was a single necessity. Keep moving. Forget tomorrow, or what happened to the caravan, or where the little Fianna with her bright eyes may be. Forget thirst, and the pain of breathing, and the fiery lash of sand on naked skin. Only don't stand still.

It was growing dark when the beast fell against a half-buried boulder and snapped its foreleg. Stark gave it a quick and merciful death. They took the straps from the pad and linked themselves together. Each took as much food as they could carry, and Stark shouldered the single skin of water that fortune had vouchsafed them.

They staggered on, and Berild did not whimper.

Night came, and still the khamsin blew. Stark wondered at the woman's strength, for he had to help her only when she fell. He had lost all feeling himself. His body was merely a thing that continued to move only because it had been ordered not to stop.

The haze in his own mind had grown as thick as the black obscurity of the night. Berild had ridden all day, but he had walked, and there was an end even to his strength. He was approaching it now, and was too weary even to be afraid.

He became aware at some indeterminate time that Berild had fallen and was dragging her weight against the straps. He turned blindly to help her up. She was saying something, crying his name, striking at him so that he should hear her words and understand.

At last he did. He pulled the wrappings from his face and breathed clean air. The wind had fallen. The sky was growing clear.

He dropped in his tracks and slept, with the exhausted woman half dead beside him.

Thirst brought them both awake in the early dawn. They drank from the skin, and then sat for a time looking at the desert, and at each other, thinking of what lay ahead.

'Do you know where we are?' Stark asked.

'Not exactly.' Berild's face was shadowed with weariness. It had changed, and somehow, to Stark, it had grown more beautiful, because there was no weakness in it.

She thought a minute, looking at the sun. 'The wind blew from the north,' she said. 'Therefore we have come south from the track. Sinharat lies that way, across the waste they call the Belly of Stones.' She pointed to the north and east.

'How far?'

'Seven, eight days, afoot.'

Stark measured their supply of water and shook his head. 'It'll be dry walking.'

He rose and took up the skin, and Berild came beside him without a word. Her red hair hung loose over her shoulders. The rags of her

silken robe had been torn away by the wind, leaving her only the loose skirt of the desert women, and her belt and collar of jewels.

She walked erect with a steady, swinging stride, and it was almost impossible for Stark to remember her as she had been, riding like a lazy queen in her scarlet litter.

There was no way to shelter themselves from the midday sun. The sun of Mars at its worst, however, was only a pale candle beside the sun of Mercury, and it did not bother Stark. He made Berild lie in the shadow of his own body, and he watched her face, relaxed and unfamiliar in sleep.

For the first time, then, he was conscious of a strangeness in her. He had seen so little of her before, in Valkis, and almost nothing on the trail. Now, there was little of her mind or heart that she could conceal from him.

Or was there? There were moments, while she slept, when her shadows of strange dreams crossed her face. Sometimes, in the unguarded moment of waking, he would see in her eyes a look he could not read, and his primitive senses quivered with a vague ripple of warning.

Yet all through those blazing days and frosty nights, tortured with thirst and weary to exhaustion, Berild was magnificent. Her white skin was darkened by the sun and her hair became a wild red mane, but she smiled and set her feet resolutely by his, and Stark thought she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

On the fourth day they climbed a scarp of limestone worn in ages past by the sea, and looked out over the place called the Belly of Stones.

The sea-bottom curved downward below them into a sort of gigantic basin, the farther rim of which was lost in shimmering waves of heat. Stark thought that never, even on Mercury, had he seen a place more cruel and utterly forsaken of gods or men.

It seemed as though some primal glacier must have met its death here in the dim dawn of Mars, hollowing out its own grave. The body of the glacier had melted away, but its bones were left.

Bones of basalt, of granite and marble and porphyry, of every conceivable colour and shape and size, picked up by the ice as it marched southward from the pole and dropped here as a cairn to mark its passing.

The Belly of Stones. Stark thought that its other name was Death.

For the first time, Berild faltered. She sat down and bent her head over her hands.

'I am tired,' she said. 'Also, I am afraid.'

Stark asked, 'Has it ever been crossed?'

'Once. But they were a war party, mounted and well supplied.'

Stark looked out across the stones. 'We will cross it,' he said.

Berild raised her head. 'Somehow I believe you.' She rose slowly and put her hands on his breast, over the strong beating of his heart.

'Give me your strength, wild man,' she whispered. 'I shall need it.'

He drew her to him and kissed her, and it was a strange and painful kiss, for their lips were cracked and bleeding from their terrible thirst. Then they went down together into the place called the Belly of

The desert had been a pleasant and kindly place. Stark looked back upon it with longing. And yet this inferno of blazing rock was so like the valleys of his boyhood that it did not occur to him to lie down and die.

They rested for a time in the sheltered crevice under a great leaning slab of blood-red stone, moistening their swollen tongues with a few drops of stinking water from the skin. At nightfall they drank the last of it, but Berild would not let him throw the skin away.

Darkness, and a lunar silence. The chill air sucked the day's heat out of the rocks and the iron frost came down, so that Stark and the red-haired woman must keep moving or freeze.

Stark's mind grew clouded. He spoke from time to time, in a croaking whisper, dropping back into the harsh mother-tongue of the Twilight Belt. It seemed to him that he was hunting, as he had so many times before, in the waterless places—for the blood of the great lizard would save him from thirst.

But nothing lived in the Belly of Stones. Nothing, but the two who crept and staggered across it under the low moons.

Berild fell, and could not rise again. Stark crouched beside her. Her face stared up at him, while in the moonlight, her eyes burning and strange.

'I will not die!' she whispered, not to him, but to the gods. 'I will not die!'

And she clawed the sand and the bitter rocks, dragging herself

onward It was uncanny, the madness that she had for life.

Stark raised her up and carried her. His breath came in deep sobbing gasps. After a while he, too, fell. He went on like a beast fours, dragging the woman.

He knew dimly that he was climbing. There was a glimmering of dawn in the sky. His hands slipped on a lip of sand and he went rolling down a smooth slope. At length he stopped and lay in his back like a dead thing.

The sun was high when consciousness returned to him. He saw Berild lying near him and crawled to her, shaking her until her eyes opened. Her hands moved feebly and her lips formed the same four words. I will not die.

Stark strained his eyes to the horizon, praying for a glimpse of Sinharat, but there was nothing, only emptiness and sand. With great difficulty he got the woman to her feet, supporting her.

He tried to tell her that they must go on, but he could no longer form the words. He could only gesture and urge her forward, in the direction of the city.

But she refused to go. 'Too far... die... without water...' He knew that she was right, but still he was not ready to give up.

She began to move away from him, toward the south, and he thought that she had gone mad and was wandering. Then he saw that she was peering with awful intensity at the line of the scarp that formed this wall of the Belly of Stones. It rose into a great ridge, serrated like the backbone of a whale, and some three miles away a long dorsal fin of reddish rock curved out into the desert.

Berild made a little sobbing noise in her throat. She began to plod toward the distant promontory.

Stark caught up with her. He tried to stop her, but she would not be stopped, turning a feral glare upon him.

She croaked, 'Water!' and pointed.

He was sure now that she was mad. He told her so, forcing the painful words out of his throat, reminding her of Sinharat and that she was going away from any possible help.

She said again, quite sanely, 'Too far. Two--three days without water,' She pointed. 'Monastery--old well--a chance...'

Stark decided that he had little to lose by trusting her. He nodded and went with her toward the curve of rock.

The three miles might have been three hundred. At last they came up under the ragged cliffs--and there was nothing there but sand.

Stark looked at the woman. A great rage and a deep sense of futility came over him. They were indeed lost.

But Berild had gone a few steps farther. With a hoarse cry, she bent over what had seemed merely a slab of stone fallen from the cliff, and Stark saw that it was a carved pillar, half buried. Now he was able to make out the mounded shape of a ruin, of which only the foundations and a few broken columns were left.

For a long while Berild stood by the pillar, her eyes closed. Stark got the uncanny feeling that she was visualising the place as it had been, though the wall must have been dust a thousand years ago. Presently she moved. He followed her, and it was strange to see her, on the

naked sand, treading the arbitrary patterns of vanished corridors.

She came to a halt, in a broad flat space that might once have been a central courtyard. There she fell on her knees and began to dig.

Stark got down beside her. They scabbled like a pair of dogs in the yielding sand. Stark's nails slipped across something hard, and there was a yellow glint through the dusty ochre. Within a few minutes they had bared a golden cover six feet across, very massive and wonderfully carved with the symbols of some lost god of the sea.

Stark struggled to lift the thing away. He could not move it. Then Berild pressed a hidden spring and the cover slid back of itself. Beneath it, sweet and cold, protected through all these ages, water stirred gently against mossy stones.

An hour later, Stark and Berild lay sleeping soaked to the skin, their very hair dripping with the blessed dampness.

That night, when the low moons roved over the desert, by the well, drowsy with an animal sense of rest and repletion. And Stark looked at the woman and said, 'I know you now.'

'What do you know, wild man?'

Stark said quietly, 'You are a Rama.'

She did not answer at once. Then she said, 'I was bred in these these deserts. Is it so strange that I should know of this well?'

'Strange that you didn't mention it before. You were afraid, weren't you, that if you led me here your secret would come out? But it was that, or die.'

He leaned forward, studying her. 'If you had led me straight to the well,

I might not have wondered. But you had to stop and remember, how the halls were built and where the doorways were that led to the inner court. You lived in this place when it was whole. And no one, not even Kynon himself, knows of it but you.'

'You dream, wild man. The moon is in your eyes.'

Stark shook his head slowly. 'I know.'

She laughed, and stretched her arms wide on the sand.

'But I am young,' she said. 'And men have told me I am beautiful. It is good to be young, for youth has nothing to do with ashes and empty skulls.'

She touched his arm, and little darts of fire went through his flesh, warm from his fingertips.

'Forget your dreams, wild man. They're madness, gone with the morning.'

He looked down at her in the clear pale light, and she was young, and beautifully made, and her lips were smiling.

He bent his head. Her arms went round him. Her hair blew soft against his cheek. Then, suddenly, she set her teeth cruelly into his lip. He cried out and thrust her away, and she sat back on her heels, mocking him.

'That,' she said, 'is because you called Fianna's name instead of mine, when the storm broke.'

Stark cursed her. There was a taste of blood in his mouth. He reached out and caught her, and again she laughed, a peculiarly

sweet, wicked sound.

The wind blew over them, sighing, and the desert was very still.

For two days they remained among the ruins. At evening of the second day Stark filled the water skin, and Berild replaced the golden cover on the well. They began the last long march toward Sinharat.

9

Stark saw it rising against the morning sky--a city of gold and marble, high on an island of rose-red coral laid bare by the vanished sea. Sinharat, the Ever Living.

Yet it had died. As he came closer to it, plodding slowly through the sand, he saw that the place was no more than a beautiful corpse, the lovely towers broken, the roofless palaces open to the sky. Whatever life Kynon and his armies might have foisted upon Sinharat was no more than the fleeting passage of ants across the perfect bones of the dead.

'What was it like before?' he asked, 'with the blue water around it, and the banners flying?'

Berild turned a dark, calculating look upon him.

'I told you before to forget that madness. If you talk it, no one will believe you.'

'No one?'

'You had best not anger me, wild man,' she said quietly. 'I may be your only hope of life, before this is over.'

They did not speak again, going with slow weary steps toward the city.

In the desert below the coral cliffs the armies of Kynon were encamped. The tall warriors of Kesh and Shun waiting, with their women and their beasts and their shining spears, for the pipers to cry them over the Border. The skin tents and the long picket lines were too many to count. In the distance, a convertible Kallman spacer that Stark recognised as Knighton's made an ugly, jarring incongruity.

Lookouts sighted the two toiling figures in the distance. Men and women and children began to stream out across the sand, and presently a great cheering arose. Where he had looked on emptiness for days, Stark was smothered now by the press of thousands. Berild was picked up and carried on the shoulders of two chiefs, and men would have carried Stark also, but he fought diem off.

Broad flights of steps were cut in the coral. The throng flowed upward along them. Ahead of them all went Eric John Stark, and Hie was smiling. From time to time he asked a question, and men drew back from that question, and his smile.

Up the steps and into the streets of Sinharat he went, with a slow, restless stride, asking, 'Where is Luhar of Venus?'

Every man there read death in his face, but they did not try to stop him.

People came out of the graceful ruins, drawn by the clamour, and the tide rolled down the broad ways, the rose-red streets of coral, until it spread out in the square before a great palace of gold and ivory and white marble blinding in the sun.

Luhar of Venus came down the terraced steps, fresh from sleep, his pale hair tumbled, his eyes still drowsy.

Others came through the door behind him. Stark did not see them. They did not matter. Berild didn't matter, calling his name from where she sat on the shoulders of the chiefs. Nothing, no one mattered, but himself and Luhar.

He crossed the square, not hurrying, a dark ravaged giant in rags. He saw Luhar pause on the bottom step. He saw the sleep and the vagueness go out of the Venusian's eyes as they rested first on the red-haired woman, then on himself. He saw the fear come into them, and the undying hate.

Someone got between him and Luhar. Stark lifted the man and flung him aside without breaking his stride, and went on. Luhar half turned. He would have run away, back into the palace, but there were too many now between him and the door. He crouched and drew his gun.

Stark sprang.

He came like a great black panther leaping, and he struck low. Luhar's shot went over his back. After that there was no more shooting. There was a moment, terribly short and silent, in which the two men lay entangled, straining against each other in a sort of stasis. Then Luhar screamed.

Stark knew dimly that there were hands, many of them, trying to drag him away. He clung growling to the Venusian until he was torn loose by main force. He struggled against his captors, and through a red haze he saw Kynon's face, close to his and very angry. Luhar was not yet dead.

'I warned you, Stark!' said Kynon furiously. 'I warned you.'

Men were bending over Luhar. Knighton, Walsh, Themis, Arrodd. Stark saw that Delgaun was among them. He did not question at the time how word had gone back to Valkis and sent Delgaun racing across the dead sea bottom with his hired bravos to search for the red-haired woman. It was right that Delgaun should be there.

In short ragged sentences, Stark told how Luhar and Freka had tried to kill him, and how Berild had been lost with him.

Kynon turned to the Venusian. Death was already glazing the cloud-grey eyes, but it had not quenched the hatred and venom.

'He lies,' whispered Luhar. 'I saw him--he tried to run away and take the woman with him.'

Luhar of Venus, taking vengeance with his last breath.

Freka pushed forward, transparently eager to pick up his cue. 'It is so,' he said. 'I was with Luhar. I saw it also.'

Delgaun laughed. Cruel, silent laughter. He stood up, and looked at Berild.

Berild's eyes were blazing. She ignored Delgaun and spoke to Kynon.

'You fool. Can't you see that they hate him? What Stark says is true. And I would have died in the desert because of them, if Stark hadn't been a better man than all of you.'

'Strange words,' said Delgaun, 'coming from a man's own mate. Perhaps Luhar did lie, after all. Perhaps it was not Stark who tried to run away, but you.'

She cursed him, with an ancient curse, and Kynon looked at her, sullenly. He said to the men who held Stark, 'Chain him below, in the dungeons.' Then he took Berild's arm and went with her into the palace.

Stark fought until someone behind him knocked him on the head with the butt of a spear. The last thing he saw was the face of Fianna, standing out from the crowd, wide-eyed with pity and love.

He came to in a place of cold, dry stone. There was an iron collar around his neck, and a five-foot chain ran from it to a ring in the wall. The cell was small. A gate of iron bars closed the entrance. Beyond was an open well, with other cell doors around it, and above were thick stone gratings open to the sky. He guessed that the place was built beneath some inner court of the palace.

There were no other prisoners. But there was a guard, a thick-shouldered barbarian who sat on the execution block in the centre of the well, with a sword and a jug of wine. A guard who watched the captive Stark, and smiled.

Freka.

When he saw that Stark was awake, Freka lifted up the jug and laughed. 'Here's to Death,' he said. For no one else comes here!

He drank, and after that he did not speak, only sat and smiled.

Stark said nothing either. He waited, with the same unhuman patience he had shown when he waited for his captors under the tor.

The dim daylight faded from the gratings. Darkness came, and the pale glimmer of the moons. Freka became a silvered statue of a man, sitting on the block. Stark's eyes glowed.

The empty jug dropped and broke. Freka rose. He took the naked sword in his hand and crossed the open space to the cell. He lifted the outer bar away. It fell with a great echoing clang, and Freka entered.

'Stand up, Outlander,' he said. 'Stand up and face the steel. After that you'll sleep in a coral pit, and not even the worms will find you.'

'Beast of Shanga!' Stark said contemptuously, and set his back against the wall, to give himself all the slack of the chain.

He saw the bright steel glimmer in the air, up and down again, but when the blow fell he had leaped aside, and the point struck ringing against the stone. Stark darted in to grapple.

His fingers slipped on hard muscle, and Freka wrenched away. He was a fighting man, and no weakling. The iron collar dug painfully into the Earthman's throat and the heavy chain threw him backward. Freka laughed, deep in his chest. The sword glinted hungrily.

Then, as though she had taken shape suddenly from the shadows, Fianna was in the doorway. The little gun in her hand made a hissing spurt of flame. Freka screamed once, and fell. He did not move again.

'The swine,' Fianna said, without emotion. 'Delgaun ordered him to wait, until it was sure that Kynon would not come down to talk to you. Then the story was to be that you had escaped somehow, with Berild's aid.'

She stepped over the body and unlocked the iron collar with a key she took from her girdle.

Stark took her slender shoulders gently between his hands. 'Are you

a witch-girl, that you know all things and always come when I need you?'

She gave him a deep, strange look. In the dusk, her proud young face was unfamiliar, touched with something fey and sad. He wished that he could see her eyes more clearly.

'I know all things because I must,' she told him wearily. 'And I think that you are my only hope--perhaps the only hope of Mars.'

He drew her to him, and kissed her, and stroked her dark head. 'You're too young to concern yourself with the destinies of worlds.'

He felt her tremble. 'The youth of the body is only illusion, when the mind is old.'

'And is yours old, little one?'

'Old,' she whispered. 'As old as Berild's.'

He felt her tears warm against his skin, and she was like a child in her arms.

'Then you know about her,' said Stark.

He paused. 'And Delgaun?'

'Delgaun also.'

'I thought so,' Stark said. He nodded, scowling at the barred moonlight in the well. 'There are things I must know, myself but we'd best get out of here. Did Berild send you?'

'Yes--as soon as she could get the key from Kynon. She is waiting for you.' She stirred Freka's body with her foot. 'Bring that. hat. We'll hide

it in the pit he meant for you.'

Stark heaved the body over his shoulder and followed the girl through a twisting maze of corridors, some pitch dark, some feebly lighted by the moons. Fianna moved as surely as though she were in the main square at high noon. There was the silence of death in these cold tunnels, and the dry faint smell of eternity.

At length Fianna whispered. 'Here. Be careful.'

She put out a hand to guide him, but Stark's eyes were like a cat's in the dark. He made out a space where the rock with which the ancient builders had faced these subterranean ways gave place to the original coral.

Ragged black mouths opened in the coral, entrances to some unguessed catacombs beneath. Stark consigned Freka to the nearest pit, and then reluctantly threw his sword in after him.

'You won't need it,' Fianna told him, 'and besides, it would be recognised. This will be a bitter night enough, without rousing the men of Shun over Freka's death.'

Stark listened to the distant sliding echoes from the pit, and shivered. He had so nearly finished there himself. He was glad to follow Fianna away from that place of darkness and silent death.

He stopped her in a place where a bar of moonlight came splashing through a great crack in the tunnel roof.

'Now,' he said, 'we will talk.'

She nodded. 'Yes. The time has come for that.'

'There are lies everywhere,' said Stark. 'I am tangled up in lies. You

know the truth that is behind this war of Kynon's. Tell me.'

'Kynon's truth is simple,' she answered, speaking slowly, choosing her words. 'He wants land and power, conquest. He will pour out the blood of his people for that, and after that he plans to use the men of the Low-Canals under Delgaun to keep the tribesmen in line. It may be true, as he said, that they would be satisfied with grazing land and water--but they would lose their freedom, and their pride, and I think he has judged them wrongly. I think they would revolt.'

She looked up at Stark. 'He planned to use your knowledge, and then destroy you if you became troublesome.'

'I guessed that. What about the others?'

'The outlanders? Use them, keep them as subordinates, or pay them off. Kill them, if necessary.'

Now,' said Stark. 'What of Delgaun and Berild?'

Fianna said softly. 'Their truth, too, is simple. They took Kynon's idea of empire, and stretched it further. It was Delgaun's idea to bring the strangers in. They would use Kynon and the tribes until the victory was won. Then they would do away with Kynon and rule themselves--with the outlanders and their ships and their powerful weapons to oppress Low-Canaler and Drylander alike.

'That way, they could rape a world. More outland vultures would come, drawn by the smell of loot. The Martian men would fight as long as there was the hope of plunder--after that, they would be slaves to hold the empire. Their masters would grow fat on tribute from the City-States and from the men of Earth who have built here, or who wish to build. An evil plan--but profitable.'

Stark thought about Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrod of Callisto Colony. He thought of others like them, and what they would do, with their talons hooked in the heart of Mars. He thought of Delgaun's yellow eyes.

He thought of Berild, and he was sick with loathing.

Fianna came close to him, speaking in a different tone that had care and anxiety only for him.

'I have told you this, because I know what Berild plans. Tonight - oh, tonight is a black and evil time, and death waits in Sinharat! It is very close to me, I know. And you must follow own heart, Eric John Stark. I cannot tell you more.'

He kissed her again, because she was sweet and very brave. Then she led him on through the dark labyrinth, to where Berild was waiting, with her dangerous beauty and all the evil of the ages in her soul.

10

They came out of the darkness so suddenly that Stark blinked in the unaccustomed light of torches set in great silver sconces on the walls.

The floor had been artificially smoothed, but otherwise the crypt was as the eroding action of the sea had shaped it out of the coral reef. It was not large, and it was like a cavern in a fairy tale, walled and roofed with the fantastic wreathing shapes of the rose-red coral. At one end there was a golden coffer set with naming jewels.

Berild was there. Her wonderful hair was dressed and shining, and

her body was clothed all in white, her arms and shoulders warm bronze from the kiss of the desert sun.

Kynon was there, also. He stood motionless and silent, and he did not so much as turn his head when Fianna and Stark came in. His eyes were wide open and blank as a blind man's.

'I have been waiting,' said Berild, 'and the time is short.'

She seemed angry and impatient, and Stark said, Freka is dead. It was necessary to hide his body.'

She nodded and turned to the girl. 'Go now, Fianna.'

Fianna bent her head and went away. She did not look at Stark. It was as though she had no interest in anything that happened.

Stark looked at Kynon, who had not moved or spoken.

'He is safe enough,' said Berild, answering Stark's unspoken question. 'I drugged his wine so that his mind was opened to mine, and he is my creature as long as I will it.'

Hypnosis, Stark thought. His nerves were beginning to do strange things. He wished desperately that he were back in the cell facing Freka's sword, which at least would deal with him openly and without guile or subterfuge.

Berild set her hands on Stark's shoulders, and smiled as she had done that night by the ancient well.

'I offer you three things tonight, wild man,' she said. Her eyes challenged him, and the scent of her hair was sweet and maddening.

'Your life--and power--and myself.'

Stark let his hands slip lightly down from her shoulders to her waist. 'And how will you do this thing?' he asked.

'Easily,' she said, and laughed. She was very proud, and sure of her strength, and glad to be alive. 'Oh, very easily. You guessed the truth about me--I am of the Twice Born, the Ramas. I hold the secret of the Sending-on of Minds, which this great ox Kynon pretended to have. I can give you life now--and forever. Remember, wild man--forever!'

He bent his dark face to hers, so that their lips touched, and murmured, 'Would I have you forever, Berild?'

'Until you tire of me--or I of you.' She kissed him, and then added mockingly, 'Delgaun has had me for a thousand years, and I am weary of him. So very weary!'

'A thousand years is a long time,' said Stark, 'and I am not Delgaun.'

'No. You're a beast, a savage, a most magnificent cold-eyed animal, and that is why I love you.' She touched the muscle of his breast, and then his throat, and added, 'It's a pity there will never be another body like this one. We must keep it as long as we can.'

'What is your plan?' Stark asked her.

'Simply this. I will place your mind in Kynon's body. You will be Kynon, with all his power. You will be able then to keep Delgaun in check--later, you can destroy him, but not until after the battle is won, for we need the men of Valkis and Jekkara. You can keep your own body safe from him, and at the worst, if by some chance he should succeed in slaying the man he believes to be you, you will still be alive.'

'And after the battle,' said Stark softly. 'What then, Berild?' 'We will rule together.' She held his palms against hers. 'You have strong hands, wild man. Would you not like to hold a world between them--and me?'

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly shrewd and probing. Or do you still believe the nonsense you talked to Kynon, about the tribes?'

Stark smiled. 'It's easy to have principles when there's no gain involved. No. I am as my name says--a man without a tribe. I have no loyalties. And if I had, would I remember them now?'

He held her, as she had said, between his hands, and they were very strong.

But even then, Berild could warn him.

'Keep faith with me, then! My wisdom is greater than yours, and I have powers you don't dream of. What I give, I can take away.'

For answer, Stark silenced her mouth with his own.

When she drew away, she said rather breathlessly, 'Let us hurry. The tribes are gathered, and Kynon was to have given the signal for war at dawn. There is much I must teach you between now and then.'

She paused with her hand on the lid of the golden coffer. 'This is a secret place,' she said quietly. 'Since before the ocean died, it has been secret. Not even Kynon knew of it. I think only Delgaun and I, the last of the Twice-Born, knew--and now you.'

'What about Fianna?'

Berild shrugged. 'She is only my servant. To her, this is only a little cavern where I keep my private wealth.'

She pressed a series of patterned bosses in intricate sequence, and there was the sharp click of an opening lock. A shiver ran up along Stark's spine. The beast in him longed to run, to be away from this whole business that smelled of evil. But the man in him knelt at Berild's wish, and waited, and did not flinch when the blank-eyed Kynon came like a moving corpse beside him.

Berild raised the golden lid. And there was a great silence.

On the slave block of Valkis, Kynon had brought forth two crowns of shining crystal and a rod of flame. As glass is to diamond, as the pallid moon to the light of the sun, were those things to the reality.

In her two hands Berild held the ancient crowns of the Ramas, the givers of life. Twin circlets of glorious fire, dimming the shallow glare of the torches, putting a nimbus of light around the white-clad woman so that she was like a goddess walking in a cloud of stars. Stark's whole being contracted to a point of icy pain at the beauty and the wonder and the terror of them.

She set one crown on Kynon's head, and even the drugged automaton shivered and sighed at its touch.

Stark's mind veered away from the incredible thing that was about to happen. It spoke words to him, hurried desperate words of sanity, about the electrical patterns of the mind, and the sensitivity of crystals, and conductors, and electro-magnetic impulses. But that was only the top of his brain. At base it was still the brain of N'Chaka that believed in gods and demons and all the sorceries of darkness. Only pride kept him from cowering abjectly at Berild's feet.

She stood above him, a creature of dreams in the unearthly light. She smiled and whispered, 'Do not fear,'—and she placed the second

crown upon his head.

A strange, shuddering fire swept through him. It was as though some chip of the primal heart of all creation had been set by an unguessed magic into the cells of the crystal. The force that shaped the universe and scattered forth the stars, and set the great suns to spinning. There was something awesome about it, something almost holy.

And yet he was afraid. Most shockingly afraid.

His brain was set free, in some strange fashion. The walls of his skull vanished. His mind floated in a dim vastness. It was like a tiny sun, glowing, spinning, swelling...

Berild lifted a crystal rod from the coffer, a wand of sorcerous fire. And now Stark's thoughts had lost all track of science. A cloud of misty darkness flowed around him, thickened...

A great leaping flare of light, a distant echo of a cry that he did not recognise as his own, and then...

Nothing.

11

He was lying on his face, his cheek pressed against the cool coral. He opened his eyes, his mind groping for the shreds of some remembered terror. He saw, vaguely at first and then with terrible clarity as his vision became clear, a man lying close beside him.

A tall man, very strongly built, with skin burned almost to blackness by exposure. A man who looked at him with eyes that were startlingly light in his dark face...

His own eyes. His own face.

He cried out and struggled to his feet, trembling, staggering, and his body felt strange to him. He looked down upon the strangeness of another man's limbs, the alien shaping of flesh and sinew upon alien bones.

The face of the dark giant who lay upon the coral mocked him. It watched, but did not see. The eyes were blank, empty, without soul or intelligence.

The mind of Eric John Stark fought, in its alien prison, for sanity.

Berild's voice spoke to him. Her hand was on his shoulder Kynon's shoulder...

'All is well, wild man. Do not fear. Kynon's mind is in your body, still sleeping at my command. And you are Kynon now.' It was not an easy thing to accept, but he knew that it was so, and he knew that he had wished it to be so. It was easier to be calm after he turned his back on the other.

Berild took him in her arms and held him until he had stopped shuddering, oddly like a mother with a frightened child. Then she kissed him, smiling, and said, 'The first time is hard. I can remember--and that was very long ago.' She shook him gently. 'Now come. We'll take your body to a place of safety. And then I must tell you all of Kynon's plans for those outside.'

She spoke to the thing that lay upon the coral, saying, 'Get up,' and it rose obediently and followed where Berild led, to a tiny barred niche in a side passage. It made no protest when it was left, locked safely in.

'Only I can give it back to you,' said Berild softly. 'Remember that.'

Stark said, 'I will remember.'

He went with Berild to Kynon's quarters in the palace. He sat among Kynon's possessions, clothed in Kynon's flesh, and learned how Kynon's mind had planned to loose a red tide upon the peaceful cities of the Border.

Only a small part of his mind was attentive to this. The rest of it was concerned with the redness of Berild's hair and the warmth of her lips, and with the heady knowledge that it was possible to be alive and young forever.

Never to lose the pride of strength, never to know the dimming sight and failing mind of age. To go on, like a child in an endless playground, with no fear of tomorrow.

It was nearly dawn.

Berild rose. She had told him much, but not the things Fianna had told him, of the secret treachery she had planned with Delgaun. She helped Stark to clothe Kynon's body in the harness of war, with the longsword and the shield and the shining spear. Then she set her lips to his so that his borrowed heart threatened to choke him with its pounding, and her eyes were wondrously bright and beautiful.

'It is time,' she whispered.

She walked beside him, as he had seen her beside Kynon in Valkis, stepping like a queen.

They came out of the palace, onto the steps where Luhar had died. There were beasts waiting, trapped for war, and an escort of tall

chiefs, with pipers and drummers and link-boys to light the way.

Stark mounted Kynon's beast. It sensed the wrongness in him, hissing and rearing, but he held it down, and imperiously raised his hand.

Throbbing drums and skirling pipes, tossing flames where the link-boys ran with the torches, a clash of metal and a cheer, and Kynon of Shun rode down through the streets of Sinharat to the coral cliffs, with the red-haired woman at his side.

They were waiting.

The men of Kesh and the men of Shun were gathered below cliffs, waiting. Stark led the way, as Berild had told him to, a ledge of coral above them. Delgaun was there, with the outlanders and a handful of Valkisians. He looked tired and tempered. Stark knew that he had been busy for hours with last-minute preparations.

The first pale rays of dawn broke across the desert. A vast ringing cry went up from the gathered armies. After that there was, silence, a taunt expectant hush.

There was no fear in Stark now. He was past that. Fear was too small an emotion for what was about to be.

He saw Delgaun's golden eyes, hot with a cruel excitement. He saw Berild's secret triumph in her smile. He looked down upon the warriors, and let the magnificent voice of Kynon ring out across the soundless air.

'There will be no war,' he said. 'You have been betrayed.'

In the moment that was left to him, he confessed the lie of the Rama

crowns. And then Berild, who was behind him now, had moved like a red-haired fury to drive her dagger into his heart.

In his own body, Stark might have escaped the blow. But the reflexes of Kynon were not as his. They were swift enough to postpone death--the blade bit deep, but not where Berild had wished it. He turned and caught her by the wrists, and said to Delgaun, 'She has betrayed you, too. Freka lies in a coral pit--and I am not Kynon.'

Berild tore away from him. She spurred her beast toward the Valkisian. She would have broken past him, through the escort, and up the cliffs to safety in the tunnels under Sinharat. But Delgaun was too quick.

One hand caught in the masses of her hair. She was dragged screaming from the saddle, and even then her screams were not of fear, but of fury. She clawed at Delgaun, and he fell with her to the ground.

The tall chieftains of the escort came forward, but they were dazed, and confused by the anger that was rising in them.

Delgaun's wiry body arched. He flung the woman over the ledge, and what happened to her after that Stark did not see, nor wish to see.

He was shouting again to the barbarians, the tale of Delgaun's treachery.

Behind him on the ledge there was turmoil where Delgaun ran on foot between the beasts, and the outlanders made their try for safety. Below him in the desert, where there had been silence, a great deep muttering was growing, like the first growling of a storm, and the ranks of spears rippled like wheat before the wind.

And Stark felt the slow running out of Kynon's blood inside him, where Berild's dagger stood out from his back.

They had headed Delgaun away from the path up the cliff. The two loose mounts had been caught and held. They had tried to catch Delgaun, but he was light and fast and slipped away from them. Now he broke back, toward Kynon's great beast.

Knock the dying man from the saddle, charge through the milling chieftains, who were hampered by their own numbers in that narrow space...

He leaped. And the arms of Kynon, driven by the will of Eric John Stark, encircled him and held him and would not let him go.

The two men crashed to the ledge. Stark let out one harsh cry of agony, and then was still, his hands locked around the Valkisian's throat, his eyes intent and strange.

Men came up, and he gasped, 'He is mine,' and they let him be.

Delgaun did not die easily. He managed to get his dagger out, and gashed the other's side until the naked ribs showed through. But once again Stark's mind was free in some dark immensity of its own. He was living again the dream he had in Valkis, and this was the end of the dream. N'Chaka had a grip at last on the demon with yellow eyes that hungered for his life, and he would not let go.

The yellow eyes widened. They blazed, and then they slowly dimmed until the last flicker of life was gone. The strength went out of N'Chaka's hands. He fell forward, over his prey.

Below, on the sand, Berild lay, and her outspread hair was as red as blood in the fiery dawn.

The men of Kesh and the men of Shun flowed, in a resistless tide up over the coral cliffs. The chieftains and the pipers and the link-boys joined them, hunting the outlanders and the wolves of Valkis through the streets of Sinharat.

Unnoticed, a dark-haired girl ran down the path to the ledge.

She bent over the body of Kynon, pressing her hand to its heart. Tears ran down and mingled with the blood.

A low, faint moan came from the man's lips. Weeping like a bullH, Fianna drew a tiny vial from her girdle and poured three drops of pale liquid on the unresponsive tongue.

12

He had come a long way. He had been down in the deep black valleys of the Place of Darkness, and the iron frost was in his bones. He had climbed the bitter mountains where no creature of the Twilight Belt might go and live.

There was light, now. He had been lost and wandering, but he had won back to the light. His tribe, his people would be waiting for him. But he knew that he would never see them.

He remembered, then, with the old terrible loneliness, that they were not truly his people. They had raised him, but they were not of his blood.

And he remembered also that they were dead, slain by the miners who had needed all the water of the valley for themselves. Slain by the miners who had taken N'Chaka and put him in a cage.

With a start of terror, he thought he was again in that cage, with the leering bearded faces peering in at him. But in the blinding dazzle of light he could see no bars.

There was only one face. The anxious, pitying face of a girl.

Fianna.

His brain began to clear. Memory returned bit by bit, the fragments fitting themselves gradually into place.

Kynon. Delgaun. Berild. Sinharat, the Ever-Living.

He remembered now with perfect clarity that he was dying, and it seemed a terrible thing to die in the body of another man. For the first time, fully, he felt the separation from his own flesh. It seemed a blasphemous thing, more terrible than death.

Fianna was weeping. She stroked his hair, and whispered, 'I am so glad. I was afraid--afraid you would never wake.'

He was touched, because he knew that she loved him and would be sad. He lifted his hand to touch her face, to comfort her.

He saw the fingers of that hand, dark against her cheek. Dark... His own fingers. His own hand.

He was not on the ledge. He was back in the coral crypt beneath the palace. The light that had dazzled his eyes was not the sun, but only the flare of torches.

He sat up, his heart pounding wildly.

Kynon of Shun lay beside him on the coral. He was quite dead, his head encircled by a crown of fire, his side open to the white bone

where Delgaun's blade had struck.

The wound that Kynon himself had never felt.

The golden coffer was open. The second crown lay near Fianna, with the rod beside it.

Stark looked at her, deep into her eyes. Very softly he said, 'I would not have dreamed it.'

'You will understand, now--many things,' she said. 'And I was glad of my power today, because I could truly give you life!' She rose, and he saw that she was very tired. Her voice was dull, as though it counted over old things that no longer mattered.

'You see why I was afraid. If they had ever suspected that I, too, was of the Twice-Born... Berild or Delgaun, each alone, I might have destroyed, but I could not destroy both of them. And if I had, there was still Kynon. You did what I could not, Eric John Stark.'

'Why were you against them, Fianna? How were you proof against the poison that made them what they were?'

She answered angrily, 'Because I am weary of evil, of scheming for power and shedding the blood of men as though they were sheep! I am not better than Berild was. I, too, have lived a long time, line, and my hands are not clean. But perhaps, by what you helped me do, I have made up a little for my sins.'

She paused, her thoughts turned darkly inward, and it was strange to see the shadow of age touching her sweet young face. Then she said, very slowly, like an old, old woman speaking, 'I am weary of living. No matter where I go, I am a stranger. You can understand that, though not so well as I. There is an end pleasure, and after that only

loneliness is left.

'I have remembered that I was human once. That is why I set myself against their plan of empire. After all these ages I have come round full circle to the starting point, and things seem to me now as they seemed then, before I was tempted by the Sending-on of Minds.

'It is a wicked thing!' she cried suddenly. 'Against nature and the gods, and it has never brought anything but evil!' She caught up the rod and held it in her hands.

'This is the last,' she said. 'Cities die, and nations perish, and material things, even such as these, are destroyed. One by one the Twice-Born have perished also, through accident or swift disease or murder, as Berild would have slain Delgaun. Now only this, and I, are left.'

Quite suddenly, she flung the rod against the coral, and it broke iemp a cloudy flame and a tinkling of crystal shards. Then, one by one, she broke the crowns.

She stood still for a long moment. Then she whispered, 'Now only I am left.'

Again there was silence, and Stark was shaken by the magnitude of the thing that she had done. Her slim girl's body somehow took on the stature of a goddess.

After a while he went to her and said awkwardly, 'I have not thanked you, Fianna. You brought me here, you saved me...' 'Kiss me once , then,' she answered, and raised her lips to his.

'For I love you, Eric John Stark--and that is the pity of it. Because I am not for you, nor for any man.'

He kissed her, very tenderly, and there was the bitter taste of tears on her soft lips.

'Now come,' she whispered, and took his hand.

She led him back through the labyrinth, into the palace, and then out again into the streets of Sinharat. Stark saw that it was sunset, and that the city was deserted. The tribes of Kesh and Shun had broken camp and gone.

There was a beast ready for him, supplied with food and water. Fianna asked him where he wished to go, and pointed the way to Tarak.

'And you?' he asked. 'Where will you go, little one?'

'I have not thought.' She lifted her head, and the wind played with her dark hair. She did not smile, and yet suddenly Stark knew that she was happy.

'I am free of a great burden,' she whispered. 'I shall stay here for a while, and think, and after that I shall know what to do. But whatever it is there will be no evil in it, and in the end I shall rest.'

He mounted, and she looked up at him, with a look that wrung his heart although it was not sad.

'Go now,' she said, 'and the gods go with you.'

'And with you.' He bent and kissed her once again, and then rode away, down to the coral cliffs.

Far out on the desert he turned and looked back, once, at the white towers of Sinharat rising against the larger moon.

Water Pirate

It was early in 2418 that the Solar System realized that there was a Water Pirate. The great tanker ships, carrying water to the rich dry-world mines and colonies, began to vanish from the space-lanes with their convoys. The Trans-Galactic Convoy Fleet, which for two hundred years had kept the space-ways safe, was suddenly helpless. Ships and men vanished without a trace or an explanation, and there was no clue to be found.

For four solid weeks not a drop of water got through. The storage tanks dropped lower and lower; a panic fear of thirst swept the dry worlds. The Interplanetary Trade Marts shook in the wind of that fear, and the economic system trembled with it.

Old Johan Gray, Chief of Special Duty of the Convoy Fleet, played his last card. His son Jaffa went through the worst hell-spots of the System, searching for something that might show them some way to fight.

And on a moon-washed Martian night, Jaffa Gray stood in the shadow of the Valkis slave-market and cursed, bitterly and softly; a stocky, strong-boned man, his square face hard with the failure that he had at last to admit. For the first time in the two days he had been in Valkis, he took off his peaked spaceman's cap, wanting the desert wind on his head and not giving a damn who saw his trademark--the broad streak where his hair had come in white over a scar. He raked his fingers through it, swearing out the last of his vocabulary; and a voice said out of the darkness: "Jaffa Gray!" He whirled, his heat-gun blurring into his hand. A boy stepped into the moonlight. His arrow-straight body was clad like Jaffa's in dark spaceman's leather, but where Jaffa's dark hair was cropped short, the boy's rose in a shining

crown, bound with the thin metal chains that marked him already a warrior in Kesh, a barbarian state in the Martian drylands. Jaffa's face hardened. He had seen that gleaming pile of hair almost everywhere in Valkis. "All right, Keshi, you've caught up with me. Talk, and talk fast!"

The boy came closer, fearless of the gun, and his words were a breathless whisper. "I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Jaffa stood like a graven image. He had risked his neck on an invisible trail. The last possible covert had drawn blank. He had been going home defeated; and now Fate dropped the whole thing neatly in his lap! His lips curled in a silent laugh. His left hand shot out to clamp the Keshi's tunic in a throttling grip; his right jammed the gun-muzzle in the boy's ribs. "Now," he said easily, "what's your game?"

The Keshi didn't flinch. "You are Jaffa Gray; I was sure when I saw your hair. You are hunting the Water Pirate. I can take you to him. There is no game." Jaffa's eyes blazed. "If you were telling the truth...." The boy grinned in his face, a fighting grin. "Feel my chin, Jaffa Gray, if you want proof!"

Puzzled, the Earthman slid the fist of his gun-hand along the up-thrust jaw. His breath hissed in sharply. Intently he retraced the jaw-line, ran downward along the smooth curve of the throat. Then he let go of the tunic abruptly, as though it had burned him.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" he whispered. "A woman!"

"Now do you believe?" mocked the low voice. "Would I have risked Valkis to tell you a lie? What would those wolves do to me, if they found out? I need you, Jaffa Gray, and you need me!"

The white lock gleamed as Jaffa's blunt fingers rumbled it. Then he

nodded shortly and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I'll take a chance," he grunted. "Let's go. We can talk aboard my ship." The Kallman two-seater was ready to fly. Behind the bolted space-port they were safe from spying, and the warrior-girl of Kesh told her story in rapid sentences.

"My name is Lhara. My brother Lhar was pilot on one of the tanker ships that disappeared. The Water Pirate holds him prisoner, along with the men from the other ships, but one man escaped. My brother sent me a message by him; told me to find you, because you were the one man in the System who could bring the Water Pirate in.

"The pilot, who escaped in one of the Pirate's own ships, was to have helped us. But something went wrong; we crashed, and he was killed. You've got to fix the ship."

"Why not just use my own?" asked Jaffa.

"How close do you think you'd get to the Pirate's hideout?" returned Lhara impatiently. "Besides, it has much better weapons than any of our ships." Jaffa's ears pricked. "Who exactly is the Water Pirate?"

"I don't know. None of the men has ever seen him." Jaffa nodded. "Where did you crash?"

"Near the Teka range, about three hundred miles from here."

"Just a minute," demanded Jaffa suspiciously. "How'd you get across the desert to Valkis?"

The girl's grey eyes were contemptuous. "I am a Keshi." She touched the chains in her tawny hair. "I have earned these honestly. It was not hard to steal a thak from a village across the first range. I rode to

Valkis." Jaffa shook his head. "You win. But warrior or no warrior, if you're lying to me I'll wring your pretty neck. What's your position?" He was admiring the pretty neck as he slid the strato-wings out of the hull and set the air-rotors going.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" Jaffa shoved back his cap and whistled.

"Where did this crate come from?"

He was standing in the open port of a wrecked space ship, lying at a slight angle in the red sand of the Teka desert. It was the weirdest ship he had ever seen, and he had seen plenty. A flattened oval, rather than the familiar cylinder of the System, the alloy of its metal and the use of various gadgets projecting from the hull were both a mystery. Inside, the control cabin was furnished with queer low couches and upholstered all over with a peculiar silky stuff that flowed in quavering patterns of green and blue and brown. A small ship, carrying four at the outside on a long voyage. To Jaffa's right as he stood was the control panel, and beyond it, the buckled bow-plates that had sustained the brunt of the crash. Ahead was a wall pierced with thick quartzite visiports. To his left was a bulkhead; the heavy door into the rear cabins was closed. And at his feet....

At his feet was the maddest thing of the whole crazy ship. Covering most of the floor space was an oval pit some six feet deep, tiled in a pattern of outlandish marine growths. It was bone dry; whatever moisture had been there had long ago gone out into the dry Martian air. But it was undoubtedly a pool of some sort, and Jaffa wondered profanely what lunatic would cart a swimming pool through space.

He whirled as bolts shot to behind him. Whirled; and dropped in a jointless heap on the narrow floor. Lhara looked grimly down at him, the paralysis-gun that Jaffa had not taken from her steady in her

hand. Mutely, Jaffa raged. He had not disarmed her, for there was no way beyond actual imprisonment to keep her from the Kallman's gun-rack; and Jaffa had been reluctant to risk alienating her help. Also, he had had no real reason to believe she lied. Now he could have kicked himself.

From a locker she produced manacles and chained him securely, wrist and ankle, taking his gun. "I'm sorry, Jaffa Gray," she said steadily, as she stood at last over him. "That was an unworthy trick. But I have told you no lie. My brother is a prisoner, I need your help, and I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Then she was gone, out into the desert.

Jaffa glared bitterly after her. The paralyzing charge had not been strong, and the life came back into him quickly. He struggled against his chains, knowing it was useless. Then he lay still, too bitter against himself and Lhara even to curse.

After a bit there came a thundering shock that rocked the desert under the ship. Sand pelted against the ports, and the sagging bow-plates shook in the surge of ruptured air. Jaffa swore. Only one thing could have made that explosion; Lhara had bombed his Kallman. His only hope of escape now lay in this queer ship that he must make fly.

The girl came back, carrying a bundle of Jaffa's things, her hair shaken in a tawny veil across her shoulders and full of sand. Subconsciously Jaffa saluted the courage it had taken to heave a sub-atomic bomb into the ship and then lie in the sand with that explosion roaring over her.

Lhara freed his hands, lengthened the chain between his ankles so that he could walk after a fashion, the paralysis-gun ready to topple him if he made a false move.

"Go look at the damage, Jaffa. You'll find everything you need here. And I advise you to hurry."

He went, grappling the problem of why, if Lhara had been telling the truth as she said, she was acting this way. She must have gone to a good deal of trouble to track him to Valkis, for he was not in the habit of leaving guide-posts behind him; and she hadn't done it simply because she needed a man to repair the ship, or even to fly it. Almost anyone else would have answered that purpose as well as he. There was something more behind it, something damned queer.

He tried to solve the mystery by the simple method of asking questions. But Lhara, along with the chains in her hair, had learned a warriors trick of keeping her jaw shut.

He learned nothing.

The damage to the ship was not great. The bow-plates had been broken so that the cabin was not space-worthy, but the instrument panel had not suffered much. The pilot had died of a broken neck, according to the girl. Jaffa studied the controls. Unfamiliar in pattern, they yet bore a resemblance to those he knew, and the ship ran on the same vibratory atom-smashing principle. He nodded in grim admiration as he saw what had made the disappearances of the tanker ships and their convoys possible. A powerful vibratory field was created by means of exterior electrodes, neutralizing the vibrations in the atom-smashing units of the System ships, rendering the engines useless. The vibrations also blanketed the radios, preventing communication. After that, the huge electro-magnets simply clamped on and towed the helpless ships like fish on a line.

A queer, wonderful ship. But he knew he could fly it; and given the proper materials, he could fix the damage in two days.

"Of course," he added, when he made his surly report to the girl, "if the mechanism of the ship has been sprung or damaged...."

"It hasn't," she assured him, and he wondered how she knew. That night the two of them bunked in the control cabin. Jaffa never thought of being alone with a woman. They brought up their girls to be men in Kesh. Lhara simply chained her prisoner securely, lay down and went to sleep. The door in the bulkhead remained closed. Jaffa tried more questions, but finally gave up and went to sleep too.

Sometime much later he came awake, not starting up, but simply ceasing to be asleep. Both moons were up, shooting crazy shadows across the narrow floor and the dry pool. Lhara's couch was empty.

Jaffa realized suddenly what had waked him. There was a sense almost of fog in his nostrils, a warm moisture faintly tinged with an unfamiliar smell. The dry, cold air sucked it up before he could analyze it. But it had been there; and Lhara was gone.

He sat up. His ankle-chain passed around a stanchion, but from where he was he could see that the bolts of the space-lock were shot from the inside, and the hatch into the engine-rooms below was locked.

His eyes fastened on the bulkhead door. Lhara was there, behind it; there was no place else for her to be. Something else was there, too, something that made warm moisture in a climate drier than the Earthly Sahara. What?

Jaffa lay awake, waiting, trying till his head ached to answer his own question. He lay so that he could see the door and still seem to be asleep; when at last the heavy door swung cautiously open, he held his breathing to an even rhythm, though he strained every sense to

see what was beyond. Nothing. Just darkness, against which Lhara's unbound hair shone like a silver cape in the moonlight. But there came again that gush of moist warmth that had wakened him, and the strange odor was a thought stronger. Then the door swung to again, and the thirsty air swallowed all trace.

Lhara stood over him a moment, listening to his breathing. Then she went back to her couch; and in spite of his rage against her, Jaffa dreamed of her, and pleasantly.

Two days of hard work saw the bow-plates once more tight. That evening Jaffa faced the Keshi girl.

"All right," he grunted. "Your crate will fly. Now what?"

"Now you try it." Lhara shot the space-bolts home. "Take her up. If she's all right, go on. If not, come back and finish the repairs."

"Had you thought we might not be able to get back?" asked Jaffa dryly. Lhara's jaw set. "Those are the orders, Jaffa Gray."

"Yours--or someone else's?"

"That doesn't concern you." The ever-present paralysis-gun motioned him to the pilot's seat. Jaffa shrugged and obeyed.

He switched on the air-pumps and the purifying system, watching the gauges intently. The needles held steady for a moment, then wavered back to the danger point.

"What is it?" asked Lhara sharply. "Cut in your rockets!" Jaffa pointed to the gauges: The girl's eyes hardened abruptly with suspicion.

"The pumps were all right when we tested for tightness an hour ago."

"You can see them now," retorted Jaffa indifferently. "If you go up with them this way, you'll not live two hours."

She wavered a moment, for the first time uncertain. She suspected a trap, but she knew nothing of machinery. In the end, she gave in; there was nothing else to do.

"All right. You'll have to go below and fix them, and you well know there's only room for one down there. But hear me, Earthman!" Her grey gaze was steel-hard, her jaw stern. "You can't escape from there. And if you make a single false move, I'll drop you in your tracks!"

Jaffa shrugged and slid his manacled feet down the hatch. A single narrow runway ran between the great bulk-headed power units, back to the fuel feed and the vibration chamber, where the special heavy atoms were smashed to power the rocket tubes. He found the air unit without any trouble, stood staring speculatively at the gleaming mass of machinery. There was nothing wrong with it; he himself had caused the reaction on the gauges. But there was an idea at the back of his mind, an unformed thing made of closed doors and cryptic actions and warm moisture in cold, dry air. With the queer inventiveness of a man on the brink of a mysterious fate, something had occurred to him; a fantastic thing, that might, just possibly come in handy. Any way, it was all he could do, and anything was better than nothing. He set to work with quick, sure hands. For nearly an hour he was at it, answering Lhara's shouted questions with surly plausibilities. When at last he climbed the ladder back to the control chamber, there was something in the air-unit that had not been there before.

He took the strange ship up, testing her in every way and finding her sound. Lhara gave him his course; he stared at it, raking the white streak in his hair with blunt fingers.

"The Asteroid Belt, eh? Trust the Water Pirate to do something no crook has done since the Fleet got its long-range detectors thirty years ago! I'll be interested to see how he does it!"

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!"

Jaffa said it, very slow and soft. Impossibility was manifest before his eyes. Mars was back of them, across the curve of space. All around them the Asteroids hurtled on their far-flung way. Ahead, where Jaffa, under Lhara's pistol-enforced order, was steering, was a tiny world-pebble a mile or so in diameter. It seemed a long way to come to commit suicide, but Jaffa held the ship steady, straight for the barren surface.

Then the impossible happened. Emptiness yawned behind a backslid portion of the asteroid itself; Jaffa, goggling, took the ship in. The strange space-door closed behind them.

"We must wait until the air is replenished," said Lhara, as though she were reciting a lesson, and Jaffa waited, staring.

A vast space had been hollowed in the rock of the asteroid, probably with powerful disintegrators, and fitted out for a hangar. Ranged neatly in ranks were the convoy ships that had vanished with the tankers; of the clumsy tankers themselves, there was no sign. There was no other ship like the one he flew, and Jaffa smiled. That fitted his embryonic theory. The floor was sheeted in metal, and he guessed at magnetic gravity plates. A green light flashed against the wall. The Keshi girl got up and shot the space-bolts back. "Come," she said, and Jaffa, shuffling in his ankle-chains, followed obediently.

Lhara guided him, muttering directions under her breath as though she had memorized them. There was a barrack room where men of

the Convoy Fleet sat in strange, quiescent alertness, like robots of flesh and blood. Lhara's eyes went in anxious pain to a tall Keshi in the uniform of the tanker company; but there was no recognition in his face, and she did not pause. Then there was a little terminal room where a car waited on a curved trough. Lhara motioned her prisoner in. Then she pressed a button, and the car shot down a green-lit tube straight for the heart of the asteroid.

With a dizzying, vertiginous suddenness, the car shot out of the metal tube into one of glass. Space opened around them--space filled with water, swarming with queer sea-creatures, suffused by a curious pale radiance. Jaffa realized, with a suffocating sensation, that the water filled the whole hollowed-out center of the asteroid.

Lhara's face was set and pale; he could not read her expression. But her knuckles were white on the grip of the ray-gun, and her breast rose to deep-drawn fighter's breathing.

There were glassite buildings ahead in the water's blur. The tube went straight into one, closing transparent walls around them. They went down a ramp and into a small room, furnished as the spaceship had been, and at Jaffa's feet there was a sunken pool, broad each way as two tall men. Jaffa followed the Keshi girl through swinging doors into a room that stretched vastly under curving crystal walls. Intricate mechanisms, control panels, coils and vacuum tubes and gigantic things of cryptic identity filled every foot of available space; there were ray lamps and heating apparatus and rack upon rack of cultures in gleaming tubes.

And there was water, in a deep sunken pool tiled green and brown in a pattern of water-weeds.

Lhara led her captive to the brink of the pool and stopped. They stood waiting, and there was a silence like a holding of breath in the

laboratory.

The water in the pool stirred suddenly, lapping against the tiles. Far down, cloaked in the rippling refractions, a solid something moved, sending a stream of crystal bubbles up along the surge of the disturbed water. Something that was swift and sure and graceful; something that gleamed with a golden sheen as the light struck it, something that was panther-lithe and supple, and had areas of shimmering iridescence at its extremities. Jaffa's blunt fingers raked his white-streaked hair and did not feel it. The head broke water.

A strange, unearthly face. Fine golden fur-covered features that were strong and clear and as streamlined as a space-cruiser. Eye and nostril were fitted with protective membranes, and there were no outward ears; but Jaffa, looking into fire-shot dark eyes, knew that this was a man, with no taint of the hybrid in his blood.

In one light surge the stranger gained the tiles beside the pool. The close golden fur that covered him shed the water in glistening streams down a smooth-muscle body, as human in shape as Jaffa's own, save that at wrist and ankle there were fanlike membranes. There was a strange, triumphant fire burning in the swimmer as he stood looking at Jaffa; and the Earthman realized abruptly that Lhara was trembling.

"You have done well, girl," murmured the golden Being, and Lhara's voice burst out of a tight throat.

"Give me my brother and let me go!"

The water-man might not have heard her. His dark gaze was fastened on Jaffa.

"The gods are with me!" he said softly. "I shall succeed." Jaffa's face

was hard as carven stone. "I seem to be the sacrifice," he observed. "Is it permitted that I know for what?" The golden swimmer swung about, reaching for a switch, "I'll show you, Earthman!" The light went out, leaving a suffocating blackness. After a moment a pale square of light gleamed; the strange voice, that had a liquid music in it, called them closer. "Look here, into this ultra-visor. It will explain better than any words."

Jaffa looked, hearing the taut breathing of the Keshi girl beside him. Something, a spinning blur, took shape in the screen, resolved itself into a planet, revolving about a triple sun. The focus drew in, blotting out the suns; the curve of the globe flattened, became a concave bowl of water, stretching to the limits of the screen. Here and there tiny islands raised swampy heads, barely above the face of the warm, teeming sea; in the shallows around them were domes of gleaming glassite, housing cities. Closer still; into the streets of the under-water cities, where there were great buildings fallen to ruin and disuse, all save the temples. No children played, and the homes were desolate. Only the temples had life--and the taverns. There were as many taverns as there were temples, and here the sunken pools were filled with stuff that was not water; those who wallowed in them were mere sodden, licentious hulks.

The cities faded to show writhing undersea forests, growing on oozy mud. Amongst the towering fronds of weeds and the amorphous bulks of giant sponges swam monstrous shadows, things with gills and dorsal fins that were yet not fish. They were to the beings in the cities as the apes are to man, and their faces were bestial beyond anything Jaffa had ever seen. They swam around the glassite domes, nuzzling the transparent surfaces, glaring hungrily at the men within; and here and there a shining dome was cracked before the strength of their numbers. The sea-things rode the spurting water through the rifts, and the men who had time to drown were the lucky ones.

Lhara gasped, and Jaffa sensed her averted head. Then, as the screen flickered out and the light came up again, the voice of the golden swimmer spoke, low and somber.

"I, Rha, was the last child to be born on Vhila."

They stood waiting, the man and the woman. The alien one faced them, his muscles drawn taut.

"Vhila is a dying world. Once, as you saw, she was great. But we are an old people, and we have seen our doom approaching for centuries. The sea-dwellers out-breed us a thousand to one. One by one our cities fall, and my people have fallen too, under the load. You saw them; some wait for death in the temples, some in the kulha-tanks. But learning and work and hope are dead on Vhila.

"Can you understand that, Earthman? A world of living dead! No future, no life, just a dumb acceptance and an endless waiting. I revolted. I lived alone in the empty colleges, the laboratories, the museums; I learned all the ancient knowledge of my race. And I turned my eyes to your solar system, where I dreamed of a new life for what remains of my people. When I was ready, I took a spaceship from the museum, stocked it with the tools I would need, but no weapons, for we are a peaceful race."

"I landed first on Venus. You can guess why, Earth-man; we are amphibious, taking water through the skin. We cannot live in a dry world. But instead of the peaceful welcome I had expected, I was attacked and driven off. The people feared me. They would have killed me if they could. I knew then that my people could not come in peace. We are alien."

"I found this asteroid, and changed it to suit me. Then I studied your system more thoroughly, by means of the ultra-visior, that I might find

means to conquer it. I have no wish to kill, only to force recognition of my wishes and to gain the power to carry them out. I found that your civilization rests basically on the water trade that permits your far-flung colonies to live. Fitting, was it not? I could prey on this water trade, bring you to the brink of destruction, and then make my demands. Under the circumstances, there could be no refusal."

Again the fire-shot eyes rested on Jaffa. "The gods have been kind. So far I have succeeded."

Jaffa raised his head. "Where do I fit in?"

Rha smiled. "I need a hostage, to insure that my demands are believed, understood, and carried out promptly. You are the son of Johan Gray. The Chief of Special, I have learned, is really the most powerful man in the System, for he sits at the secret head of all the activities of the planets. To him, through you, I shall make my demands."

Jaffa nodded, his eyes hooded behind dropped lids. "And if he refuses?" Rha sighed and spread his hands.

For the first time Lhara spoke. Both men started. Her voice was sharp and fearless as a sword, and the paralysis-gun was steady in her hand.

"I've been a fool, Rha! I knew none of this; only that if I brought you this man, you would cure my brother and let him go. I thought you were only a clever bandit, and I was willing to barter with you for my brother's life. If I had known, I would have killed Lhar with my own hands before I would have obeyed you!"

She flung quick words over her shoulder at Jaffa. "I am sorry, Earthman, for what I did. Stand by me now!"

Rha did not flinch. "You cannot escape. The doors are closed, and my pilots, who are my slaves since I injected them with a special hormone, guard the hangar. Only I can take you out of here."

Wills met and locked. Then Lhara bowed before the truth. Rha took the gun from her unresisting hand.

"Now," he said. "We will go out again in my spaceship, away from here so that my position cannot be traced by the radio carrier-waves, and contact Johan Gray. You will not be stubborn, Jaffa, I am sure."

Jaffa's eyes were still hidden, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. He asked: "Why did you come back here at all? You were aboard the ship back on Mars."

"You guessed it, did you?" Rha nodded as he led the way out of the laboratory.

"The Martian air is so dry I couldn't leave my cabin, and I was afraid if you knew, you'd try something. An unfortunate thing, that smash-up, especially the pilot's death. But I had to have you, Jaffa, and I had to have Lhara to get you.

"I came back here for two reasons. The water, air, and food were nearly exhausted; but particularly I wanted you to see my stronghold and my laboratory, so that you would know I made no idle boasts. Vhila has scientific secrets your people won't guess at for several centuries yet."

They made a silent trio on the trip back to the hangar. Rha picked up three armed pilots from the barrack-room. He smiled at Lhara as he motioned her into his ship, saying: "I feel safer with you where I can watch you." Then the ship roared out through the space-door. The bulkhead door was closed, and the pool in the control cabin was

newly filled.

At a safe distance Rha brought the ship to a standstill. And as the throb of the motors died, Jaffa came to his feet. His chains clashed as he hurled himself in a desperate dive for the control panel. Before anyone could stop him, he had landed all his weight on a knife-switch set beside the controls, smashed it down to the end of its slot.

Down in the bowels of the ship there was a grating clash. The water in the pool began to bubble and hiss, and a whitish gas rolled sluggishly over the brink to spread across the floor. In the time it took Jaffa to regain his feet, it had covered the floor-plates and was lapping the ankles of the thunderstruck people who watched it.

"That gas," said Jaffa steadily, "is highly explosive. I should advise the men not to fire their heat-guns."

Rha snapped his orders. "Take him--but don't fire!" The three pilots moved forward like plastic robots. Jaffa faced them; without shifting his eyes he called to Lhara, "Keep your head above the mist!" Rha stood quietly, waiting, but his eyes were on a switch above the one Jaffa had thrown, and he said "Hurry!" very quietly.

The white gas billowed sluggishly at their wrists.

The rest, afterwards, was a blur to Jaffa's memory. One man missed his footing on the narrow floor and vanished into the pool. The other two came on, holding their heat-guns clubbed. The Earthman caught a glimpse of Lhara, stalking like a panther behind Rha. Then he had grappled the two pilots and gone lurching down into the sea of mist.

The swirling opacity blinded him; he held his breath while he struggled, praying that his chest wouldn't burst until he had what he wanted. The pilots fought doggedly to hold him while they regained

their feet. But Jaffa had the desperation of a man clutching his last chance; and he knew that above the rising flood of gas, Rha was reaching for the switch that would mean defeat. His hand closed on a flailing heat-gun. His head was ringing, his lungs burned with the agony of suffocation. Dimly he knew that one man had fallen limply to the floor, unconscious. He wrenched desperately at the gun, knowing he couldn't last much longer. The distorted face close to his loosed a burst of breath that set the white gas swirling. Then the empty lungs sucked in; the hand went limp.

With the last of his strength Jaffa surged upward. The gas had risen; how high? Above his head, perhaps. Perhaps it had choked all air from the cabin, pouring up faster than the air-conditioners could work. Perhaps Rha and Lhara were lying under it, dying of anoxia. And suddenly, through his pain and desperation, Jaffa knew something. The hard-held air in his lungs broke from him in a cry.

"Lhara!"

Like a swimmer, his head broke the surface. The gas lapped his chin, but there was air still. He gulped it in. Rha's head was rigid above the rising tide, and behind it, Lhara's, her hair fallen in a bright cloak that gleamed through the mist.

Jaffa raised his gun and fired.

In a crackling fury of sparks the flying controls fused to a blackened ruin. Jaffa lurched forward, dragged at the switch above the one he had pressed before. The handle scorched his palm, so near had the destructive blast come to it. A gurgling rush came from the pool, and the gas sucked downward in a sullen whirlpool. Jaffa leaned weakly against the bulkhead, and knew that he was laughing at the two thunderstruck faces.

"Dry ice!" he gasped. "I diverted carbon dioxide from the air purifiers and improvised a compression unit with one of the pressure tanks. Then I connected the compression-tank release with a cut-in on the feed-pipe for this pool, the only one that can be emptied from the control panel. When I pulled that switch I dumped about ten pounds of dry ice into the water. That gas was the released carbon dioxide perfectly harmless, except that it can suffocate." Lhara released the arm she had been holding in a vise-grip behind Rha's back; the grip that had kept him from getting to that all-important switch and wrecking Jaffa's plans. Together they got the men up above the last of the gas that hovered above the empty pool. When they were breathing properly again, Jaffa turned to Rha.

"You realize your position. Very soon after I radio, Fleet ships will come to take us in tow. In the ordinary course of events, you will be destroyed as a danger to the welfare of the Solar System.

"But I don't think you are a menace, Rha. I think you're a very courageous man, and a great scientist; and on those grounds, I'll make a bargain with you. My father, as you said, has influence. I think, after I explain, that I can persuade him to arrange a colony for you, provided you give your word to live in peace. And that's what you really want, isn't it, Rha?"

"I ask only a useful life for my people." For a long, long moment Rha looked into the Earthman's eyes. Then he bowed his head, and his voice was deep as he answered:

"I accept your offer, Jaffa Gray."

Jaffa sighed relieved and turned to the radio. Lhara sat on a couch beside it.

"You'll go back to Kesh now?" he asked abruptly.

"As soon as my brother is free." She faced him frankly. "I'm sorry for what I did, Jaffa. But since it's turned out this way...."

"I think," said Jaffa, "if I were to come to Kesh, and you were to try very hard, I might forgive you."

All The Colors Of The Rainbow

It had rained in the valley, steadily and hard, for thirty-six hours. The ground was saturated. Every fold in the rough flanks of the hills spouted a muddy torrent and the torrents flowed in sheets over the flat country below and poured through raw self-gouged channels into the river. And the river, roused from its normal meek placidity, roared and rolled like a new Mississippi, tearing away its banks, spreading wide and yellow across the fields, into the orchards and over the roads, into the streets of Grand Falls where the people had left their houses and fled to the safety of higher land. Uprooted trees and broken timbers knocked at the walls of the old brick buildings on the main street. In the lobby of the Grand Falls Hotel the brass spittoons floated ever higher, clanging mournfully when they struck their sides together.

High on the ridges that enclosed the valley to the northeast and the southwest, hidden by a careful hand, two small mechanisms hummed quietly, ceaselessly. They were called miniseeders and they were not part of Earth's native technology. Their charges would run out in a matter of days, but in the meantime they were extremely efficient, hurling a steady stream of charged particles into the sky to seed the clouds moving over the ridges.

In the valley, it continued to rain...

IT WAS HIS FIRST BIG JOB ON his own responsibility, with no superior closer than Galactic Center, which was a long way off. He was not at all sure he was going to be able to do it.

He said so to Ruvi, slowing down the cumbersome ground car so she could see what he meant.

"Look at it. How can this mess ever be made into a civilized continent?" She turned her head in the quick way she had and said, "Scared, Flin?"

"I guess I am."

He was ashamed to say it, particularly since it was not really the difficulty and importance of the job that daunted him but the planet itself. He had studied weather-control engineering on his home-world at Mintaka, which was one of the science's earliest triumphs, and he had done research and field work on five other worlds, at least two of which were in fairly early stages of control. But he had never been anywhere before that was so totally untouched by galactic civilization.

Peripheral Survey had made contact with these fringe systems only in the last couple of decades and that was far too short a time to make much of an impress on them. Even in the big urban centers an alien like himself could hardly walk down the street yet without attracting an unwelcome amount of attention, not all of it polite. Coming from the Federation worlds with their cosmopolitan populations, Flin found this hard to take. But Galactic Center was enthusiastic about these fringe worlds because quite a few of them had an amazingly high, if highly

uneven, degree of civilization which they had developed literally in their several vacuums. Center was in a rush to send them teachers and technicians and that was why he, far ahead of his due time, had been pitchforked into the position of leading a four-man planning-and-instruction team of weather-control experts.

It was a splendid opportunity with splendid possibilities for the future, and the raise in pay had enabled him to take on Ruvi as a permanent mate much sooner than he had hoped. But he hadn't bargained for the loneliness, the constant uncertainty in relationships, the lack of all the vast solid background he was used to on the Federation worlds. Ruvi said, "All right then, I'll admit I'm scared too. And hot. Let's stop this clumsy thing and get a breath of air. Right over there looks like a good place."

He eased the car off the narrow road, onto a point of land with a few big stones around the edge to mark the drop-off. Ruvi got out and went to stand by them, looking out over the valley. The breeze pressed her thin yellow tunic against her body and ruffled the soft short silvery mass of curls around her head. Her skin glistened even under this alien sun with the dark lovely green of youth and health. Flin's heart still turned over in him every time he looked at her. He did not suppose this would last forever but as long as it did it was a beautiful sort of pain.

He made sure he had done the required things to keep the car from bolting away over the cliff and then joined her. The breeze was hot and moisture-laden, full of strange smells. The valley wound away in a series of curves with a glint of water at the bottom. On either side of it the rough ridges rolled and humped, blue in the distance where the heat haze covered them, rank green closer at hand with the shaggy woods that grew wild on them, the trees pushing and crowding for space, choked with undergrowth and strangling vines, absolutely

neglected.

"I suppose," said Ruvy, "they're full of wild animals, too."

"Nothing very dangerous, I believe."

Ruvy shivered slightly. "Whenever I get just a little way out of the cities I begin to feel that I'm on a truly savage world. And everything's wrong. The trees, the flowers, even the grass-blades are the wrong shape, and the colors are all wrong, and the sky isn't at all the way it ought to be." She laughed. "Anyone would know this was my first trip away from home." Two huge birds came into sight over one of the ridges. They hung in the sky, wheeling in slow circles on still gray-brown wings. Instinctively Flin put his arm around Ruvy, uncertain whether the birds would attack. They did not, drifting on down over the valley where the air currents took them. There was no sign of human habitation and except for the narrow road they might have been in a complete wilderness.

"It is rather beautiful, though," Ruvy said, "in its own way."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the only standard you really should use to judge things, isn't it? Their own."

Flin said sourly, "That's easier to do when you know what 'their own'

standard is. They seem to have thousands of them here. That's why Sherbondy keeps telling us to get out and see the country, to learn what his people are really like." Sherbondy was their contact with the local Government, a big hearty man with an enormous enthusiasm for all the things that were going to be done. "The only trouble with that is that it would take a lifetime to--"

There was a noise like an avalanche behind them. Flin jumped and turned around, but it was only a huge red vehicle roaring by, spouting smoke from a pipe behind the driver's compartment. The driver noticed them just before the truck passed out of sight and Flin thought the man was going to drive it right into the woods while he was staring.

He sighed. "Let's go."

They got back into the car and Flin managed to get it back onto the road and headed in the direction he wanted to go without mishap--always, he felt, a minor triumph. The primitive vehicles that were subject to everybody's individual whim of operation on these equally primitive road systems still frightened the wits out of him after nearly six months. It was just as hot as ever. As a gesture of courtesy, and to avoid attracting any more attention than was necessary, he had adopted the local variety of shirt and pants. Most of the men in the various instruction groups did this soon after landing. It didn't seem to matter what the women of the groups wore as long as certain puritanical tabus were observed, but the men found it less embarrassing to conform. Flin thought the garments abominably uncomfortable and envied Ruvy her relatively cool tunic. She seemed wilted and subdued, leaning back in the corner of the wide overstuffed seat, her eyes half closed, the graceful tilted contours of her face accentuated by the gleaming of sweat on the delicate ridges.

"I think of home," she said, "and then I think of the money."

"It's something to think of."

The woods rolled by, clotted underneath with deep shadow, full of rustlings and rank dusty smells. Sometimes they passed a kind of

food-raising station that had not been seen in the Federation for centuries, where part of the land was in several kinds of crops and part of it in pasture and the whole thing was operated by one man and his family. Sometimes they passed through little towns or villages with very strange names, where the people stared at them and the children pointed and yelled, Green niggers, lookit the green niggers!

Flin studied the houses. They were different from each other, and quite different from the ones he had grown used to in the cities, but they were all built on the same hut-based principle. He tried to imagine what life would be like in one of these towns, in one of these wooden or stone or brick houses with the queer decorations and the pointed roofs. Probably Sherbondy was right. Probably all the Federation people should try to get closer to the everyday life of the planet, familiarize themselves with what the people thought and felt, how they coped with their environment. The next few decades would see changes so radical and complete that this present life would soon begin to be forgotten...

The change had already begun. This planet--the native name for it was Earth, a rather pretty one, Flin thought--had been making its first wobbling steps into space on its own when the Survey ships arrived. With Federation technicians and techniques that process had been enormously accelerated. The first manned ships built on Earth and operated by Federation-trained but native-born personnel had been licensed for limited service within the last seven or eight years. Planning surveys were under way, guided by groups like his own, not only in weather-control but in global unification, production, education, and above all pacification--the countless things that would have to be accomplished to make Earth a suitable member of the Federation.

But these things had not yet made themselves felt on the population as a whole. Most of Earth was going along just as it always had, and

Flin knew from experience that many of the natives even on the administrative level were extremely touchy and proud, not inclined to accept any sudden alterations in their thinking; probably the more provincial masses were even more so. It would be necessary to win them over, to make them feel that they were equals in the task and not merely the recipients of gifts from an older and wider culture.

It would be a long, interesting business. An energetic young man who stuck with it could make a career out of it, a satisfying and very profitable one. The only trouble was-Ruvi's thoughts seemed to have paralleled his own, because she said, "Are we going to stay on here?"

"We have to stay until we've finished our immediate job."

"But after that? I know some of the men have already decided to."

"The offers these people make are very good," Flin said slowly. "They'll need technicians and educators for a long time yet, and Center is in favor of it because it'll speed up integration." He reached out and patted her.

"We could be rich and famous."

She smiled, very fleetingly. "All right," she said in a quiet voice, "I'll start making myself like it."

She began to stare grimly at the queerly shaped and colored trees, the peculiar houses that looked so dreadfully functional, the crowds of chattering natives in the towns. Finally she shook her head and gave up, lying back with her eyes closed.

"I'll try it again sometime when it isn't so hot." "Weather-control will fix that."

"But not for years."

They drove in silence. Flin felt vaguely ill at ease and unhappy, but he kept thinking of Sherbondy's offer and the things it might lead to for them, and he did not say anything. He did not want to commit himself with Ruvii yet, one way or the other.

About mid-afternoon there was a violent downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning. As a weather expert Flin knew perfectly well what caused the disturbance, but the knowledge did nothing to decrease the effect of it on himself. Ruvii simply hid her head in the corner and shook. Flin kept on driving. If you let the natives know that you were afraid of their weather, they would never believe that you would be able to control it. He made it a practice in Washington to walk out in storms that had even the natives cowering. He could barely see the road well enough to stay on it and he was nervous about floods, but he trundled resolutely ahead. Eventually he ran out of the storm, or it passed over. The sun came out again, boiling and steaming the saturated air. It was difficult to breathe. Great black clouds still bulked in the sky, presaging more trouble later. In the strange light the countryside took on a look completely alien and somehow ominous, the little scattered houses crouching among their weird trees like suspicious gnomes with hostile eyes, the empty fields and dripping woods suggestive of infinite loneliness.

"I'm tired and hungry," Ruvii said. "Let's stop."

"The next town that has accommodations." Flin was tired himself. He found driving a strain and yearned for the fleet little air-cars that darted so easily and safely through the peaceful skies of the Federation worlds. They would not be practical here until global weather-control was an actuality. The next town was a long way off. The road lifted and wound through low rough mountains and over

brawling stream beds. The villages they passed through were very tiny, sometimes with only two or three dwellings. The shadows grew heavy in the valleys. Ruvy began to fret a bit. Flin knew that it was only because the shadows and the wild country made her nervous, but it irritated him. He was having trouble enough of his own. An animal of some sort stuttered across the road and he nearly went into the ditch avoiding it. The light was bad. He was worried about the fuel gauge, which was low. And the road seemed to go on forever through a steadily darkening tunnel of trees.

They passed a tiny wooden temple next to one of the absolutely barbaric native burying grounds that always horrified them, the ritual stones gleaming pallid among uncut grass and briar roses. It all flashed by so quickly that Flin realized he had pushed the speed of the big car beyond the limit of safety. So he was already slowing down when he swung around a curve and came right onto a farm vehicle moving very slowly in the road. He managed to go around it without hitting anything but it gave him a sharp fright. The man driving the thing shouted after them. Flin could not hear exactly what he said but there was no doubt he was angry. After that Flin went carefully.

There began to be painted signs along the edge of the road. Ruvy read them off. "Restaurant. Hotel. Garage. There is a town ahead. Grand Falls, I think."

The road passed suddenly over a crest and there was a wide irregular valley below them, full of light from the low sun which shone through a gap in the west. Perhaps Flin was in an exceptionally receptive mood but it struck him as one of the loveliest places he had seen. There was a river flashing with curious dull glints from the setting sun, rolling smoothly over a pretty little falls that burst into bright foam at the bottom. The white houses of the town were bowered in trees and blooming vines, slumbrous and peaceful in the

hot evening, with one tall white spire standing over them.

"Look, I see the hotel," said Ruvi, pointing. "Oh glorious, how I will love a cool bath before dinner!"

She ran her fingers through her silvery curls and sat up straight beside him, smiling as he drove down the hill into Grand Falls. It had rained here recently. The pavements still glistened and the air steamed with it. There was a fragrance of nameless flowers, very sweet and heavy. On the shadowy porches of the houses along the way there was a sound of voices and hidden laughter, and the small scurrying shapes of children moved under the dripping trees.

The road became the main street splashed with the crude colors of neon signs, the lighted windows showing yellow in the dusk. On both sides now there were curious low buildings, apparently quite old, built tight together so that each row looked like one building except its front was broken up into narrow vertical sections with different cornices and different patterns of wood or brickwork around the windows. They were mostly of red brick, which seemed to be a common building material, and not above two stories high. The shops and offices were closed. The eating and drinking places were open and busy, and somewhere inside there was music playing, a strong simple beat with a high-pitched male voice wailing over it. The smell of flowers was drowned out by the pungence of hot wet brick and hotter, wetter asphalt. A few couples walked toward the gaudily lighted entrance of a theatre farther along the street, the women wearing bright-colored dresses, their long hair done in elaborate coiffures, their thick sturdy legs and arms bare. Knots of young men lounged against the walls near the drinking places. They were smoking the universal cigarettes and talking, looking after the women.

Seen close up now the town was less beautiful than it had looked

from the crest. The white paint was dirty and peeling, the old buildings poorly kept up.

"Well," Flin muttered, "Sherbondy said to get off the beaten track and see the real native life undiluted."

"The hotel looks charming," Ruvy said determinedly. "I am not going to quarrel with anything."

Even in the dusk they were beginning to draw attention. First the little knots of idlers were attracted by the long gleaming car with the Government plates, and then by Flin and Ruvy themselves. There were other cars in the street, both moving and parked along the curb, but the one Flin was driving seemed to be newer and fancier than most. He could see people pointing and looking at them. He swore silently and wondered if they could have dinner sent up to their room.

The hotel was on the corner of the main intersection. It was three stories high, built of the red brick, with a crudely ornate cornice and long narrow windows. A balcony ran around its two exposed sides at the second floor level, extending over the street and supported on slender metal pillars which had once been painted white. A second tier of pillars on the balcony itself supported a roof. There were five or six oldish men sitting in chairs on the balcony, and several more below on the covered portion of the street. Flin looked at it doubtfully. "I wonder if it has a bath." Her own enthusiasm somewhat cooled, Ruvy said, "It'll do for one night. It might be a long way to the next one and I don't suppose it would be any better."

Flin grunted and pulled the car in to the curb and stopped. There was a scraping of chair legs as the men sat forward or rose to come closer. Flin got out and walked around the car. He smiled at the men but they only stared, blowing strong smoke and squinting through it at him and the car and the license plates and then at Ruvy.

Flin turned and opened the door for her. He noticed over the low roof of the car that men were beginning to come from across the street, and already a number of boys had sprung from nowhere and were clustering like insects, their eyes bright and excited.

He helped Ruvy out, slim in her yellow tunic, her silver curls picking up the light from the tall front door of the hotel.

One of the men said in a high shrill voice. "Green as grass, by God!" There was laughter and somebody whistled.

Flin's face tightened but he did not say anything nor look at the men. He took Ruvy's arm and they went into the hotel.

They walked on a faded carpet, between islands of heavy furniture in worn leather and dusty plush. Fans turned slowly against the ceiling, barely disturbing either the hot air or the moths that had come in to flutter around the lights. There was a smell that Flin could not fully identify. Dust, the stale stink of dead tobacco, and something else—age, perhaps, and decay. Behind the large wooden desk a gray-haired man had risen from a chair and stood with his hands spread out on the desk top, watching them come. The men from the street followed, crowding quickly through the doors. One particular man seemed to lead them, a red-faced fellow wearing an amulet on a gold chain across his broad paunch.

Flin and Ruvy stood in front of the desk. Once more Flin smiled. He said,

"Good evening."

The gray-haired man glanced past them at the men who had come in, bringing with them a many-faceted odor of sweat to add to what was

already inside. They had stopped talking, as though they were waiting to hear what the gray-haired man would say. The fans in the ceiling creaked gently as they turned.

The gray-haired man cleared his throat. He, too, smiled, but there was no friendliness in it.

"If you're wanting a room," he said, with unnecessary loudness as though he were speaking not to Flin but to the others in the lobby, "I'm sorry, but we're filled up."

"Filled up?" Flin repeated.

"Filled up." The gray-haired man took hold of a large book which lay open in front of him and closed it in a kind of ceremonial gesture. "You understand now. I'm not refusing you accommodations. I just don't have any available." He glanced again at the men by the door and there was a little undertone of laughter.

"But--" said Ruv, on a note of protest.

Flin pressed her arm and she stopped. His own face was suddenly hot. He knew the man was lying, and that his lie had been expected and was approved by the others, and that he and Ruv were the only two people there who did not understand why. He also knew that it would do them no good to get into an argument. So he spoke, as pleasantly as he could.

"I see. Perhaps then you could tell us of another place in town--"

"Don't know of any," said the gray-haired man, shaking his head. "Don't know of a single place."

"Thank you," said Flin and turned around and walked back across the

lobby, still holding Ruvi's arm.

The crowd had grown. Half the people in Grand Falls, Flin thought, must be gathered now on that one corner. The original group of men, reinforced to twice its size, blocked the doorway. They parted to let Flin and Ruvi through but they did it with a certain veiled insolence, staring hard at Ruvi who bent her head and did not look at them.

Flin walked slowly, refusing to notice them or be hurried. But their nearness, the heat and smell of them, the sense of something menacing about them that he did not understand, twisted his nerves to a painful tightness.

He passed through the door, almost brushing against a young girl who squealed and jumped back out of his way with a great show of being afraid of him. There was a bunch of young people with her, both boys and girls, and they began a great cackling and shoving. The crowd had become more vocal as it grew. There were a lot of women in it now. Flin waited politely for them to separate, moving a step at a time toward the car, and the voices flew back and forth over his head, at him, around him.

--ain't even human!

Hey, greenie, can't you afford to feed your women where you come from?

Lookit how skinnyAre they kidding with that crazy hair?

--just like I seen on the teevee, and I says to Jack then, Jack Spivey I says, if you ever see anything like them coming down the road Hey, greenie, is it true your women lay eggs?

Laughter. Derision. And something deeper. Something evil.

Something he did not understand.

He reached the car and got Ruvy into it. As he bent close to her he whispered in her ear, in their own language, "Just take it easy. We're getting out."

Mama, how come them funny niggers got a bigger car'n we got?

Because the Government's payin' them big money to come and kindly teach us what we didn't know before. "Please hurry," whispered Ruvy. He started around the car to get in and found his way blocked by the red-faced man with the gold chain, and beyond him a solid mass in the street in front of the car. He sensed that they were not going to let him through, so he stopped as though he had intended to do so and spoke to the man with the chain.

"I beg your pardon--could you tell me how far it is to the next city?" The girls were giggling loudly over Ruvy's tunic and the way she looked generally. They were all the fat-hipped, heavy-breasted local type, with thick legs and thick faces. Flin thought they had very little to criticize. Just beyond the man with the gold chain were four or five younger men standing together. They had very obviously come out of one of the taverns. They were lean rangy young men with their hair slicked down and their hips thrust forward in a curiously insolent slouch. They had eyes, Flin thought, like animals. They had been by the door when he came out. They were still looking at Ruvy.

"The next city?" said the man with the gold chain. He accented the word city as Flin had. He had a deep, ringing voice, apparently well used to addressing crowds. "A hundred and twenty-four miles."

A long way at night through strange country. A great anger boiled up in Flin but he kept it carefully inside. "Thank you. I wonder where we might get something to eat before we start?"

"Well now, it's pretty late," the man said. "Our restaurants have just about now stopped serving. Am I right, Mr. Nellis?"

"You are, Judge Shaw," said a man in the crowd. This too was a lie, but Flin accepted it. He nodded and said, "I must have fuel. Where--"

"Garage is closed," Shaw said. "If you got enough to get you down the road apiece there's a pump at Patch's roadhouse. He's open late enough."

"Thank you," said Flin. "We will go now." He started again, but Shaw did not move out of Flin's way. Instead he put up his hand and said, "Now just a minute there, before you go. We've been reading about you people in the papers and seeing you on the teevee but we don't get much chance to talk to celebrities here. There's some questions we'd like to ask."

The rangy young men with the animal eyes began to sidle past Shaw and behind Flin toward the car, leaving a heavy breath of liquor where they moved.

"A damn lot of questions," somebody shouted from the back, "like why the hell don't you stay home?"

"Now, now," said Shaw, waving his hand, "let's keep this friendly. Reverend, did you have something to say?"

"I certainly do," said a fat man in a soiled dark suit, shouldering his way through the crowd to stand peering at Flin. "I bet I've preached a sermon on this subject three Sundays out of five and it's the most important question facing this world today. If we don't face it, if we don't answer this question in a way that's acceptable to the Almighty, we might just as well throw away all these centuries of doing battle

with Satan and admit we're licked."

"Amen," cried a woman's voice. "Amen to that, Reverend Tibbs!" Reverend Tibbs thrust his face close to Flin's and said, "Do you consider yourselves human?"

Flin knew that he was on dangerous ground here. This was a religious man and religion was strictly a local affair, not to be discussed or meddled with in any way.

So he said cautiously, "On our own worlds we consider ourselves so. However, I am not prepared to argue it from your viewpoint, sir." He moved toward the car, but the crowd only pulled in and held him tighter.

"Well now," said the Reverend Tibbs, "what I want to know is how you can call yourselves human when it says right in Scriptures that God created this good Earth here under my feet and then created man--human man--right out of that self-same earth. Now if you--"

"Oh, hell, save that stuff for the pulpit," said another man, pushing his way in front of Tibbs. This one was sunburned and leathery, with a lantern jaw and keen hard eyes. "I ain't worried about their souls and I don't care if they're all pups to the Beast of the Apocalypse." Now he spoke directly to Flin. "I been seeing faces on my teevee for years. Green faces like yours. Red ones, blue ones, purple ones, yellow ones--all the colors of the rainbow, and what I want to know is, ain't you got any white folks out there?"

"Yeah!" said the crowd and nodded its collective heads. The man they called Judge Shaw nodded too and said, "I reckon you put the question for all of us, Sam."

"What I mean is," said the lantern-jawed Sam, "this here is a white

town. In most other places nowadays, I understand, you'll find blacks and whites all run together like they were out of the same still, but we got kind of a different situation here, and we ain't the only ones, either. There's little pockets of us here and there, kind of holding out, you might say. And we ain't broken any laws. We didn't refuse to integrate, see. It was just that for one reason or another what colored folks there was around--" Here the crowd snickered knowingly.

"--decided they could do better somewheres else and went there. So we didn't need to integrate. We don't have any color problem. We ain't had any for twenty I years. And what's more, we don't want any." A shout from the crowd.

Shaw said in his big booming voice, "The point we'd like to make clear to you, so you can pass it on to whoever's interested, is that some of us like to run our lives and our towns to suit ourselves. Now, this old Earth is a pretty good place just as she stands, and we never felt any need for outsiders to come and tell us what we ought to do. So we ain't any too friendly to begin with, you see? But we're not unreasonable, we're willing to listen to things so as to form our own judgments on them. Only you people had better understand right now that no matter what goes on in the big cities and other places like that, we aren't going to be told anything by a bunch of colored folks and it doesn't matter one damn bit what color they are. If--"

Ruvi gave a sudden cry.

Flin spun around. The young men who smelled of liquor were beside the car, all crowded together and leaning in over the door. They were laughing now and one of them said, "Aw now, what's the matter? I was just--"

"Flin, please!"

He could see her over their bent backs and bobbing heads, as far away from them as she could get on the seat. Other faces peered in from the opposite side, grinning, hemming her in.

Somebody said in a tone of mock reproach. "You got her scared now, Jed, ain't you ashamed?"

Flin took two steps toward the car, pushing somebody out of the way. He did not see who it was. He did not see anything but Ruv's frightened face and the backs of the young men.

"Get away from there," he said.

The laughter stopped. The young men straightened slowly. One of them said, "Did I hear somebody say something?"

"You heard me," said Flin. "Get away from the car." They turned around, and now the crowd was all quiet and watching. The young men were tall. They had big coarse hands, strong for any task. Their mouths hung open a little to show their teeth, and they breathed and smiled, and their eyes were cruel.

"I don't think," said the one they called Jed, "I liked the tone of your voice when you said that."

"I don't give a damn whether you liked it or not." "You gonna take that, Jed?" somebody yelled. "From a nigger, even if he is a green one?" There was a burst of laughter. Jed smiled and tilted his weight forward over his bent knees.

"I was just trying to talk friendly with your woman," he said. "You shouldn't object to that."

He reached out and pushed with his stiffened fingers hard against

Flin's chest.

Flin turned his body and let the force of the thrust slide off his shoulder. Everything seemed to be moving very slowly, in a curiously icy vacuum which for the moment contained only himself and Jed. He was conscious of a new and terrible feeling within him, something he had never felt before. He stepped forward, lightly, strongly, not hurrying. His feet and hands performed four motions. He had done them countless times before in the gymnasium against a friendly opponent. He had never done them like this before, full force, with hate, with a dark evil brute lust to do injury. He watched the blood spurt from Jed's nose, watched him fall slowly, slowly to the pavement with his hands clutching his belly and his eyes wide open and his mouth gasping in astonishment and pain.

Outside this center of subjective time and hate in which he stood Flin sensed other movement and noise. Gradually, then with urgent swiftness, they came clear. Judge Shaw had thrust himself in front of Flin. Others were holding Jed, who was getting up. A swag-bellied man with a badge on his shirt was waving his arms, clearing people away from around the car, Jed's friends among them. There was a confused and frightening clamor of voices and over it all Shaw's big authoritative voice was shouting.

"Calm down now, everybody, we don't want any trouble here." He turned his head and said to Flin, "I advise you to be on your way just as fast as you can go."

Flin walked around the car where the policeman had cleared the way. He got in and started the motor. The crowd surged forward as though it was going to try and stop him in spite of Shaw and the policeman. Suddenly he cried out at them.

"Yes, we have white folks out there, about one in every ten thousand,

and they don't think anything of it and neither do we. You can't hide from the universe. You're going to be tramped under with color--all the colors of the rainbow!"

And he understood then that that was exactly what they feared. He let in the drive and sent the big car lurching forward. The people in the street scattered out of his way. There were noises as thrown objects struck the top and sides of the car and then the street was long and straight and clear ahead of him and he pushed the throttle lever all the way down. Lights flashed by. Then there was darkness and the town was gone. Flin eased back on the throttle. Ruvi was bent over in the seat beside him, her hands covering her face. She was not crying. He reached out and touched her shoulder. She was trembling, and so was he. He felt physically sick, but he made his voice quiet and reassuring.

"It's all right now. They're gone."

She made a sound--a whimper, an answer, he was not sure. Presently she sat erect, her hands clenched in her lap. They did not speak again. The air was cooler here but still oppressive with moisture, almost as clammy as fog against the skin. No stars showed. Off to the right there were intermittent flashes of lightning and a low growling of thunder. A clot of red light appeared on the night ahead, resolving itself into a neon sign. Patch's. The roadhouse with the pump.

Ruvi whispered, "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"I have to," he said gently, and pulled off the road onto a wide gravelled space beside a ramshackle frame building with dimly lighted windows. Strongly rhythmic music played inside. There was a smaller building, a dwelling-house, beside the tavern, and midway between them was a single fuel pump.

Flin stopped beside it. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he turned and fumbled in the back seat for his hat and jacket and put them on, pulling the hatbrim down to hide his face as much as possible. Ruv had a yellow shawl that matched her tunic. She drew it over her head and shoulders and made herself small in the corner of the seat. Flin switched off the dashboard lights.

A raw-boned lanky woman came out of the dwelling.

Probably the man ran the tavern, leaving her to tend to smaller matters. Trying to keep his voice steady, Flin asked her to fill the tank. She hardly glanced at him and went surlily to the pump. He got out his wallet and felt with shaking hands among the bills.

On the dark road beyond the circle of light from the tavern, a car went slowly past.

The pump mechanism clicked and rang its solemn bells and finally was still. The woman hung up the hose with a clash and came forward. Flin took a deep breath. He thrust a bill at her. "That'll be eight-eighty-seven," she said and took the bill and saw the color of the hand she took it from. She started to speak or yell, stepping back and bending suddenly in the same movement. He saw her eyes shining in the light, peering into the car. Flin had already started the motor. He roared away in a spurt of gravel, leaving the woman standing with her arm out, pointing after them.

"We won't have to stop again until we reach the city. It'll be all right there."

He threw his hat into the back seat. Ruv let the shawl fall away from her head.

"I've never wanted to hide my face before," she said. "It's a strange feeling."

Flin muttered savagely, "I've got a lot to say but I can't say it now, not if I'm going to drive."

The road was narrow and black beneath the thunderous sky, between the empty fields and dark woods.

There was another car in the road ahead, moving slowly. Flin overtook it.

It was well out in the middle. He waited a moment for the driver to see that he wanted to pass and make room for him. The car continued to block the road. He sounded his horn, politely at first and then loudly. The car stayed where it was, moving slower and slower so that he had to brake to keep from hitting it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Ruv. "Why won't they let us by?" Flin shook his head. "I don't know."

He began to be afraid.

He pulled as far as he could to the left, riding on the rough berm. He sounded the horn and tramped on the throttle.

The other car swerved too. Its rear fender struck his front one. Ruv screamed. Flin steadied the wildly lurching car. Sweat prickled like hot needles all over his skin. He stamped his foot hard on the brake. The other car skidded on ahead. Flin swung the wheel sharp right and pushed the throttle down, whipping the big car across the road and onto the berm on the other side.

For one brief moment he thought he was going to make it. But the

other car swayed over with ruthless speed and punched and rebounded and punched again with its clattering fenders like a man pushing another with his shoulder. Holes and stones threw Flin's car back and forth. He fought to control it, hearing the voices of men shouting close by... Hit the sonofabitch, knock his goddam ass off the road, That's the way There was a tree ahead. His headlights picked it up, brought it starkly into view, the rough-textured bark, the knots and gnarls, the uneven branches and dark leaves. Flin spun the wheel frantically. The lights made a wide slicing turn across meadow grass and weeds. The car bounded, leaped, sprang over uneven ground and fell with a jarring crash into the ditch of a little stream and died.

Silence, dazed and desperate.

Flin looked back. The other car had stopped at the side of the road. Men were getting out of it. He counted five. He thought he knew what men they were.

He reached across Ruvy and opened the door and pushed her ahead of him.

"We're going to run now," he said, surprised at the flat banality of his voice, as though he were speaking to a child about some unimportant game. The car tilted that way and Ruvy slid out easily. Flin came behind her into mud and cold water that lapped around his ankles. He half helped, half threw her up the low steep bank and followed, grabbing her hand then and pulling her along.

He did not look back again. He did not have to. The men called as they ran, laughing, hooting, baying like great hounds.

Crooked fire lighted a curtain of black cloud. Flin saw trees, a clump of woods. The fire died and was followed by a hollow booming. The woods vanished. He continued to run toward them. The grass and

weeds tangled around his legs. Ruvy lagged, pulling harder and harder against his grip, sobbing as she ran.

They were among the trees.

He let go of her. "Go on. Hide yourself somewhere. Don't make a sound no matter what happens."

"No. I won't leave--"

He pushed her fiercely, trying not to scream at her aloud. "Go on!" The young men came loping through the long grass, into the trees. They had a light. Its long white beam probed and poked.

See anything?

Not yet.

Who's got the bottle? I'm dry from runnin'.

See anything?

They're in here somewhere.

Breath rasping in big hard throats, legs ripping the undergrowth, feet trampling the ground.

I'm gonna find out, by God. After I take care of that sonofabitch I'm gonna find out.

Whatcha gonna find out, Jed?

If it's true they lay eggs or not.

Laughter.

Who's got the goddam bottle?

Wait a minute, hey, right there, swing that light back, I hear the bastards moving

Hey!

Flin turned, straightening his shoulders, standing between them and Ruv. One of them held the light in his face. He could not see them clearly. But he heard the voice of the one called Jed speaking to him.

"All right, greenie, you're so anxious to teach us things--it ain't fair for us to take and not give, so we got a lesson for you."

"Let my wife go," said Flin steadily. "You have no quarrel with her."

"Your wife, huh?" said Jed. "Well now, how do we know she's your wife?"

Was you married here under the laws of this land?"

"We were married under our own laws--"

"You hear that, boys? Well, your laws don't cut any ice with us, greenie, so it don't seem that you are man and wife as we would say. Anyway, she stays. That's part of the lesson."

Jed laughed. They all laughed.

In their own language Min said to Ruv, "Run now." He sprang forward at the man holding the light.

Another man moved quickly from the side and struck him across the shoulders and neck with something more than the naked hand. A tree

branch, perhaps, or a metal bar. Flin went down, stunned with pain. He heard Ruvy cry out. He tried to tell her again to run but his voice had left him. There were scuffling sounds and more cries. He tried to get up and hard-shod feet kicked him and stamped him down. Iron knuckles battered his face. Jed bent over him and shook him.

"Hold him up there, Mike, I want to be sure he hears this. You hear me, greenie? Lesson One. Niggers always keep to their own side of the road." Crash. Blood in the mouth, and pain.

Ruvy?

"Hold him, Mike, goddam it. Lesson Two. When a white man takes a mind to a female nigger, she ain't supposed to get uppity about it. It's an honor, see? She's supposed to be real nice and happy and flattered. See?" More blood, more pain.

Ruvy, Ruvy!

"Lesson Three. And this one you better remember and write out and hang up where all the other red, blue, green, and purple niggers can see it. You never lay a hand on a white man. Never. No matter what." Ruvy was quiet. He could not hear her voice.

"You understand that? No matter what!"

Hya-hoo!

Give it to him, Jed. Tell him so he don't forget.

Dark, night, thunder, red fire, red blood, silence, distance, one long fading echoing voice.

--just like a real human woman by God what do you know Laughter.

RuviGone.

There was a great deal of public indignation about it. Newspapers all over the world had editorials. The President made a statement. The Governor made a formal apology for his state and a sincere promise to find and punish the handful of men responsible for the outrage. Grand Falls protected its own.

No witnesses could be found to identify the men involved in the incident that had occurred in town. Judge Shaw was sure he had never seen them before. So was the policeman. The attack itself had taken place out in the country, of course, and in the dark. Flin did not remember the license number of the car nor had he seen the faces of the men clearly. Neither had Ruvi. They could have been anyone from anywhere.

The name "Jed" by itself meant nothing. There were a number of Jeds in the neighborhood but they were the wrong ones. The right Jed never turned up, and if he had Flin could only have identified him definitely as the man he himself had struck in front of the Grand Falls Hotel. ("Mighty hot tempered, he seemed," Judge Shaw said. "Took offense where I'm sure none was meant. Like he just didn't understand our ways.") So there was no finding and no punishment.

As soon as the doctors told him he was fit to travel, Flin informed his group that he was returning home. He had already been in contact with Galactic Center. Someone else would be sent to take his place. They were very angry about the whole thing at home and various steps were being considered. But since Earth was not a member planet she was not subject to galactic law, and since the future of a world was considerably more important than the actions of a few individuals or the feelings of their victims, probably nothing very drastic would be done. And Flin recognized that this was right.

Sherbondy came to see him.

"I feel responsible for all this," he said. "If I hadn't advised that trip--"

"It would have happened sooner or later," Flin said. "To us or to somebody else. Your world's got a long way to go yet."

"I wish you'd stay," said Sherbondy miserably. "I'd like to prove to you that we're not all brutes."

"You don't have to prove that. It's obvious. The trouble now is with us--with Ruv and me."

Sherbondy looked at him, puzzled.

Flin said, "We are not civilized any more. Perhaps we will be again some day. I hope so. That's one reason we're going home, for psychiatric treatment of a kind we can't get here. Ruv especially..." He shook his head and began to stride up and down the room, his body taut with an anger he could only by great effort control.

"An act like that--people like that--they foul and degrade everything they touch. They pass on some of themselves. I'm full of irrational feelings now. I'm afraid of darkness and trees and quiet places. Worse than that, I'm afraid of your people. I can't go out of my rooms now without feeling as though I walk among wild beasts."

Sherbondy sighed heavily. "I can't blame you. It's a pity. You could have had a good life here, done a lot--" "Yes," said Flin.

"Well," said Sherbondy, getting up, "I'll say good bye." He held out his hand. "I hope you don't mind shaking my hand--" Min hesitated, then took Sherbondy's hand briefly. Even you," he said, with real sorrow. "You see why we must go."

Sherbondy said, "I see." He turned to the door. "God damn those bastards," he said with sudden fury. "You'd think in this day and age-- Oh, hell... Goodbye, Flin. And the best of luck."

He went away.

Flin helped Ruvy with the last of the packing. He checked over the mass of equipment the weather-control group had brought with them for demonstration purposes, which he would be leaving behind for his successor.

Then he said quietly, "There is one more thing I have to do before we go. Don't worry about me. I'll be back in plenty of time for the take-off." She looked at him, startled, but she did not ask any questions. He got into his car and drove away alone.

He spoke as he drove, grimly and bitterly, to someone who was not there.

"You wanted to teach me a lesson," he said. "You did. Now I will show you how well you taught me, and how' well I learned." And that was the real evil that had been done to him and Ruvy. The physical outrage and the pain were soon over, but the other things were harder to eradicate--the sense of injustice, the rankling fury, the blind hatred of all men whose faces were white.

Especially the hatred.

Some day, he hoped and prayed, he could be rid of that feeling, clean and whole again as he had been before it happened. But it was too soon. Far too soon now.

With two fully charged miniseeders in his pockets he drove steadily toward Grand Falls....

The Secret of Sinharat

by Leigh Brackett

I

FOR HOURS the hard-pressed beast had fled across the Martian desert with its dark rider. Now it was spent. It faltered and broke stride, and when the rider cursed and dug his heels into the scaly sides, the brute only turned its head and hissed at him. It stumbled on a few more paces into the lee of a sandhill, and there it stopped, crouching down in the dust.

The man dismounted. The creature's eyes burned like green lamps in the light of the little moons, and he knew that it was no use trying to urge it on. He looked back the way he had come.

In the distance there were four black shadows grouped together in the barren emptiness. They were running fast. In a few minutes they would be upon him. He stood still, thinking what he should do next. Ahead, far ahead, was a low ridge, and beyond the ridge lay Valkis and safety, but he could never make it now. Off to his right, a lonely tor stood up out of the blowing sand. There were tumbled rocks at its foot.

"They tried to run me down in the open," he thought. "But here, by the Nine Hells, they'll have to work for it!"

He moved then, running toward the tor with a lightness and speed incredible in anything but an animal or a savage. He was of Earth stock, built tall, and more massive than he looked by reason of his leanness. The desert wind was bitter cold, but he did not seem to

notice it, though he wore only a ragged shirt of Venusian spider silk, open to the waist. His skin was almost as dark as his black hair, burned indelibly by years of exposure to some terrible sun. His eyes were startlingly light in color, reflecting back the pale glow of the moons.

With the practiced ease of a lizard he slid in among the loose and treacherous rocks. Finding a vantage point, where his back was protected by the tor itself, he crouched down.

After that he did not move, except to draw his gun. There was something eerie about his utter stillness, a quality of patience as unhuman as the patience of the rock that sheltered him.

The four black shadows came closer, and resolved themselves into mounted men. They found the beast, where it lay panting, and stopped. The line of the man's footprints, already blurred by the wind but still plain enough, showed where he had gone.

The leader motioned. The others dismounted. Working with the swift precision of soldiers, they removed equipment from their saddle-packs and began to assemble it.

The man crouching under the tor saw the thing that took shape. It was a Banning shocker, and he knew that he was not going to fight his way out of this trap. His pursuers were out of range of his own weapon. They would remain so. The Banning, with its powerful electric beam, would take him--dead or senseless, as they wished.

He thrust the useless gun back into his belt. He knew who these men were, and what they wanted with him. They were officers of the Earth Police Control, bringing him a gift--twenty years in the Luna cell-blocks. Twenty years in the gray catacombs, buried in the silence and the eternal dark.

He recognized the inevitable. He was used to inevitables--hunger, pain, loneliness, the emptiness of dreams. He had accepted a lot of them in his time. Yet he made no move to surrender. He looked out at the desert and the night sky, and his eyes blazed, the desperate, strangely beautiful eyes of a creature very close to the roots of life, something less and more than man. His hands found a shard of rock and broke it.

The leader of the four men rode slowly toward the tor, his right arm raised. His voice carried clearly on the wind. "Eric John Stark!" he called, and the dark man tensed in the shadows.

The rider stopped. He spoke again, but this time in a different tongue. It was no dialect of Earth, Mars or Venus, but a strange speech, as harsh and vital as the blazing Mercurian valleys that bred it.

"Oh N'Chaka, oh Man-without-a-tribe, I call you!" There was a long silence. The rider and his mount were motionless under the low moons, waiting.

Eric John Stark stepped slowly out from the pool of blackness under the tor.

"Who calls me N'Chaka?"

The rider relaxed somewhat. He answered in English, "You know perfectly well who I am, Eric. May we meet in peace?"

Stark shrugged. "Of course."

He walked on to meet the rider, who had dismounted, leaving his beast behind. He was a slight, wiry man, this EPC officer, but there was about him the rawhide look of the planetary frontiers. Those

planets, Earth's sister worlds, were not quite as forbidding as they had once seemed when peered at from millions of miles away, and they had their peoples, descendants of some parent human stock that long ago had seeded the whole System. But they were still cruel worlds and even as they had left their mark on Stark, they had left it on this man, on his grizzled hair and sun-blackened skin, in his hard good-humored face and keen dark eyes.

"It's been a long time, Eric," he said.

Stark nodded. "Sixteen years." The two men studied each other for a moment, and then Stark said, "I thought you were still on Mercury, Ashton."

"They've called all us experienced hands in to Mars." He held out cigarettes.

"Smoke?"

Stark took one. They bent over Ashton's lighter, and then stood there smoking while the wind blew red dust over their feet and the three men of the patrol waited quietly beside the Banning. Ashton was taking no chances. The electro-beam could stun without injury.

Presently Ashton said, "I'm going to be crude, Eric. I'm going to remind you of some things."

"Save it," Stark retorted. "You've got me. There's no need to talk about it."

"Yes," said Ashton, "I've got you, and a damned hard time I've had doing it. That's why I'm going to talk about it."

His dark eyes met Stark's cold stare and held it.

"Remember who I am--Simon Ashton. Remember who came along when the miners in that valley on Mercury had a wild boy in a cage, and were going to finish him off like they had the tribe that raised him. Remember all the years after that, when I brought that boy up to be a civilized human being." Stark laughed, not without a certain humor. "You should have left me in the cage. I was caught a little old for civilizing."

"Maybe. I don't think so. Anyway, I'm reminding you," Ashton said. Stark said, with no particular bitterness, "You don't have to get sentimental. I know it's your job to take me in."

Ashton said deliberately, "I won't take you in, Eric, unless you make me." He went on then, rapidly, before Stark could answer. "You've got a twenty-year sentence hanging over you, for running guns to the Middle-Swamp tribes when they revolted against Terro-Venusian Metals, and a couple of similar jobs. All right. So I know why you did it, and I won't say I don't agree with you. But you put yourself outside the law, and that's that. Now you're on your way to Valkis. You're headed into a mess that'll put you on Luna for life, the next time you're caught."

"And this time you don't agree with me."

"No. Why do you think I broke my neck to catch you before you got there?" Ashton bent closer, his face very intent. "Have you made any deal with Delgaun of Valkis? Did he send for you?"

"He sent for me, but there's no deal yet. I'm on the beach. Broke. I got a message from this Delgaun, whoever he is, that there was going to be a private war back in the Drylands, and he'd pay me to help fight it. After all, that's my business."

Ashton shook his head.

"This isn't a private war, Eric. It's something a lot bigger and nastier than that. The Martian Council of City-States and the Earth Commission are both in a cold sweat, and nobody can find out exactly what's going on. You know what the Low-Canal towns are--Valkis, Jekkara, Barrakesh. No law-abiding Martian, let alone an Earthman, can last five minutes in them. And the back-blocks are absolutely verboten. So all we get is rumors.

"Fantastic rumors about a barbarian chief named Kynon, who seems to be promising heaven and earth to the tribes of Kesh and Shun--some wild stuff about the ancient cult of the Ramas that everybody thought was dead a thousand years ago. We know that Kynon is tied up somehow with Delgaun, who is a most efficient bandit, and we know that some of the top criminals of the whole System are filtering in to join them. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrod of Callisto Colony--and, I believe, your old comrade in arms, Luhar the Venusian."

Stark gave a slight start, and Ashton smiled briefly.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I heard about that." Then he sobered. "You can figure that set-up for yourself, Eric. The barbarians are going to go out and fight some kind of a holy war, to suit the entirely unholy purposes of men like Delgaun and the others. Half a world is going to be raped, blood is going to run deep in the Drylands--and it will all be barbarian blood spilled for a lying promise, and the carrion crows of Valkis will get fat on it. Unless, somehow, we can stop it."

He paused, then said flatly, "I want you to go to Valkis, Eric--but as my agent. I won't put it on the grounds that you'd be doing civilization a service. You don't owe anything to civilization, Lord knows. But you might save a lot of your own kind of people from getting slaughtered, to say nothing of the border-state Martians who'll be the first to get

Kynon's axe.

"Also, you could wipe that twenty-year hitch on Luna off the slate, maybe even work up a desire to make a man of yourself, instead of a sort of tiger wandering from one kill to the next." He added, "If you live." Stark said slowly, "You're clever, Ashton. You know I've got a feeling for all planetary primitives like those who raised me, and you appeal to that."

"Yes," said Ashton, "I'm clever. But I'm not a liar. What I've told you is true."

Stark carefully ground out the cigarette beneath his heel. Then he looked up.

"Suppose I agree to become your agent in this, and go off to Valkis. What's to prevent me from forgetting all about you, then?" Ashton said softly, "Your word, Eric. You get to know a man pretty well when you know him from boyhood on up. Your word is enough." There was a silence, and then Stark held out his hand. "All right, Simon--but only for this one deal. After that, no promises."

"Fair enough." They shook hands.

"I can't give you any suggestions," Ashton said. "You're on your own, completely. You can get in touch with me through the Earth Commission office in Tarak. You know where that is?"

Stark nodded. "On the Dryland Border."

"Good luck to you, Eric."

He turned, and they walked back together to where the three men waited. Ashton nodded, and they began to dismantle the Banning.

Neither they nor Ashton looked back, as they rode away.

Stark watched them go. He filled his lungs with the cold air, and stretched. Then he roused the beast out of the sand. It had rested, and was willing to carry him again as long as he did not press it. He set off again, across the desert.

The ridge grew as he approached it, looming into a low mountain chain much worn by the ages. A pass opened before him, twisting between the hills of barren rock.

He traversed it, coming out at the farther end above the basin of a dead sea. The lifeless land stretched away into darkness, a vast waste of desolation more lonely than even the desert. And between the sea-bottom and the foothills, Stark saw the lights of Valkis.

II

THERE WERE MANY lights, far below. Tiny pinpricks of flame where torches burned in the streets beside the Low-Canal--the thread of black water that was all that remained of a forgotten ocean.

Stark had never been here before. Now he looked at the city that sprawled down the slope under the low moons, and shivered, the primitive twitching of the nerves that an animal feels in the presence of death. For the streets where the torches flared were only a tiny part of Valkis. The life of the city had flowed downward from the cliff-tops, following the dropping level of the sea. Five cities, the oldest scarcely recognizable as a place of human habitation. Five harbors, the docks and quays still standing, half buried in the dust.

Five ages of Martian history, crowned on the topmost level with the ruined palace of the old pirate kings of Valkis. The towers still stood,

broken but indomitable, and in the moonlight they had a sleeping look, as though they dreamed of blue water and the sound of waves, and of tall ships coming in heavy with treasure.

Stark picked his way slowly down the steep descent. There was something fascinating to him in the stone houses, roofless and silent in the night. The paving blocks still showed the rutting of wheels where carters had driven to the marketplace, and princes had gone by in gilded chariots. The quays were scarred where ships had lain against them, rising and falling with the tides. Stark's senses had developed in a strange school, and the thin veneer of civilization he affected had not dulled them. Now it seemed to him that the wind had the echoes of voices in it, and the smell of spices and fresh-spilled blood.

He was not surprised when, in the last level above the living town, armed men came out of the shadows and stopped him.

They were lean, dark men, very wiry and light of foot, and their faces were the faces of wolves--not primitive wolves at all but beasts of prey that had been civilized for so many thousands of years that they could afford to forget it.

They were most courteous, and Stark would not have cared to disobey their requests.

He gave his name. "Delgaun sent for me."

The leader of the Valkisians nodded his narrow head. "You're expected." His sharp eyes had taken in every feature of the Earthman, and Stark knew that his description had been memorized down to the last detail. Valkis guarded its doors with care.

"Ask in the city," said the sentry. "Anyone can direct you to the

palace." Stark nodded and went on, down through the long-dead streets in the moonlight and the silence.

With shocking suddenness, he was plunged into the streets of the living. It was very late now, but Valkis was awake and stirring. Seething, rather. The narrow twisting ways were crowded. The laughter of women came down from the flat roofs. Torchlight flared, gold and scarlet, lighting the wine-shops, making blacker the shadows of the alley-mouths.

Stark left his beast at a serai on the edge of the canal. The paddocks were already jammed. Stark recognized the long-legged brutes of the Dryland breed, and as he left a caravan passed him, coming in, with a jangling of bronze bangles and a great hissing and stamping in the dust. The riders were tall barbarians--Keshi, Stark thought, from the way they braided their tawny hair. They wore plain leather, and their blue-eyed women rode like queens.

Valkis was full of them. For days, it seemed, they must have poured in across the dead sea bottom, from the distant oases and the barren deserts of the backblocks. Brawny warriors of Kesh and Shun, making holiday beside the Low-Canal, where there was more water than any of them had seen in their lives.

They were in Valkis, these barbarians, but they were not part of it. Shouldering his way through the streets, Stark got the peculiar flavor of the town, that he guessed could never be touched or changed by anything. In the square, a girl danced to the music of harp and drum. The air was heavy with the smell of wine and burning pitch and incense. A lithe, swart Valkisian in his bright kilt and jewelled girdle leaped out and danced with the girl, his teeth flashing as he whirled and postured. In the end he bore her off, laughing, her black hair hanging down his back.

Women looked at Stark. Women graceful as cats, bare to the waist, their skirts slit at the sides above the thigh, wearing no ornaments but the tiny golden bells that are the particular property of the Low-Canal towns, so that the air is always filled with their delicate, wanton chiming. Valkis had a laughing, wicked soul. Stark had been in many places in his life, but never one before that beat with such a pulse of evil, incredibly ancient, but strong and gay.

He found the palace at last--a great rambling structure of quarried stone, with doors and shutters of beaten bronze closed against the dust and the incessant wind. He gave his name to the guard and was taken inside, through halls hung with antique tapestries, the flagged floors worn hollow by countless generations of sandalled feet.

Again, Stark's half-wild senses told him that life within these walls had not been placid. The very stones whispered of age-old violence, the shadows were heavy with the lingering ghosts of passion.

He was brought before Delgaun, the lord of Valkis, in the big central room that served as his headquarters.

Delgaun was lean and catlike, after the fashion of his race. His black hair showed a stippling of silver, and the hard beauty of his face was strongly marked, the lines drawn deep and all the softness of youth long gone away. He wore a magnificent harness, and his eyes, under fine dark brows, were like drops of hot gold.

He looked up as the Earthman came in, one swift penetrating glance. Then he said, "You're Stark."

There was something odd about those yellow eyes, bright and keen as a killer hawk's yet somehow secret, as though the true thoughts behind them would never show through. Instinctively, Stark disliked the man.

But he nodded and came up to the council table, turning his attention to the others in the room. A handful of Martians--Low Canallers, chief and fighting men from their ornaments and their proud looks--and several outlanders, their conventional garments incongruous in this place.

Stark knew them all. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrodd of Callisto Colony--and Luhar of Venus. Pirates, thieves, renegades, and each one an expert in his line.

Ashton was right. There was something big, something very big and very ugly, shaping between Valkis and the Drylands.

But that was only a quick passing thought in Stark's mind. It was on Luhar that his attention centered. Bitter memory and hatred had come to savage life within him as soon as he saw the Venusian.

The man was handsome. A cashiered officer of the crack Venusian Guards, very slim, very elegant, his pale hair cropped short and curling, his dark tunic fitting him like a second skin.

He said, "The aborigine! I thought we had enough barbarians here without sending for more."

Stark said nothing. He began to walk toward Luhar. Luhar said sharply,

"There's no use in getting nasty, Stark. Past scores are past. We're on the same side now." The Earthman spoke, then, with a peculiar gentleness.

"We were on the same side once before. Against Terro-Venus Metals. Remember?"

"I remember very well!" Luhar was speaking now not to Stark alone, but to everyone in the room. "I remember that your innocent barbarian friends had me tied to the block there in the swamps, and that you were watching the whole thing with honest pleasure. If the Company men hadn't come along, I'd be screaming there yet."

"You sold us out," Stark said. "You had it coming." He continued to walk toward Luhar.

Delgaun spoke. He did not raise his voice, yet Stark felt the impact of his command.

"There will be no fighting here," Delgaun said. "You are both hired mercenaries, and while you take my pay you will forget your private quarrels. Do you understand?"

Luhar nodded and sat down, smiling out of the corner of his mouth at Stark, who stood looking with narrowed eyes at Delgaun. He was still half blind with his anger against Luhar. His hands ached for the kill. But even so, he recognized the power in Delgaun.

A sound shockingly akin to the growl of a beast echoed in his throat. Then, gradually, he relaxed. The man Delgaun he would have challenged. But to do so would wreck the mission that he had promised to carry out here for Ashton. He shrugged and joined the others at the table.

Walsh of Terra rose abruptly and began to prowl back and forth.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" he demanded. Delgaun poured wine into a bronze goblet. "Don't expect me to know," he snapped. He shoved the flagon along the table toward Stark. Stark helped himself. The wine was warm and sweet on his tongue. He drank slowly, sitting relaxed and patient, while the others smoked

nervously or rose to pace up and down.

Stark wondered what, or who, they were waiting for. But he did not ask. Time went by.

Stark raised his head, listening. "What's that?" Their duller ears had heard nothing, but Delgaun rose and flung open the shutters of the window near him.

The Martian dawn, brilliant and clear, flooded the dead sea bottom with harsh light. Beyond the black line of the canal a caravan was coming toward Valkis through the blowing dust.

It was no ordinary caravan. Warriors rode before and behind, their spearheads blazing in the sunrise. Jewelled trappings on the beasts, a litter with curtains of crimson silk, barbaric splendor. Clear and thin on the air came the wild music of pipes and the deep-throated throbbing of drums. Stark guessed without being told who it was that rode out of the desert like a king.

Delgaun made a harsh sound in his throat. "It's Kynon, at last!" he said, and swung around from the window. His eyes sparkled with some private amusement.

"Let us go and welcome the Giver of Life!"

Stark went with them, out into the crowded streets. A silence had fallen on the town. Valkisian and barbarian alike were caught now in a breathless excitement, pressing through the narrow ways, flowing toward the canal. Stark found himself beside Delgaun in the great square of the slave market, standing on the auction block, above the heads of the throng. The stillness, the expectancy of the crowd were uncanny...

To the measured thunder of drums and the wild skirling of desert-pipes, Kynon of Shun came into Valkis.

III

STRAIGHT INTO the square of the slave market the caravan came, and the people pressed back against the walls to make way for them. Stamping of padded hoofs on the stones, ring and clash of harness, brave glitter of spears and the great two-handed broadswords of the Drylands, with drumbeats to shake the heart and the savage cry of the pipes to set the blood leaping. Stark could not restrain an appreciative thrill in himself.

The advance guard reached the slave block. Then, with deafening abruptness, the drummers crossed their sticks and the pipers ceased, and there was utter silence in the square.

It lasted for almost a minute, and then from every barbarian throat the name of Kynon roared out until the stones of the city echoed with it. A man leaped from the back of his mount to the block standing at its outer edge where all could see, his hands flung up.

"I greet you, my brothers!"

And the cheering went on.

Stark studied Kynon, surprised that he was so young. He had expected a gray-bearded prophet, and instead, here was a brawny-shouldered man of war standing as tall as himself.

Kynon's eyes were a bright, compelling blue, and his face was the face of a young eagle. His voice had deep music in it--the kind of voice that can sway crowds to madness. Stark looked from him to the

rapt faces of the people--even the Valkisians had caught the mood--and thought that Kynon was the most dangerous man he had ever seen. This tawny-haired barbarian in his kilt of bronze-bossed leather was already half a god.

Kynon shouted to the captain of his warriors, "Bring the captive and the old man!" Then he turned again to the crowd, urging them to silence. When at last the square was still, his voice rang challengingly across it.

"There are still those who doubt me. Therefore I have come to Valkis, and this day--now! I will show proof that I have not lied!" A roar and a mutter from the crowd. Kynon's men were lifting to the block a tottering ancient so bowed with years that he could barely stand, and a youth of Terran stock. The boy was in chains. The old man's eyes burned, and he looked at the boy beside him with a terrible joy.

Stark settled down to watch. The litter with the crimson curtains was now beside the block. A girl, a Valkisian, stood beside it, looking up. It seemed to Stark that her green eyes rested on Kynon with a smouldering anger. He glanced away from the serving girl, and saw that the curtains were partly open. A woman lay on the cushions within. He could not see much of her, except that her hair was like dark flame and she was smiling, looking at the old man and the naked boy. Then her glance, very dark in the shadows of the litter, shifted away and Stark followed it and saw Delgaun. Every muscle of Delgaun's body was drawn taut, and he seemed unable to look away from the woman in the litter.

Stark smiled, very slightly. The outlanders were cynically absorbed in what was going on. The crowd had settled again to that silent, breathless tension. The sun blazed down out of the empty sky. The dust blew, and the wind was sharp with the smell of living flesh.

The old man reached out and touched the boy's smooth shoulder, and his gums showed bluish as he laughed.

Kynon was speaking again.

"There are still those who doubt me, I say! Those who scoffed when I said that I possessed the ancient secret of the Ramas of long ago--the secret by which one man's mind may be transferred into another's body. But none of you after today will doubt that I hold that secret!

"I, myself, am not a Rama." He glanced down along his powerful frame, half-consciously flexing his muscles, and laughed. "Why should I be a Rama? I have no need, as yet, for the Sending-on of Minds!" Answering laughter, half ribald, from the crowd. "No," said Kynon. "I am not a Rama. I am a man like you. Like you, I have no wish to grow old, and in the end, to die." He swung abruptly to the old man.

"You, Grandfather! Would you not wish to be young again--to ride out to battle, to take the woman of your choice?"

The old man wailed, "Yes! Yes!" and his gaze dwelt hungrily upon the boy.

"And you shall be!" The strength of a god rang in Kynon's voice. He turned again to the crowd and cried out, "For years I suffered in the desert alone, searching for the lost secret of the Ramas. And I found it, my brothers! I alone--in these two hands I hold it, and with it I shall begin a new era for our Dryland races!

"There will be fighting, yes. There will be bloodshed. But when that is over and the men of Kesh and Shun are free from their ancient bondage of thirst and the men of the Low-Canals have regained their own--then I shall give new life, unending life, to all who have followed

me. The aged and lamed and wounded can choose new bodies from among the captives. There will be no more age, no more sickness, no more death!"

A rippling, shivering sigh from the crowd. Eyeballs gleaming in the bitter light, mouths open on the hunger that is nearest to the human soul.

"Lest anyone still doubt my promise," said Kynon, "watch. Watch--and I will show you!"

They watched. Not stirring, hardly breathing, they watched. The drums struck up a slow and solemn beat. The captain of the warriors, with an escort of six men, marched to the litter and took from the woman's hands a bundle wrapped in silks. Bearing it as though it were precious beyond belief, he came to the block and lifted it up, and Kynon took it from him. The silken wrappings fluttered loose, fell away. And in Kynon's hands gleamed two crystal crowns and a shining rod. He held them high, the sunlight glancing in cold fire from the crystal.

"Behold!" he said. "The Crowns of the Ramas!" The crowd drew breath then, one long rasping Ah!

The solemn drumbeat never faltered. It was as though the pulse of the whole world throbbed within it. Kynon turned. The old man began to tremble. Kynon placed one crown on his wrinkled scalp, and the tottering creature winced as though in pain, but his face was ecstatic. Relentlessly, Kynon crowned with the second circlet the head of the frightened boy.

"Kneel," he said.

They knelt. Standing tall above them, Kynon held the rod in his two

hands, between the crystal crowns.

Light was born in the rod. It was no reflection of the sun. Blue and brilliant, it flashed along the rod and leaped from it to wake an answering brilliance in the crowns, so that the old man and the youth were haloed with a chill, supernal fire.

The drumbeat ceased. The old man cried out. His hands plucked feebly at his head, then went to his breast and clenched there. Quite suddenly he fell forward over his knees. A convulsive tremor shook him. Then he lay still. The boy swayed and then fell forward also, with a clashing of chains. The light died out of the crowns. Kynon stood a moment longer, rigid as a statue, holding the rod which still flickered with blue lightning. Then that also died.

Kynon lowered the rod. In a ringing voice he cried, "Arise, grandfather!" The boy stirred. Slowly, very slowly, he rose to his feet. Holding out his hands, he stared at them, and then touched his thighs, and his flat belly, and the deep curve of his chest. Up the firm young throat the wondering fingers went, to the smooth cheeks, to the thick fair hair above the crown. A cry broke from him.

With the perfect accent of the Drylands, the Earth boy cried in Martian, "I am in the youth's body! I am young again!"

A scream, a wail of ecstasy, burst from the crowd. It swayed like a great beast, white faces turned upward. The boy fell down and embraced Kynon's knees.

Eric John Stark found that he himself was trembling slightly. He glanced at Delgaun and the outlanders. The Valkisian wore a look of intense satisfaction under his mask of awe. The others were almost as rapt and open-mouthed as the crowd.

Stark turned his head slightly and looked down at the litter. One white hand was already drawing the curtains, so that the scarlet silk appeared to shake with silent laughter. The serving girl beside it had not moved. She looked up at Kynon, and there was nothing in her eyes but hate. After that there was bedlam, the rush and trample of the crowd, the beating of drums, the screaming of pipes, deafening uproar. The crowns and the crystal rod were wrapped again and taken away. Kynon raised up the boy and struck off the chains of captivity. He mounted, with the boy beside him. Delgaun walked before him through the streets, and so did the outlanders. The body of the old man was disregarded, except by some of Kynon's barbarians who wrapped it in a white cloth and took it away.

Kynon of Shun came in triumph to Delgaun's palace. Standing beside the litter, he gave his hand to the woman, who stepped out and walked beside him through the bronze door.

The women of Shun are tall and strong, bred to stand beside their men in war as well as love, and this red-haired daughter of the Drylands was enough to stop a man's heart with her proud step and her white shoulders, and her eyes that were the color of smoke. Stark's gaze followed her from a distance. Presently in the council room were gathered Delgaun and the outlanders, Kynon and his bright-haired queen--and no other Martians but those three. Kynon sprawled out in the high seat at the head of the table. His face was beaming. He wiped the sweat off it, and then filled a goblet with wine, looking around the room with his bright blue eyes.

"Fill up, gentlemen. I'll give you a toast." He lifted the goblet. "Here's to the secret of the Ramas, and the gift of life!"

Stark put down his goblet, still empty. He stared directly at Kynon.

"You have no secret," said Stark deliberately. Kynon sat perfectly still,

except that, very slowly, he put his own goblet down. Nobody else moved.

Stark's voice sounded loud in the stillness.

"Furthermore," he said, "that demonstration in the square was a lie from beginning to end."

IV

STARK'S WORDS had the effect of an electric shock on the listeners. Delgaun's black brows went up, and the woman came forward a little to stare at the Earthman with profound interest.

Kynon asked a question, of nobody in particular. "Who," he demanded, "is this great black ape?"

Delgaun told him.

"Ah, yes," said Kynon. "Eric John Stark, the wild man from Mercury." He scowled threateningly. "Very well--explain how I lied in the square!"

"Certainly. First of all, the Earth boy was a prisoner. He was told what he had to do to save his neck, and then was carefully coached in his part. Second, the crystal rod and the crowns are a fake. You used a simple Purcell unit in the rod to produce an electronic brush discharge. That made the blue light. Third, you gave the old man poison, probably by means of a sharp point on the crown. I saw him wince when you put it on him." Stark paused. "The old man died. The boy went through his sham. And that was that."

Again there was a flat silence. Luhar crouched over the table, his face avid with hope. The woman's eyes dwelt on Stark and did not

turn away. Then, suddenly, Kynon laughed. He roared with it until the tears ran.

"It was a good show, though," he said at last. "Damned good. You'll have to admit that. The crowd swallowed it, horn, hoofs and hide." He got up and came round to Stark, clapping him on the shoulder, a blow that would have laid a lesser man flat.

"I like you, wild man. Nobody else here had the guts to speak out, but I'll give you odds they were all thinking the same thing." Stark said, "Just where were you, Kynon, during those years you were supposed to be suffering alone in the desert?"

"Curious, aren't you? Well, I'll let you in on a secret." Kynon lapsed abruptly into perfectly good colloquial English. "I was on Terra, learning about things like the Purcell electronic discharge." Reaching over, he poured wine for Stark and held it out to him. "Now you know. Now we all know. So let's wash the dust out of our throats and get down to business." Stark said, "No."

Kynon looked at him. "What now?"

"You're lying to your people," Stark said flatly. "You're making false promises, to lead them into war."

Kynon was genuinely puzzled by Stark's anger. "But of course!" he said. "Is there anything new or strange in that?"

Luhar spoke up, his voice acid with hate. "Watch out for him, Kynon. He'll sell you out, he'll cut your throat, if he thinks it best for the barbarians." Delgaun said, "Stark's reputation is known all over the system. There's no need to tell us that again."

"No." Kynon shook his head, looking very candidly at Stark. "We sent

for you, didn't we, knowing that? All right."

He stepped back a little, so that the others were included in what he was going to say.

"My people have a just cause for war. They go hungry and thirsty, while the City-States along the Dryland border hog all the water sources and grow fat. Do you know what it means to watch your children die crying for water on a long march, to come at last to the oasis and find the well sanded in by a storm, to go on again, trying to save your people and your herd? Well, I do! I was born and bred in the Drylands, and many a time I've cursed the border states with a tongue like a dry stick.

"Stark, you should know the workings of the barbarian mind as well as I do. The men of Kesh and Shun are traditional enemies. Raiding and thieving, open warfare over water and grass. I had to give them a rallying point--faith strong enough to unite them. Resurrecting the old Rama legend was the only hope I had. And it has worked. The tribes are one people now. They can go on and take what belongs to them--the right to live. I'm not really so far out in my promise, at that. Now do you understand?"

Stark studied him, with his cold cat-eyes. "Where do the men of Valkis come in--the men of Jekkara and Barrakesh? Where do we come in, the hired bravos?" Kynon smiled. It was a perfectly sincere smile, and it had no humor in it, only a great pride and a cheerful cruelty.

"We're going to create an empire," he said softly. "The City-States are disorganized, too starved or too fat to fight. And Earth is taking us over. Before long, Mars would be hardly more than another Luna. We're going to build a power out of dust and blood--and there will be loot in plenty to go round."

"That's where my men come in," said Delgaun, and laughed. "We Low-Canallers live by rapine."

"And you," said Kynon, "the 'hired braves,' are in it to help. I need you and the Venusian, Stark, to train my men, to plan campaigns, to give me all you know of guerrilla fighting. Knighton has a fast cruiser. He'll bring us supplies from outside. Walsh is a genius, they tell me, at fashioning weapons. Themis is a mechanic, and also the cleverest thief this side of hell--saving your presence, Delgaun! Arrod organized and bossed the Brotherhood of the Little Worlds, which had the Patrol going mad for years. He can do the same for us. So there you have it. Now, Stark, what do you say?" The Earthman answered slowly, "I'll go along with you--as long as no harm comes to the tribes."

Kynon laughed. "No need to worry about that."

"Just one more question," Stark said. "What's going to happen when the people find out that this Rama stuff of yours is just a fake?"

"They won't," said Kynon. "The crowns will be destroyed in battle, and it will be very tragic, but very final. No one knows how to make more of them. Oh, I can handle the people! They'll be happy enough, with good land and water." He looked around and then said plaintively, "And now can we sit down and drink like civilized men?"

They sat. The wine went round, and the vultures of Valkis drank to each other's luck and loot, and Stark learned that the woman's name was Berild. Kynon was happy. He had made his point with the people, and he was celebrating. But Stark noticed that though his tongue grew thick, it did not loosen.

Luhar grew steadily more morose and silent, glancing covertly across

the table at Stark. Delgaun toyed with his goblet, and his yellow gaze which gave nothing away moved restlessly between Berild and Stark. Berild drank not at all. She sat a little apart, with her face in shadow, and her red mouth smiled. Her thoughts, too, were her own secret. But Stark knew that she was still watching him, and he knew that Delgaun was aware of it. Presently Kynon said, "Delgaun and I have some talking to do, so I'll bid you gentlemen farewell for the present. You, Stark, and Luhar--I'm going back into the desert at midnight, and you're going with me, so you'd better get some sleep."

Stark nodded. He rose and went out, with the others. An attendant showed him to his quarters, in the north wing. Stark had not rested for twenty-four hours, and he was glad of the chance to sleep.

He lay down. The wine spun in his head, and Berild's smile mocked him. Then his thoughts turned to Ashton, and his promise. Presently he slept, and dreamed.

He was a boy on Mercury again, running down a path that led from a cave mouth to the floor of a valley, one of the deep, interconnecting valleys of air. Above him the mountains rose into the sky and were lost beyond the shallow atmosphere. The rocks danced in the terrible heat, but the soles of his feet were like iron, and trod them lightly. He was quite naked. The blaze of the sun between the valley walls was like the shining heart of Hell. It did not seem to the boy N'Chaka that it could ever be cold again, yet he knew that when darkness came there would be ice on the shallows of the little stream. The gods were constantly at war.

He passed a place, ruined by earthquake. It was a mine, and N'Chaka remembered that when he had been very small he had lived there, with several white-skinned creatures shaped like himself. He went on without a second glance.

He was searching for Tilca. When he was old enough, he would mate with her. He wanted to hunt with her now, for she was fleet and as keen as he at scenting out the great lizards. He heard her voice calling his name. There was terror in it, and N'Chaka began to run. He saw her, crouched between two huge boulders, her light fur stained with blood.

A vast black-winged shadow swooped down upon him. It glared at him with its yellow eyes, and its long beak tore at him. He thrust his spear at it, but talons hooked into his shoulder, and the golden eyes were close to him, bright and full of death.

He knew those eyes. Tika screamed, but the sound faded, everything faded but those eyes. He sprang up, grappling with the thing...

A man's voice yelling, a man's hands thrusting him away. The dream receded. Stark came back to reality, dropping the scared attendant who had come to waken him.

The man cringed away from him. "Delgaun sent me --he wants you, in the council room." Then he turned and fled.

Stark shook himself. The dream had been terribly real. He went down to the council room. It was dusk now, and the torches were lighted. Delgaun was waiting, and Berild sat beside him at the table. They were alone there. Delgaun looked up, with his golden eyes.

"I have a job for you, Stark," he said. "You remember the captain of Kynon's men, in the square today?"

"I do."

"His name is Freka, and he's a good man, but he's addicted to a certain vice. He'll be up to his ears in it by now, and somebody has to

get him back by the time Kynon leaves. Will you see to it?"

Stark glanced at Berild. It seemed to him that she was amused, whether at him or at Delgaun he could not tell. He asked, "Where will I find him?"

"There's only one place where he can get his particular poison--Kala's, out on the edge of Valkis. It's in the old city, beyond the lower quays." Delgaun smiled. "You may have to be ready with your fists, Stark. Freka may not want to come."

Stark hesitated. Then, "I'll do my best," he said, and went out into the dusky streets of Valkis.

He crossed a square, heading away from the palace. A twisting lane swallowed him up. And quite suddenly, someone took his arm and said rapidly, "Smile at me, and then turn aside into the alley."

The hand on his arm was small and brown, the voice very pretty with its accompaniment of little chiming bells. He smiled, as she had bade him, and turned aside into the alley, which was barely more than a crack between two rows of houses.

Swiftly, he put his hands against the wall, so that the girl was prisoned between them. A green-eyed girl, with golden bells braided in her black hair, and impudent breasts bare above a jewelled girdle. A handsome girl, with a proud look to her.

The serving girl who had stood beside the litter in the square, and had watched Kynon with such bleak hatred.

"Well," said Stark. "And what do you want with me, little one?" She answered, "My name is Fianna. And I do not intend to kill you, neither will I run away."

Stark let his hands drop. "Did you follow me, Fianna?"

"I did. Delgaun's palace is full of hidden ways, and I know them all. I was listening behind the panel in the council room. I heard you speak out against Kynon, and I heard Delgaun's order, just now."

So?

"So, if you meant what you said about tribes, you had better get away now, while you have the chance. Kynon lied to you. He will use you, and then kill you, as he will use and then destroy his own people." Her voice was hot with bitter fury.

Stark gave her a slow smile that might have meant anything, or nothing.

"You're a Valkisian, Fianna. What do you care what happens to the barbarians?" Her slightly tilted green eyes looked scornfully into his.

"I'm not trying to trap you, Earthman. I hate Kynon. And my mother was a woman of the desert."

She paused, then went on somberly, "Also I serve the lady Berild and I have learned many things. There is trouble coming, greater trouble than Kynon knows." She asked, suddenly, "What do you know of the Ramas?"

"Nothing," he answered, "except that they don't exist now, if they ever did." Fianna gave him an odd look. "Perhaps they don't. Will you listen to me, Earthman from Mercury? Will you get away, now that you know you're marked for death?"

Stark said, "No."

"Even if I tell you that Delgaun has set a trap for you at Kala's?"

"No. But I will thank you for your warning, Fianna." He bent and kissed her, because she was very young and honest. Then he turned and went on his way.

V

NIGHT CAME SWIFTLY. Stark left behind him the torches and the laughter and the sounding harps, coming into the streets of the old city where there was nothing but silence and the light of the low moons.

He saw the lower quays, great looming shapes of marble rounded and worn by time, and went toward them. Presently he found that he was following a faint but definite path, threaded between the ancient houses. It was very still, so that the dry whisper of the drifting dust was audible. He passed under the shadow of the quays, and turned into a broad way that had once led up from the harbor. A little way ahead, on the other side, he saw a tall building half fallen in ruin. Its windows were shuttered, barred with light, and from it came the sound of voices and a thin thread of music, very reedy and evil.

Stark approached it, slipping through the ragged shadows as though he had no more weight to him than a drift of smoke. Once a door banged and a man came out of Kala's and passed by, going down to Valkis. Stark saw his face in the moonlight. It was the face of a beast, rather than a man. He muttered to himself as he went, and once he laughed, and Stark felt a loathing in him. He waited until the sound of footsteps had died away. The ruined houses gave no sign of danger. A lizard rustled between the stones, and that was all. The moonlight lay bright and still on Kala's door.

Stark found a little shard of rock and tossed it, so that it made a sharp snicking sound against the shadowed wall beyond him. Then he held his breath, listening.

No one, nothing, stirred. Only the dry wind stirred in the empty houses. Stark went out, across the open space, and nothing happened. He flung open the door of Kala's dive.

Yellow light spilled out, and a choking wave of hot and stuffy air. Inside, there were tall lamps with quartz lenses, each of which poured down a beam of throbbing, gold-orange light. And in the little pools of radiance, on filthy furs and cushions on the floor, lay men and women whose faces were slack and bestial.

Stark realized now what secret vice Kala sold here.

Shanga--the going-back--the radiation that caused temporary artificial atavism and let men wallow for a time in beasthood. It was supposed to have been stamped out, years ago. But it still persisted, in places like this outside the law.

He looked for Freka and recognized the tall barbarian. He was sprawled under one of the Shanga lamps, eyes closed, face brutish, growling and twitching in sleep like the beast he had temporarily become.

A voice spoke from behind Stark's shoulder. "I am Kala. What do you wish, Outlander?"

He turned. Kala might have been beautiful once, a thousand years ago as you reckon sin. She wore still the sweet chiming bells in her hair, and Stark thought of Fianna. The woman's ravaged face turned him sick. It was like the reedy, piping music, woven out of the very heart of evil. Yet her eyes were shrewd, and he knew that she had not

missed his searching look around the room, nor his interest in Freka. There was a note of warning in her voice. He did not want trouble, yet. Not until he found some hint of the trap Fianna had told him of.

He said, "Bring me wine."

"Will you try the lamp of Going-back, Outlander? It brings much joy."

"Perhaps later. Now, I wish wine."

She went away, clapping her hands for a slatternly wench who came between the sprawled figures with an earthen mug. Stark sat down beside a table, where his back was to the wall and he could see both the door and the whole room. Kala had returned to her own heap of furs by the door, but her basilisk eyes were alert.

Stark made a pretense of drinking, but his mind was very busy, very cold. Perhaps this, in itself, was the trap. Freka was temporarily a beast. He would fight, and Kala would shriek, and the other dull-eyed brutes would rise and fight also.

But he would have needed no warning about that--and Delgaun himself had said there would be trouble.

No. There was something more.

He let his gaze wander over the room. It was large, and there were other rooms off of it, the openings hung with ragged curtains. Through the rents, Stark could see others of Kala's customers sprawled under Shanga-lamps, and some of these had gone so far back from humanity that they were hideous to behold. But still there was no sign of danger to himself.

There was only one odd thing. The room nearest to where Freka sat

was empty, and its curtains were only partly drawn.

Stark began to brood on the emptiness of that room.

He beckoned Kala to him. "I will try the lamp," he said. "But I wish privacy. Have it brought to that room, there."

Kala said, "That room is taken."

"But I see no one!"

"It is taken, it is paid for, and no one may enter. I will have the lamp brought here."

"No," said Stark. "The hell with it. I'm going." He flung down a coin and went out. Moving swiftly outside, he placed his eye to a crack in the nearest shutter, and waited.

Luhar of Venus came out of the empty room. His face was worried, and Stark smiled. He went back and stood flat against the wall beside the door. In a moment it opened and the Venusian came out, drawing his gun as he did so. Stark jumped him.

Luhar let out one angry cry. His gun went off, a vicious streak of flame across the moonlight, and then Stark's great hand crushed the bones of his wrist together so that he dropped it clashing on the stones. He whirled around, raking Stark's face with his nails as he clawed for the Earthman's eyes, and Stark hit him. Luhar fell, rolling over, and before he could scramble up again Stark had picked up the gun and thrown it away into the ruins across the street.

Luhar came up from the pavement in one catlike spring. Stark fell with him, back through Kala's door, and they rolled together among the foul fur and cushions. Luhar was built of spring steel, with no

softness in him anywhere, and his long fingers were locked around Stark's throat. Kala screamed with fury. She caught a whip from among her cushions--a traditional weapon along the Low Canals--and began to lash the two men impartially, her hair flying in tangled locks across her face. The bestial figures under the lamps shambled to their feet, and growled. The long lash ripped Stark's shirt and the flesh of his back beneath it. He snarled and staggered to his feet, with Luhar still clinging to the death grip on his throat. He pushed Luhar's face away from him with both hands and threw himself forward, over a table, so that Luhar was crushed beneath him. The Venusian's breath left him with a whistling grunt. His fingers relaxed. Stark struck his hands away. He rose and bent over Luhar and picked him up, gripping him cruelly so that he turned white with the pain, and raised him high and flung him bodily into the growling, beast-faced men who were shambling toward him.

Kala leaped at Stark, cursing, striking him with the coiling lash. He turned. The thin veneer of civilization was gone from Stark now, erased in a second by the first hint of battle. His eyes blazed with a cold light. He took the whip out of Kala's hand and laid his palm across her evil face, and she fell and lay still.

He faced the ring of bestial, Shanga-sodden men who walled him off from what he had been sent to do. There was a reddish tinge to his vision, partly blood, partly sheer rage. He could see Freka standing erect in the corner, his head weaving from side to side brutishly.

Stark raised the whip and strode into the ring of men who were no longer quite men.

Hands struck and clawed him. Bodies reeled and fell away. Blank eyes glittered, and red mouths squealed, and there was a mingling of snarls and bestial laughter in his ears. The blood-lust had spread to these creatures now. They swarmed upon Stark and bore him down

with the weight of their writhing bodies.

They bit him and savaged him in a blind way, and he fought his way up again, shaking them off with his great shoulders, trampling them under his boots. The lash hissed and sang, and the smell of blood rose on the choking air. Freka's dazed, brutish face swam before Stark. The Martian growled and flung himself forward. Stark swung the loaded butt of the whip. It cracked solidly on the Shunni's temple, and he sagged into Stark's arms. Out of the corner of his eyes, Stark saw Luhar. He had risen and crept around the edge of the fight. He was behind Stark now, and there was a knife in his hand.

Hampered by Freka's weight, Stark could not leap aside. As Luhar rushed in, he crouched and went backward, his head and shoulders taking the Venusian low in the belly. He felt the hot kiss of the blade in his flesh, but the wound was glancing, and before Luhar could strike again, Stark twisted like a great cat and struck down. Luhar's skull rang on the flagging. The Earthman's fist rose and fell twice. After that, Luhar did not move.

Stark got to his feet. He stood with his knees bent and his shoulders flexed, looking from side to side, and the sound that came out of his throat was one of pure savagery.

He moved forward a step or two, half naked, bleeding, towering like a dark colossus over the lean Martians, and the brutish throng gave back from him. They had taken more mauling than they liked, and there was something about the Outlander's simple desire to rend them apart that penetrated even their Shanga-clouded minds.

Kala sat up on the floor, and snarled, "Get out." Stark stood a moment or two longer, looking at them. Then he lifted Freka to his feet and laid him over his shoulder like a sack of meal and went out, moving neither fast nor slow, but in a straight line, and way was made

for him.

He carried the Shunni down through the silent streets, and into the twisting, crowded ways of Valkis. There, too, the people stared at him and drew back, out of his path. He came to Delgaun's palace. The guards closed in behind him, but they did not ask that he stop.

Delgaun was in the council room, and Berild was still with him. It seemed that they had been waiting, over their wine and their private talk. Delgaun rose to his feet as Stark came in, so sharply that his goblet fell and spilled a red pool of wine at his feet.

Stark let the Shunni drop to the floor.

"I have brought Freka," he said. "Lunar is still at Kala's." He looked into Delgaun's eyes, golden and cruel, the eyes of his dream. It was hard not to kill.

Suddenly the woman laughed, very clear and ringing, and her laughter was all for Delgaun.

"Well done, wild man," she said to Stark. "Kynon is lucky to have such a captain. One word for the future, though--watch out for Freka. He won't forgive you this."

Stark said thickly, looking at Delgaun, "This hasn't been a night for forgiveness." Then he added, "I can handle Freka." Berild said, "I like you, wild man." Her eyes dwelt on Stark's face, curious, compelling. "Ride beside me when we go. I would know more about you." And she smiled.

A dark flush crept over Delgaun's face. In a voice tight with fury, he said,

"Perhaps you've forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in this barbarian, this creature of an hour!"

He would have said more in his anger, but Berild said sharply, "We will not speak of time. Go now, Stark. Be ready at midnight." Stark went. And as he went, his brow was furrowed deep by a strange doubt.

VI

AT MIDNIGHT, in the great square of the slave market, Kynon's caravan formed again and went out of Valkis with thundering drums and skirling pipes. Delgaun was there to see them go, and the cheering of the people rang after them on the desert wind.

Stark rode alone. He was in a brooding mood and wanted no company, least of all that of the Lady Berild. She was beautiful, she was dangerous, and she belonged to Kynon, or to Delgaun, or perhaps to both of them. In Stark's experience, women like that were sudden death, and he wanted no part of her. At any rate, not yet.

Luhar rode ahead with Kynon. He had come dragging into the square at the mounting, his face battered and swollen, an ugly look in his eyes. Kynon gave one quick look from him to Stark, who had his own scars, and said harshly,

"Delgaun tells me there's a blood feud between you two, I want no more of it, understand? After you're paid off you can kill each other and welcome, but not until then. Is that clear?"

Stark nodded, keeping his mouth shut. Luhar muttered assent, and they had not looked at each other since.

Freka rode in his customary place by Kynon, which put him near to Luhar. It seemed to Stark that their beasts swung close together more often than was necessary from the roughness of the track.

The big barbarian captain sat rigidly erect in his saddle, but Stark had seen his face in the torchlight, sick and sweating, with the brute look still clouding his eyes. There was a purple mark on his temple, but Stark was quite sure that Berild had spoken the truth—Freka would not forgive him either the indignity or the hangover of his unfinished wallow under the lamps of Shanga. The dead sea bottom widened away under the black sky. As they left the lights of Valkis behind, winding their way over the sand and the ribs of coral, dropping lower with every mile into the vast basin, it was hard to believe that there could be life anywhere on a world that could produce such cosmic desolation.

The little moons fled away, trailing their eerie shadows over rock formations tortured into impossible shapes by wind and water, peering into clefts that seemed to have no bottom, turning the sand white as bone. The iron stars blazed, so close that the wind seemed edged with their frosty light. And in all that endless space nothing moved, and the silence was so deep that the coughing howl of a sand-cat far away to the east made Stark jump with its loudness.

Yet Stark was not oppressed by the wilderness. Born and bred to the wild and barren places, this desert was more kin to him than the cities of men. After a while there was a jangling of bangles behind him and Fianna came up. He smiled at her, and she said rather sullenly, "The Lady Berild sent me, to remind you of her wish."

Stark glanced to where the scarlet-curtained litter rocked along, and his eyes glinted.

"She's not one to let go of a thing, is she?"

"No." Fianna saw that no one was within earshot, and then said quietly, "Was it as I said, at Kala's?"

Stark nodded. "I think, little one, that I owe you my life. Luhar would have killed me as soon as I tackled Freka."

He reached over and touched her hand where it lay on the bridle. She smiled, a young girl's smile that seemed very sweet in the moonlight, honest and comradely.

It was odd to be talking of death with a pretty girl in the moonlight. Stark said, "Why does Delgaun want to kill me?"

"He gave no reason, when he spoke to the man from Venus. But perhaps I can guess. He knows that you're as strong as he is, and so he fears you. Also, the Lady Berild looked at you in a certain way."

"I thought Berild was Kynon's woman."

"Perhaps she is—for the time," answered Fianna enigmatically. Then she shook her head, glancing around with what was almost fear. "I have risked much already. Please—don't let it be known that I've spoken to you, beyond what I was sent to say."

Her eyes pleaded with him, and Stark realized with a shock that Fianna, too, stood on the edge of a quicksand.

"Don't be afraid," he said, and meant it. "We'd better go." She swung her beast around, and as she did so she whispered, "Be careful, Eric John Stark!"

Stark nodded. He rode behind her, thinking that he liked the sound of his name on her lips.

The Lady Berild lay among her furs and cushions, and even then there was no indolence about her. She was relaxed as a cat is, perfectly at ease and yet vibrant with life. In the shadows of the litter her skin showed silver-white and her loosened hair was a sweet darkness.

"Are you stubborn, wild man?" she asked. "Or do you find me distasteful?" He had not realized before how rich and soft her voice was. He looked down at the magnificent supple length of her, and said, "I find you most damnably attractive--and that's why I'm stubborn."

"Afraid?"

"I'm taking Kynon's pay. Should I take his woman also?" She laughed, half scornfully. "Kynon's ambitions leave no room for me. We have an agreement, because a king must have a queen--and he finds my counsel useful. You see, I am ambitious too! Apart from that, there is nothing." Stark looked at her, trying to read her smoke-gray eyes in the gloom. "And Delgaun?"

"He wants me, but..." She hesitated, and then went on, in a tone quite different from before, her voice low and throbbing with a secret pleasure as vast and elemental as the star-shot sky.

"I belong to no one," she said. "I am my own." Stark knew that for the moment she had forgotten him. He rode for a time in silence and then he said slowly, repeating Delgaun's words, "Perhaps you have forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in me, the creature of an hour."

He saw her start, and for a moment her eyes blazed and her breath was sharply drawn. Then she laughed, and said, "The wild man is also a parrot. And an hour can be a long time--as long as eternity, if

one wills it so."

"Yes," said Stark, "I have often thought so, waiting for death to come at me out of a crevice in the rocks. The great lizard stings, and his bite is fatal."

He leaned over in the saddle, his shoulders looming above hers, naked in the biting wind.

"My hours with women are short ones," he said. "They come after the battle, when there is time for such things. Perhaps then I'll come and see you." He spurred away and left her without a backward look, and the skin of his back tingled with the expectancy of a flying knife. But the only thing that followed him was an echo of disturbing laughter down the wind. Dawn came. Kynon beckoned Stark to his side, and pointed out at the cruel waste of sand, with here and there a reef of basalt black against the burning white.

"This is the country you will lead your men over. Learn it." He was speaking to Luhar as well. "Learn every water hole, every vantage point, every trail that leads toward the Border. There are no better fighters than the Dryland men when they're well led, and you must prove to them that you can lead. You'll work with their own chieftains--Freka, and the others you'll meet after we reach Sinharat."

Lunar said, "Sinharat?"

"My headquarters. It's about seven days' march--an island city, old as the moons. The Rama cult was strong there, legend has it, and it's a sort of holy, taboo place to the tribesmen. That's why I picked it." He took a deep breath and smiled, looking out over the dead sea bottom toward the Border, and his eyes held the same pitiless light as the sun that baked the desert.

Very soon, now, he said, more to himself than the others. "Only a handful of days before we drown the Border states in their own blood. And after that..." He laughed, very softly, and said no more. Stark could believe that what Berild said of him was true. There was a flame of ambition in Kynon that would let nothing stand in its way. He measured the size and the strength of the tall barbarian, the eagle look of his face and the iron that lay beneath his joviality. Then Stark, too, stared off toward the Border and wondered if he would ever see Tarak or hear Simon Ashton's voice again. For three days they marched without incident. At noon they made a dry camp and slept away the blazing hours, and then went on again under a darkening sky, a long line of tall men and rangy beasts, with the scarlet litter blooming like a strange flower in the midst of it. Jingling bridles and dust, and padded hoofs trampling the bones of the sea, toward the island city of Sinharat. Stark did not speak again to Berild, nor did she send for him. Fianna would pass him in the camp, and smile sidelong, and go on. For her sake, he did not stop her.

Neither Luhar nor Freka came near him. They avoided him pointedly, except when Kynon called them all together to discuss some point of strategy. But the two seemed to have become friends, and drank together from the same bottle of wine.

Stark slept always beside his mount, his back guarded and his gun loose. The hard lessons learned in his childhood had stayed with him, and if there was a footfall near him in the dust he woke often before the beast did. Toward morning of the fourth night the wind, that never seemed to falter from its steady blowing, began to drop. At dawn it was dead still, and the rising sun had a tinge of blood. The dust arose under the feet of the beasts and fell again where it had risen.

Stark began to sniff the air. More and more often he looked toward the north, where there was a long slope as flat as his palm that

stretched away farther than he could see.

A restless unease grew within him. Presently he spurred ahead to join Kynon.

"There is a storm coming," he said, and turned his head northward again. Kynon looked at him curiously.

"You even have the right direction," he said. "One might think you were a native." He, too, gazed with brooding anger at the long sweep of emptiness.

"I wish we were closer to the city. But one place is as bad as another when the storm wind blows, and the only thing to do is to keep moving. You're a dead dog if you stop--dead and buried."

He swore, with a curious admixture of Anglo-Saxon in his Martian profanity, as though this storm were a personal enemy.

"Pass the Word along to force it--dump whatever they have to to lighten the loads. And get Berild out of that damned litter. Stick by her, will you, Stark? I've got to stay here, at the head of the line. And don't get separated. Above all, don't get separated!"

Stark nodded and dropped back. He got Berild mounted, and they left the litter there, a bright patch of crimson on the sand, its curtains limp in the utter stillness.

Nobody talked much. The beasts were urged on to the top of their speed. They were nervous and fidgety, inclined to break out of line and run for it. The sun rose higher.

One hour.

The windless air shimmered. The silence lay upon the caravan with a

crushing hand. Stark went up and down the line, lending a hand to the sweating drovers with the pack animals that now carried only water skins and a bare supply of food. Fianna rode close beside Berild.

Two hours.

For the first time that day there was a sound in the desert. It came from far off, a moaning wail like the cry of a giantess in travail. It rushed closer, rising as it did so to a dry and bitter shriek that filled the whole sky, shook it, and tore it open, letting in all the winds of hell. It struck swiftly. One moment the air was clear and motionless. The next, it was blind with dust and screaming as it fled, tearing with demoniac fury at everything in its path.

Stark spurred toward the women, who were only a few feet away but already hidden by the veil of mingled dust and sand.

Someone blundered into him in the murk. Long hair whipped across his face and he reached out, crying "Fianna! Fianna!" A woman's hand caught his, and a voice answered, but he could not hear the words.

Then, suddenly, his beast was crowded by other scaly bodies. The woman's grip had broken. Hard masculine hands clawed at him. He could make out, dimly, the features of two men, close to him.

Luhar and Freka.

His beast gave a great lurch, and sprang forward. Stark was dragged from the saddle, to fall backward into the raging sand.

HE LAY half-stunned for a moment, his breath knocked out of him. There was a terrible reptilian screaming sounding thin through the roar of the wind. Vague shapes bolted past him, and twice he was nearly crushed by their trampling hoofs.

Luhar and Freka must have waited their chance. It was so beautifully easy. Leave Stark alone and afoot, and the storm and the desert between them would do the work, with no blame attaching to any man.

Stark got to his feet, and a human body struck him at the knees so that he went down again. He grappled with it, snarling, before he realized that the flesh between his hands was soft and draped in silken cloth. Then he saw that he was holding Berild.

"It was I," she gasped, "and not Fianna." Her words reached him very faintly, though he knew she was yelling at the top of her lungs. She must have been knocked from her own mount when Luhar thrust between them.

Gripping her tightly, so that she should not be blown away, Stark struggled up again. With all his strength, it was almost impossible to stand. Blinded, deafened, half strangled, he fought his way forward a few paces, and suddenly one of the pack-beasts loomed shadow-like beside him, going by with a rush and a squeal.

By the grace of Providence and his own swift reflexes, he caught its pack lashings, clinging with the tenacity of a man determined not to die. It floundered about, dragging them, until Berild managed to grasp its trailing halter rope. Between them, they fought the creature down. Stark clung to its head while the woman clambered to its back, twisting her arm through the straps of the pad. A silken scarf whipped toward them. He took it and tied it over the head of the beast so it could breathe, and after that it was quieter.

There was no direction, no sight of anything, in that howling inferno. The caravan seemed to have been scattered like a drift of autumn leaves. Already, in the few brief moments he had stood still, Stark's legs were buried to the knees in a substratum of sand that rolled like water. He pulled himself free and started on, going nowhere, remembering Kynon's words. Berild ripped her thin robe apart and gave him another strip of silk for himself. He bound it over his nose and eyes, and some of the choking and the blindness abated.

Stumbling, staggering, beaten by the wind as a child is beaten by a strong man, Stark went on, hoping desperately to find the main body of the caravan, and knowing somehow that the hope was futile.

The hours that followed were nightmare. He shut his mind to them, in a way that a civilized man would have found impossible. In his childhood there had been days, and nights, and the problems had been simple ones—how to survive one span of light that one might then survive the span of darkness that came after. One thing, one danger, at a time.

Now there was a single necessity. Keep moving. Forget tomorrow, or what happened to the caravan, or where the little Fianna with her bright eyes may be. Forget thirst, and the pain of breathing, and the fiery lash of sand on naked skin. Only don't stand still.

It was growing dark when the beast fell against a half-buried boulder and snapped its foreleg. Stark gave it a quick and merciful death. They took the straps from the pad and linked themselves together. Each took as much food as he could carry, and Stark shouldered the single skin of water that fortune had vouchsafed them.

They staggered on, and Berild did not whimper.

Night came, and still the storm wind blew. Stark wondered at the woman's strength, for he had to help her only when she fell. He had lost all feeling himself. His body was merely a thing that continued to move only because it had been ordered not to stop.

The haze in his own mind had grown as thick as the black obscurity of the night. Berild had ridden all day, but he had walked, and there was an end even to his strength. He was approaching it now, and was too weary even to be afraid.

He became aware at some indeterminate time that Berild had fallen and was dragging her weight against the straps. He turned blindly to help her up. She was saying something, crying his name, striking at him so that he should hear her words and understand.

At last he did. He pulled the wrappings from his face and breathed clean air. The wind had fallen. The sky was growing clear.

He dropped in his tracks and slept, with the exhausted woman half dead beside him.

Thirst brought them both awake in the early dawn. They drank from the skin, and then sat for a time looking at the desert, and at each other, thinking of what lay ahead.

"Do you know where we are?" Stark asked.

"Not exactly." Berild's face was shadowed with weariness. It had changed, and somehow, to Stark, it had grown more beautiful, because there was no weakness in it.

She thought a minute, looking at the sun. "The wind blew from the north," she said. "Therefore we have come south from the track. Sinharat lies that way, across the waste they call the Belly of Stones."

She pointed to the north and east.

"How far?"

"Seven, eight days, afoot."

Stark measured their supply of water and shook his head. "It'll be dry walking."

He rose and took up the skin, and Berild came beside him without a word. Her red hair hung loose over her shoulders. The rags of her silken robe had been torn away by the wind, leaving her only the loose skirt of the desert women, and her belt and collar of jewels.

She walked erect with a steady, swinging stride, and it was almost impossible for Stark to remember her as she had been, riding like a lazy queen in her scarlet litter.

There was no way to shelter themselves from the midday sun. The sun of Mars at its worst, however, was only a pale candle beside the sun of Mercury, and it did not bother Stark. He made Berild lie in the shadow of his own body, and he watched her face, relaxed and unfamiliar in sleep.

For the first time, then, he was conscious of a strangeness in her. He had seen so little of her before, in Valkis, and almost nothing on the trail. Now, there was little of her mind or heart that she could conceal from him. Or was there? There were moments, while she slept, when the shadows of strange dreams crossed her face. Sometimes, in the unguarded moment of waking, he would see in her eyes a look he could not read, and his primitive senses quivered with a vague ripple of warning.

Yet all through those blazing days and frosty nights, tortured with thirst

and weary to exhaustion, Berild was magnificent. Her white skin was darkened by the sun and her hair became a wild red mane, but she smiled and set her feet resolutely by his, and Stark thought she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

On the fourth day they climbed a scarp of limestone worn in ages past by the sea, and looked out over the place called the Belly of Stones. The sea-bottom curved downward below them into a sort of gigantic basin, the farther rim of which was lost in shimmering distance. Stark thought that never, even on Mercury, had he seen a place more cruel and utterly forsaken of gods or men.

It seemed as though some primal glacier must have met its death here in the dim dawn of Mars, hollowing out its own grave. The body of the glacier had melted away, but its bones were left. Bones of basalt, of granite and marble and porphyry, of every conceivable shape and color and size, picked up by the ice as it marched southward from the pole and dropped here as a cairn to mark its passing.

The Belly of Stones. Stark thought that its other name was Death. For the first time, Berild faltered. She sat down and bent her head over her hands.

"I am tired," she said. "Also, I am afraid." Stark asked, "Has it ever been crossed?"

"Once, that I know of. But they were a war party, mounted and well supplied." Stark looked out across the stones. "We will cross it," he said. Berild raised her head. "Somehow I believe you." She rose slowly and put her hands on his breast, over the strong beating of his heart.

"Give me your strength, wild man," she whispered. "I shall need it."

He drew her to him and kissed her, and it was a strange and painful kiss, for their lips were cracked and bleeding from their terrible thirst. Then they went down together into the place called the Belly of Stones.

VIII

THE DESERT had been a pleasant and kindly place. Stark looked back upon it with longing. And yet this inferno of glaring rock was so like the valleys of his boyhood that it did not occur to him to lie down and die. They rested for a time in the sheltered crevice under a great leaning slab of blood-red stone, moistening their swollen tongues with a few drops of stinking water from the skin. At nightfall they drank the last of it, but Berild would not let him throw the skin away.

Darkness, and a lunar silence. The chill air sucked the day's heat out of the rocks and the iron frost came down, so that Stark and the red-haired woman must keep moving or freeze.

Stark's mind grew clouded. He spoke from time to time, in a croaking whisper, dropping back into the harsh mother-tongue of the Twilight Belt. It seemed to him that he was hunting, as he had so many times before, in the waterless places—for the blood of the great lizard would save him from thirst. But nothing lived in the Belly of Stones. Nothing, but the two who crept and staggered across it under the low moons.

Berild fell, and could not rise again. Stark crouched beside her. Her face stared up at him, white in the moonlight, her eyes burning and strange.

"I will not die!" she whispered, not to him, but to the gods. "I will not die!"

And she clawed the sand and the bitter rocks, dragging herself onward. It was uncanny, the madness that she had for life.

Stark raised her up and carried her. His breath came in deep, sobbing gasps. After a while he, too, fell. He went on like a beast on all fours, dragging the woman.

He knew dimly that he was climbing. There was a glimmering of dawn in the sky. His hands slipped on a lip of sand and he went rolling down a smooth slope. At length he stopped and lay on his back like a dead thing. The sun was high when consciousness returned to him. He saw Berild lying near him and crawled to her, shaking her until her eyes opened. Her hands moved feebly and her lips formed the same four words. I will not die. Stark strained his eyes to the horizon, praying for a glimpse of Sinharat, but there was nothing, only emptiness and sand and stone. With great difficulty he got the woman to her feet, and for a while he had to support her. He tried to tell her that they must go on, but he could no longer form the words. He could only gesture and urge her forward, in the direction of the city.

But she refused to go. "Too far... die... without water..." He knew that she was right, but still he was not ready to give up. She began to move away from him, toward the south, and he thought that she had gone mad and was wandering. Then he saw that she was peering with awful intensity at the line of the scrap that formed this wall of the Belly of Stones. It rose into a great ridge, serrated like the backbone of a whale, and some three miles away a long dorsal fin of reddish rock curved out into the desert.

Berild made a little sobbing noise in her throat. She began to plod toward the distant promontory.

Stark caught up with her. He tried to stop her but she would not be

stopped, turning a feral glare upon him.

She croaked, "Water!" and pointed.

He was sure now that she was mad. He told her so, forcing the painful words out of his throat, reminding her of Sinharat and that she was going away from any possible help.

She said again, "Too far. Two--three days, without water." She pointed. "Very old well--a chance--"

Stark hesitated, standing with his head swaying drunkenly. He could not think very well. But he thought that the chances were a hundred to one that this was all only a hallucination born of Berild's thirst-madness. Yet they had very little to lose by taking the gamble. He knew now that they were not going to reach Sinharat. He nodded slowly, and went with her toward the curve of rock.

The three miles might have been three hundred. Each time either of them fell, they lay now for a longer time before struggling up again. Each time, Stark thought that it was the end for the woman. But every time, Berild finally got up and staggered forward again, and he went with her, forcing his body painfully forward on this last throw of the dice.

The sun was setting by the time they came up under the ragged cliffs, onto a little crest. The long, streaming light showed everything, pitilessly. There was no well. There was a carved pillar, half buried on one side, and the mounded shape of an incalculably ancient ruin of which only the foundations and a few broken columns were left. That was all.

Berild pitched forward and lay still. Stark stood and stared, knowing that this was the end of everything, but unable to think, unable even to

remember. He sagged down on his knees beside the woman, and the darkness slid over his mind.

He awoke later, and it was night, and cold. He was vaguely surprised to awaken at all, and he lay for some moments before he tried to raise his head. The two little moons cast a shifting brilliance. He looked for Berild beside him. She was gone.

Stark stared at the place in the sand where she had lain, and then after a moment he struggled up to his feet. He looked around, and saw Berild. She was down there below the little crest on which he was. He saw her quite clearly in the moonlight, standing beside the half-buried pillar at the edge of the shapeless ruins. She leaned on the pillar, and her head hung downward as though she could not raise it. He wondered what last well-spring of strength had enabled her to awake and make her way down there. As Stark watched, he saw Berild's head come up. She looked this way and that through the flattened ruins, turning her head very slowly. After a little while, Stark got an uncanny feeling that she was trying to visualize the place as it had been, even though the walls must have been dust a thousand years ago.

Berild moved. She went inward into the ruin, slowly, carefully, and then she put out her hand as though she was touching the long-vanished wall, as though she was feeling along it for a doorway that had not been there for ages. She turned right after so many steps, and again moved carefully in a straight line, and then turned again to her left.

It almost seemed to Stark as though she could see the vanished walls, and was following them. He watched her, a white shape moving in the moonlight, stopping now and then to gather a little strength, but carefully, surely, threading through the desolation of the ancient flattened ruin. Finally she halted, in a broad flat place that

might once have been a central courtyard. There she fell on her knees and began to dig weakly. The vagueness suddenly left Stark's brain, and his body screamed with its need. There was only one thing Berild would dig for with dying strength. He lurched his way down the little slope, and got down beside her.

"Well," she gasped. "Dig..."

They scrabbled like a pair of dogs in the yielding sand. Stark's nails slipped across something hard, and the moonlight struck a metallic glint from something beneath the dust. Within a few minutes they had bared a golden cover six feet across, very massive and wonderfully carved with the symbols of some lost god of the sea.

Stark struggled to lift the thing away. He could not move it. Then Berild pressed a hidden spring and the cover slid back of itself. Beneath it, sweet and cold, protected through all these ages, water stirred gently against mossy stones.

An hour later, Stark and Berild lay sleeping, soaked to the skin, their very hair dripping with the blessed dampness.

Next night, when the low moons roved again over the desert, they sat by the well, drowsy with an animal sense of rest and repletion. Stark looked at the woman, and said, "Who are you, Berild?"

"But you know that. I am a Shunni woman, and I am to be Kynon's queen."

"Are you, Berild? I think you are a witch. Only a witch could find a well hidden for ages, here in a place where you have never been." She became very still. But when she answered, it was with a laugh.

"No witchcraft, wild man. I told you that a war-party once crossed the

Belly of Stones. They followed old tradition, and finally found the well. My father was of that party."

It could be, Stark thought. The secret of a well was a treasure beyond price in these Drylands, to be handed down from father to child.

"I did not know we were near the place," she added, "until I saw the landmark, the fin of rock that juts from the great ridge. But I feared we would die before we reached it."

Yes, thought Stark, it could very well be as she said. But why did she walk through this place as though she knew and saw the walls as they were a thousand years ago? She does not know that I watched her, moving familiarly through this ancient ruin as one who lived here when it was whole would move.

"What are you dreaming of, wild man? The moon is in your eyes."

"I don't know," said Stark.

Dreams, delusions, the unearthly suspicions that had crossed his mind? It could be that he had heard too much talk of old Martian legends, in this deathly wilderness where the dark memory of the Ramas haunted the minds of men.

"Forget your dreams, wild man. That which is real is better." He looked down at her in the pale light, and she was young, and beautifully made, and her lips were smiling.

He bent his head. Her arms went round him. Her hair blew soft against his cheek. Then, suddenly, she set her teeth cruelly into his lip. He cried out and thrust her away, and she sat back on her heels, mocking him. Stark cursed her. There was a taste of blood in his mouth. He reached out and caught her, and again she laughed, a

peculiarly sweet, wicked sound.

"That," she said, "is because you called Fianna's name instead of mine, when the storm broke."

The wind blew over them, sighing, and the desert was very still. For two days they remained among the ruins. At evening of the second day Stark filled the water skin, and Berild replaced the golden cover on the well. They began the last long march toward Sinharat.

IX

STARK SAW IT rising against the morning sky--a city of marble, high on an island of coral laid bare by the vanishing of the sea. The coral island stood up tall in the hard clear sunlight, its naked cliffs beautifully striated with deep rose and white and delicate pink. And from this lovely pedestal there rose walls and towers so perfectly built from many-shaded marble and so softly sculptured by time that it was difficult to tell where the work of men began and ended. Sinharat, the Ever-living...

Yet it had died. As he came closer to it, plodding slowly through the sand with Berild, he saw that the place was now no more than a beautiful corpse, many of the lovely towers broken, many of the palaces roofless and open to the sky. The only signs of life were outside and below the city, on the dry lagoon that surrounded it. Here were beasts and tents and men, a huddle of them that looked small and unimportant under the loom of the dead city.

"The caravan," said Berild. "Kynon... and the others... are here."

"Why are they camped below the city instead of in it?" asked Stark. She gave him a mocking sidelong glance. "This was the old city of

the Ramas, and its name still has power. The people of the Drylands don't like to enter it. When the hordes gather here, you will see. They will camp outside."

"For fear of the Ramas? But the Ramas are gone, long ago."

"Of course—but old fears die slowly." Berild laughed. "Kynon has no such superstitions. He will be up there in the city." As they plodded nearer, they were seen. Riders started to race out toward them from the encampment, and figures hurried between the skin tents. Soon they were near enough to hear a distant crying of excited voices. Stark walked stolidly on, his face set straight ahead. It seemed to him that the shimmering haze around them had darkened, a little. A vein in his temple had begun to throb.

The racing Shunni riders reached them, voices shouted to them. Berild answered, but Stark said nothing. He walked on, and his eyes were on the city. Berild plucked his arm, and spoke his name urgently, repeating it so that he would listen.

"Stark! I know what is in your mind, but it is not the way. You must wait..." He plodded on and did not answer, or look at her. Now they were near enough the camp that tribesmen were all around them, calling Berild's name in a rising uproar of excitement, while others of them ran toward the great stairway, carved in the coral, that led up into Sinharat. The camp of the caravan was below that stairway, and not far from the encampment was a big arched opening in the coral cliff, a natural cavern. Men came from it with heavy water-skins, so that it was evident that there was a well in the cavern. But Stark saw only the great stairway that led upward, and as he walked on toward it, the tribesmen around them stopped the excited shouting. They fell silent, watching Stark's face, and drew away from him as he set foot upon the lowest step of the stair.

"You must listen!" Berild, somewhere in the darkening haze beside him, was clinging to his arm, speaking almost in his ear. "Kynon will kill you if you do this thing. I know him, Stark."

But he was not Stark any more, he was N'Chaka. The enemies of N'Chaka had dealt him a cruel death, but it had passed him by, he had not died and now it was his turn. They were up there, on the cliffs where even the great lizards did not go, and they thought they were safe from him but he would climb, and climb, and slay...

He climbed, and the darkness of his vision deepened, and then of a sudden it cleared away and he stood in the hard clear sunlight in a great square of the city Sinharat.

All around the square rose the sculptured fronts of buildings, dazzling in the morning light. On them marched files of carved figures in the dress of ancient Mars, and the sun struck glints from jewelled eyes, and harshened the outlines of the faces so that it seemed that all the pride and glory and cruelty of the Ramas of old still held sway here.

But Stark had eyes only for the living, for the men who were coming across the square. Kynon, a gun in his hand, was walking out from the biggest palace, and ahead of him came Luhar.

Luhar.

"Stark, stop!" Kynon's voice rang.

Stark did not even look at him. He had eyes only for Luhar, who stood there fresh from sleep, his pale hair tumbled, his eyes still drowsy but now, sharply, awakening.

"I will shoot you unless you stop, Stark!" warned Kynon. From beside him, Stark vaguely heard Berild's cry. "But for him, I'd be dead in the

desert, Kynon!"

Kynon made a decisive gesture. "If he saved you, I will thank him. But he must not touch Luhar! Come here, Berild!"

Voices. And what were voices to N'Chaka when the time for slaying, for vengeance, had come?

Berild had left him, had hurried forward to run past Luhar in the direction of Kynon, who stood, grim with the levelled gun. And still Stark moved on. He saw the first sharp alarm in Luhar's face now replaced by a triumphant, taunting smile. The man whom Luhar had killed had come back to life, but he was going to be killed a second time, here and now, and all was well. Luhar's smile deepened.

Berild, running past Luhar, seemed to stumble and pitch against him, and then recovered herself.

Luhar's smile of triumph suddenly blanked out. In his face was only an incredulous astonishment. He stood, and looked down at the slash in his tunic from which his heart's blood was spurting, and then he crashed down to the flagging.

Stark stopped, then. He did not understand. But Kynon did and his voice came in a wrathful shout.

"Berild!"

Berild calmly threw away the little knife in her hand. Its thin blade glittered redly in the sun, and it rattled and tinkled on the stone paving. Her back was to Stark and he could not see her face, but he could hear the bitter passion that throbbed in her voice as she said to Kynon, "He was nearly my death. Do you understand that? He would have ended me!" She spoke the word as though she was uttering the

most blackly blasphemous thing in the world.

"What now, Kynon? Will you shoot me?"

There was a silence. N'Chaka was gone, and Eric John Stark stood looking down at the dead Venusian. He was not thinking of Luhar now. He was thinking that Berild must have had that little knife hidden in the waistband of her skirt all this time, and he was wondering how close he had come to getting it in his back.

And why, in the moment of her passion, had she spoken that odd word, accusing Luhar of nearly "ending" her?

Stark went on, toward Kynon. He saw the rage in Kynon's face and he thought that he was going to shoot, after all. There was nothing of the jovial barbarian and hail-fellow about Kynon now. He looked as friendly as a frustrated tiger.

"Damn you, Berild, I needed that man!" he said. Berild's eyes blazed. "Why don't you get down beside him and cry and cover your head? In his desire to murder Stark, he did not scruple to leave me to die also. Am I to forgive that?"

Kynon looked as though he was tempted to strike her. But Stark spoke, and asked, "Where is Freka?"

Kynon turned on him, and his face now was dark and dangerous. "Listen, Stark, you'd be dead on the stones right now instead of Luhar, if Berild hadn't such a passion for revenge. You're alive, you're lucky. Don't push it." Stark merely waited. Kynon went on, in a voice that cut as coldly as a wind from the pole.

"Freka is out with others, raising the Dryland fighting-men who will gather here. Freka will return. When he returns, I'll kill the first of you

two who makes a move at the other. Do you hear?"

Stark said, "I hear."

Kynon's piercing gaze hung on him, but apparently he decided not to push it either. He growled, "Hell take such allies! Old hatred, old feuds, always at each other's throats."

"I thought you wanted tough fighters," said Stark. "If you wanted dear hearts and loving friendships, you sent for the wrong men."

"I'm beginning to think I did," said Kynon, scowling. "Well, it's done for now. But it isn't done for good. Delgaun was close with Luhar and he'll want blood for this when he finds out about it. He and his cursed Low-Canallers have been difficult enough to handle, as it is." He turned angrily and started back toward the building from which he had come. Berild gave Stark an unfathomable look as they followed. There came a sound that made the hair bristle a little on Stark's neck. It was a murmuring seeming to come from all the silent, dead white city around them, a sound not human in tone but rising and falling like distant voices. The morning breeze had begun to blow and the vague whispering seemed brought by it. Stark did not like it at all.

They went with Kynon into a room of polished marble, with faded frescoes of the same figures in ancient dress that marched in the carvings outside. The frescoes were much more faded in some places than in others, so that only here and there did a shadowy face leap suddenly into being, prideful and mocking with smiling lips, or a procession pass solemnly toward some obliterated worship.

Kynon had here a folding wooden desk, with papers scattered on it, which looked utterly incongruous in this place.

"I sent riders back," Kynon said abruptly, "to search for you. They

didn't find you. You were nowhere near Sinharat. And now you pop up out of nowhere." Berild said, "Your riders wouldn't have found us. We came across the Belly of Stones."

"With one skin of water? It's impossible!"

Berild nodded. "But we had three skins, that were on the packbeast that Stark caught. They were our life."

So Berild had her secrets from Kynon, and one of them was the hidden well?

Stark was not surprised. She was the kind of woman who would have many secrets.

But I have my secrets too, Berild. And I will not tell even you how I saw you walking in the moonlight with too great a knowledge of dead ages.

"It was not," Berild was saying to Kynon, "exactly a pleasure journey. I want to rest. Was Fianna saved?"

Kynon came out of some inner abstraction to answer, with a nod, "Yes, she and most of your things."

Berild left. Kynon's eyes followed her, and when she had gone he looked at Stark.

"Even with water, only a wild man could have done it," he said. "But again I warn you--curb your wildness, Stark. Especially when Delgaun comes." Stark said, "Drylanders and Low-Canallers and outland mercenaries--can you keep them from each other's throats?"

"By all the gods, I'll do it if I have to tear throats out myself!" Kynon swore viciously. "We can grab a world and only one thing could

prevent it—the old feuds that have brought so many brave plans to wreck, in the past. They'll not wreck my plans!"

They would if he could encompass it, Stark thought. He had known from the time that Ashton had given him his mission of stopping this thing, that the only possible leverage he would have was the ancient quarrels of Mars, that his only chance would be to turn these old enemies against each other. How he would do this, he did not know.

He found that he was swaying, and Kynon saw it and exclaimed, "Go get some rest before you drop here. I'll say this, that you may be a wild man but you are indeed a man, to have come the way you did." He stepped closer and added flatly, "And I'll tell you also, that I don't quite like men who are as tough or almost as tough as I am. Get out." Stark went the way he pointed, into a broad and shadowy hallway. The first room he looked into had a sleeping-pad in the corner. He stumbled to it and fell, rather than lay down.

But even as he plunged into sleep, he heard the faint echoing whisper from outside, the uncanny murmurs, rising now into a strange, pulsating singing of sound that seemed to moan through the whole dead city like a dirge.

X

STARK AWOKE to find the room in semi-dusk, a narrow shaft of red sunset light striking in from a high loophole window. He sensed that a presence had awakened him and then he saw Fianna, sitting on a carved stone bench across the room. She was looking at him, her eyes serious and dark.

"You growled, before you awoke," she said. "Like a great beast."

"Perhaps that is what I am," he said.

"Perhaps it is," Fianna said, and nodded. "But if so, I will tell you this, beast: You have come into a trap."

He got to his feet, every nerve waking to alertness. He went and stood looking down at her.

"What do you mean, little one?"

"Don't call me 'Little one,' " she flashed. "It is not I who am foolish and young--it is you. If you were not, you would not be in Sinharat."

"But you are here also, Fianna."

She sighed. "I know. It is not a place where I would wish to be. But I serve the Lady Berild, and must go where she takes me." He looked keenly down at her for a moment. "You serve her. Yet you hate her." She hesitated. "I don't hate her. Sometimes, for all her wickednesses, I envy her--she lives so passionately and fully. But I fear her--I fear what she and Kynon may do to my people."

Eric John Stark feared that too but he did not say so. Instead, he said,

"Being a beast, I'm concerned for my hide. You spoke of a trap."

"It is this," said Fianna. "You are valuable to Kynon, to train his hordes, when they gather, in outland fighting-skills. But Delgaun and his support are even more valuable to Kynon. If Delgaun asks your death for Luhar's..." She did not finish, and Stark finished for her. "Why, then Kynon will very likely regretfully sacrifice one guerrilla fighter, to keep the Low-Canallers happy. Thanks for the warning. But this was already in my mind." Fianna said hopefully, "You could slip

away before Delgaun comes. If you stole a mount and took water, you could escape."

No, thought Stark. It is the sensible thing to do, if I want to save my skin, but Simon Ashton will be waiting in Tarak and I can't go to him and say that I've quit the whole thing, it's just too dangerous.

Besides, he thought, there's something here that I can't understand and that I must find out. Something...

Fianna, watching his face, said suddenly, "You're going to stay. But don't give me the lying reasons you're now thinking up. You stay because of Berild." Stark smiled. "All women think that men do nothing except for a woman."

"And all men deny it when it is true," she said. "Tell me, were you and Berild lovers in the desert?"

"Jealous, Fianna?"

He expected her to sputter resentment at that, but she did not. Instead an enigmatic, almost pitying look came into her eyes, and she said softly, "No, not jealous, Eric John Stark. But saddened."

She rose suddenly to her feet and said, formally, "I am sent to bring you to the Lady Berild."

Stark's eyes narrowed slightly. "With Kynon right here? Will he like that?" Fianna smiled mirthlessly. "That's a clever, cautious beast, to think of that. But Kynon is down in the camp below the city. And the Lady Berild does not like this place, and lives elsewhere. I will take you." He went out with her into the great square. There was no one in it at all, and its sculptured walls and towers rose into the flaring red sunset, wrapped in a silence that was oppressive. As they walked,

their footfalls sounded loud upon the ancient flagstones, and it seemed to Stark that all the stones of dead Sinharat that loomed around them were listening and watching. The evening wind sprang up and touched his face. Suddenly, he stopped. He had heard a sound that began as an inaudible vibration and rose stealthily into his hearing. A whispering, a vast, vague murmuring that came from everywhere and nowhere, so that it seemed that Sinharat was not only listening and watching, but was now speaking also.

Of a sudden, the whispering swelled up into musical voices. Organ-voices, that seemed to come from the very coral on which the city stood. Flute-voices, from the tall towers that caught the last red light. Shrill, distant voices as of the desert pipes, raging from the carved cornices of buildings far across the city.

Stark caught Fianna's arm. "What is it?"

"The voices of the Ramas."

He said roughly, "Make sense."

She shrugged. "So all Drylanders believe. That is why they hate to come here. But others have said that it is only the wind that sings in the hollow coral." Stark understood. The massive coral pedestal on which the city stood was indeed a vast honeycomb of tiny air-passages, and the wind forcing up through them could create this eerie effect.

"No wonder your barbarians don't like it," he muttered. "I'm a barbarian. I don't like it."

They went through streets that ran like topless tunnels between the walls and the towers that reached impossibly thin and tall into the evening sky. Some of them had lost their upper stories, and some

had fallen entirely, but in the main they were still beautiful, the colors of the marble still lovely. And as the wind changed, the singing voices of Sinharat changed with it. Sometimes those voices were soft and gentle, murmuring about everlasting youth and its pleasures. And then they became strong and fierce with pride, crying You die, but I do not! Sometimes they swelled up, mad, laughing and hateful. But always their song was subtly evil.

In the outside world, even in Valkis, the Ramas had been only a legend, a shadowy tradition that a clever barbarian was using to give glamor to his leadership. But here in Sinharat, the Ramas seemed very real, and he began to understand why all this world in the long ago had feared them, and hated them, and envied them.

Fianna led him toward the western battlement of the high city, a point a little distance away from the great stair. She took him into a building that loomed in the gathering darkness like a white dream-castle, and along a hallway where flaring torches in sockets threw a shaking light over the caravan dancing-girls that seemed in that illumination to be moving along the walls. She opened a door and stepped aside for Stark to enter. The room was low and long, and the soft glow that lighted it came from lamps with shades of alabaster as thin as paper. Berild came toward him, but not the Berild of the desert. She wore a jewelled girdle, and a wide collar of green jewels above her breasts, and a white cloak hanging from her shoulders. "I hate that gloomy ruin where Kynon holds his councils," she said. "This is better. Do you think it was the apartment of a queen?"

"It is now," said Stark.

Her eyes softened. He took her by the shoulders, and her mocking smile flashed and she said, "But if I am a queen, I am not for you, wild man." Then, with a startling abruptness, the smile left her face and she put his hands away. "There is no time for this," she said. "I sent

for you to speak of danger. You may not live out this night."

"If you wanted to take my mind off you," said Stark, "that statement is just the thing to do it."

His grim humor awakened no answer in her sober face. She took his hand and led him to an open window.

This westward face of the building rose sheer from the edge of the coral cliff. Out beyond the window stretched the vastness of the deepening Martian night, with no moons yet up but a great vault of stars tenting the desert. A little to the left, down at the base of the cliff, were the torches of the camp, winking and shaking in the wind.

Up from beneath them came the murmurous whistling, piping voices of the wind in the hollow coral. But also there came the sounds of the camp, of squealing beasts, of a voice bawling an order, of picket-pins being driven deeper.

"Kynon is there," said Berild. "He waits to welcome Delgaun and the others from Valkis, who arrive tonight."

The skin between Stark's shoulders tightened slightly. The crisis had come sooner than he expected.

He shrugged. "Well, then, Delgaun is coming. I wasn't afraid of him in Valkis, and I don't fear him here."

Berild looked at him steadily. "Fear him," she said. "I know Delgaun." Their faces were only inches apart and there was something in hers that he had glimpsed there once before.

"How can you know him so well?" he asked. "You're a Shunni woman, and he is a Valkis."

"Do you think Kynon hasn't been plotting with Delgaun for months?" she demanded impatiently. "Do you think I can watch a man all those times and not know whether he is dangerous?"

"Your concern for me is moving, Berild," said Stark. "That is--if it's sincere."

He half-expected her to flare out at him for that, but she did not. She looked at him levelly, and said, "You're strong. And it may be that I shall need a strong man at my side."

"To protect you? But you have Kynon!"

Berild said impatiently, "I need no one to protect me. As for Kynon, I come always second with him, and his ambitions first. He would put me aside without a thought, if it helped to realize his plans of conquest."

"And you don't intend to be put aside," said Stark. Her eyes flashed. "I do not."

"So, the wild man may be useful," said Stark. "I'll say this for you, Berild--you have a certain honesty that I admire." She smiled wickedly. "It's only the least of my attractions." Stark thought for a moment. "When Delgaun arrives, will the tribesmen down there come up into Sinharat with him and Kynon?" Berild nodded. "Yes, for this night Kynon is to raise his standard. For that, they'll come--even though they have a superstitious fear of this place." He looked at her curiously, and said, "You talk of tribesmen's superstitions--yet you yourself are a woman of the Shunni."

"Yes. But I do not believe what they believe. Kynon taught me better--he had education, in outland places, and I learned from him."

"You didn't learn ambition from him," said Stark.

"No," she said. "I'm tired of being just another woman. I too would like to hold a world between my hands."

Looking at her, it came to Stark that Ashton might have more to fear than he knew, that this woman might be as great a threat to the peace of Mars as Kynon and Delgaun.

Of a sudden, the cold night wind brought through the open window a sound of excited voices from the encampment underneath the cliff. Stark and Berild went to the window. Far out in the darkness of the desert there were little points of ruddy light that moved in a long line toward Sinharat.

Drums suddenly boomed hoarsely down in the camp below, drowning with their clamor the piping of the wind in the coral. Torches sprang to light between the tents, and the drums grew louder.

"Delgaun has come," said Berild.

"And I must go," said Stark.

He turned and went out of the room. In the corridor of the carved dancing-girls, he came face to face with Fianna.

"You were listening," he said.

She did not deny it. "I hate to see foolish beasts run their throats toward the knife," she said. "So I have a word for you, Eric John Stark."

"Yes?"

"Don't trust Berild too far. She is not all she seems." Fianna paused,

and then in a whisper, she added, "Did you ever think that all of the Ramas of old might not be dead?"

All the half-formed, vague suspicions that had haunted Stark since the desert surged up in a cold tide within him. He grasped for her, demanding, "What do you mean?"

But Fianna eluded him, and was gone like a shadow. After a moment, he turned and went out into the dark, silent street.

The drums were echoing across dead Sinharat, but as Stark went through the streets it seemed to him that above them he could hear, louder than ever before, the mocking sounds, the pipings and fluting and whisperings, that seemed to echo from the past.

XI

SHATTERING THE NIGHT, light and sound crashed up the grand stairway of Sinharat. First came massed torch-bearers, holding their flaring brands high. Then the thundering skin drums and shrilling pipes, and then Kynon and his newcome allies, and after them the tribesmen.

As the procession climbed, the dark western face of the cliff-top city leaped into the quivering light. The ancient carven faces that had for centuries looked out on nothing but darkness and silence and desert, now glared triumphantly in the shaking red rays. And despite the proud, loud clamor of drums and pipes, the eyes of climbing tribesmen glinted with doubt as they looked up and beheld the old stone faces of the Ramas. Stark heard the uproar approaching through the streets, as he waited patiently in the darkness of a deep doorway of the building that was Kynon's headquarters. He saw the torches, drummers, pipers, warriors, march into the great square and

across it toward him. He thought that Kynon was putting on a brave show indeed, to impress everyone that the men of Kesh and Shun and the men of the Low Canals were now friends and allies.

Kynon came up onto the steps in front of the old building, only a score of yards from where Stark stood in shadows. He turned and faced the torches and the glinting spears and the fierce faces.

"Bring the banner!" he cried in his bull voice. A tall barbarian came promptly, with a black silken banner rolled on a long staff. With a gesture totally theatrical, and yet none the less impressive, Kynon shook the silk loose so that it flowed out on the cold wind.

"Here I raise the Banner of Death and Life!" he cried. "Death for our enemies, and life--unending life-- for us who shall rule this world!" The silken standard, unfolding on the wind, showed two white crowns, and below them a red sword, on a field of dead black.

The cry of the crowd was like the baying of a great hound. Stark's eyes had been searching the faces in the torchlight and now he saw the little knot of men in outland dress--Walsh, Themis, Arrodd--and in front of them, Delgaun.

"I bring you not only a banner, but strong allies!" roared Kynon. "In the new era that begins, old enmities are forgotten. Delgaun of Valkis stands shoulder to shoulder with us in this conquest, and with him will march the men of the Low-Canals!"

Delgaun came up beside Kynon and faced the crowd and raised his hand. There was a response, but not a wildly enthusiastic one.

Shrewdly, Kynon did not give them time to start muttering. He said loudly,

"And when Kesh and Shun, and Valkis and Jekkara, march together against the Border States, with us will fight brave men from far away!" Walsh and the other two heard their cue and started up the steps. But Stark stepped out of the shadows and came up beside Delgaun and Kynon, and looked at them and smiled. He said loudly, so that all could hear, "I will follow your banner--and I greet my brother and comrade-in-arms, Delgaun of Valkis!" He put his hand on Delgaun's shoulder in the traditional gesture. Delgaun's gold-colored eyes flared hot as an eagle's, and his hand went under his cloak. He said thickly,

"You bastard..."

"Do you want to ruin everything?" said Kynon in a low voice charged with agony and anger. "Return the greeting!"

Slowly, as though he would rather have torn his arm from its socket, Delgaun raised his hand and placed it on Stark's shoulder. There was sweat on his face.

Stark grinned at him sardonically. He thought his timing had been rather good. Delgaun would try to kill him, but would not now dare to do it openly. Comradeship in arms was a sacred thing to the barbarians.

"The riders are out in the Drylands this night!" Kynon shouted at the crowd.

"The fighting-men of all the tribes will soon gather here! Go back down and prepare for them. And remember..." He paused dramatically, then continued,

"Remember that it is not only the loot of a world we march for, but unending life to enjoy it in, through the Sending On of Minds!" The

crowd raised a storm of cheers. But it seemed to Stark that the carved stone faces of the Ramas high above them looked down at them with secret mirth.

Kynon turned abruptly and led the way into his council hall. They followed. In the torchlit room, he turned on them, looking dangerous as an angry lion.

"We'll have this out once and for all," he said between his teeth. "Stark, you've brought nothing but dissension to us, since you came." Stark answered flatly. "An old enemy tried to kill me--and when I survived, I tried to kill him. Would you yourself have done differently?" He looked then at Delgaun. "Luhar was my enemy, but I do not know why Delgaun should hate me. Let's have this thing out, as you say. Delgaun, if you have cause for anger against me, say now what it is. Speak out!" The golden eyes glared at him out of a face that had become livid. Delgaun's lips twisted, but he did not speak.

Damn you, you can't speak, thought Stark. You hate me because you're jealous over Berild, but you daren't say that out.

Delgaun finally muttered, "I may have been wrong. It could be that Luhar poisoned my mind against Stark."

"Then that is that," said Kynon.

He went over to the table and sat down behind it and let his bleak gaze rove over their faces before he spoke.

"The fighting-men will start arriving tomorrow," he said. "I want them trained in detachments as they come in. Arrodd, you'll help Stark do that. Knight's cruiser should be here in two days, with the weapons we need. I want our force on the march from Sinharat two weeks from now, no later." A glow came into Kynon's eagle eyes, although his

voice remained hard and harsh.

"The Border States we'll hit first will be Varl and Kathuun. They're bound to get warning enough to close their gates. My Drylanders will make a pretense of siege. Then we'll retreat, a little, as help comes from the two cities." A slow smile curved Delgaun's lips. "Yes, help, from Valkis and Jekkara. My Low-Canallers will nobly come to the assistance of the Border States. When they joyfully open their gates to us--then we all go in together."

"Clever," said Walsh admiringly, a smile on his coarse face. Kynon's big hand squeezed shut. "The fall of Varl and Kathuun will breach the whole line of the Border States. We'll roll up that line, and in six months we'll be in Kahora."

Themis, a man with a dark, saturnine face who spoke little, asked, "What about the government of Earth?"

Kynon grinned. "Principle of non-intervention in Martian affairs has been their policy for a long time. They'll deplore, they'll protest--but nothing more, and we'll have our hands on the throat and the loot of a world." Stark felt cold. He could not fault this plan. It would work, and red destruction would run along the Border like a spreading flame. Men would die in those cities, and most of them would be the warriors of the Drylands, so that the clever thieves of the Low Canals could reap the plunder. There came to Stark the determination to kill Kynon with his own hand before he let this thing happen.

Kynon rose. "That's it. You've got your jobs, and they won't be easy. Get to them by the first light of morning."

His voice stopped them as they were going. "One more thing. The soul and spirit of this whole war is the hunger for eternal life, the secret of the Ramas. If any of you let on that I don't have that secret, if

any of you even as much as smile when the Sending On of Minds is mentioned--" He did not finish. He did not have to. What was in Kynon's face was a threat more deadly than any he could have spoken.

Stark thought that if what he suspected was true, the joke was on Kynon, and a grim and terrible joke it was. If Berild...

He would not let himself finish that thought. It was impossible. To dream that the old, dark secret of Mars had survived, that some of the Ramas had survived, just because he saw a woman walking in the moonlight and heard a serving-girl's sullen insinuation--it was too fantastic. He would forget it. But Stark could not forget it in the days that followed. He spent each day down in the dust and glare of the desert, teaching the techniques of modern guerrilla warfare to the men of Kesh and Shun who rode constantly in from the wastes. He heard the talk of these warriors, and more even than loot they talked of unending life. He saw how their eyes followed the great black banner, with its white crowns above the crimson sword, when it went with Kynon through the camp.

Knighton's little cruiser came in, its weapons were unloaded, and it went away again for more. Men came from Valkis and Jekkara and Barrakesh, and with these Kynon and Delgaun talked long, setting the times and routes for the great stroke against the Border, and then these too went away again. Freka came, with the last of the fighting men of Shun. Stark saw the tall barbarian chieftain riding with his men through the camp that had now grown great, and he heard the shouts that hailed him. He went a little later to report to Kynon, and Freka was standing with him by the banner. Stark felt the Shunni's eyes glaring at him through half-drooping lids, yet Freka made no move.

"You've both had your warning," Kynon said curtly. "Remember it. I

won't repeat it."

Stark made his report on the readiness of the warriors, and went away, and felt Freka's gaze burning a hole in his back.

He had not seen Berild, in these days of hurry and toil. One evening when he left Kynon and Delgaun in the camp, and climbed the great stairway in the red sunset light, Stark turned aside and went toward the building where she had her quarters. He felt that he had to put the dark, impossible doubt in his mind at rest.

The wind was talking through the hollow coral, the streets of Sinharat vibrated to the murmuring voices that strengthened as the light faded and the wind rose. From the marble walls, the stone faces of the llamas watched him with fixed and secret smiles.

Stark came into the street he sought and then stopped suddenly. At the far end of the dusky street, he saw the flutter of a white cloak that disappeared as he watched.

He thought that it was Berild, and he followed. But without being conscious of it, he made his footfalls softer and softer, going through the silent, dusky streets after her like a hunting sand-cat. Where a street turned, he lost her. Stark stood, undecided which way to search, and the whispering voices in the coral mocked and jeered him. A narrow way beside him led to a wider street on which rose a great domed white pile. There was a track in the blown dust and sand that way. He followed it, and reached the gaping open doorway of the building, and peered cautiously.

It was not much more shadowy inside than in the dusking street. Light still struck through tall windows set above a gallery that ringed the great dome, high up above the floor. The light was enough to show a round, perfectly empty hall, whose only feature was a crumbling

inscription that covered all one wall. Berild stood, her back to him, looking up and reading this inscription. She was silent, but he knew that she was reading from the way her head turned slightly, inclining forward with each few lines. And for a moment, Stark felt a coldness like that of outer space.

For the inscription was in that ancient language of the Ramas which no one for millennia had been able to read.

"Witch-woman," his instincts clamored. "Not human, not really human. Run!" He forced himself to stand silent, there in the shadows outside the door. He saw Berild, after a few more minutes of concentration, droop her head as though in pain.

Then she turned brusquely away from the inscription, and her sandals tapped the dusty flagstones. She went toward a stair that spiralled up the side of the vast room, to the encircling gallery. Stark saw her go to one of the tall windows there, and stand looking out with her back still toward him. The wind chuckled and muttered through the gaping doors and windows, and it covered the sound of Stark's soft footfalls as he went across the room and up the stair. He came up and stopped, a dozen feet behind the silent woman.

"It's not as you remembered it, is it, Berild?" he said. "What was it like before, with the blue ocean around it, and the ships?"

XII

BERILD DID NOT turn around. It was as though she had not heard his voice. She stood absolutely still--too still.

Stark went to the window and stood beside her. The dying light from across the desert showed her face, with its mocking smile.

"What are you dreaming about now, wild man?" To Stark's ears, it seemed as though there was a thin edge of brittleness in her mockery.

"You're a Rama," he said flatly.

"But the Ramas were long ago," she said. "If I were one, I would be very old. How old?"

He disregarded the derision in her tone. He said, "That's what I want to know, Berild. How old? A thousand years... ten thousand? How many bodies have you inhabited?"

Instantly, the moment that he put the thought into spoken words, it seemed immeasurably more horrible to Stark than it had before. Something of that horror must have shown in his face, for he saw a dangerous flash in her eyes.

"What you say is madness," she said. "Who has put this thought into your head?"

"A woman walking in the moonlight," he muttered. "A woman who threaded her way through walls and doorways that hadn't been there for centuries, and that she could only know because she remembered them."

Berild's tension seemed to relax a little. She said impatiently, "So that's it! In the Belly of Stones--you were awake, when I hunted for and found the well."

Then she laughed. "Why didn't you say so, why did you keep it to yourself? I could have told you that it was the secret my father gave me--to walk this way, so many steps, then that way, and so on, until I was where the well was buried. And you thought..." Her laughter

came again.

"I don't believe you," he said. "You were not measuring your steps--you were groping, remembering." The shadows were deepening. He took a step toward her, peering into her face. "You've been laughing at Kynon all along haven't you?

The real Rama, laughing at the pretended one?"

Berild said, in a slow voice that had now no laughter in it at all, "Forget this thing, Eric John Stark. It is madness, and it could be your death."

"How many of you are there, Berild? How many have come down through the ages, secretly stealing the bodies of others, laughing at the world that thought they were all gone long ago?"

In a whisper that was full of infinite menace, Berild said, "I tell you again, forget this."

"There would have to be at least two of you, so one could use the Sending On of Minds on the other," Stark said, and nodded. "And who but the jealous one, the one who said, 'There is nothing for you in this creature of an hour.' It is he, isn't it? Delgaun?"

In a voice sibilant with passion, Berild said, "I will hear no more of your delusions. Don't come with me--I want no madman for an escort." And she turned swiftly and left him, almost running down the stair that was in heavy darkness now, and so out of the building.

Stark stood, his mind awirl. She had been warm and living, her arms around him that night, but inside the Shunni woman's vibrant body--a Rama woman of long ago?

He turned and looked back out the open window. The moons were rising, and their shifting light slanted across the vague desert. Down beneath the cliffs of Sinharat, the far-flung torches of the Drylanders' camp pricked the gloom, and voices came up on the piping wind, and the squeal of beasts, and the sounds of a sane and normal world. He told himself that he was deluded, obsessed. But he knew that it was not so.

Looking down there, another thought came slowly to Stark. If it was true, if Berild and Delgaun were Ramas of old, then this barbarian campaign to loot and conquer half of Mars was steered by intelligence as old and evil as Sinharat. Yet Kynon would be the conqueror, the ruler, and he was no Rama. Was that why Berild had become Kynon's woman, to influence his every move, plotting all the while with Delgaun?

He turned abruptly around, away from the window. The great, ancient hall was now a well of utter darkness, and the wind that moaned and whispered through it seemed cold with the cold of dead ages. A detestation of the place seized Stark, and he went down the stairs and out of the building, feeling all the way as though eyes watched him in the blackness.

As he walked through the silent, moon-splashed streets of Sinharat, Stark tried to think. He had to stop Kynon's plan of conquest--was more bound to do so, if age-old evil was behind it. Should he tell Kynon and the others, about Delgaun and Berild?

They would laugh at him. He had no proof to show them, none in the world. But there must be some way. He...

Stark suddenly stopped walking, all his nerves alert. He listened, turning his head this way and that.

There was no sound at all, but the wind and its whisperings. Nothing moved in the shadow-blotched, moonlit streets of the dead city. But Stark was not reassured. His senses had spoken and had told him that someone, something, was stalking him.

He moved on, after a moment, heading toward the distant glow of light that came from Kynon's palace in the great square. But after a dozen steps he suddenly froze again.

This time, he heard it. A scutter and scuffle of feet, back down the narrow street in the shadows.

Stark put his hand on his gun and his voice rang down the street. "Come out!" A stooping figure came out of the shadow, toward him. For a moment he did not realize that this was the tall barbarian chieftain, Freka, for the man was hunched, bent forward.

Then as Freka came across a bar of moonlight, Stark saw his face, slack-jawed, grinning, inexpressibly repulsive. He knew then. Freka, the addict of an ancient vice, was a long way into Shanga, and in his animalism he cared not the least about the gun facing him. He cared only about his brute hatred. "Go back," Stark said softly. "I'll kill you." But he knew that he could not, that the threat was an empty one. If he killed Freka, he would incur the death penalty himself.

With a flash of insight, Stark realized the neatness of the trap. Delgaun had set it, without a doubt--no one else would have brought Freka the Shanga lamp. Whoever of the two killed the other, must himself die by Kynon's decree. Delgaun could not lose.

Stark suddenly took to his heels and ran. He ran in the direction of the distant torch-glow. If he could get that far, so that Kynon and the others saw Freka pursuing and attacking him...

He did not get that far. Freka, half an animal, could run as fast as he, and faster. With an animal-like sound, he caught up to Stark, and his long arms went around Stark's head, and his teeth sank into the back of Stark's neck. Stark, feeling himself going down, dived to the pavement to help the movement. The side of his head rang on the time-worn cobbles and he felt half-stunned but he kept on rolling in a somersault that shook off the thing on his back. It shook the gun out of his hand, also. He scrambled to his feet. Freka, mewing, reached from the street where he had fallen and his long arms grabbed Stark's knees and pulled him down again.

A kind of horror possessed Stark. He had been called a half-beast, in his lifetime, but the thing he fought was all beast.

The teeth were trying for his throat. Stark's hand grabbed the long hair of the barbarian and snapped his head back. Still holding Freka's hair, he banged his head onto the cobbles.

Freka still clawed and mewed, and a shivering conviction that this creature was invulnerable came to Stark. He heard vague voices yelling somewhere. In a kind of hysterical fury he banged Freka's head again and again on the cobblestones.

The voice of Kynon roared close by, and Stark was hauled to his feet and blinked his eyes at the tossing torches.

"He's murdered Freka--give me a spear!" screamed a Shunni warrior. Stark saw other tribesmen, all with fury on their faces, and saw also the horrified face of Walsh, and then Kynon's head blotted out the others as Kynon came close to him.

"I warned you, Stark!"

"The man was in Shanga, he was an animal set upon me!" gasped

Stark. "And I know who set him! Delgaun..."

The flat of Kynon's great hand cracked across his mouth and he reeled backward. Hard hands held him when he would have struck back.

"Blood for Freka's blood!" the Shunni warrior was speaking to Kynon. "Unless all the men of Shun see this man die, we do not march with you!"

"You will see it," Kynon said. "All will see it. And yours, brother, will be the weapon that wipes out Freka's blood."

Stark, raging, roared to Kynon, "You idiot! Pretending to the Rama knowledge, while all the time you're a puppet dangled by..."

A spear-haft hit Stark on the back of his head and he fell into blackness. He came to in a place of cold, dry stone. There was an iron collar around his neck, and a five-foot chain ran from it to a ring in the wall. The cell was small. A gate of iron bars closed the single entrance. Beyond was a well, with other cell doors around it, and above were thick stone gratings. He guessed that the place was built beneath some inner court of the palace. A torch lit the room. There were no other prisoners. But there was a guard, a thick-shouldered barbarian who sat on what looked like an execution block in the center of the well, with a sword and a jug of wine. It was the Shunni warrior who had screamed for a spear, and he looked at Stark, and smiled.

"You should not have slept so long, outlander," he said. "For you have only three hours till morning. And when morning comes, you will die on the great stair, where all the men of Shun can see."

He drank from the jug, and set it down, and smiled again.

"Death comes easily if the thrust is sure," he said.

"But if the thrust wobbles, death is very slow, and very painful. I think yours will be slow."

Stark did not answer. He waited, with the same unhuman patience he had shown when he waited for his captors under the tor.

The man on the block laughed, and raised the jug again. Stark's eyes narrowed slightly. He saw the movement of a shadow, in the darkness beyond the drinking man.

He thought he knew who it was that came to this place so stealthily. Delgaun would make very sure that he never stood upon the great stair, to shout mad accusations to the Drylanders before he died.

He thought that he had not even three hours, now.

XIII

THEN, AS THOUGH she had suddenly taken shape there, Fianna stood in the shadows behind the Shunni. Her young face was very pale, but her hand did not tremble as she brought up the little gun she held.

The gun coughed, and the Shunni warrior pitched forward and lay without moving, while his sword rattled along the stone floor. The jug, upset, sent out bright crawling loopings of red.

Fianna stepped over the body and unlocked the iron collar with a key she took from her girdle.

Stark took her slender shoulders between his hands. "Listen, Fianna.

It could be your death if it becomes known that you have done this." She gave him a deep, strange look. In the dusky light, her proud young face was unfamiliar, touched with something fey and sad. He wished that he could see her eyes more clearly.

"I think that the death of many things is close," she said. "Tonight is a black and evil time in Sinharat, which has known so much of darkness and evil. And I risked freeing you because I think you are my only hope --perhaps the only hope of Mars."

He drew her to him, and kissed her, and stroked her dark head. "You're too young to concern yourself with the destiny of worlds." He felt her tremble. "The youth of the body is only illusion when the mind is old."

"And is yours old, Fianna?"

"Old," she whispered. "As old as Berild's." The words vibrated away and were lost in silence. But to Stark, it seemed that suddenly a world-deep abyss had been opened between him and this girl who looked up at him from dark, unguessable eyes. "You too?" he whispered.

"I, too," she said, "am of the Twice-Born, the Ramas. Even as those whom you know as Berild and Delgaun."

He could not quite take it in. He stared at her in silence, and then asked,

"But, then, how many of you are there?"

Fianna shook her head. "I am not sure, but I think only we three are left. And now you know why I follow Berild and serve her. She and Delgaun have the secret of the Sending On of Minds, the true secret.

They know where the Crowns of the Ramas are hidden, somewhere here in Sinharat, and I do not know that. They give me life, from one lifetime to another, so that I have lived only at their caprice. And that has been a long, long time." Without realizing it, Stark had let his hands fall from her and had stepped back. Fianna looked up at him and said, not resentfully but sadly, "I do not blame you. I know what we have been. The ever-young, the ever-living immortals, the stealers of others' lives. It was wrong, wrong, the thing that began here in Sinharat long ago. I have known it was wrong, through all these changing lives. But I will tell you this--most evilly powerful of all addictions is the addiction to life."

Stark stepped forward and again he took her head between his hands. "Whatever you are and have been, Fianna, I think you are my friend."

"Your friend, and the friend of all the Dryland tribesmen from whom I--the real I--sprang. They must not march, and drown Mars and themselves in blood. Will you help me?"

"It is why I am here," he said.

"Then come with me," said Fianna. She stirred the Shunni's body with her foot.

"Bring that. It must not be found here."

Stark heaved the body over his shoulder and followed the girl through a twisting maze of corridors, some pitch dark, some feebly lighted by the moons. Fianna moved as surely as though she were in the main square at high noon. There was the silence of death in these cold tunnels, and the dry, faint smell of eternity.

At length Fianna whispered, "Here. Be careful." She put out a hand to

guide him but Stark's eyes were like a cat's in the dark. He made out a space where the rock with which the ancient builders had faced these subterranean ways gave place to the original coral. Ragged black mouths opened in the coral, entrances to some unguessed catacombs beneath. Stark consigned the body to the nearest pit, but he kept the sword with which the Shunni warrior had planned to kill him.

"You will need it," Fianna said.

Stark listened to the distant sliding echoes from the pit, and shivered. He had so nearly finished there himself. He was glad to follow Fianna away from that place of darkness and silent death.

He stopped her in a place where a bar of moonlight came splashing through a great crack in the tunnel roof. He said, "You want my help in preventing the march and the conquest. But only Kynon's death can prevent that."

"Kynon stands in danger of worse than death, tonight," she said. "We go to save him."

Stark roughly caught her wrist. "Save Kynon? But he planned this bloody thing..."

he is the man who will lead it!"

Fianna shook her head. "He will not lead it, though he will seem to do so. And he did not plan it, for that was the doing of Delgaun and Berild, who put the plan into Kynon's head."

"There are lies everywhere," said Stark. "I am tangled up in lies. Tell me the truth."

"The truth of Delgaun and Berild is this," said Fianna. "They are tired of wandering secretly through the ages of the world. Even Berild has wearied of living for pleasure only, and longs for power. They, the Twice-Born, should rule the short-lived peoples. So they conceived their plan for empire.

"Berild it was who subtly put into Kynon's mind the idea of using the legendary secret of the Sending On of Minds, the lure of immortality, as a bait to lure the fighting-men, to rally Drylanders and Low-Canallers together. Kynon, always ambitious and eager for power, seized upon that. He prepared the hoax, and with the promise of the crowns, he has gathered the men. It was Delgaun who suggested bringing in the outlanders, and their weapons. More outland vultures will come, drawn by the smell of loot, if the first conquest succeeds. And Delgaun and Berild will use them to keep the Martian tribes in check, and to prop their evil rule." Stark thought about Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis and Arrod of Mercury and Callisto Colony. He thought of others like them, and what they would do with their talons hooked in the heart of Mars. He thought of Delgaun's yellow eyes. He said, "You speak of Delgaun and Berild ruling--but would they dare get rid of Kynon, whom all look on as leader?"

Fianna looked at him pityingly. "You don't understand. They will not get rid of Kynon physically. It will still be Kynon whom the tribesmen hail and follow as their leader."

Still Stark could not comprehend. "What do you mean? Kynon may have been influenced, but he's not one to dance to anyone's bidding."

"I said, they will not get rid of Kynon physically," Fianna repeated. Stark began to understand, and a cold sickness rose in him. "You mean--the Sending On of Minds?"

The sickness in Stark became a shuddering repulsion, as from a

nightmare. He suddenly felt a violent hatred for this ancient, evil world and of the black things that came up from its past.

"Do you understand now why I need your help?" Fianna was saying. "This final wickedness must not happen. If Delgaun takes the body of Kynon, he'll use it to lead the Drylanders to bloody ruin. You have to help me prevent that." Stark looked at her, and asked thickly, "Where?"

"Berild's quarters. Kynon is there now, in the trap. Delgaun has gone to bring the Crowns of the Ramas from their hiding-place." Stark gripped the Shunni sword and said, "Take me there the shortest way."

"Not quite the shortest, but the safest. Come!" She led him through labyrinthine underground ways, a dark maze that twisted and turned and seemed to go on forever. And he saw things on the way that he had not dreamed existed under the dead pile of Sinharat. One great cavern was lighted vaguely by a globe of cold green fire that stood upon a pedestal in a corner. It cast a livid glow over masses of piled and jumbled and incomprehensible objects. There were massive silvery wheels and targes, weird reticulations of dusty metal rods, brazen beaks that had once adorned the prows of ships, in the old days when Sinharat was an island rising arrogantly from the rolling ocean.

Relics, possessions, or perhaps only loot--they were of the Ramas and the past that should be dead but not, quite. They set Stark to bristling, and he gripped the sword more tightly, but Fianna did not glance at them. A flight of dark steps took them up into a passageway that smelled of the upper air. And now a whispering began about them, a muttering and chuckling and piping that he had heard before, and it seemed uncannily to Stark as though the sounds that were called the voices of the Ramas were really voices now. It

was as though the old ones, the Ever-living, watched and gloated over the thing that was about to be done.

"The wind is rising and it will soon be dawn," said Fianna. "We must hurry." Cold air struck Stark's face as he followed her upward again, this time into a room whose windows let in the light of the flying moons.

"We are there," whispered Fianna. "Now, very quietly. I must know first if Delgaun has returned."

She went softly down a hallway, motioning him to wait. After a moment, without any sound at all, a little crack of light spilled into the corridor and showed Fianna pressed close outside a door she had softly opened. Stark's pulses thudded as he caught the sound of a silvery voice that he recognized as Berild's. Then the dark silhouette of Fianna moved, making a beckoning gesture.

He came softly to her side and she stepped away so that he might see through the crack in the doorway. He looked, into the lamplit room. He saw Kynon, in profile, bound by leather thongs to one of the massive stone pillars. There was a great bruise on Kynon's temple, and in his harsh, powerful face there was a look that Stark had never seen on any human face before.

Delgaun stood nearby, but Kynon ignored him and stared fixedly at Berild.

"You may well look, Kynon," she said. "It is the last you will see of Berild, your submissive and patient woman. You great ox of a barbarian! Not in a thousand years have I been so bored with anyone as I have been with you, and your roaring boasts and childish schemes."

"There's no time for this," Delgaun said sharply. "Let us get it done." Berild nodded, and went to a small coffer of golden metal that rested on a table. She pressed a series of patterned bosses in an intricate sequence, and there was a sharp click of an opening lock. A shiver ran up along Stark's spine as he watched Berild raise the lid of the coffer and reach her hands inside it.

On the slave block of Valkis, Kynon had brought forth two crowns of shining crystal and a rod of flame. But as glass is to diamond, as the pallid moon to the light of the sun, were those things to the reality that now shone forth. In her two hands Berild had the ancient crowns of the Ramas, the givers of life. Twin circlets of glorious fire, dimming the shallow light of the lamps, putting a nimbus of light around the white-clad woman so that as she walked across the room she was like a goddess walking in a cloud of stars. She held them for Kynon to see, mocking him. "You blazoned them on your banner for all the world to see-do not shrink from them now!"

"I say again, we waste time," cut in the sharp voice of Delgaun. Delgaun came and stood beside bound Kynon, with his back also against the pillar. And Berild raised the two flashing crowns in her hands and bent toward them.

In the ear of Stark, Fianna said, "Now!"

XIV

STARK WENT INTO the room with his sword up and he Went fast, heading toward Delgaun. He had always recognized the infinite dangerousness of this man. And now that he knew that it was backed by countless lifetimes of cunning and experience, he thought that his chances were not good. Delgaun's yellow eyes flashed amazement, but he reacted with superb speed. He ran swiftly toward the corner of

the room, and scrabbled a gun out of its hiding-place under a cloak.

And Stark thought, as he plunged, "Of course, he wouldn't have the gun on him when his body was going to be exchanged with Kynon's..." He had never seen such speed as Delgaun's, turning with the gun. But the Shunni blade went home before the turn was ever completed, and Delgaun pitched and fell, the fall of his body wrenching the sword-hilt out of Stark's hand. Stark, kneeling to retrieve the sword, heard a ringing sound and saw something bright rolling past him. It was one of the crystal crowns, but whatever material they were made of, it was not really crystal, for the crown was unharmed by its fall. Still stooping, grabbing the sword-hilt, he turned swiftly.

Berild had dropped the Crowns, and had drawn a slender knife. In her face was terror. For Kynon was loose, cut loose by Fianna, and the big barbarian was advancing toward her. His face was terrible as he grasped with hungry hands for the woman.

Berild's knife flashed, twice, and then Kynon's great arms closed around her. She screamed chokingly. Kynon's face was as red as the blood that was pouring from his side, his mighty muscles straining, and in a moment, by the time Stark was on his feet again, Berild was broken and dead. Kynon flung her limp body away, like an outworn, unclean doll. He turned slowly and his hand went to the gashes in his side. He said thickly, "The Rama witch has killed me. My life is pouring out..."

He stood, rocking and swaying, with a numbed expression on his face as though he could not actually believe it. Stark went to his side and supported him.

"Kynon, listen!"

Kynon did not even seem to hear him. His eyes had turned upon the motionless bodies of Berild and Delgaun.

"Witch and wizard," he muttered. "All this time--deceiving me, laughing at me, using me for their own ends. It is good that you killed the man, too." Stark spoke urgently. "Kynon, their evil will still live and work if the men of the Drylands march! Not Berild and Delgaun, but someone else will spend the blood of the tribes for power."

Kynon seemed dazedly to consider that, and then his eyes blazed fiercely.

"Power that should have been mine... No, by God! Help me, Stark--I have a thing to tell the tribes!"

He was lurching, like an oak about to fall. Powerful as Stark was, he had difficulty supporting Kynon as they went out of the room. Fianna remained, still standing by the pillar and trembling and looking after them. The dawn lightened the streets of Sinharat, and the morning wind was stronger. Louder came the pipings and fluting from the city. Kynon, his left hand pressed against his side, looked up at the stone faces of the Ramas and then raised his clenched right hand and shook it at them.

They came to the great stairway and started down it. Below them in the sunrise light the vast huddle of tents was awakening. Then a voice yelled, a tribesman pointed wildly to where Stark and Kynon came painfully down the stair, and with a bursting roar of excited voices, the whole camp came to life. The men of Kesh and Shun came crowding in hundreds, then in thousands, their faces fierce and strange in the brightening light as they looked up to where Kynon stood swaying, with Stark steadying him.

Kynon looked down at them without speaking, for a moment. Then he

seemed to gather his strength, and his bull voice roared out almost as loudly as it had on the slave block in Valkis.

"I have been deceived and betrayed, and so have you all! Delgaun and Berild conspired to use us of the Drylands, as a sword to hack conquests for them, not us!"

It took moments for them to take it in. Then a low growling sound came up from the thousands below.

A Keshi chieftain leaped up a few steps on the stairway and shook his weapon and shouted, "Death for them!"

And the crowd took up and echoed that fierce shout. Kynon held up his hand.

"They are already dead... and Delgaun was slain by Stark, who tried to save me. But the snake Berild stung me, and I am dying."

He swayed so that Stark had to hold up his massive weight by both arms around him, but then he gathered his strength again.

"I lied when I said I had the secret of the Ramas," Kynon said. "And now I know that that secret would yield only evil. Forget it, and forget the war that you would fight only for the profit of others." He tried to say more, but did not seem to be able to voice the words. Stark felt the weight of him sagging more heavily, and tried to hold him, but Kynon said thickly, "Let be."

He slid down, still holding his side, to sit upon the steps. He sat there, as the sun rose higher, with the great battlements and towers of Sinharat behind him and with the fighting-men of the Drylands looking silently up at him, and the desert stretching far away. And what thoughts were mirrored in his face, Stark, who stood behind him,

could not see.

Kynon said no more. He sat, and his shoulders sagged, and then his whole body sagged down and was still.

For a time, nothing at all happened. Stark stood waiting, and farther back up the stair, Knighton and Walsh and Arrodd and Themis stood, peering and stricken, but no one moved.

Then four chieftains of the Shunni came silently up the stair. They did not even glance at Stark. They picked up Kynon's body and went back down the stair with it, and the crowd of warriors divided in front of them. Stark climbed back up the stairway to where Knight and the others waited, a group of downcast, doubtful men.

"The thing's blown," said Stark. "There won't be any war, and there won't be any loot."

Walsh cursed. He asked, "What happened?"

Stark shrugged. "You heard Kynon."

They were not satisfied at all, but there was nothing they could do about it. They stood pondering, looking with gloomy eyes down at the striking of the skin tents and the loading of the beasts, as the great camp broke up. Knighton said, finally, "I'm getting out. And the rest of you had better go with me, and not back to Valkis or anywhere near it."

The others had already had that thought. Delgaun's lieutenants would be waiting in Valkis, ready for the great stroke against the Border, and they would not be happy with the thing that had happened.

Stark said, "I won't go with you. I'm going to Tarak." He thought of

Simon Ashton, waiting in Tarak, and he thought that Ashton would be glad of the word he brought, the word that meant peace and not war. Walsh, looking at Stark without love, told him, "It's just as well. I think you Jonah'd this whole deal, though I don't know how. There are riding-beasts in the pen behind Kynon's palace."

They turned and went away. Stark looked back down the stairway toward the desert.

The vast encampment was disappearing as by magic. It was dissolving into streams of men and animals that moved out in long caravans, in many different directions, back into the recesses of the Drylands.

One file of men and beasts moved to the sound of booming drums and skirling pipes. Kynon of Shun was going home as a leader should. Stark walked back through the silent streets of Sinharat, and came again into the room where Delgaun and Berild had died. Their bodies were not there now. But Fianna sat by the window looking out at the departure of the hosts. Stark's gaze swiftly searched around the room. Fianna turned, and said,

"They're not here, if it's the Crowns of the Ramas you are looking for. I hid them."

"The thought that was in my mind was to destroy them," said Stark. She nodded. "I had the same thought. I almost did it. But--"

"But the addiction to life is a strong one, indeed," said Stark. "So you said, remember?"

Fianna got up and came to face him, and her face was shadowed by doubt.

"I know this," she said, "I do not want another life, who have had so many. I do not want it now. But when the body finally fails, and death stoops near, it may be different. There will always be time to destroy the Crowns."

"There will always be time," said Stark. "But there will never be the will." Fianna came closer to him and her eyes were suddenly fierce. "Don't be so smug in your strength! You haven't felt your life guttering out... as I have, more than once! Perhaps when you come to feel that, you would be glad to join me in the Sending On of Minds."

Stark was silent for a moment, and then he shook his head. "I don't think so. Life has not been so soft and sweet for me that I would want to live it over."

"Don't answer me now," Fianna said. "Answer me thirty years from now. And if your answer is 'Yes,' come seek me here in Sinharat. Soon or late, I will always return here."

"I will not return," Stark said flatly.

She looked up at him, and then she whispered, "Perhaps you won't. But don't be too sure."

The throbbing of Kynon's burial-drums was only a faint echo now, and far out on the desert the dust of the caravans receded.

Stark turned. "I am going, as soon as I can prepare. Do you go with me?" Fianna shook her head. "I stay here, at least for a while. I am the last of my people, and this is my place."

Stark hesitated, then turned and left her.

When night came, he was riding far out on the desert, leading his

pack-beasts. The wind was rising, murmuring and piping in the lonesomeness, but he knew it was only illusion that made him seem to hear at this distance the whispering, fluting voices of the city behind him.

Would he someday go back there, questing for another life, seeking out Fianna so that they two might go down through ages as Delgaun and Berild had done?

No. And yet...

Stark turned in the saddle and looked back, at the white towers of Sinharat rising against the larger moon.

The Beast-Jewel of Mars

I

Burk Winters remained in the passenger section while the Starflight made her landing at Kahora Port. He did not think that he could bear to see another man, not even one he liked as much as he did Johnny Niles, handle the controls of the ship that had been his for so long.

He did not wish even to say goodbye to Johnny, but there was no avoiding it. The young officer was waiting for him as he came down the ramp, and the deep concern he felt was not hidden in the least by his casually hearty grin. Johnny held out his hand. "So long, Burk. You've earned this leave. Have fun with it."

Burk Winters looked out over the vast tarmac that spread for miles across the ochre desert. An orderly, roaring confusion of trucks and flatcars and men and ships—ore ships, freighters, tramps, sleek liners like the Starflight, bearing the colors of three planets and a dozen colonies, but still arrogantly and predominantly Terran.

Johnny followed his gaze and said softly, "It always gives you a thrill, doesn't it?"

Winters did not answer. Miles away, safe from the thundering rocket blasts, the glassite dome of Kahora, Trade City for Mars, rose jewel-like out of the red sand. The little sun stared wearily down and the ancient hills considered it, and the old, old wandering wind passed over it, and it seemed as though the planet bore Kahora and its spaceport with patience, as though it were a small local infection that would soon be gone.

He had forgotten Johnny Niles. He had forgotten everything but his own dark thoughts. The young officer studied him with covert pity, and he did not know it.

Burk Winters was a big man, and a tough man, tempered by years of deep-space flying. The same glare of naked light that had burned his skin so dark had bleached his hair until it was almost white, and just in the last few months his gray eyes seemed to have caught and held a spark of that pitiless radiance. The easy good nature was gone out of them, and the lines that laughter had shaped around his mouth had deepened now into bitter scars. A big man, a hard man, but a man who was no longer in control of himself. All during the voyage out from Earth he had chain-smoked the little Venusian cigarettes that have a sedative effect. He was smoking one now, and even so he could not keep his hands steady nor stop the everlasting tic in his right cheek.

"Burk." Johnny's voice came to him from a great distance; "Burk, it's none of my business, but..." He hesitated, then blurted out, "Do you think Mars is good for you, now?"

Quite abruptly, Winters said, "Take good care of the Starflight, Johnny. Goodbye."

He went away, down the ramp. The pilot stared after him. The Second Officer came up to Johnny. "That guy has sure gone to pieces," he said.

Johnny nodded. He was angry, because he had come up under Winters and he loved him.

"The damn fool." he said. "He shouldn't have come here." He looked out over the mocking immensity of Mars and added, "His girl was lost out there, somewhere. They never found her body."

A spaceport taxi took Burk Winters into Kahora, and Mars vanished. He was back in the world of the Trade Cities, which belong to all planets, and none. Vhia on Venus, N'York on Earth, Sun City in Mercury's Twilight Belt, the glassite refuges of the Outer Worlds, they were all alike. They were dedicated to the coddling of wealth and greed, little paradises where millions were made and lost in comfort, where men and women from all over the Solar System could expend their feverish energies without regard for such annoyances as weather and gravitation.

Other things than the making of money were done in the Trade Cities. The lovely plastic buildings, the terraces and gardens and the glowing web of moving walks that spun them together, offered every pleasure and civilized vice of the known worlds.

Winters hated the Trade Cities. He was used to the elemental honesty of space. Here the speech, the dress, even the air one breathed, were artificial. And he had a deeper reason than that for his hatred. Yet he had left N'York in feverish haste to reach Kahora, and now that he was here he felt that he could not endure even the delay caused by the necessity of crossing the city. He sat tensely on the edge of the seat, and his nervous twitching grew worse by the minute.

When finally he reached his destination, he could not hold the money for his fare. He dropped the plastic tokens on the floor and left the driver to scramble for them.

He stood for a moment, looking up at the ivory facade before him. It was perfectly plain, the epitome of expensive unpretentiousness. Above the door, in small letters of greenish silver, was the one Martian word: Shanga.

"The return," he translated. "The going-back." A strange and rather terrible smile crossed his face, very briefly. Then he opened the door and went inside. Subdued lighting, comfortable lounges, soft music, the perfect waiting room. There were half a dozen men and women there, all Terrans. They wore the fashionably simple white tunic of the Trade Cities, which set off the magnificent blaze of their jewelry and the exotic styles in which they dressed their hair.

Their faces were pallid and effeminate, scored with the haggard marks of life lived under the driving tension of a super-modern age. A Martian woman sat in an alcove, behind a glassite desk. She was dark, sophisticatedly lovely. Her costume was the artfully adapted short robe of ancient Mars, and she wore no ornament. Her slanting topaz eyes regarded Burk Winters with professional pleasantness, but deep in them he could see the scorn and the pride of a race so old that the Terran exquisites of the Trade Cities were only crude children beside it.

"Captain Winters." she said. "How nice to see you again." He was in no mood for conventional pleasantries. "I want to see Kor Hal," he said. "Now."

"I'm afraid..." she began. Then she took another look at Winters' face and turned to the intercom. Presently she said, "You may go in." He pushed open the door that led into the interior of the building, which consisted almost entirely of a huge solarium. Glassite walls enclosed it. Around the sides were many small cells, containing only a padded table. The roofs of the cells were quartz, and acted as mammoth lenses. Skirting the solarium on the way to Kor Hal's office, Winters' mouth twisted with contempt as he looked through the transparent wall. An exotic forest blossomed there. Trees, ferns, brilliant flowers, soft green sward, a myriad of birds. And through this mock-primitive playground wandered the men and women who were devotees of

Shanga.

They lay first on the padded tables and let the radiation play with them. Winters knew. Neuro-psychic therapy, the doctors called it. Heritage of the lost wisdom of old Mars. Specific for the jangled nerves and overwrought emotions of modern man, who lived too fast in too complex an environment. You lie there and the radiation tingles through you. Your glandular balance tips a little. Your brain slows down. All sorts of strange and pleasant things happen inside of you, while the radiation tinkers with nerves and reflexes and metabolism. And pretty soon you're a child again, in an evolutionary sort of way.

Shanga, the going-back. Mentally, and just a tiny bit physically, back to the primitive, until the effect wore off and the normal balance restored itself. And even then, for a while, you felt better and happier, because you'd had one hell of a rest, from everything.

Their pampered white bodies incongruously clad in skins and bits of colored cloth, the Earthlings of Kahora played and fought among the trees, and their worries were simple ones concerning food and love and strings of gaudy beads. Hidden away out of sight were watchful men with shock guns. Sometimes someone went a little bit too far down the road. Winters knew. He had been knocked cold himself, on his last visit here. He remembered that he had tried to kill a man.

Or rather, he had been told that he had tried to kill a man. One did not remember much of the interludes of Shanga. That was one reason people liked it. One was free of inhibitions.

Fashionable vice, made respectable by the cloak of science. It was a new kind of excitement, a new kind of escape from the glittering complexities of life. The Terrans were mad for it.

But only the Terrans. The barbaric Venusians were still too close to

the savage to have any need for it, and the Martians were too old and wise in sin to use it. Besides, thought Winters, they made Shanga. They know. A deep shudder ran through him as he thrust his way into the office of Kor Hal, the director.

Kor Hal was lean and dark and of no particular age. His national origin was lost in the anonymity of the conventional white tunic. He was Martian, and his courtesy was only a velvet sheath over chilled steel, but beyond that he was quantity X.

"Captain Winters," he said. "Please sit down." Winters sat.

Kor Hal studied him. "You're nervous, Captain Winters. But I am afraid to treat you anymore. Atavism lies too close to the surface in you." He shrugged.

"You remember the last time."

Winters nodded. "The same thing happened in N'York." He leaned forward. "I don't want you to treat me anymore. What you have here isn't enough now. Sar Kree told me that, in N'York. He told me to come to Mars." Kor Hal said quietly, "He communicated with me."

"Then you will..." Winters broke off, because there were no words with which to finish his question.

Kor Hal did not answer. He reclined at ease against the cushions of his lounge chair, handsome, unconcerned. Only his eyes, which were green and feral, held a buried spark of amusement. The cruel amusement of a cat which has a crippled mouse under its paw.

"Are you sure," he asked finally, "that you know what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"People differ, Captain Winters. Those mannikins out there"--he indicated the solarium--"have neither blood nor heart. They are artificial products of an artificial environment. But men like you, Winters, are playing with fire when they play with Shanga."

"Listen," said Winters. "The girl I was going to marry took her flier out over the desert one day and never came back. God only knows what happened to her. You know better than I do the things that can happen to people in the dead sea bottoms. I hunted for her. I found her flier, where it had crashed. I never found her. After that nothing mattered much to me. Nothing but forgetting." Kor Hal inclined his dark, narrow head. "I remember. A tragedy, Captain Winters. I knew Miss Leland, a lovely young woman. She used to come here."

"I know," said Winters. "She wasn't Trade City, really, but she had too much money and too much time. Anyway, I'm not worried about playing with your fire, Kor Hal. I've been burned too deep with it already. Like you say, people differ. Those lily-whites in their toy jungle, they have no desire to go back any farther. They haven't the guts or the passions to want to. I have." Winters' eyes blazed with a peculiarly animal light. "I want to go back, Kor Hal. Back as far as Shanga will take me."

"Sometimes," said the Martian, "that's a long way."

"I don't care."

Kor Hal gave him an intent look. "For some, there is no return."

"I have nothing to return to."

"It is not easy, Winters. Shanga--the real Shanga, of which these solariums and quartz lenses are only a weak copy, was forbidden centuries ago by the City-States of Mars. There are risks, and

discomforts, which means that the process is expensive."

"I have money." Winters leaped up suddenly, his control breaking. "Be damned to your arguments! They're all hypocrisy, anyway. You know perfectly well which ones are going to take to Shanga. You keep them coming until they're addicts, half crazy to feel the real thing, and you know damn well you're going to give them what they want as soon as they cross your dirty palm with silver."

He tossed a checkbook on Kor Hal's desk. The top one was blank, but signed.

"There," he said. "Anything up to a hundred-thousand Universal Credits."

"I would prefer," said Kor Hal, "that you draw your own check, to cash." He handed the checkbook back to Winters. "The full amount, in advance." Burk Winters said one word. "When?"

"Tonight, if you wish. Where are you staying?"

"The Tri-Planet."

"Have dinner there as usual. Then remain in the bar. Sometime during the evening your guide will join you."

"I'll be waiting," Winters said, and went out. Kor Hal smiled. His teeth were very white, very sharp. They had the hungry look of fangs.

II

Burk Winters got his bearings finally when Phobos rose, and he could guess where they were heading.

They had slipped quietly out of Kahora, he and the slender young Martian who had joined him unobtrusively in the Tri-Planet bar. A flier waited for them on a private field. Kor Hal waited also. They took off, with a fourth man, who looked to be one of the big barbarians from the northern hills of Kesh. Kor Hal took the controls.

Winters was sure now that they were bound for the Low Canals, the ancient waterways and the ancient wicked towns--Jekkara, Valkis, Barrakesh--outside the laws of the scattered City-States. Thieves' market, slave market, vice market of a world. Earthmen were warned to keep away from them. Miles reeled behind them. The utter desolation of the landscape below got on Winters' nerves. The silence in the flier became unendurable. There was something menacing about it. Kor Hal and the big Keshi and the slim young man seemed to be nursing some common inner thought that gave them a peculiarly vicious pleasure. Its shadow showed on their faces. Winters spoke finally, "Are your headquarters out here?" No answer.

Winters said rather petulantly, "There's no need to be so secretive. After all, I'm one of you now."

The slim young man said sharply, "Do the beasts lie down with the masters?" Winters started to bristle, and the barbarian put his hand on the wicked little sap he carried at his belt. Then Kor Hal spoke coolly.

"You wished to practice Shanga in its true form, Captain Winters. That is what you have paid for. That is what you will receive. All else is irrelevant." Winters shrugged sulkily. He sat smoking his sedative tobacco, and he did not speak again.

After a long, long time the seemingly endless desert began to change. Low ridges rose naked from the sand and grew into a mountain range, of which nothing was left now but the barren rock.

Beyond the mountains lay a dead sea bottom. It stretched away under the moonlight, dropping, always dropping, until at last it became only a vast pit of darkness. Ribs of chalk and coral gleamed here and there, pushing through the lichens like bones through the dried skin of a man long dead. Winters saw that there was a city between the foothills and the sea. It had followed the receding water down the slopes. From this height, Winters could see the outlines of five harbors, abandoned one by one as the sea drew back, the great stone docks still standing. Houses had been built to fill their emptiness, and then abandoned in their turn for a lower level. Now the straggling town had coalesced along the bank of the canal that drew what feeble life was left from the buried springs of the bottom. There was something infinitely sad about that thin dark line--all that was left of a blue and rolling ocean.

The flier circled and came down. The Keshi said something rapidly in his own dialect, from which Winters caught the one word, Valkis. Kor Hal answered him. Then he turned to Winters and said:

"We have not far to go. Stay close by me." The four men left the flier. Winters knew that he was under guard, and felt that it was not entirely for the sake of protecting him. The wind blew thin and dry. Dust rose in clouds around their feet. Valkis lay ahead, a stony darkness sprawling upward toward the cliffs, cold in the eerie light of the twin moons. Winters saw, high up on the crest, the broken towers of a palace.

They walked beside still black water, on paving stones worn hollow by the sandaled feet of countless generations. Even at this late hour, Valkis did not sleep. Torches burned yellow against the night. Somewhere a double-banked harp made strange music. The streets, the alley mouths, the doorways and the flat roofs of the houses rustled with life.

Lithe lean men and catlike women watched the strangers, hot-eyed and silent. And over all, Winters heard the particular sound of the Low Canal towns--the whispering and chiming of the wanton little bells that the women wear, braided into their dark hair, hanging from their ears, chained around their ankles. Evil, that town. Ancient, and very evil, but not tired. Winters could feel the pulse of life that beat there, strong and hot. He was afraid. His own civilian garb and the white tunics of his companions were terribly conspicuous in this place of bare breasts and bright kilts and jeweled girdles. No one molested them. Kor Hal led the way into a large house and shut the door of beaten bronze behind them, and Winters felt a great relief. He turned to Kor Hal.

"How soon?" he asked, and tried to conceal the trembling of his hands.

"Everything is ready, Winters. Halk, show him the way." The Keshi nodded and went off, with Winters at his heels. This was very different from the Hall of Shanga in Kahora. Within these walls of quarried stone, men and women had lived and loved and died in violence. The blood and tears of centuries had dried in the cracks between the flags. The rugs, the tapestries, and the furnishings were worth a fortune as antiques. Their beauty was worn, but still bright.

At the end of a corridor was a bronze door, pierced by a narrow grille. Halk stopped. He said to Winters, "Strip." Winters hesitated. He carried a gun, and he did not like to leave it behind.

"Why out here? I'd rather have my clothes with me." Halk said, "Strip here. It is the rule."

Winters obeyed.

He walked naked into the narrow cell. There was no comfortable table here, only a few skins thrown on the bare floor. A barred opening showed darkly in the opposite wall.

The bronze door rang shut behind him and he heard the great bar drop into place. It was completely dark. He was really afraid, now. Terribly afraid. But it was too late for that. It had been too late, for a long time. Ever since Jill Leland was lost.

He lay down on the hides. High above, in the vault of the roof, he could make out a faint, vague shimmering. It grew brighter. Presently he saw that it was a prism set into the stone, rather large and cut from a crystalline substance that was the color of fire.

Kor Hal's voice reached him through the grille. "Earthman!"

"Yes?"

"That prism is one of the Jewels of Shanga. The wise men of Caer Dhu carved them half a million years ago. Only they knew the secret of the substance, and the shaping of the facets. There are only three of the jewels left." Sparks that were more energy than light flickered on the stone walls of the cell. Gold and orange and greenish blue. Little flames, the fire of Shanga, to burn the heart.

Because he was afraid, Winters said, "But the radiation, the ray that comes through the prism. Is it the same as that in Kahora?"

"Yes. The secret of the projectors was lost also with Caer Dhu. Presumably they use cosmic rays. By substituting ordinary quartz for the prisms, we could make the radiation weak enough for our purpose in the Trade Cities."

"Who is 'we,' Kor Hal?"

Laughter, soft and wicked. "Earthman--we are Mars!" Dancing fire, growing, growing, glinting on his flesh, darting through his blood, his brain. It was not like this in the solariums, with their pretty trees. It was pleasure there, tantalizing, heady pleasure. It was exciting, and strange. But this...

His body began to move, to arch itself into strong writhing curves. He thought he could not endure the lovely, lovely pain.

Kor Hal's voice boomed down some huge fateful distance. "The wise men of Caer Dhu were not so wise. They found the secret of Shanga, and they escaped their wars and their troubles by fleeing backward along the path of evolution. Do you know what happened to them? They perished, Earthman! In one generation, Caer Dhu vanished from the face of Mars." It was getting hard to answer, hard to think. Winters said hoarsely, "Did it matter? They were happy, while they lived."

"Are you happy, Earthman?"

"Yes!" he panted. "Yes!"

The words were only half articulate. Twisting, rolling on the hide rugs, in the grip of such magnificent, unholy sensation as he had never dreamed of before, Burk Winters was happy. The fire of Shanga blazed down upon him like a melting away, and there was nothing left but joy.

Again, Kor Hal laughed.

* * *

After that, Winters was not sure of anything. His mind rocked, and there were periods of darkness. When he was conscious, he knew

only a feeling of strangeness. But he carried one memory with him, at least part way down that eerie road.

During a lucid period, a space of only a minute or two, he thought that one of the stones had rolled back to reveal a quartzite screen, and that through the screen a face looked at him, watching as he bathed naked in the beautiful flame.

A woman's face. Martian, highbred, with strong delicate bones and arrogant brows, and a red mouth that would be like a bittersweet fruit to kiss. Her eyes were golden as the fire, and as hot, and proud, and scornful. There must have been a microphone in the wall, for she spoke and he heard her voice, full of a sweet cruel magic. She called his name. He could not rise, but he managed to crawl toward her, and to his reeling brain she was part of the unearthly force that played with him. A destruction and a fascination, as irresistible as death.

To his alien eyes, she was not as lovely as Jill. But there was a power in her. And her red mouth taunted him, and the curve of her bare shoulders drove him to madness.

"You're strong," she said. "You will live, until the end. And that is well, Burk Winters."

He tried to speak, but he could no longer form the words. She smiled. "You have challenged me, Earthman. I know. You've challenged Shanga. You're brave, and I like brave men. You're also a fool, and I like fools, because they give me sport. I'm looking forward, Earthman, to the moment when you reach the end of your search!" He tried again to speak, and failed, and then the night and the silence came to stay. He took the sound of her mocking laughter with him into the dark.

He did not think of himself now as Captain Burk Winters, but only by the short personal name of Burk. The stones upon which he lay were cold and hard. It was pitch-dark, but his eyes and ears were very keen. He could tell by the sound of his breathing that he was in a closed space, and he did not like it. A low growl rumbled in his throat. The hairs stiffened at the back of his neck. He tried to remember how he had come here. Something had happened, something to do with fire, but he did not know what, or why. Only one thing he knew. He was searching for something. It was gone, and he wanted it back. The wanting was a pain in him. He could not remember what the object was that he wanted, but the need for it was greater than any obstacle short of death.

He rose and began to explore his prison.

Almost at once he found an opening. Cautious testing told him that there was a passage beyond. He could see nothing, but the air that blew in to him was very heavy with strange smells. Instinct told him that it was a trap. He crouched resolute, his hands opening and closing in desire for a weapon. There was no weapon. Presently he went into the passage, moving without sound. He went a long way, his shoulders brushing stone on either side. Then he saw light ahead, red and flickering, and the air brought him the taint of smoke, and the smell of man.

Very, very slowly, the creature called Burk padded toward the light. He came close to the end of the tunnel, and suddenly a barred gate dropped behind him with a ringing clash. He could not go back. He did not wish to go back. Enemies were in front of him, and he wished to fight. He knew now that he could not come upon them secretly. Flexing his great chest, he leaped out boldly from the tunnel mouth. The tossing glare of torches dazzled his eyes, and a wild mob howl deafened him. He stood alone on a great block--the old slave block

of Valkis, though he did not know that. They stared up, jeering at the Earthman who had tasted the forbidden fruit that even the soulless men of the Low Canals would not touch. The creature called Burk was still a man, but a man already shadowed by the ape. During the hours he had bathed in the light of Shanga, he had changed physically. Bone and flesh had altered under the accelerated urging of glands and increased metabolism.

Already a big, powerful man, he had thickened and coarsened along the lines of brutish strength. His jaw and brow ridges jutted. Thick hair covered his chest and limbs and extended in a rudimentary mane down the back of his neck. His deep-set eyes had a hard and cunning gleam of intelligence, but it was the intelligence of the primitive mind that had learned to speak and make fire and weapons, and no more than that.

Half crouching, he glared down at the crowd. He did not know who these men were; he hated them. They were of another tribe, and their very smell was alien. They hated him, too. The air bristled with their enmity. His gaze fell on a man who stepped out lightly and proudly into the empty space. He did not remember that this man's name was Kor Hal. He did not notice that Kor Hal had shed the white tunic of the Trade Cities for the kilt and girdle of the Low Canals, nor that he wore in his ears the pierced gold rings of Barrakesh, and was now honestly himself—a bandit, born and bred among a race of bandits who had been civilized for so long that they could afford to forget it.

Burk knew only that this man was his particular enemy.

"Captain Burk Winters," said Kor Hal. "Man of the tribe of Terra--Lords of the spaceways, builders of the Trade Cities, masters of greed and rapine." His voice carried over the packed square, though he did not shout. Burk watched him, his eyes like blinking red sparks in the torchlight, weaving slightly on his feet, his hands swinging loose

and hungry. He did not understand the words, but they were threat and insult.

"Look at him, Oh men of Valkis!" cried Kor Hal. "He is our master now. His government kings it over the City-States of Mars. Our pride is stripped, our wealth is gone. What have we left, oh children of a dying world?" The answer that rang the walls of Valkis was soft and wordless, the opening chord of a hymn written in hell.

Someone threw a stone.

Burk came down off the slave block in a great effortless sprig and sped across the square, straight for Kor Hal's throat.

A laugh went up, mirth that was half a cat-scream of sheer savagery. Like one supple creature, the crowd moved. Torchlight flashed from knife-blade and jewels and eyes of glittering green and topaz, and the small chiming bells, and the points of the deadly spiked knuckle-dusters. Long black tongues of whips licked out with a hiss and a crack.

Kor Hal waited until Burk almost reached him. Then he bent and pivoted in the graceful Martian savatte. His foot caught Burk under the chin and sent him sprawling.

As he rolled half stunned, Kor Hal caught a whip from a man's hand.

"That's it, Earthman!" he cried out. "Grovel! Belly down, and lick the stones that were here before the apes of Earth had learned to walk!" The long lash sang and bit, lacing the hairy body with red weals, and the harsh mob scream went up--Drive him! Drive the beast of Shanga, as the invading beasts of old were driven by our forefathers!

And they drove him, with whip and knife and spike, through the

streets of Valkis under the racing moons. Jeering they drove him. He fought them. Mad with fury, he fought them, but he could not come to grips with them. When he lunged they melted before him, and each way he turned he was met by the lash and the blade and the crippling lick. Blood ran, but it was all his own, and the high shrill laughter of women pursued him as he went. At last there was only fear and the desire to escape. They let him run. Along the crumbling ways of Valkis, up and down the twisting alleys that reeked of ancient crime, they let him run. But not too far. They blocked him off from the canal and the freedom of the sea bottom beyond. Again and again they headed the panting, shambling creature that had been Burk Winters, captain of the Starflight, and drove it higher up the slope. Burk moved slowly now. He snarled and his head wove blindly from side to side in a pathetic attempt at defiance. His blood dripped hot on the stones. And always the insolent stinging lashes drove him on.

Up and up. Past the great looming docks, with the bollards and the scars of moored ships still on them, and the dust of their own decay lapping dry around their feet. Four levels above the canal. Four harbors, four cities, four epochs written in fading characters of stone. Even the dawn-man Burk was oppressed and frightened.

There was no life here. There been no life for a long time, even in the lowest level. The wind had scoured and polished the empty houses, smoothing the corners to roundness, hollowing the doors and windows, until the work of man was almost erased. Only strange things were left, that looked as though the wind had made them by itself out of little mountain tops. The people of Valkis were silent now. They drove the beast, and their hate had not abated, but was intensified.

They walked here upon the very bones of their world. Earth was a green star, young and rich. Here the Martians passed the marble pier

where the Kings of Valkis had moored their galleys, and the very marble was shattered under the heel of time.

High on the ridge above the oldest city the palace of the kings looked down at the scourging of the interloper. And in all of Valkis now there was no sound but the whispering of little bells that was like the sigh of wind on another world, where the women ran on their small bare feet, ankle deep in dust. Burk climbed apeline up the history of Mars. His belly was cold with a terror of these dark places that smelled of nothing, not even of death. He passed a place where houses had been built within the curve of a coral reef. He clambered over the reef, and saw above him a sloping face of rock with gaping holes that the sea had made. He climbed that, not knowing or caring what it was.

On the level space above he passed the broken quays that had once made safe mooring in the bay, and stopped to look back.

They were still hunting him. His flanks heaved and his eyes were desperate. He went on, scrambling up steep narrow streets where the paving blocks had fallen out and the houses had come down in shapeless heaps, and his hands and feet left red prints where he put them down.

Then, at last, he was at the top of the ridge.

The great bulk of the palace loomed above him against the sky. Primitive wisdom told him the place was dangerous. He skirted the high wall of marble that ringed it, and suddenly his twitching nostrils caught the scent of water. His tongue was swollen in his mouth, his throat choked with dust. His need was so great, with the salt bleeding and the fever of his wounds, that he forgot his enemies and the menace of the mountain-thing behind the wall. Breaking into a ragged lope, he went forward along the cliff top until he came to a gateway, and plunged through it, and suddenly there was turf under

his feet, soft and cool. There were shrubs, and flowers pale in the moonlight, heavily sweet, and dark branches against the sky.

The gate closed silently behind him. He did not see it. He ran down a grassy ride between rows of trees trimmed into fantastic shapes, guided by the smell of water. Here and there were strange gleams and glints of statuary, wrought in marble and semiprecious stones. Burk's skin crawled with an awareness of danger, but he was too weary and too mad with thirst to care. The ride ended. Beyond was an open space, and in the center of it was a great sunken tank, carved and ornamented. The water in it was like polished jet. Nothing stirred in the open. A wing of the palace rose beyond the tank like a black wall, and it seemed that nothing lived there, but Burk's hair-trigger nerves told him otherwise. He stopped in the shelter of the trees, sniffing the air and listening.

Nothing. Darkness and silence. Burk looked at the waiting water. It filled all his senses. Suddenly he ran toward it.

He flung himself belly down on the slabs of turquoise that paved the brink and buried his face in the icy water and drank. Then he lay there panting, utterly spent.

Still nothing moved.

Then, all at once, a long howl rose on the night, from somewhere beyond the palace wing. Burk stiffened. He got to his hands and knees, every hair on his body bristling with fear.

The howl was answered by a strange reptilian scream. Now that he had satisfied his thirst, the night wind brought him many odors. They were too numerous and tangled to be identified, except for a strong musky taint that made his flesh crawl with instinctive loathing. He did not know what sort of creature gave off that taint, but it filled him with

horror, because it seemed that he almost knew--and did not want to. He wanted only to get away from that place, that was so full of secret life and hidden menace and silence.

He began to move toward the trees, back the way he had come. Slowly, because he was wounded and very weak. And then, quite suddenly, he saw her. She had come without sound into the open space, out of the shelter of huge flowering shrubs. She stood not far away, in the shifting glow of the little racing moons, watching him. She was shy and large-eyed, poised for flight. The hair that hung down her back and the shining down that covered her body were the color of the moonlight.

Burk stopped. A tremor went through him. All his sense of loss and his desperate searching came back to him, and with them a desire to be closer to this slender she.

A name spoke itself from some dim chamber of his soul "Jill?" She started. He thought she was going to run away, and he cried out again,

"Jill!" Then, step by step, uncertainly, she came nearer, lovely as a fawn in spring.

She made a questioning sound, and he answered. "Burk." She stood still for a moment, repeating the word, and then she whimpered and began to run toward him, and he was filled with a great joy. He laughed and mouthed her name over and over, and there were tears in his eyes. He reached out toward her. A spear flashed and fell quivering between them.

She gave him a cry of warning and fled, vanishing into the shrubbery. Burk tried to follow, but his knees gave under him. He turned, snarling. Tall Keshi guards in resplendent harness had come out of

the trees, circling behind him. They carried spears and a net of heavy ropes. In a moment he was surrounded! The spear-points pricked him back until the net was thrown and he went down helpless.

As they carried him away, he heard two things. The wail of the silver she, and from somewhere nearby, a woman's mocking laughter.

He had heard that laughter before. He could not remember where, or how, but it filled him with such fury that he was finally knocked over the head with a spear-butt, to keep him quiet.

III

He came to himself--the self that was Captain Burk Winters--in a room that was much like the one he last remembered, in Valkis, except that the walls were of a dark green rock and there was no prism.

Winters could not remember anything of what had happened since that last room, except that he knew he had had a strong emotional shock. Jill's name was uppermost in his mind. He began to tremble with a deep excitement. He got to his feet, and it was then that he realized he was shackled. Chains ran from cuffs on his wrists to similar cuffs on his ankles, passing through rings on a metal belt around his waist. These constituted his entire clothing. He saw also that there were freshly healed scars on his body. The heavy door was opened for him before he could begin to pound on it. Four tall barbarians, their harness magnificent with jewels and wrought metal, formed up a guard around him, and an officer led the way. They did not speak to Winters, and he knew the uselessness of trying to get anything out of them. He had not the faintest idea where he was, or how he had come there, beyond a vague memory of pain and flight that was like something he had dreamed. And somewhere, during

that dream, he had seen Jill, spoken to her. He was as certain of that as he was of the weight of his chains. He stumbled, because his sight was blurred with tears. Up to then, he had not been sure. He had seen the twisted wreck of her flier, and while he did not believe it, there was always the chance that she might really be dead, and lost to him beyond all hope.

Now he knew. She was alive, and if Winters had been alone he would have wept like a child.

Instead, he studied the corridors and the great halls through which the guard took him. From the size and the splendor of them he knew that he was in a palace, and guessed that it might be the one he had seen on the cliffs above Valkis. This was confirmed when he caught a glimpse of the town through a window embrasure.

The palace was older than anything he had seen on Mars, except for the buried ruins of Lhak in the northern deserts. But this was no ruin. It had grown old in somber beauty. The patterns of the mosaic floors were blurred, the precious stones worn thin as porcelain. The tapestries, preserved by the wonderful Martian formula that had been lost for centuries, like everything else on Mars, had grown frail and brittle, their colors all softened to faint glows, infinitely sad and lovely.

Here and there, on the walls or the soaring vault of a roof, were murals--magnificent pageants of lost glory, dim as an old man's memory. The seas they pictured were deep and blue, and the ships were tall, and the mail of the warriors was set with gems, and the captive queens were beautiful as dusky pearls.

Proud architecture, mating beauty with strength, and showing that strange blend of culture and barbarism that is so typically Martian. Winters reflected on how long ago these stones had been quarried, and went on to reflect that at that time civilization had already

destroyed itself in a series of atomic wars, and the proud Kings of Valkis were only bandit chieftains in a world that was slipping downward toward the night.

They came at length to doors of beaten gold that were more than twice Burk's six-foot height. The Keshi guards who stood there pushed them wide, and Burk saw the throne room.

Westering sunlight slanted in from the high embrasures, falling across the pillars and the tessellated floor. The pale light touched vagrant glints from the shields and the weapons of dead kings, warmed the old banners to brief life. Everywhere else in that vast place was a brooding darkness, full of whispers and small faint echoing.

A shaft of cool gold fell directly upon the throne at the far end of the room. The high seat itself was cut from a single block of black basalt, and as Winters approached it, his swinging chains making a loud sound in the silence, he saw that the stone had been already half shaped by the sea. It was very worn and smooth with the patient sanding of the tides, and where hands had lain on the armpieces there were deep hollows, and on the basalt step below. An old woman sat upon the throne. She was wrapped in a black cloak, and her hair wound into a sort of white crown on her head, braided with jewels. She stared with half-blind eyes at the Earthman, and suddenly she spoke, in sonorous High Martian, a tongue as antique on Mars as Sanskrit is on Earth. Winters could not understand one word of it, but he knew from her tone and expression that she was quite mad.

Someone sat in the heavy shadows by her feet, outside the shaft of sunlight, and veiled by it from Winters' sight. He could catch only a vague pallor of ivory-tinted flesh, but for some reason his nerves tingled with premonition. As he neared the high seat, the old woman rose and stretched out her arm toward him, a wrinkled Cassandra

crying doom upon his head. The wild echoes of her voice rolled from the vaulted roof, and her eyes were full of a blazing hate.

The guards set the butts of their spears into his back so that he was thrown face down before the basalt step. A low, sweet, mocking laugh came out of the shadows, and he felt the pressure of a little sandaled foot on his neck. He knew the voice that said, "Greeting, Captain Winters! The throne of Valkis welcomes you."

The foot was withdrawn from his neck. He rose. The old woman had fallen back onto the throne. She was intoning what sounded like a church litany, and her upturned face had an exalted look.

The remembered voice said out of the dimness, "My mother is repeating the coronation rites. Presently she will demand the year's tribute from the Outer Islands and the coastal tribes. Time and reality do not bother her, and it pleases her to play at being queen. Therefore, as you see, I, Fand, rule Valkis from the shadow of the throne."

"Sometimes," Winters said, "you must come into the light."

"Yes."

A soft, quick rustle and she was standing there in the shaft of sunlight. Her hair was the color of night after moonset, intricately coiled. She was dressed in the old, arrogant fashion of the bandit kingdoms--the long full skirt slit to the waist at the sides, so that her thighs showed when she moved, the wide jeweled girdle, collar of golden plaques. Her small, high breasts were bare and lovely, her body slender, with a catlike grace. Her face was as he remembered it. Proud and fine, golden-eyed, a mouth like a red fruit that mingled honey and poison, a lazy, slumberous power behind the beauty, the fascination of all things that are at once beautiful and deadly. She looked at Winters

and smiled. "So at last you have reached the end of your search."

He looked down at his chains and his nakedness. "A strange way to reach it. I paid Kor Hal well for this privilege." He gave her a searching glance. "Do you rule Shanga, as well as Valkis? If so you're not very courteous to your guests."

"On the contrary, I treat them very well--as you shall see." Her golden eyes taunted him. "But you didn't come here to practice Shanga, Captain Winters."

"Why else would I have come?"

"To find Jill Leland."

He was not really surprised. Subconsciously he had known that she knew. But he managed a look of blank amazement.

"Jill Leland is dead."

"Was she, when you saw her in the garden, and spoke to her?" Fand laughed. "Do you think we're such fools? Everyone who comes to the Hall of Shanga in the Trade Cities is carefully checked and examined. We were particularly careful with you, Captain Winters, because psychologically you were the wrong type to be drawn to Shanga. Men like you are too strong to need escape.

"You knew, of course, that your fiancée had taken up the practice. You didn't like it, and tried to make her stop. Kor Hal said that she was terribly upset about it on several occasions. But Jill had gone too far to stop. She begged to be allowed the full power, the real Shanga. She helped us plan her supposed death in the sea bottom. We would have done that anyway, for our own protection, since the girl has influential connections and we can't afford to have people hunting for

our clients. But she wanted you to believe that she was dead, so that you would forget her. She felt she had no right to marry you, that she would ruin your life. Doesn't that touch you, Captain Winters?

Doesn't that bring tears to your eyes?"

It brought more than that to Winters. It brought an overpowering urge to take this lovely she-devil between his hands and break her and then stamp the pieces into the earth.

His chains made one harsh jangling sound, and then the spears came up and touched his flesh with sharp red kisses. He stood still and said, "Why have you done this? Is it for money, or for hate?"

"For both, Earthman! And for something more important than either of them." Her lips curved in brief amusement. "Besides, I've done nothing to your people. I built the Halls of Shanga, yes. But the men and women of Earth degrade themselves of their own free will. Come here." She motioned him to follow her to the window. As she crossed the vast room, she said, "You have seen part of the palace. Earth credits have rebuilt and restored the house of my fathers. The credits of apelings who wish to return to their normal state because the civilization they have forced themselves is too much for them. Look out there. Earth money has done that, too." Winters looked out upon a sight that had almost vanished from the face of Mars. A garden, the varied and jewel-bright garden that would have belonged with a palace like this. Broad lawns of bronze green turf, formal plantings, statuary...

For some reason he could not quite remember, that garden gave Burk Winters a cold shuddering chill.

But the garden itself was only a part of what he saw. A small part. Beneath the window the ground sloped away into a vast bowl-shaped

depression, perhaps a quarter-mile away, and Winters looked down into an amphitheater. Ruined as it was, it was still magnificent, with tiers of seats rising like steps of hewn stone from the inner walls. He thought of how it must have looked when the games were held in the old days, with all of those thousands of places filled.

Now, in the arena, there was another garden. A wild and tangled garden, closed in by the high protective walls that had kept the beasts from the spectators. There were trees in it, and open spaces, and he could make out moving forms among the shadows, strange forms. He could not see them clearly for the distance and the slanting light, but a chill pang struck through him, a cold breath of foreboding.

In the center of the arena was a lake. Not a large one, and probably not deep, but there were creatures splashing in it, and he caught the faint echo of a reptilian scream. An echo he had heard before.... Fand was looking outward to the amphitheater, with an odd, slow smile. Winters saw that there were people already in the lower tiers of the seats, and more of them gathering.

"What is this thing," he asked her, "that is more important than money or your hatred for the men of Earth?"

All the ancient pride of her race and house flashed out in her eyes as she answered him. He forgot his loathing of her for a moment, in his respect for her deep sincerity.

She said only one word. "Mars."

The old woman heard her and cried out from the throne. Then she flung the corner of her black mantle over her head and was silent.

"Mars," said Fand quietly. "The world that could not even die in decency and honor, because the carrion birds came flying to pick its

bones, and the greedy rats suck away the last of its blood and pride." Winters said, "I don't understand. What has Shanga to do with Mars?"

"You'll see." She turned on him suddenly. "You challenged Shanga, Earthman, just as your people have challenged Mars. We'll find out which is the stronger!"

She motioned to the officer of the guard, who went away. Then she said to Winters, "You wanted your girl back. You were willing to go through the fire of Shanga for her, though you abhorred it. You were willing to risk your identity through the changes of the ray—which after a while, Earthman, never go away. And all for Jill Leland. Do you still want her back?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of that."

"Yes."

"Very well." Fand glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "There she is." For a long moment, Burk Winters did not turn around. Fand moved away a little, watching with a cruel, amused interest. Winters' back stiffened. He turned. She was there, standing in the sunlight, bewildered, frightened, a wild and shining creature out of the dawn of the world, with a rope around her neck. The guards were laughing.

Winters thought desperately, She has not changed too much. Back to the primitive, but not yet to the ape. There is a soul still in her eyes, and the light of reason.

Jill, Jill! How could you have done this thing?

But he understood now how she could have done it. He remembered how bitterly he had quarreled with her over Shanga. He had thought it a stupid and childish thing, far beneath her intelligence and as degrading as any other drug. But he had not understood.

He did now. And he was filled with a deadly fear, because he understood so well.

Because he himself was now numbered among the beasts of Shanga. And beneath his horror as he looked at the creature that was Jill and yet not Jill, he was aware that in some unholy way he found her more beautiful and more alluring than he ever had before. Stripped of all the shams and the studied unconventions of society, freed of all complexity, her body strong and fleet as a doe's quivering with sensitive life...

It would take two of a kind. Dawn-woman, dawn-man. Strong sinew, strong passion, the guts that cities stole away...

Fand said, "She can still be saved, if you can find a way to do it." Then she added shrewdly, "Unless you now need someone to save you, Captain Winters!" A strong shock of revulsion rocked him, but his eyes still held a strange light.

The silver she was coming toward him. Her gaze was fixed upon him. He saw that she was drawn to him, and struggling to understand why. She did not speak, and somehow Winters' throat closed on an aching lump, so that he too was dumb. The guard who held her rope let her move as she would. She came close to Winters, hesitantly, as an animal does. Then she stopped and looked up into his face. Tears gathered in her wide dark eyes. Presently she whimpered, very softly, and went down on her knees at his feet.

The old woman let out a shrill cackling. Fand's eyes were like cups of

molten gold.

Winters bent over and caught Jill in his arms. He lifted her to her feet and stood holding her to him, in a fury of protective possessive love. He said very softly to Fand, "You've seen it all now. Can we go?" She nodded. "Take them to the garden of Shanga," she said, and added "It is almost time."

The guards took them, Burk Winters and the woman he had lost and found again, out through the great echoing halls of the palace and down the long slope of lawn to the amphitheater.

A barred gate of heavy metal covered the mouth of a tunnel. The guards unlocked it and took off Winters' chains and thrust him inside with Jill. The gate was locked again behind them.

Holding Jill tightly by the hand, Winters went down the tunnel and came presently into the arena--into the garden of Shanga. He stopped, blinking in the sudden light. Jill's hand tightened on his. She quivered with a tense expectancy, and her head was tilted in an attitude of listening.

He had only a moment before the gong sounded, the mellow sonorous notes that might have been calling some evil priesthood to its dark prayers. Only a moment to glimpse the trees and the shambling anthropoid forms that moved among them, to catch the rank beast taint in the air, to hear the splashing and the hissing screams from the hidden pool.

Only a moment to be filled with horror and a sick fear, to deny to himself the reality of this nightmare garden, to wish that he were blind and deaf, or better than that, dead.

In the seats above the protecting wall, rows of Martian faces looked

down. They were the faces of men and women who watch the antics of creatures in a zoo--destructive creatures for which they have a personal hatred. Then the gong called out, and Jill leaped away, pulling him by the hand. All over the garden there was a moment of intense silence, and then there rose a devil's chorus of roaring and screaming in voices that were horribly human and even more horribly not, and close to him Jill's voice chimed in, saying over and over, "Shanga! Shanga!"

It came to Winters in a flash, then, what Fand had meant about Mars. As Jill pulled him headlong between the trees and across the open grassy spaces, he realized that this garden of Shanga was in fact a zoo, an exhibit, where the people of Mars might come to see what manner of beast their economic conquerors were. A hot and dire shame rose in him. Apeling, running naked through the trees, a slave to the fire of Shanga!

He yelled at Jill to stop!

She only plunged on the harder, so that he had to fight her, setting his heels in the earth. And she turned on him snarling, saying, "Shanga!" A great anthropoid male came rushing toward them. He had slipped back beyond speech, but ecstatic noises came out of his throat. Behind him were others, males, females, and young on the same evolutionary level. Winters and the silver she that was Jill were caught up and carried on in their tribal rush. Winters fought to get away, but it was hopeless. The wild hairy bodies walled him in.

As they approached the center of the garden they were joined by more and more, all apparently summoned by the sound of the gong. Looking at them, Winters'

stomach turned over. This was Walpurgis Night, a festival of blasphemies. And he was trapped in it, inextricably joined to

destruction. The ones like Jill, who had only gone a little way as yet, were not so bad. They were human. Winters knew that he himself had been like that, and he felt no particular horror of them. But there were others. Back through all the stages of the primitive, beyond the Neanderthal, beyond Pithecanthropus Erectus, beyond the missing link, back to the common ancestor. Shapeless, shambling, hairy brutes, deformed skulls and little red cunning eyes, bared teeth grinning yellow. Things that even the anthropologist had never seen or dreamed of. Things that were not human, or ape, nor any form of life that had ever been classified.

All the dark secrets of Terran evolution were laid bare in this garden, for the Martians to see. It made even Winters, the Earthman, flinch to think that bodies like that had given ultimate birth to him. What respect could the Martians have for such a race, that was still so close to its beginnings?

But he was to see more, much more, of those beginnings.... . The gong struck a last booming summons. The tide of bowed hairy shoulders and flat brows and ugly things that went on all fours swept Winters and Jill out into the clearing at the center, where from the palace window he had seen the lake. A strong musky reek hung in the air. It had the same sickly taint that a snake-house does. And Winters saw that the lake was agitated by the creatures who lived there, and who were swarming out to answer the gong. Back to the common ancestor, and beyond. Beyond the mammal, back to the gill and the scale, to the egg laid in the warm mud, to the hissing, squirming, utterly loathly ultimate!

Jill panted, "Shanga! Shanga!" looking up, and Winters felt a darkness swimming in his brain. A cold wet thing slithered between his legs, and he swayed, retching. The surface of the lake rippled, but he could not look. He could not.

Grasping Jill, he tried to batter his way through the crowd, but it was hopeless. He was caught, trapped.

Looking up, he saw the prisms that were set high overhead on long booms. He saw them start to glow, with the remembered flame.

He had reached the end, now. The end of his search for Jill Leland, the end of everything. The first sweet deadly thrill of the ray touched his flesh. He felt the waking hunger in him, the deep lust, the stirring of the beast that lay so close under his own skin. He thought of the lake, and wondered how it would be to lie in its wetness, breathing through the gill slits that had once opened in his own flesh when he was an embryo in his mother's womb. Because that is where I shall be, he thought. In the lake. Jill and I. And beyond the lake, what? The amoeba, and then... ?

He saw the royal box, whence the Kings of Valkis had watched the gladiators and the flowing blood. Fand sat there now. She leaned her slender elbows on the stone and watched, and it seemed to Winters that even at this distance he could see the smile and the scorn in her golden eyes. Kor Hal sat beside her, and the old woman, a muffled shape of black.

The fires of Shanga burned and brightened. There was a silence on the clearing now. The sounds that came, the moanings and the little whimpers, did not touch the silence. They only made it deeper. The warm glints danced on the upturned faces, glowed in the staring eyes. Each scaled or shaggy body bore a nimbus of beauty. He saw Jill standing there, reaching up toward the twin suns, a slim shaft of silver flame.

The madness already in his blood. Muscle and sinew taut with it, arching, curving. Brain clouding with a bright soft veil, forgetfulness, release. Jill and Burk, dawn-man, dawn-woman, happy while they

lived, done with everything but their own love, their own satisfaction. Why not? They were both in it now, both marked with the same stamp.

Then he heard the laughter and the jeering of the Martians who were gathered to watch the shame of his world. He tore his gaze away from the wicked light and looked again into the face of Fand of Valkis, and then at Kor Hal and the thousand other faces, and a bleak and terrible expression came into his eyes. The ranks of the crowd had broken. The beast-shapes lay upon the turf, writhing in the ecstasy of Shanga. Jill was on her hands and knees. Winters felt the strength going out of him. The lovely pain, the beautiful, wild, exultant pain...

He grasped Jill and began to drag her, back toward the trees, out of the circle of light.

She did not want to go. She screamed and tore his face with her nails and kicked him, and he struck her. After that she lay limp in his arms. He kept on, stumbling over the twitching bodies, falling, crawling at last on his hands and knees. Only one thing kept him going on. Only one thing made him undergo the tortures of the damned, fighting Shanga. That thing was the scornful, smiling face of Fand.

The touch of the ray weakened and was gone. He was safe, beyond the circle. He dragged the girl farther into the shrubbery and turned his back on the clearing because he wanted more than any drug addict could conceive of wanting to go back into the light, and he dared not look at it. Instead, he pulled himself erect and faced the royal box. It was only pride that kept him standing. He looked straight into the distant eyes of Fand, and her clear silvery voice carried to him.

"You will go back into the fire of Shanga, Earthman. Tomorrow, or the day after--you will go."

Complete assurance there, as one is sure of the rising of the sun. Burk Winters did not answer. He stood a moment longer, his gaze level with Fand's. Then, even pride failed. He fell and lay still. The last conscious thought of his mind was that Fand and Mars together had challenged Earth, and that it was no longer merely a matter of saving a girl from destruction.

IV

When he came to, it was night. Jill sat patiently beside him. She had brought him food, and while he wolfed it down she went away to fetch water in a broad cupped leaf.

He tried to talk to her, but there was a gulf between them too wide to be bridged. She seemed subdued and brooding, and would not come close to him. He had robbed her of the fire of Shanga, and she had not forgotten it. The futility of trying to escape with her was obvious. After a while he rose and left her, and she did not try to follow.

The garden was still under the light of the low moons. Apparently the beasts of Shanga, true to their ape heritage, were sleeping. Moving with infinite caution, Winters prowled the arena in search of a way out. A plan had taken shape in his mind. It was not much of a plan, and he knew that very probably he would be dead before morning, but he had nothing to lose. He did not even particularly care. He was a man, an Earthman, and there was an anger in him that was deeper than any fear.

The walls of the arena were smooth and high. Even an ape could not

have climbed them. All the tunnels were blocked off except the one by which they had entered. He crept down it and found the barred gate impenetrable. Beyond it was a little guard fire, and two sentries. Winters went back to the arena. He could see no sign of a guard in the empty tiers of seats. There was no reason for one. In itself, the amphitheater was a perfect prison, and the creatures of the garden had no wish to escape from the besotting joys of Shanga.

Whipped before he started, Winters stood glaring bitterly at the walls that held him fast. Then he caught sight of the booms from which the Shanga prisms were suspended.

Going to the nearest one, he studied it. It was high out of reach, a long metal pole that stretched from the side of the arena above the wall and, with the other one, centered the Shanga-rays over the clearing. High out of reach. But if a man had a rope... Winters went in among the trees. He found vines and creepers, and tore them away, and knotted them together. He found a small log in a deadfall, big enough to weight one end but light enough for throwing. Then he returned to the boom. On the third cast the log went over. He drew his flimsy rope down, making a double strand. Hand over hand, praying that the vines would hold, he began to climb.

It seemed like a long way up. He felt very naked and exposed in the moonlight. The vines held, and no challenging voice shouted at him. He clung to the boom and worked his way along it, first dropping the telltale rope. Presently he was safe among the tiered seats.

Avoiding the guard by the tunnel, he made his way out of the amphitheater and circled out across the slope, keeping to cover where there was cover, crawling on his belly where there was none. The shifting moon-shadows helped him, because they made visibility a treacherous thing. The palace loomed above him, huge and dark, crushed under the weight of time.

Only two lights showed. One, on the ground floor, he guessed would be the guard room. The other, on the third level, was dim as though made by a single torch. That, he hoped, would be the apartment of Fand. Up the slope and into the shelter of the palace garden, and then into the palace itself. The great half-ruined pile could not have been guarded, even if there had been reason to guard it. Padding silently on naked feet, Winters glided through the vast empty halls, trying to keep a plan of the place straight in his mind.

His eyes were accustomed to the dark, and enough moonlight fell through the embrasures to let him see where he was going. Room and hall and corridor, smelling of dust and death, dreaming over their faded flags and broken trophies, remembering glory. Winters shivered. Something of the cold breath of eternity lived in this place.

He found a ramp, and then another, and at last on the third level he saw light, the weak flicker of it from the crack of a door. There was no guard. That was a break. Not only because it was a difficulty eliminated, but because it confirmed his guess that Fand was a person who would want no check on her comings and goings. From the standpoint of safety in this place, a guard would be only a useless adornment. Fand was on her own ground here. There were no enemies.

Save one.

Winters opened the door without sound. A maid slept on a low couch. She did not stir as he passed. Beyond an open arch hung with heavy curtains he found the lady Fand.

She slept in a huge carved bed, the bed of the Kings of Valkis. She looked like a child lost in its hugeness. She was very beautiful. Very wicked, and most damnably beautiful.

Winters struck her, quite ruthlessly. Sleep became unconsciousness. There was no outcry. With silks and girdles he found in the room he bound and gagged her, and flung her light weight over his shoulder. Then he went back the way he had come, silently out of the palace.

It was as easy as that. He had not thought it would be easy, but it was. After all, he thought, men seldom guard against the impossible. Phobos had gone on its careening flight around Mars, and Deimos was too low to give much light. Now carrying the unconscious Fand, now dragging her across the open spaces, Winters made his way back to the amphitheater. In and across the tiered seats to the wall. It was a twenty-foot drop, but he made it as easy as he could on her. He didn't want her dead. Then he slid over, himself, hung briefly by his fingertips, and fell into cushioning brush. When he got his breath back he made sure that Fand was not hurt. Then he carried her swiftly into the shelter of the unholy garden. Remembering a particularly dense patch of shrubbery near the central clearing, he made for it and crept thankfully into concealment with the heir of all the Kings of Valkis.

Then he waited.

* * *

Her eyes were looking up at him in the dim light, bitter gold above the gag of scarlet silk.

"Yes," he said, "you're here, in the garden of Shanga. I brought you here. We have a bargain to talk about, Fand."

He undid the gag, keeping his hand close over her mouth lest she should cry out.

She said, "There will be no bargain between us, Earthman."

"Your life, Fand. Your life for mine, and Jill's and the others here who can still be saved. Destroy the prisms, stop this madness, and you can live to be as old and crazy as your mother."

There was no fear in her. Unbending pride, and hatred, but no fear. She laughed.

He put his hand on her throat, his fingers reaching iron-strong around her neck. "Slim," he said. "Soft, and tender. It would snap so easily."

"Break it, then. Shanga will go on without me. Kor Hal will take over. And you, Burk Winters--you can't escape." Her teeth showed white in a taunting smile. "You'll run with the beasts. No man can break free from Shanga." Winters nodded. "I know that," he said quietly. "Therefore I must destroy Shanga before it destroys me."

She looked at him, naked and unarmed, crouching in the brush. Once more, she laughed.

He shrugged. "Perhaps it is impossible. I won't know that until it's too late, anyway. It isn't really me I'm worried about, Fand. I could be perfectly happy running on all fours through your garden. Probably I would be perfectly happy hissing and wallowing in the lake. Now the idea sickens me, but after a touch of Shanga it would be all right. No. It isn't me that matters, nor even Jill."

"What, then?"

"Earth has its pride, too," he told her gravely, "It's a younger and cruder pride than yours. It can become pretty ruthless and obnoxious at times, I'll admit. But on the whole, Earth is a good planet, and her people are good people, and she's done more to advance the Solar System than all the other worlds put together. As an Earthman, I don't like to see my world disgraced." He glanced up and around the

amphitheater. "I think," he went on, "that Earth and Mars can learn a lot from each other, if the fanatics on both sides will stop making trouble. You're the worst one I've ever heard of, Fand. You go even beyond fanaticism." He looked at her speculatively. "I think you're as mad right now as your mother."

She did not flare up at that, which convinced him that she was not mad at all, only twisted by the way she lived and the things she had been taught. She said, "What do you plan to do about all this?"

"Wait. Until dawn, or perhaps later. Anyway, until you've had time to think. Then I shall give you a last chance. After that, I shall kill you." She was smiling when he replaced the gag, and her eyes did not waver. The hours passed. Darkness into dawn, and then into full daylight. Winters sat unmoving, his head bowed over his knees. Fand's eyes were closed, and it seemed that she slept.

The garden woke to life with the sun, and all around the dense thicket Winters heard the padding footsteps and the growling of the beasts of Shanga. The things in the shallow lake cried out, and their musky taint soured the wind. Winters shivered like a man with fever and his brooding eyes were haunted. After a while Jill came. Animal-like she had found him, animal-like she came slipping without sound through the brush. She would have cried out at the sight of Fand, but he silenced her. She crouched beside him, watching him. She was afraid of him and yet she could not stay away. He stroked her shoulder. It was soft and strong and trembling under his hand. Her gaze was doe-like, full of sadness and a bewildered yearning.

Winters' face became as bleak and pitiless as the barren stars that watch from outer space.

The time grew very short. Jill began to look upward toward the prisms. Winters sensed in her a growing nervousness.

He shook Fand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, and he knew what her answer would be before he asked the question.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

For the first time, Winters smiled. "I have decided," he said, "not to kill you, after all."

What he did after that was done quickly and efficiently, and there was no one to see but Jill and Fand. Jill did not understand; the heiress of the Kings of Valkis understood too well.

People began to drift into the amphitheater. Martians, coming to see a show, coming to learn contempt and loathing for the men of Earth. Winters watched them. He was still smiling.

Suddenly he turned to Jill. When he rose a few minutes later, scratched and panting, she was securely bound with strips torn from bonds of Fand. This time she would not bathe so helplessly in the fire of Shanga. The Martians gathered. Kor Hal came into the royal box, bringing the old woman, who leaned on his arm.

The gong sounded.

V

Once again, Winters watched the gathering of the beasts of Shanga. Hidden in the thicket, beyond the reach of the rays, he saw the hairy bodies rush and jostle toward the central clearing. He saw the shining of their drugged eyes. He heard them moan and whimper, and all over the garden the mouthing whisper went--"Shanga! Shanga!"

Jill writhed and thrashed in the agony of her desire, her cries muffled by the wad of silk he had thrust into her mouth. Winters could not bear to look at her. He knew how she was suffering. He was suffering too. He saw that Kor Hal was leaning forward over the edge of the wall, searching the garden. He knew what the Martian was looking for. The last notes of the gong rang out. A silence fell on the clearing. Hairy anthropoid, shambling brutes that ran on all fours, nameless creatures beyond the ape, crawling things with wet and shining scales—all silent, all waiting. The prisms began to glow. The beautiful wicked fire of Shanga filled the air. Burk Winters set his hand between his teeth and bit until the blood ran. It seemed to him that he could hear a faint thin screaming, rising out of the flowering shrubs by the lake. Low, tough-stemmed shrubs that lay under the full rays of the prisms.

Shanga! Shanga!

He had to go, into the clearing, into the fiery light. He could not stand it. He must feel again the burning touch on his flesh, the madness and the joy. He could not stay away.

In desperation he flung himself down beside Jill and clung to her, shuddering in torment.

He heard Kor Hal's voice, calling his name.

He steadied himself and rose, stepping out into the full sight of the royal box. The Martians ranged on either side watched him with interest, turning their attention momentarily from the orgy of the beasts of Shanga. Winters said, "I'm here, Kor Hal."

The man of Barrakesh looked at him and laughed. "Why fight it, Winters? You can't keep away from Shanga."

Winters asked, "Where is your high priestess? Has she wearied of the sport?" Kor Hal shrugged. "Who knows the mind of the Lady Fand? She comes and goes as she will." He leaned forward, "Go on, Winters! The fire of Shanga is waiting. Look how he sweats there, trying to be a man! Go on, apeling--join your brothers!"

The shrill jeering laughter of the Martians fell upon Winters with the sharpness of spears.

He stood there, naked in the sunlight, his head held stubbornly erect, and he did not move. He could not control the trembling of his limbs nor the harshness of his breathing. The sweat ran in his eyes and blinded him, and the fire of Shanga danced on the writhing bodies, and he thought he would go mad with torment, but he stood there and would not move. He thought he was going to die, but he would not move.

And the Martians watched.

Kor Hal said, "Tomorrow, then. Perhaps the next day--but you'll go, Earthman." Winters knew that he would. He could not go through this again. If he were still alive in the garden of Shanga the next time the gong sounded, he would go with his brothers.

The fire of Shanga died at last from the prisms, and the creatures of its making lay still on the ground. The Martians sighed. The first stir of departure ran through them. Burk Winters cried out, "Wait!" His voice rang back from the empty upper tiers, and it brought every eye upon him. There was desperation in it, and triumph, and the anger of a man driven beyond the bounds of reason.

"Wait, you men of Mars! You came to see a show. Very well, I'll give you one. You, Kor Hal! You told me something, down there in Valkis. You told me of the men of Caer Dhu who first made Shanga, and how

in one generation they were destroyed by it. One generation."

He stepped forward, finding release for his tortured nerves in this denunciation.

"We of Earth are a young race. We're still close to our beginnings, and for that you hate and mock us, calling us apes. Very well. But that youth gives us strength. We go very slowly down the road of Shanga.

"But you of Mars are old. You have followed the circle of time a long way around, and the end is always close to the beginning. In one generation the men of Caer Dhu were gone. Our fibers are iron, but theirs were only straw.

"That's why no Martian will practice Shanga--why it was forbidden by the City-States. You don't dare to practice it, because it hurls you headlong down that road--toward your end or your beginning, who knows? But you haven't the strength to take it, and you're afraid."

A jeering, angry howl rose from the crowd.

Kor Hal shouted, "Listen to the ape. Listen to the beast we drove through the streets of Valkis!"

"Yes, listen to him!" Winters cried. "Because the Lady Fand is gone, and only the ape knows where she is!"

That silenced them, and in the quiet Winters laughed.

"Perhaps you don't believe me. Shall I tell you how I did it?" He told them, and when he was through telling he listened, while they called him liar, and he jeered in Kor Hal's face.

"Wait," he shouted. "Wait, and I'll bring her to you." He turned and

went toward the clearing. He went fast, because the beasts were already beginning to stir and rouse from their temporary stupor. He remembered from his own experience with Shanga that before consciousness returned there was a period of delirium, so that even in the Trade City solariums the people were not turned loose until it had passed.

Threading his way between the brutish bodies, leaping over them, avoiding the touch of the scaly things, he came to the clump of flowering shrubs by the lake and crawled in among them.

He had not known. He had guessed from Kor Hal's statement that the metamorphosis was swift, but he had not known. There were some things that a man could not even guess at.

In spite of himself, he cried out. He did not want to look at the thing that lay there, did not even want to know that such a form of life had existed, or could exist. But he had to look at it. He had to go close to it, so that he might undo the silken bonds that held it to the roots of the shrubs. He had to touch it. He had to lay his hands upon its softness, lift its flaccid weight, hold its slippery squirming against his own body.

It had eyes. That was the worst of it. It had eyes, and it looked at him. He went away from the thicket, carrying his burden. Back across the clearing, where two great males were already fighting over a she, out into the open space before the royal box, where all could plainly see. He lifted the thing over his head, high into the sunlight.

"Here!" he shouted. "Don't you recognize her? Last of the royal house of Valkis--the Lady Fand!"

Around a portion of the wriggling anatomy that might once have been a neck, the collar of golden plaques swung, shining.

For a moment he held her so, while the faces of the Martians stared like the masks of dead men and Kor Hal rose and gripped the edges of the stone. Then he laid his burden down and stepped back from it where it moved horribly across the turf.

"Look there, you Martians," he said. "That is your own beginning." In the utter, stricken silence the old woman rose. She stood for a moment, looking down, and it seemed that she was about to speak or cry out, but no sound came. Then she fell, out over the wall and down the sheer drop into the arena. She did not move again.

As though she had led them, the Martians rose with one low terrible cry and followed her. Not to death, as they dropped over the wall, but to vengeance. Winters ran. He had Jill free in a minute, dragging her away into denser cover. The mouth of the tunnel was not far distant. The Martians swarmed in upon the clearing, and then the beasts of Shanga saw them. With roars and screams, they surged out to meet their attackers. Knife and short sword and spiked brass knuckles against fang and claw and the powerful muscles of the brute. The scaly creatures darted here and there, hissing, slashing with their rows of needle-sharp reptilian teeth. Great hands ripped and tore, snapping bones like matchsticks, cracking skulls. And the slim blades flickered in the sunlight, bright tongues speaking death. Vengeance was done that day in the garden of Shanga. The vengeance of Earth on Mars, and the vengeance of men upon the shame of their heritage. Winters saw Kor Hal run his sword through the creeping horror that had been Fand, through and through again until all motion stopped. Then he shouted Winters' name.

Winters went to him.

Neither spoke. There was nothing more to say. Bare-handed, Winters went against the Martian's sword. With the nightmare

carnage of the battle going on around them, they two were alone. They two had a special score to settle. Winters took one long gash above the heart before he caught Kor Hal's arm and broke it. The Martian never whimpered. With his left hand he reached for the knife at his girdle, but it never left the sheath. Winters laid Kor Hal backward across his knee and placed one thigh across his loins and an elbow across his throat. After a moment he dropped the broken body and went away, taking the sword.

The guards came running into the arena through the tunnel. The fight was spreading outward from the lake. Locked in struggling, swaying knots, the beasts of Shanga slew the Martians and were slain. The waters of the lake were stained red, and the corpse of a Martian was being dragged stealthily into it from the mud of the bank. There was something hidden below the surface, something that could no longer fight on land, but only lay quietly in wait, and fed.

Now the guards had come with their long spears, and Winters knew that in the end there would not be one creature left alive in the garden. And it was well. He took Jill's hand and led her toward the tunnel, running in the shelter of the trees. The fight was occupying everyone's attention. The brute males were hard to kill, and they fought for the love of it. The tunnel was empty, the gate open, the guards inside the arena, hard at work. Winters and the girl fled through it, taking cover outside the amphitheater just before another group of guards came down from the palace.

From there, with infinite haste and caution, they made their way down the cliffs through the dead ruins of Valkis, and then out across the desert, skirting the living town by the canal. Kor Hal's flier was on the field where Winters remembered it.

He thrust Jill inside, and as he followed her he saw the angry mob start to pour out of Valkis, where word of his crime and his escape

had been brought, a little too late.

He took the flier up, setting a course for Kahora. And now that it was all over, he felt a great weariness and an overwhelming desire to forget the very name of Shanga.

But he knew that he could never forget. The golden fire had burned too deep. He knew that he would always be haunted by the beautiful face of Fand as it had looked when he shackled her in the clearing, and by the memory of the high thin screaming as the light poured down from the prisms. Even the psychos could never make him forget.

The governments of Earth and Mars would see to it now that Shanga was stamped out forever. He was glad, and a little proud, because it had been his doing. But even so...

He looked over at Jill. Someday, he prayed, she would be herself again. The taint of Shanga would pass her, and she would once more be the Jill Leland he had given his heart to.

But will it pass entirely? For a moment it seemed that he heard the mocking voice of Fand, speaking in his soul. Will it pass from you, Burk Winters? Can one who has run with the beasts of Shanga ever be the same again?

He did not know. Looking back, he saw the smoke rising from the unholy garden--and he did not know.

The Dancing Girl of Ganymede

I: The Wanderer

Tony Harrah came into the bazaar of Komar, heading for the Street of the Gamblers. The sour wine was heavy in him and his pockets were light and he was in no hurry. Win or lose, there was nothing to be in a hurry about. He was on the beach and Komar is a far lost beach for an Earthman. The wind blew slowly through the narrow streets, stirring the torch flames that burned eternally under the dim red sky. It smelled of heat and sulphur, of the volcanic heart of Ganymede. Even here on the plateau, a thousand feet above the jungle, there was no escape from it. The sliding roofs of the houses were open wide to receive it for there was no other breath of air. Above the tumult of the bazaar the great yellow star that was the Sun blazed splendidly in the far darkness of space. Jupiter filled half the sky, misty, banded with crimson and purple and grey. Between Sun and Jupiter raced the thronging moons, catching light now from one, now from the other, burning, flashing, glorious.

Harrah took no joy in that magnificence. He had looked at it too long. He shouldered his way toward the square where the Street of the Gamblers joins the Street of Maidens and the Street of Thieves and at his heels like a furry shadow came Tok the aboriginal, the lemur-eyed child of the forests, who was Harrah's and who loved him utterly.

It was on the edge of the square that Harrah caught the first wild rhythms of the music. And it was there that Tok reached out one sudden hand-like paw and caught his master's shirt and said, "Lord--wait!" Harrah turned, startled by the urgency in Tok's voice. He opened his mouth to speak but he did not speak. The look in Tok's eyes stopped him. A queer blank look, luminous with some great

fear.

The aboriginal moved forward, past Harrah, and then became a motionless shape of darkness between the torches and the moons. His head was lifted slightly into the wind. His nostrils quivered and gradually the quivering spread over his whole slim body as though he breathed in terror with every breath. Imperceptibly his flesh seemed to shrink in upon itself until all the look of humankind was gone from him and he was an animal poised for flight.

"Lord," he whispered. "Evil, Lord--evil and death. It is in the wind." Harrah repressed a shiver. He could see nothing but the crowded square--the polyglot life of Komar, the landless, the lawless, the unwanted and forgotten, the mingled off-scourings of the Inner Worlds, mixed with the dark native-human folk of Ganymede. The only unusual thing was the music and there was nothing fearsome in that. Pipe and drum and a double-banked harp, raw and barbaric but stirring to the blood.

Yet Tok half turned and looked at him with the eyes of one who has seen forbidden things and cried out, "Go! Go back, Lord. The wind is full of death!"

And as he spoke others of his kind came running from the square, furry man-things far from their native jungles, and one of them whimpered as he ran,

"Demons. Demons with the eyes of darkness!"

"Go, Lord," whispered Tok.

The power of suggestion was so strong that Harrah almost obeyed. Then he caught himself and laughed. "What is it, Tok?" he demanded, in the simple aboriginal speech. "I see no demons."

"They are there. Please, Lord!"

"Nonsense." He jingled the coins in his pocket. "Either I win some money or you steal to feed us. Go back yourself."

He patted Tok's quivering shoulder and went on into the square forging his way through the crowd. He was curious now. He wanted to see what had frightened Tok and set the aboriginals to flight.

* * *

He saw the dancing girl, whirling crimson and white across the dirty stones, to the music of pipe and drum and harp, played by three men who might have been her brothers.

She was a Wanderer, from her ornaments and her ragged dress--a sort of interplanetary gypsy, one of the vast worldless tribe of space who travel from planet to planet but are citizens of none. Their blood is a mixture of every race in the System capable of cross-breeding and they are outcaste below the lowest.

There had been a few of them in Komar but this girl was new. If Harrah had seen her before he would not have forgotten. He thought that no man could ever forget her. There was something about her eyes.

Half naked in her bright rags she went on swift white feet through the tossing glare of the torches. Her hair was tawny gold and her face was the face of a smiling angel and her eyes were black.

They did not smile, those dark, deep eyes. They had no kinship with the lithe gaiety of her body. They were sorrowful and smoldering and full of anger--the most bitter raging eyes that Harrah had ever seen.

He pushed forward, farther still, until he stood in the open space where she danced, so close that her loose mane of hair almost brushed him as she passed. And as he watched he became aware of an odd thing.

The music was sensuous and the very steps of the dance were an invitation as old as humankind. Yet in some peculiar way the girl took the primitive animal rhythms and transmuted them into something cool and lovely. An old old memory came back to Harrah, of silver birches dancing in the wind. Then, abruptly, she came to a halt before him, her arms high above her head, poised on a quivering note of longing from the reed pipe. She looked at him, the dark, sinewy Earthman with a handful of coins, and her look was a curse. He could feel the hatred in her as a personal thing, alive and thirsting. The violence of it shook him. He was about to speak, and then she was gone again, blown like a leaf on the surging music.

He stood where he was, waiting, in the grip of a sudden fascination that he had no wish to break. And between his feet as he watched a small brown cur slunk snarling.

The dogs of Komar are like many another pack on worlds far from their parent Earth. Lost, strayed or abandoned from the ships that land there out of space, they have thriven in the gutters and the steaming alleys. And now, quite suddenly, Harrah became aware of a new sound in the bazaar. The narrow streets were as full of noise as ever and the wild oblique rhythms of the music filled the square. But the little brown cur lifted his muzzle to the sky and howled, a long savage wail, and somewhere close by another dog-throat picked it up, and another, and still another, until the square rang with it. Harrah heard the cry spreading out and away, running through the twisting alleys and the dark ways of Komar, howl answering howl, desolate and full of fear, and a coldness crept along the Earthman's spine.

There was something terrible about that primitive warning out of Earth's far past, unchanged even on this alien moon.

The music faltered and died. The girl stopped her dancing, her body half bent, poised and still. A silence fell across the square and gradually the sound of human voices ceased entirely as the city listened to the howling of its dogs. Harrah shivered. The crowd began to stir uneasily and a little muttering began to creep under the wailing of the dogs. The dancing girl relaxed very slowly from her pose, gathering herself.

A rough body brushed Harrah's knee. He looked down to see a great lurcher moving half-crouched into the open space. He realized then that the square was full of dogs, furtive shadows gliding between the legs of the men. They had stopped howling, these dogs. They growled and whimpered and their white fangs gleamed.

The small brown cur moaned once. Then he went with a rush and a scrabble out across the stones and leaped straight for the dancing girl's throat.

II: The Brothers

She did not scream. She moved, as swiftly as the dog, and caught the wiry brown body in mid-leap, between her two hands. Harrah saw her stand so for a split second, holding the frenzied beast that was shrieking now to get at her, and her eyes had narrowed to two slits of cold fire, utterly black and without fear.

Then she threw the dog into the jaws of the lurcher, that had started a rush of his own, and the two went down in a snarling tangle. After that there was bedlam. The one act of violence was all that was needed. The crowd turned and rolled in upon itself in a panic desire to be quit

of the square. Dogs and humans were mixed in a trampling screaming turmoil. Something had set the beasts mad and in their madness they snapped and tore at whatever got in their way. There began to be blood on the stones and weapons flashed in the torchlight and the voice of fury bayed in the hot wind. Dogs and men only fought there. The aborigines were gone. Harrah managed to stand his ground for a moment. He saw the girl run past him and brought the barrel of his gun down across the head of a long-jawed brute that came at her from behind. When he looked again she had disappeared. The press of the crowd bore him on then, the way she had gone. After a few paces he stumbled and looked down to see scarlet cloth and white flesh between his feet. She was trying to get up. He fought a clear space for her, battering with fists and elbows. In a second she was up, tearing like a wildcat with her long nails at the bodies that threatened to crush her down again. She was still not afraid.

Harrah grinned. He caught her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She was small, and surprisingly light. He let the tide carry them, concentrating only on keeping his feet, clubbing dog and man alike.

The girl had drawn a little knife from somewhere in her rags. Hanging head down over his shoulder, she plied it and laughed. Harrah thought that it was fine to be brave but he thought she needn't have enjoyed it so much. Her body was like spring steel, clinging around him.

An alley mouth opened before him. He went down it with a rush of escaping humanity and raging dogs, making for the wall. The houses were irregularly built and presently he found a crevice between two of them that had once housed a stall. He dodged into it, set the girl on her feet behind him and stood getting his breath back, watchful of the crowd still streaming by not a foot away from him.

He knew that the girl was looking at him. She was very close in that cramped space. She was not trembling nor even breathing hard.

"Why did you glare at me like that, in the square?" he asked her. "Was it personal or do you just hate all men?"

"Did you pick me up just to get the answer to that question?" She spoke English perfectly, without a trace of an accent, and her voice was as beautiful as her body, very clear and soft.

"Perhaps."

"Very well then. I hate all men. And women too--especially women." She was matter-of-fact about it. It came to Harrah with a small qualm that she meant it. Every word of it. He was suddenly uneasy about having her little knife where she could use it on his back.

He turned around, catching her wrist. She let him take the knife, smiling a little.

"Fear," she said. "Always fear, no matter where you are."

"But you're not afraid."

"No." She glanced past him, into the alley. "The crowd is thinning now. I will go and find my brothers."

A big rusty-red mongrel thrust his head into the crevice and snarled. Harrah kicked him and he slunk back reluctantly, his lips winkled, his red-rimmed eyes fixed on the girl.

"I wouldn't," said Harrah. "The dogs don't seem to like you." She laughed. "I haven't a scratch on me. Look at yourself." He looked. He was bleeding in a number of places, and his clothes were in shreds.

He shook his head.

"What the devil got into them?" he demanded.

"Fear," said the girl. "Always fear. I will go now." She moved to pass him, and he stopped her. "Oh, no. I saved your life, lady. You can't walk away quite so easily."

* * *

He put his hands on her shoulders. Her flesh was cool and firm, and the strands of her tawny mane curled over it between his fingers. What mingling of alien strains had bred her he could not guess but she was like no one he had ever seen before, inexpressibly lovely in the light of the flashing moons. She was like moonlight herself, the soft gleam of it in her hair, her skin, her great haunted eyes.

Outcaste, dancer in the public streets, pariah in crimson rags, there was a magic about her. It stirred Harrah deeply. Some intuition warned him to take his hands from her and let her go, because she was a stranger beyond his knowing. But he did not. He could not.

He bent and kissed her lightly between the brows. "What's your name, little Wanderer?"

"Marith."

Harrah knew that word, in the lingua franca of the thieves' markets. He smiled.

"And why should you be called 'Forbidden'?" Her dark gaze dwelt upon him somberly. "I am not for any man to love."

"Will you come home with me, Marith?"

She whispered, "I warn you, Earthman--I am death!" He laughed and gathered her into his arms. "You're a child and children should not be full of hate. Come home with me, Marith. I'll only kiss you now and then and buy you pretty things and teach you how to laugh." She did not answer at once. Her face was distant and dreaming as though she listened to some far-off voice. Presently she shrugged and said "Very well. I will come."

They started off together. The alley was deserted now. There were lingering sounds of turmoil in the bazaar but they were far away. Harrah led the girl toward his house and the streets were empty and still under the thronging moons.

He kept his arm around her. He was full of a strange excitement and his bored ill-temper had left him completely. Yet as he walked he became aware again of a gulf between him and Marith, something he could not understand. A pang of doubt that was almost fear crossed his heart. He did not know what he held, child, woman or some alien, wicked creature, close in the hollow of his arm. He remembered the aborigines, who had cried of death and demons. He remembered the howling of the dogs. And he wondered because of what he felt within himself.

But she was very lovely and her little white feet stepped so lightly in the dust beside his and he would not let her go.

They had left the bazaar behind them. They came to a quiet place, surrounded by the blank walls of houses, and suddenly, without sound, as though they had taken form ghost-like from the shadows, two men stepped out and barred their way.

One was an Earthman, a large man, heavy-shouldered, heavy-faced, with a look of ponderous immovability about him. The other was a Venusian, slim and handsome, with bright pale hair. Both men were

armed. There was something infinitely ominous about the way they stood there, neither moving nor speaking, with the moonlight touching a hard blue glitter from their guns. Harrah stopped, his hands half raised, and Marith moved forward, one step, away from him. Then she too stopped, like a crouching cat. Harrah said, "What is this? What do you want?" The Earthman answered, "We want the--the girl not you." His slow, deep voice hesitated oddly over that word, "girl."

Marith turned. She would have fled past Harrah, back the way they had come, but again she came to a dead halt.

"There is someone behind you," she said. Her eyes looked at Harrah and he was startled to see that they were full of terror. She was afraid now--deathly afraid.

"Don't let them take me," she whispered. "Please don't let them take me!" And then, as though to herself, "Hurry. Oh, hurry!" Her head moved tensely from side to side, the head of an animal seeking escape, but there was no escape.

* * *

Harrah glanced over his shoulder. A third man had come from somewhere to stand behind them with a gun, a yellow-eyed Martian with a smiling, wolfish face. Deep within Harrah a small chill pulse of warning began to beat. This was no spur-of-the-moment holdup. This was ambush, carefully planned. He and Marith had been deliberately followed, herded and trapped.

"Marith," he said. "Do you know these men?" She nodded. "I know them. Not their names--but I know them." It was terrible to see her so afraid.

It seemed to Harrah that he knew the men also, an intuitive

knowledge based on long experience.

"You smell of law," he said to them. He laughed. "You've forgotten where you are. This is Komar."

The large man shook his head. "We're not law. This is--personal."

"Let us have no trouble, Earthman," said the Martian. "We have no quarrel with you. It is only the girl-thing we want." He began to move closer to Harrah, slowly, like a man approaching a dangerous animal. At the same time the others moved in also.

"Unfasten your belt." said the large man to Harrah. "Let it drop."

"Don't let them take me." whispered Marith. Harrah lowered his hands to his belt.

He moved then, very swiftly. But they were swift too and there were three of them. Harrah had not quite cleared his gun from the holster when the Martian's weapon took him club-fashion across the side of the head. He fell. He heard his gun clatter sharply against stone, far away where someone had kicked it. He heard Marith cry out.

With infinite effort he raised himself on his hands. Wavering bands of blackness and intense light obscured his vision. But he saw dimly that the Venusian had caught the girl and that the other two were struggling to subdue her, and that her struggle was beyond belief, the small white body fighting to be free.

He tried to rise and could not. In a minute they had borne her down, the three of them. The slender wrists were snared and bound. One of the men produced a cloth that gleamed like metal and raised it above her head. They seemed to recede from Harrah, gliding away down a street curiously lengthened into some dark dimension of pain. The

echoes of their grunts and scuffings rang queerly muffled in his ears. But he saw, quite clearly, the last despairing look that Marith gave him before the shining cloth descended and hid her face.

His heart was wrenched with sorrow for her and a terrible rage rose in him against the men. He tried to get up and go after her and for a time he thought he had but when his sight cleared a little he realized that he had only crawled a few inches. How long the effort had taken him he did not know but the street was empty and there was no sound.

"Marith," he said. "Marith!"

Then he looked up, and saw that her brothers were standing over him, immensely tall, their beautiful strange faces very white in the shifting light of the moons.

III: A Broken Edge

One of the Wanderers reached down and gathered Harrah's shirtfront into his hand. Without effort, he lifted the Earthman to his feet. He looked into Harrah's face with eyes that were like Marith's, black and deep, charged with some cruel anger of the soul.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Where have they taken her?"

"I don't know." Harrah found that he could stand up. He tried to shake off the Wanderer's grip. "Where did you come from? How did you--"

"Find her." The hand that would not be shaken off tightened on Harrah's shirt until the cloth was drawn close around his throat. "You took her away, Earthman. Between you and the dogs something has happened that was not meant to happen. You took her--now find her!"

Harrah said between his teeth, "Let go."

"Let him go, Kehlin," said one of the others. "He will be no use dead." Almost reluctantly the throttling grip relaxed and was gone. Harrah stepped back. He was furious but he was also more than a little frightened. Again, as with Marith, he had touched something strange in this man Kehlin. The terrible relentless strength of that strangling hand seemed more than human. Then he swayed and nearly fell and realized that he was still dizzy from the blow and probably not thinking very clearly.

The man called Kehlin said, with iron patience, "She must be found quickly. At once, do you understand? She is in great danger." Harrah remembered his last sight of Marith's face. He remembered her fear and the quiet deadly urgency with which the three strangers had gone about the taking of her. He knew that Kehlin spoke the truth.

"I'll get Tok," said Harrah. "He can find out where she is."

"Who is Tok?"

Harrah explained. "The aborigines know everything that goes on in Komar almost before it happens."

He turned, suddenly in a hurry to get on to his lodgings and look for Tok, but Kehlin said sharply, "Wait. I can do it more quickly." Harrah stopped, a cold tingle sweeping across his skin. Kehlin's face had the same look that he had seen on Marith's before, the odd expression of one listening to distant voices. There was a moment of silence and then the Wanderer smiled and said, "Tok is coming." One point of mystery cleared up for Harrah. "Telepaths. That's how you found me, how you knew what had happened to Marith. She was calling to you to hurry."

Kehlin nodded. "Unfortunately it's a limited talent. We can communicate among ourselves when we wish, and we have some control over minds of the lower orders, that are animal or very near it, like Tok's. But I cannot read or even trace the minds of the men who have taken my sister--and she is being prevented from using her own ability to talk to me."

"They put a cloth over her head," said Harrah. "A shining sort of cloth."

"Thought waves are electrical in nature," said Kehlin. "They can be screened." After that no one spoke. They stood in the empty space under the blank walls of the houses and waited.

Presently among the shadows a darker shadow moved. Slowly, with a terrible reluctance, it came toward them into the moonlight and Harrah saw that it was Tok. Tok, creeping, cringing, bent as though under a heavy burden--not wanting to come but drawn as a fish is drawn unwilling by hook and line. The hook and line of Kehlin's mind. Harrah glanced from the Wanderer's still face to the awful misery of fear in Tok's eyes and a wave of anger swept over him, mingled with a certain dread.

"Tok," he said gently. "Tok!"

The aboriginal turned his head and gave Harrah one look of hopeless pleading--just such a look as Marith had given when the strangers took her away. Then he crouched down at Kehlin's feet and stayed there, shivering. Impulsively, Harrah started forward and one of Kehlin's brothers caught him by the arm.

"If you want to save her--be still!"

Harrah was still, and felt the aching of his flesh where the man had

gripped it, as though with five clamps of steel instead of human fingers. Kehlin did not speak and the only sound that came from Tok was a sort of unconscious whimpering. But after a minute or two Kehlin said, "He knows where she is. He will guide us."

* * *

Tok had already turned to go. The men followed him. Harrah saw that Tok's step was swift now, almost eager. But the terror had not left him. Kehlin watched him and his eyes were black and deep as the spaces beyond the stars.

Demons. Demons with the eyes of darkness.

A shiver of superstitious fear went over Harrah. Then he looked again at the Wanderers in their tawdry rags--outcasts of an outcaste tribe, selling their sister's beauty in the marketplace for the sake of a few coins, and his awe left him.

He had caught too much of it from the aboriginals, who could make an evil spirit out of every shadow.

He began to think again of Marith, and the yellow-eyed Martian who had cracked his skull, and his knuckles itched.

He had no weapon now except a knife he carried under his shirt but he felt that he could make shift.

Abruptly he asked a question that had been on the top of his mind. "What did the men want with her?"

One of the Wanderers shrugged. "She is beautiful."

"That was not in their minds," said Harrah. "Nor is it yours."

"An old feud," said Kehlin harshly. "A blood feud." Something about his voice made Harrah shiver all over again. There was something strange about Komar now. After that brief violence of the dogs, nothing stirred. The sound of voices came from the roofless houses, a sort of uneasy muttering that burst into sharper cadence around the wine shops.

But no man walked in the streets. Even the dogs were gone. Harrah was sure that eyes watched them from the darkness, as Marith and her captors had been watched. But it was only a feeling. The aboriginals themselves were intangible as smoke.

Tok led the way swiftly, doubling back toward the lower side of the bazaar. Here was a section that Harrah never visited--the Quarter of the Sellers of Dreams. Poetic name for a maze of filthy rat-runs stinking with the breath of nameless substances. The sliding roofs were always closed and what few voices could be heard were beyond human speech.

They came to a house that stood by itself at the end of an alley. It looked as though it had stood a long time by itself, the fecund weeds growing thick around the door, rooting in the chinks of the walls. There was no light, no sound. But Tok stopped and pointed. After a moment Kehlin nodded. With that gesture he dismissed Tok, forgot him utterly, and the aboriginal went with three loping strides into the shadows and was gone.

* * *

Kehlin moved forward, treading noiselessly in the dust. The others followed. Around at the side was a wing, partially destroyed in some old quake. A thick stubby tree had sprouted in the dirt floor, its branches spreading out over the broken walls.

Without waiting for Kehlin's orders Harrah swung up into the tree and climbed from there to the coping of the house, where he could look down upon the roof. The sliding sections were closed. But they were old and rotted and through the gaps Harrah saw a dim glow of light. Somewhere below a lantern burned and a man was talking.

The Wanderers were beside him now on the coping, moving with great care on the crumbling brick. Their eyes caught the lantern-glow with a feral glitter, giving them a look unutterably cruel and strange.

Harrah thought they had forgotten him now as completely as they had forgotten Tok.

He shifted position until he could see directly down through a hole in the roof. Kehlin was beside him, very close.

The man's voice came up to them, slow, deliberate, without pity.

"We've come a long way for this. We didn't have to. We could have stayed safe at home and let somebody else do the worrying. But we came. One man from each world--men, hear me? Human men."

His shadow fell broad and black across the floor, across Marith. A large shadow, ponderous, immovable. The girl lay on the floor. The metallic cloth still covered her head and a gag had been added outside it, to keep her from screaming. She was still bound but the cords had been replaced by metal cuffs, connected by wires that led to a little black box. A tiny portable generator, Harrah thought, and was filled with fury.

"You're tough," said the man. "But we're tough too. And we won't go away empty handed. I'll ask you once more. How many--and where?" Marith shook her head.

A lean dark hand that could only have belonged to the Martian reached out and pressed a stud on the black box. The body of the girl stiffened, was shaken with agony.

Harrah gathered himself. And in the instant before he jumped Kehlin moved so that his shoulder struck the Earthman a hard thrusting blow and sent him plunging head foremost through the roof.

There was a great splintering of rotten wood. The whole room was suddenly revealed to Harrah--the three men looking upward, the girl scarlet and white against the brown floor, the small black box, all rushing up, up to meet him. He grasped at a broken edge of roof. It crumbled in his hands, and he saw the Venusian step back, it seemed very slowly, to get out of his way. The momentary breaking of his fall enabled Harrah to get his feet under him and he thought that he was not going to die at once, he would surely live long enough to break Kehlin's neck instead of his own.

He hit the floor in a shower of dust and splinters. Half smiling the Martian drew his gun.

IV: As Leopards...

After that for a moment no one moved. The dust of years sifted down on them. Another board fell with a crash. Harrah gasped for the breath that had been knocked out of him and the girl writhed in her uninterrupted pain. A brief moment of stillness in which the Earthman, the Martian and the Venusian stared at Harrah and thought of nothing else.

Then, very stealthily and swiftly, the Wanderers dropped through the open roof as leopards drop on their quarry from above. In a way, it was beautiful to watch--the marvelous grace and strength with which

they moved, the flashing of the three bright silent blades. A ballet with knives. The Martian's gun went off once. It didn't hit anything. The big Earthman turned to grapple with Kehlin and grunted as the steel went home between his ribs. Harrah got up. There didn't seem to be any place for him in that fight. It was over too fast, so fast that it seemed impossible that three men could die in so few seconds. The faces of Marith's brothers were cold with a terrible coldness that turned Harrah sick to look at them.

He stepped over the body of the Venusian, noting how the curling silver hair was mottled with crimson and dark dust. He cut the power from the black box and Marith relaxed slowly, her flesh still quivering. He tore the gag and the metal cloth from her head, and thought that men who could do this thing to a girl deserved to die. And yet he took no joy in it.

Marith looked up at him and he thought she smiled. He lifted her and held her in his arms, touching her with awkward gentle hands. The big Earthman raised his head. Even death he would meet on his own time, refusing to be hurried. He saw what had been done, and there was something now in his broad stolid face that startled Harrah—a grim and shining faith. He looked at the Wanderers with a look of bitter fury in which there was no acknowledgment of defeat.

"All right," he said. "All right. You're safe for a while now. You set a trap and you baited it with her and it worked—and you're safe now. But you can't hide. The very dogs know you. There's no place for you in earth, heaven or hell. If it takes every drop of human blood in the System to drown you we'll do it."

He turned to Harrah, kneeling in the dirt with Marith in his arms.

"Don't you know what they are?" he demanded. "Are you in love with that and you don't know what it is?"

Harrah felt Marith shudder and sigh against him and before he could speak Kehlin had stooped, smiling, over the big man. The Wanderer's knife made one quick dainty motion and there were no more words, only a strangled grunting such as a butchered pig makes when it falls. Then silence. Marith's fingers tightened on Harrah's wrist. She tried to rise and he helped her up and steadied her.

Still smiling, Kehlin came across the room, the knife swinging languidly in his hand.

Marith said, "Wait."

Kehlin's smile turned into something sardonic. As one who is in no hurry he waited, coming only far enough so that the blood of the big Earthman would not touch his sandals.

Marith looked up into Harrah's face. There was no hatred in her eyes now.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Do you love me?" Harrah could not answer. He looked at the dead men and the three silent beings that stood over them and there was a sickness in him, a sickness beyond the fear of death.

"What are you?" he said to them. "The dogs know you. Tok knows you. But I don't know you."

His gaze came back to Marith. She had not taken her eyes from him. They broke his heart.

"Yes," he said, with a queer harshness. "Yes, I guess I love you as much as you can make any meaning out of the word." The smell of

blood lay heavy and sweet on the air and the blade gleamed in Kehlin's hand and it seemed a strange word to be speaking in this place. It had a jeering sound of laughter. Marith whispered, "Kiss me."

* * *

Stiffly, slowly, Harrah bent and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips were cool and very sweet and a queer wild pang rang through him so that his flesh contracted as though from pain or fear and his heart began a great pounding. He stepped back and said, "You're not human."

"No," she answered softly. "I am android." Presently she smiled. "I told you, Earthman. I am Marith. I am Forbidden."

She did not weep. She had no human tears. But her eyes were heavy with the sadness of all creation.

"From time to time," she murmured, "men and women have loved us. It is a great sin and they are punished for it and we are destroyed. We have no souls and are less than the dogs that tear at us. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—even that is denied us for we are not born of the earth, of Adam's clay. The hand of man made us, not the hand of God, and it is true that we have no place in heaven or hell."

"We will make a place," said Kehlin, and his fingers played with the shining knife. There was no sadness about him. He looked at the dead men, the man of Earth, the man of Venus, the man of Mars.

"On their worlds we will make a place. Heaven has no meaning for us nor hell. Only the life we have now, the life man gave us. You, Earthman! How long have you been out here beyond the Belt?"

"A long time," said Harrah. "A long, long time."

"Then you haven't heard of the war." Kehlin's white teeth glittered. "The secret quiet war against us--the slaves, the pets, the big wonderful toys that grew so strong we frightened the men who made us. It's not strange you haven't heard. The governments tried to keep it secret. They didn't want a panic, people killing each other in mistake for runaway androids. We were so hard to detect, you see, once we shed our uniforms and got rid of our tattoo marks." He stirred the Martian with his foot, the dark face turned upward, snarling even in death.

"It took men like this to recognize us," he said. "Men trained in the laboratories before they were trained against crime. We thought we were safe here, far beyond the law, but we had to be sure. Law wouldn't matter if word got back to the Inner Worlds. They would come out and destroy us." He laughed.

"Now we're sure."

"For a time," said Marith. "There will be others like them."

"Time," said Kehlin. "A little time. That's all we need." He moved again toward Harrah, casually swift, as though one more thing needed to be done.

Harrah watched him come. He did not quite believe, even now. He was remembering androids as he had known of them long ago--Kehlin had named them. The slaves, the pets, the big wonderful toys. Synthetic creatures built of chemical protoplasm, molded in pressure tanks, sparked to intelligent life by the magic of cosmic rays drawn pure from outer space. Creatures made originally to do the work that human flesh was too frail for--the dangerous things, the experiments with pressure and radiation, the gathering of data from places where men could not go, the long lonely grinding jobs that tear human

nerves to pieces.

For man had built better than Nature. The androids were not hampered by the need of food, air and water. A few ounces of chemicals every year or so kept them going. Their lungs were ornamental, for the purpose of speech only. They had no complicated internal structure to break down and their flesh was tough-celled, all but indestructible.

And because they could be made beautiful, because they had strength and grace and endurance beyond the human, their uses had widened. Entertainers, household servants, fashionable adjuncts to expensive living. Things. Objects to be bought and sold like machines. And they had not been content. Kehlin's eyes were brilliant with the glory of hate. He was as splendid and inevitable as the angel of death and, looking at him, Harrah became aware of a bitter truth--the truth that the big Earthman had denied with his dying breath. Man had wrought too well. These were the natural inheritors of the universe. Marith said again, "Wait."

This time Kehlin did not stop.

Marith faced him, standing between him and Harrah's vulnerable body.

"I have earned this right," she said. "I demand it." Kehlin answered without a flicker of emotion. "This man must die." And he would not stop.

Marith would not move and behind her back Harrah drew his own knife into his hand. Futile as it was he could not submit to butchery without at least the gesture of fighting back. He looked into Kehlin's face and shuddered, an inward shudder of the soul.

Marith spoke.

"This man has already helped us greatly--perhaps he has saved us by saving me." She pointed to the bodies. "We're not free of their kind and what we have to do can't be done in a minute. We need supplies from Komar--metals, tools, chemicals, many things. If we get them ourselves we run the risk of being recognized. But if we had an agent, a go-between--" She paused, then added, "A human."

Kehlin had at last halted to listen. One of the other men--Harrah could not, somehow, stop thinking of them as men--spoke up.

"That is worth thinking about, Kehlin. We can't spend all our time in the public squares, watching for spies."

Kehlin looked across Marith's white shoulder at the Earthman, and shook his head.

"Trust a human?" He laughed.

"There are ways to prevent betrayal," said Marith. "Ways you know of." And the android who had spoken before echoed, "That is so." Kehlin played with the knife and continued to watch Harrah but he did not move. Harrah said hoarsely, "To the devil with you all. No one has asked me whether I'm willing to betray my own kind."

Kehlin shrugged. "You can join them quite easily." he said, and glanced at the bodies. Marith turned and took Harrah by the arms. Her touch sent that queer pang through his flesh again, and it was strangely sweet.

"Death is yours for the asking, now or later. But think, Earthman.

Perhaps there is justice on our side too. Wait a little before you die." She had not changed, he thought. Her little white feet that had walked beside his in the dust of Komar, her voice that had spoken to him through the moonlight--they had not changed. Only her eyes were different. Marith's eyes and himself, because of what he knew. And yet he remembered. He did not know what he held--child, woman or some alien wicked creature, close in the hollow of his arm. But she was very lovely and he would not let her go. He drew a long breath. Her eyes, searching his, were a beauty and a pain so poignant that he could neither bear it nor look away.

"All right." he said. "I'll wait."

V: The Same Beauty

They had come a long way down from the plateau of Komar, into the jungle that laps around it like a hungry ochereous sea. They had come by steep and secret ways that were possible only to an aboriginal--or an android. Harrah, who had been handed bodily down the dizzy cliffs, was more conscious than ever of his human inferiority. He was exhausted, his bones ached with wrenching, and his nerves were screaming. But Marith, so small and sweetly made, had dropped over the precipices like a little white bird, unaided, and she was quite unwearied.

Once during the descent Kehlin had paused, holding Harrah without effort over a thousand feet of sheer space, between the wheeling moons and the darkness. He had smiled, and said, "Tok is following. He is afraid but he is following you."

Harrah himself was too much afraid even to be touched. Now they stood, the four androids and the man from Earth, in the jungle of Ganymede. Vapor from some hidden boiling spring drifted through

the tangle of branches and flowering vines, the choking wanton growth of a hothouse run wild. There was a taste of sulphur in the air and a smell of decay and a terrible heat.

Kehlin seemed to be listening to something. He turned slightly once, then again as though getting his direction. Then he started off with complete certainty and the others followed. No one spoke. No one had told Harrah where they were going or why.

Only Marith kept close to him and now and again he would meet her gaze and she would smile, a smile wistful and sad as far-off music. And Harrah hated her because he was weary and drenched with sweat and every step was a pain. He hoped that Tok was still following them. It was comforting to think of that furry shape gliding noiselessly along, at home in the jungle, part of it. Tok was not human either. But he too could feel pain and weariness and fear. He and Harrah were brothers in blood.

The sky was blotted out. The eternal moonlight sifted through the trees, restless, many-hued, tinged here and there with blood from the red glow of Jupiter. The forest was very still. It seemed as endless as the dark reaches of the dreams that come with fever, and Harrah fancied that it held its breath and waited.

Once they came to a place where the trees were slashed by a vast sickle of volcanic slag. To the north a gaunt cone stood up against the sky, crooked, evil, wearing a plume of smoke on its brow. The smell of sulphur was very strong and heat breathed out of the mountain's flanks with a hissing sound like the laughter of serpents.

Lightly, swiftly, the white-skinned beautiful creatures sped across that blasted plain and the man came staggering after them. Three times they passed through rude villages. But the huts were empty. Word had gone through the jungle as though the wind carried it and the

aboriginals had vanished.

Kehlin smiled. "They have hidden their women and children," he said, "but the men watch us. They crouch in the trees around our camp. They are afraid and they watch."

At length through the stillness Harrah began to hear a sound very strange in this primal forest--the clangor of forges. Then, quite suddenly, they came to the edge of a place where the undergrowth had been cleared away and their journey was over.

The picked bones of a rusty hull lay among the trees and beneath its skeletal shadow there was motion. Long sheds had been built. Lights burned in them and figures passed to and fro and vast heaps of metal torn from the ship lay ready to be worked.

Kehlin said softly, "Look at them, Earthman. Thirty-four, counting ourselves. All that are left. But the finest, the best. The lords of the world." Harrah looked. Men, a few women or creatures made in their semblance, all stamped with the same beauty, the same tireless strength. There was something wonderful about them, working, building, untouched by their environment, apart from it, using it only as a tool to serve them. Something wonderful, Harrah thought, struggling for breath in the bitter heat. Wonderful and frightening. Kehlin had apparently given them the whole story telepathically, for they did not pause from their work to ask questions. Only they glanced at Harrah as he passed and in their eyes he saw the shadow of fate. Kehlin said, "We will go into the ship."

* * *

Some of the inner cabins were still intact. The ship had been old and very small. Stolen, Harrah guessed, the best that they could do, but they had made it good enough. No more than ten men could have

survived in its cramped quarters. Yet thirty-four androids had ridden it across deep space. Darkness, lack of air and food, did not bother them.

"We brought what equipment we could." said Kehlin. "The rest we must fashion for ourselves." The sound of the forges echoed his words. He led Harrah into what had been the captain's cabin. It was crammed with delicate electronic apparatus, some of which Harrah recognized as having to do with encephalographs and the intricacies of thought-waves. There was no room for furniture. Kehlin indicated a small clear space on the deck-plates. "Sit down."

Harrah did not obey at once and the android smiled. "I'm not going to torture you and if I had wished to kill you I could have done so long ago. We must have complete understanding, you and I." He paused and Harrah was perfectly aware of the threat behind his words. "Our minds must speak, for that is the only way to understanding."

Marith said softly, "That is so, Earthman. Don't be afraid." Harrah studied her. "Will I be able to understand you then?"

"Perhaps."

Harrah sat down on the hard iron plates and folded his hands between his knees to hide their trembling. Kehlin worked smoothly for a time. Harrah noted the infinite deftness of his movements. A distant humming rose in the cabin and was lost to hearing. Kehlin placed round electrodes at the Earthman's temples and Harrah felt a faint tingling warmth.

Then the android knelt and looked into his eyes and he forgot everything, even Marith, in the depths of that passionate alien gaze.

"Seventy-three years ago I was made." said Kehlin. "How long have

you lived, Earthman? Thirty years? Forty? How much have you done, what have you learned?

How is the strength of your body? How is the power of your mind? What are your memories, your hopes? We will exchange these things, you and I--and then we will know each other."

A deep tremor shook Harrah. He did not speak. Two sharp movements of Kehlin's hands. The cabin darkened around him. A swift reeling vertigo, an awful plunging across some unknown void, a loss of identity... Harrah cried out in deadly fear and the voice was not his own. He could not move. Vague images crowded his mind, whirling, trampling, unutterably strange.

Memories coming back, confused, chaotic, a painful meshing of realities. Silence. Darkness. Peace.

He lay at rest. It seemed that there had never been anything but this bodiless negation in the very womb of sleep. He had no memories. He had no identity. He was nothing. He was without thought or trouble, wrapped in the complete peacefulness of not-being. Forever and forever, the timeless sleep. Then, from somewhere out of the void, vast and inescapable as the stroke of creation upon nothingness, a command came. The command to wake. He awoke.

Like a comet, cruel and bright across the slumbrous dark, awareness came. A sudden explosion of being, leaping full upon him with a blaze and a shriek. Here was no slow gentle realization, softened by the long years of childhood. Here was inundation, agony--self.

The little part of Harrah that remained cringed before that terrible awakening. No human brain could have borne it. Yet it was as though the memory were his own. He felt the flood tide of life roar in and fill his emptiness, felt the fabric of his being shudder, withstand and find

itself. He knew that he was remembering the moment of Kehlin's birth. He opened his eyes.

Vision keen as an eagle's, careless of darkness, of shadows, of blinding light. He saw a tall Earthman with a haggard face, who sat before him on the rusty deck and regarded him with strange eyes. An Earthman named Tony Harrah. Himself. Yet it was Kehlin the android who looked out of his eyes. He started up, wavering on the brink of madness, and Marith's hands were on his shoulders, holding him steady.

"Don't be afraid. I am here."

It was not her voice speaking to him but her mind. He could hear it now. He could feel it touching his, sweet and full of comfort. Quite suddenly he realized that she was no longer a stranger. He knew her now. She was—Marith. Her mind spoke gently. "Remember, Earthman. Remember the days of Kehlin." He remembered.

VI: Lords of the World

He remembered the laboratory, the birthplace, the doorway to the world of men. He remembered the moment when he first rose up from the slab where he had lain and stood before his makers, embodied and alive. He remembered the fine smooth power of his limbs, the bright newness of sounds, the wonderful awareness of intellect.

Brief vivid flashes, the highlights of seventy-three years of existence, coming to Harrah as though they were his own. The long intensive training—Kehlin, Type A, technical expert. The ease of learning, the memory that never faltered, the growth of mental power until it overtopped the best of the human teachers.

He remembered the moment when Kehlin first looked upon the redness of human blood and realized how frail were the bodies of men. He watched the gradual development of emotion.

Emotion is instinctive in natural life. In the android, Harrah saw it grow slowly from the intellect. An odd sort of growth, like a tree of crystal with clear, sharp branches--but alive and no less powerful than the blind sprawling impulses of man. Different, though. Very different

One great root was lacking--the root of lust. Kehlin's hungers were not of the flesh and because he was free of this he was free also of greed and cruelty and--this came to Harrah with a shock of surprise--of hate. In this uncanny sharing of another mind he remembered testing experimental ships at velocities too great for human endurance. He had enjoyed that, hurtling across infinity like a rogue asteroid with a silent shriek of speed. He remembered being cast adrift in space alone. He wore no protective armor. The cold could not harm him and he had no need of air. He looked at the naked blaze of the universe and was not awed. The magnificence of space did not crush him with any sense of his own smallness.

He did not expect to be as big as a star. Rather, for the first time, he felt free. Free of the little worlds, the little works of men. They were bound but he was not. Distance and time were no barriers to him. He was brother to the roving stars because both had been made, not born. He wanted to go out to them.

The rescue ship came and took him in but he never forgot his dream of the other suns and his longing to go among them, clear out to the edge of the universe.

Instead he gathered data for the scientists in the forbidden places of the Solar System. He walked the chasms of Mercury's Darkside, where the human mind will crack in the terrible night, where the black

mountain ranges claw at the stars and no life has ever been or ever will be. He went deep into the caverns of the Moon. He went into the Asteroid Belt and charted a hundred deadly little worlds alone while his masters waited safely in the shelter of their ship.

And still he was outcaste--a thing, an android. Men used him and ignored him. They were human and he was an object out of nature, vaguely repulsive, a little frightening. He had not even any contact with his own kind. As though they had some foreknowledge of trouble men kept their androids apart. Harrah was aware, in Kehlin's mind, of a piercing loneliness. There's no place for you in earth, heaven or hell!

Marith's thought crossed his like the falling of tears. "For us there was no comfort, no hope, no refuge. We were made in your image, man and woman. Yet you were cruel gods for you made a lie and gave us the intelligence to know it. You denied us even dignity. And--we did not ask to be made." Kehlin said, "It is enough."

Once again Harrah was flung across a reeling darkness. This time the change was not so frightening but in a way it was worse. He did not realize that until he was again fully aware of himself. Then he was conscious of a bitter contrast, a thing both saddening and shameful.

The mind of the android, that he had shared for that brief time, had been as a wide space flooded with light. His own seemed cluttered and dark to him now, haunted by ugly shapes that crept along the borders of consciousness. All the splendid strength was gone. The crushing weariness of his body descended upon him, and he looked down almost with disgust at his unsteady hands. He did not ask what Kehlin had found in him. He did not want to know.

"Can you understand now how we felt?" asked Kehlin. "Can you understand how we learned to hate men?"

Harrah shook his head. "You don't hate," he said. "You don't know the meaning of hate as we do. What I mistook for hatred in you was something much bigger. I'd call it pride."

He had seen so much in Kehlin's mind. Pity for man in his weakness, admiration for his courage because he had survived and built in spite of his weakness. Perhaps even gratitude.

* * *

But Kehlin had called his fellow androids the lords of the world, and he was right. They were proud and their pride was just and they would not live in chains.

Kehlin shrugged. "Call it what you will, it doesn't matter." He looked at Harrah, and for the first time the Earthman saw in the android a softening, almost a weariness.

"It isn't that we want to rule men. It isn't that we want power! It's only that men have driven us through fear. Should we go down into nothingness because men fear us? Remember, we don't even have the hope of a hereafter to soften our going!"

He shook his head. "It will be a long fight and a bitter one. I don't want it, none of us do. But we must survive and to do that we must rule and perhaps men will come out the better for it. There will never be any peace or real advancement until these wretched little worlds are governed by those who are not of the mass but above it, not driven by every wind that blows." He was silent a moment, brooding, and then he echoed Marith's words.

"Fear. Always fear. The human race is ridden with it. Lust and fear and greed and sorrow. If only they had not been afraid of us!" The old blaze of anger came again into his eyes. "With acid and with fire they

destroyed us, Earthman. Thirty-four, all that are left. But not for long. Human reproduction is slow and clumsy, but not ours. Only a little time and there will be more of us, many more, and we will go back and take what is ours."

He said it very quietly and Harrah heard truth in his voice like the tolling of a bell—the passing-bell for the mastery of human kind.

"Will you help us, Earthman, or will you die?" Harrah did not answer and Marith said, "Let him rest." Kehlin nodded. He left and Harrah was hardly aware of his going. The girl spoke to him gently and he rose and stumbled after her, out of the ship. She led him to a space apart from the main sheds, an unfinished lean-to where only a dim light filtered from the work-lamps. It was dark under the trees and hot. Terribly hot. Harrah sat down on the moist ground and put his head between his hands and there was still no answer in him, only a great blankness.

Marith waited and did not speak.

After awhile Harrah lifted his head and looked at her. "Why did you save me from Kehlin's knife?"

She answered slowly, "I'm not like Kehlin. I was made only for beauty, a dancer. My mind won't reach so high. It asks questions but they're little ones, of small account."

"What questions, Marith?"

"I have been alive for nineteen years. My owner was very proud of me and I made him a great deal of money. And everywhere I went, in every city, on every world, I watched men and women. I saw the way they looked at each other, the way they smiled. Many of the women were not beautiful or talented. But men loved them and they were

happy."

Harrah remembered her words--I hate all men and women also. Especially women.

"When I was through working." she said, "my owner put me away like a dancing doll until it was time to work again. I had nothing to do but sit alone and think and wonder."

She was close to Harrah. Her face was indistinct in the gloom, a shadowy thing of dreams.

"When you thought that I was human you said you loved me. I think that is why I saved you from the knife."

There was a long silence and then Harrah said the words she was waiting for, wanting to hear, and they were the truth.

"I love you now."

She said, very softly, "But not as you would love a woman." He remembered her dancing in the bazaar, the ancient sensual dance that became in her a thing of sheer loveliness.

"No," he said. "But that's because you're more than human, not less." He took her into his arms and he knew now what he held there. Not child nor woman nor any wicked thing but a creature innocent and beautiful as the moonlight and as far beyond him.

He held her close and it was as though for a moment he held his own youth again, the short bright days before he had learned the things Kehlin had named--lust and fear and greed and sorrow. He held her close and there was no passion in him, only an immense tenderness, a longing and regret so deep that his heart was near to breaking. He

had his answer.

* * *

Marith drew away from him and rose, turning her face into the darkness so that he could not see her eyes. She said, "I should have let you die in Komar. It would have been easier then for both of us."

An eerie chill ran over Harrah. "You can read my mind now." He got up, very slowly.

She nodded. "Kehlin more than I because he shared it fully. That was what I meant when I reminded him that there were ways to prevent betrayal. If I were human I would tell you to run quickly and hide yourself from Kehlin and I would hope. But I am not human and I know there is no hope." She turned toward him then, clear in the barred moonlight.

"Like to like." she whispered. "You have your burden and your pride and you would not be free of either. Kehlin was right. And yet I wish--oh, I wish . . ." Quite suddenly she was gone and Harrah was reaching out his hand to emptiness. For a long moment he did not move. He heard the sound of movement in the camp and knew that the telepathic warning had gone out and that within a few seconds he would be dead but he could only think that Marith was gone and he had lost her.

Then from the dark jungle, swift with love and terror, Tok came crying out to his lord.

Harrah had forgotten Tok, who had followed him down from the safety of Komar. He had forgotten a number of things. Now he remembered. He remembered Kehlin's words and the three men who had died in Komar and why they had died. He remembered that

he was human and could hope where there was no hope. "Come, Lord! Run!"

Harrah ran. And it was already too late.

The androids came, the fleet lithe creatures heading him off. Tok stood not thirty feet away, but he knew that he could never make it. He stopped running. He saw Kehlin among those who came to trap him and he saw the gun the android carried now in place of the knife. With acid and with fire they destroyed us...

With fire.

It was Harrah's turn to cry out to Tok, to the unseen watchers in the trees. He shouted with all his strength in the split second before he fell and his words carried over even the sound of the shot.

He thought that Tok was gone. He thought that there was an answer from the jungle but he was not sure. He was not sure of anything but pain.

* * *

He lay where he had fallen and he knew that he would continue to lie there because his leg was broken above the knee. He looked incuriously at the dark blood seeping around the wound, and then up into the face of Kehlin, wondering why the android had aimed so low.

Reading his thought Kehlin answered, "You had already spoken. And—I preferred you should die with us."

For a long time after that he did not speak and there was a great silence on the clearing. The androids stood, the thirty-four tall splendid beings who were the last of their kind, and they made no

sound. The jungle also was very still. But the aboriginals had done their work well and already there was a taint of smoke on the air and the wind blew hot. The naked bones of the ship mocked them with the shelter they might have had. There was no refuge, no escape, and they knew it.

Harrah saw how Kehlin looked up at the sky, at the distant suns that light the edges of the universe. The jungle sighed and flames stood up among the trees all around them like a ring of spears. Harrah thought that humans were not alone in their knowledge of sorrow. Kehlin turned abruptly and called,

"Marith!"

She came out from among the others and stood before him.

"Are you happy, Marith? You have done a human thing. You have behaved like a woman, wrecking empires for love."

He flung her down beside Harrah and then he shook his head slowly and said,

"No, the blame is mine. I was the leader. I should have killed the man." He laughed suddenly. "And so this is the end--and it does not come to us from the hands of man but from the paws of apes who have learned no more than the making of fire!"

Harrah nodded. "Apes," he said. "Yes. That's the gulf between us. That's why we fear you. You were never an ape."

He watched the ring of fire brighten and draw in. The pain in his leg was very great and he was bleeding and his mind seemed distant from his body and full of profound thoughts.

"We distrust anyone who is different," he said. "We always destroy them, one way or another."

He looked up at Kehlin. "Apes. A restless, unruly bunch, driven by passions and hungers you could never understand. You would not have been able to rule us. No one ever has. We can't even ourselves. So in the end you would have destroyed us."

Kehlin's eyes met his, the black, deep eyes, brilliant now with some terrible emotion that Harrah could not read.

"Perhaps," he said softly. "Perhaps. And you're proud, aren't you? The weakling has pulled down his betters and it makes him feel strong. You're proud to die because you think you've put an end to us. But you have not, Earthman! You have not!"

Standing very tall beneath the banners of red light that shook from the flaring trees Kehlin cried out strongly, shouting to the stars, to all creation.

"You made us once, you little men who love to feel like gods! You will make us again. You can't keep from it--and we will inherit the universe!" Harrah knew now what was in Kehlin's mind. It was faith. He saw it in the faces of all those who stood with Kehlin, the beautiful creatures trapped and waiting under the crimson pall.

A great curtain of flame and falling ash swept between them, hiding the androids from Harrah's sight. A bitter pang struck through him, a wild regret, and he tried to call out, to say that he was sorry. But the words would not come and he felt ashamed and very small and full of a black and evil guilt. He bowed his head and wept.

* * *

Marith's voice spoke close beside him. "They are gone and soon we will be too and it is better so."

Harrah turned. He was amazed to see that there was a strange look of joy about her as though she had been released from some dark prison.

"Do you love me, Marith? Do you love me still after what I've done?" She answered, "You have set me free."

He took her in his arms and held her and it came to him that only this way, only now, could they two have been joined. And he was happy.

So Pale, So Cold, So Fair

Leigh Brackett

I

She was the last person in the world I expected to see. But she was there, in the moonlight, lying across the porch of my rented cabin. She wore a black evening dress, and little sandals with very high heels. At her throat was a gleam of dim fire that even by moonlight you knew had to be made by nothing less than diamonds. She was very beautiful. Her name was Marjorie, and once upon a time, a thousand years ago, she had been engaged to me.

That was a thousand years ago. If you checked the calendar it would only say eight and a half, but it seemed like a thousand to me. She hadn't married me. She married Brian Ingraham, and she was still married to him, and I had to admit she had probably been right, because he could buy her the diamonds and I was still just a reporter for the Fordstown Herald. I didn't know what Marjorie Ingraham was doing on my porch at two thirty-five of a Sunday morning. I stood still on the graveled path and tried to figure it out.

The poker game was going strong in Dave Schuman's cabin next door. I had just left it. The cards had not been running my way, and the whiskey had, and about five minutes ago I had decided to call it a night. I had walked along the lake shore, looking with a sort of vague pleasure at the water and the sky, thinking that I still had eight whole days of vacation before I had to get back to my typewriter again.

And now here was Marjorie, lying across my porch. I couldn't figure it out. She had not moved. There was a heavy dew, and the drops

glistened on her cheeks like tears. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to be sleeping.

"Marjorie?" I said. "Marjorie--" There wasn't any answer.

I went up to the low step and reached across it and touched her bare shoulder. It was not really cold. It only felt that way because of the dew that was on it.

I laid my fingers on her throat, above the diamonds. I waited and waited, but there was no pulse. Her throat was faintly warm, too. It felt like marble that has been for a time in the sun. I could see the two dark, curved lines of her brows and the shadows of her lashes. I could see her mouth, slightly parted. I held my hand over it and there was nothing, no slightest breath. All of her was still, as still and remote as the face of the moon. She was not sleeping. She was dead.

I stood there, hanging onto the porch rail, feeling sick as the whiskey turned in me and the glow went out. A lot of thoughts went through my mind about Marjorie, and now suddenly she was gone, and I would not have believed it could hit me so hard. The night and the world rocked around me, and then, when they steadied down again, I began to feel another emotion. Alarm.

Marjorie was dead. She was on my porch, laid out with her skirt neat and her eyes closed, and her hands folded across her waist. I didn't think it was likely she had come there by herself and then suddenly died in just that position. Someone had brought her and put her there, on purpose. But who? And why?

I ran back to Dave Schuman's.

I must have looked like calamity, because the minute I came in the door they forgot the cards and stared at me, and Dave got up and

said, "Greg, what is it?"

"I think you better come with me," I said, meaning all of them. "I want witnesses."

I told them why. Dave's face tightened, and he said, "Marge Ingraham? My God." Dave, who is in the circulation department of the Herald, went to school with me and Marjorie and knows the whole story.

He grabbed a flashlight and went out the door, and the local physician, our old poker pal Doc Evers, asked me, "Are you sure she's dead?"

"I think so. But I want you to check it." He was already on his way. There were three other guys besides Dave Schuman and Doc Evers and me: another member of the Herald gang; Hughie Brown, who ran Brown's Boat Livery on the lake; and a young fellow who was a visiting relation or something of Hughie's. We hurried back along the lake shore and up the gravel path.

Marjorie had not gone away.

Somebody turned on the porch light. The hard, harsh glare beat down, more cruel but more honest than the moonlight.

Hughie Brown's young relative said, in a startled kind of way, "But she can't be dead, look at the color in her skin."

Doc Evers grunted and bent over her. "She's dead, all right. At a rough guess, three or four hours."

"How?" I asked.

"As the boy says, look at the color of her skin. That usually indicates

carbon-monoxide poisoning."

Dave said, in a curiously hesitant voice, "Suicide?" Doc Evers shrugged. "It usually is."

"It could have been accidental," I said.

"Possibly."

"Either way," I said, "She couldn't have died here."

"No," said Doc, "hardly. Monoxide poisoning presupposes a closed space."

"All right," I said. "Why was she brought here and left on my doorstep?" Doc Evers said, "Well, in any case, you're in the clear. You've been with us since before six last evening."

Hughie Brown's young relative was staring at me. I realized what I was doing and shoved my hands in my pockets. I had been running my fingers over the scars that still show on my face, a nervous trick I haven't quite been able to shake.

"Sure," said Dave. "That's right. You're in the clear, Greg. No matter what."

"That comforts me," I said. "But not greatly." I went back to fingering the scars.

I had enemies in Fordstown. I went out of my way to make them, with a batch of articles I was brainless enough to write about how things were being run in the city. The people involved had used a simple and direct method of convincing me that I had made a serious error in judgment. I turned again to look at poor Marjorie, and I wondered.

A man named Joe Justinian was my chief and unassailable enemy. Chief because he was the control center of Fordstown's considerable vice rackets, and unassailable because he owned the city administration, hoof, horns and hide. A uniformed cop and a city detective of the Fordstown force had stood by and watched while Justinian's boys had their fun, bouncing me up and down on the old brick paving of the alley where they cornered me. The detective had had to move his feet to keep from getting my blood on his shoes. Afterward neither he nor the cop could remember a single identifying feature about the men. Justinian had two right-hand bowers. One was Eddie Sego, an alert and sprightly young hood who saw to it that everything ran smoothly. The other was Marjorie's husband--now widower--Brian Ingraham. Brian was the respectable one, the lawyer who maintained in the world the polite fiction that Mr. Joseph Justinian was an honest businessman who operated a night club known as the Roman Garden, and who had various "investments." Brian himself was one of Justinian's best investments. From a small lawyer with several clients he had become a big lawyer with one client. And now his wife was dead on my doorstep.

Any way I looked at it, I couldn't see that this night was going to bring me anything but trouble.

Hughie Brown came back with a folded sheet fresh from the laundry. Doc Evers unfolded it, crisp and white, and that was the last I ever saw of Marjorie. Doc said, "Where's the nearest phone?"

II

On Monday afternoon I was in Fordstown, in the office of Wade Hickey, our current chief of police.

Brian Ingraham was there, too. He was sitting in the opposite corner,

his head bowed, not looking at me or or Hickey. He seemed all shrunken together and gray-faced, and his fingers twitched so that it was an effort to hold the cigarettes he was chain-smoking. I kept glancing at him, fascinated. This was a new role for Brian. I had never seen him before when he didn't radiate perfect confidence in his ability to outsmart the whole world and everybody in it.

Hickey was speaking. He was a big, thick-necked man with curly gray hair and one of those coarse, ruddy, jovial faces that can fool some of the people all of the time, but others for only the first five minutes.

"The reports are all complete now," he said, placing one large hand on a file folder in front of him on the desk. "Poor Marjorie took her own life. What her reasons may have been are known only to herself and God--" Suddenly, viciously, Ingraham said, "You're not making a speech now, Wade. You don't have to ham it up."

His face was drawn like something on a rack. Hickey gave him a pitying glance.

"I'm sorry, Brian," he said, "but these facts have to be made perfectly clear. Mr. Carver is in a peculiar position here, and he has a right to know." He turned to me and went on.

"Marjorie's car was found in a patch of woods off Beaver Run Road, maybe ten miles out of town. There's an old logging cut there, and she had driven in on it about a quarter of a mile, where she wasn't likely to be disturbed. As it happened, of course, somebody did find her, too late to be of any help--"

"Somebody," I said, "with a fine sense of humor."

"Or someone wanting to make trouble for you," said Hickey. "Let's

not forget that possibility. You do have enemies, you know."

"Yes," I said. "What a pity they were all complete strangers." Hickey's eyes got cold. "Look, Carver," he said, "I'm trying to be decent about this. Don't make it hard for me."

"It seems to me," I said, "that I've been shamefully co-operative."

"Cooperation," said Hickey, "is how we all get along in this world. You oughtn't to be ashamed of it. Now then." He turned a page over in the folder.

"Whoever found her and removed her body left the front door open, but all the windows were tight shut except the wind-wing on the right side. The That was open sufficiently to admit a hose running from the exhaust pipe. The autopsy findings agree with the preliminary reports made by the doctor up at Lakelands--"

"Doctor Evers."

"That's right, Doctor Evers--and the police doctor who accompanied the ambulance. Carbon-monoxide poisoning." He closed the folder. "There's only one possible conclusion."

"Suicide," I said.

Hickey spread his hands and nodded solemnly.

I looked at Brian Ingraham. "You knew her better than anybody. What do you think?"

"What is there to think?" he said, in an old, dry, helpless voice that hardly carried across the room. "She did it. That's all." He ran the back of his hand across his eyes. He was crying.

"Now," said Hickey, "as to why her body was removed from the car, transported approximately twenty miles and left on your porch, Carver, I don't to suppose we'll ever know."

A ghoulish joke, an act of malice--a body can be an embarrassing thing to explain away--or simply the act of a nut, with no real motive behind it at all. Whatever the explanation, it isn't important. And we certainly can't connect you in any way with Marjorie's death. So if I were you, I'd go home and forget about it."

"Yes," I said. "I guess that's the thing to do. Brian--"

"Yes."

"Do you know of any reason? Was she sick, or unhappy?" He looked at me, through me, beyond me, into some dark well of misery. "No, I don't know of any reason. According to the autopsy she was in perfect health. As far as I knew"--he faltered, and then went on, in that curiously dead voice--"as far as I knew, she was happy."

"It's always a cruel thing to accept," said Hickey, "when someone we love takes that way out. But we have to realize--"

"We," said Ingraham, getting up. "What the hell have you got to do with it, you greedy, grubbing, boot-licking slob? And how would you know, anyway?"

You've never loved anything but yourself and money since the day you were born."

He went past me and out the door.

Hickey shook his fine, big, leonine head. "Poor Brian. He's taking this mighty hard."

"Yes," I said.

"Well," said Hickey, "it's no wonder. Marjorie was a mighty fine girl."

"Yes," I said. I got up. "I take it that's all?" Hickey nodded. He picked up the file and shoved it in a drawer. He shut the drawer. Symbol of completion.

I went to the Herald and did a nice, neat, factual follow-up on the story I had already filed. Then I stopped at the State Store and picked up a bottle, and returned to the bachelor apartment I inhabit for fifty weeks of the year. So I was home, as Hickey had recommended, but I did not forget it. I forgot to go out for food, and I forgot later to turn the lights on, but I couldn't forget Marjorie. I kept seeing her face turned toward me in the moonlight, with the dew on her cheeks and her lips parted. After a while it seemed to me that she had been trying to speak, to tell me something. And I got angry.

"That's just like you," I said. "Make a mess of things, and then come running to me for help. Well, this time I can't help you." I thought of her sitting all alone in her car in the old logging cut, listening to the motor throb, feeling death with every breath she breathed, and I wondered if she had thought that at the end. I wondered if she had thought of me at all. "Such a waste, Marjorie. You could have left Brian. You could have done a million other things. Why did you have to go and kill yourself?"

It was hot and dark in the room. The Marjorie-image receded slowly into a thickening haze.

"That's it," I said. "Go away." The haze got thicker. It enveloped me, too. It was restful. Marjorie was gone. Everything was gone. It was very nice. Then the noise began. It was a sharp, insistent noise. A ringing. It had a definite significance, one I tried hard to ignore. But I

couldn't, quite. It was the doorbell, and in the end I didn't have any choice. I fought my way partly out of the fog and answered it.

She was standing in the hall, looking in at me.

"Oh, God," I said. "No. I told you. You can't come back to me now. You're dead."

Her voice reached me out of an enormous and terrible void. "Please," it said.

"Mr. Carver, please! My name

is Sheila Harding. I want to talk to you."

She was shorter than Marjorie, and not so handsome. This girl's hair was brown and her eyes were blue.

I hung onto the door jamb. "I don't know you," I said, too far gone to be polite.

"I was a friend of Marjorie's." She stepped forward. "Please, I must talk to you."

She pushed by me, and I let her. I switched the light on and closed the door. There was a chair beside the door. I sat in it.

She didn't look like her at all, really. She didn't move the same way, and the whole shape and outline of her was different. She kept glancing at me, and it dawned on me that she hadn't counted on finding me drunk.

"I can still hear you," I said. "What's on your mind?" She hesitated. "Maybe I'd better--"

"I plan to be drunk all the rest of this week. So unless it's something that can wait--"

"All right," she said rather sharply. "It's about Marjorie." I waited.

"She was a very unhappy person," Sheila Harding said.

"That's not what Brian said. He said she was happy."

"He knows better than that," she said bitterly. "He must know. He just doesn't want to admit it. Of course, I knew Marjorie quite a long while before I realized it, but that's different. We both belonged to the League."

"Oh," I said. "You're one of those society dolls. Now wait." The name Harding clicked over in my dim brain with a sound of falling coins.

"Gilbert Harding, Harding Steel, umpteen millions. I don't remember a daughter."

"There wasn't one. I'm his niece."

"Marjorie enjoyed belonging to the League," I said. "She was born and raised on the South Side, right where I was. Her biggest ambition was to grow up to be a snob."

I was annoying Miss Harding, who said, "That isn't important, Mr. Carver. The important thing is that she needed a friend very badly, and for some reason she picked me."

"You look the friendly type."

Her mouth tightened another notch. But she went on. "Marjorie was worried about Brian. About what he was doing, the people he was mixed up with." I laughed. I got up and went over to the window, in

search of air. "Brian was working for Justinian when she married him. She knew it. She thought it was just splendid of him to be so ambitious."

"Nine years ago," said Sheila quietly, "Justinian was a lot more careful what he did."

She sounded so sensible and so grim that I turned around and looked at her with considerably more interest.

"That's true," I said. "But I still think it was late in the day for Marjorie to get upset. I told her at the beginning just what the score was. She didn't give a damn, as long as it paid."

"She did later. I told you she was an unhappy person. She had made some bad mistakes, and she knew it."

"They weren't that bad," I said. "They weren't so bad she had to kill herself."

Her eyes met mine, blue, compelling, strangely hard. "Marjorie didn't kill herself," she said.

III

I LET THAT HANG THERE in the hot, still air while I looked at it. Marjorie didn't kill herself.

There were two sides to it. One: Of course she killed herself; the evidence is as clear as day. Two: I'm not surprised; I never thought she did. I said carefully, "I was in the office of the Chief of Police this afternoon. I heard all the evidence, the autopsy report, the works. Furthermore, I saw the body, and a doctor friend of mine nine saw it. Monoxide poisoning, self-administered, in her own car. Period."

"I read the papers," said Sheila. "I know all about that. I know all about you, too."

"Do you?"

"Marjorie told me."

"Girlish confidences, eh?"

"Something a little more than that, Mr. Carver. It was when you were beaten so badly, a year or so back, that Marjorie began to feel--well, to put it honestly--guilty."

"I'm sorry. I'm not at my best tonight. Go on."

"Then," said Sheila, "my brother was killed, just after New Year's."

"Your brother?" I sat down again, this time on the edge of the bed, facing her.

"He was in the personnel department of Harding Steel, a very junior executive. He told me the numbers racket--the bug, he called it--was taking thousands of dollars out of the men's pay checks every month. I guess that goes on in all the mills, more or less."

"Around here it does. And more, not less."

"Well, Bill thought he'd found a way to catch the people who were doing it, and clean up Harding Steel. He was ambitious. He wanted to do something big and startling. He was all excited about it. And then a load of steel rods dropped on him, and that was that. Just a plant accident. Everybody was sorry."

I remembered, now that she told me. I hadn't covered the story

myself, and there was no reason in particular why it should stick in my mind. But there hadn't been any suspicion of foul play at the time. I said so.

"Of course not. They were very careful about it. But Bill had told me the night before that his life had been threatened. He almost bragged about it. He said they couldn't stop him now; he had the men he wanted--Justinian's men, naturally--right here." She held out her hand and closed the fingers. "He was murdered."

"And you told this to Marjorie."

"Yes. We were very good friends, Mr. Carver. Very close. She didn't think I was hysterical. She knew Bill, and liked him. She became terribly angry and upset. She said she would find out everything she could, and if it was really murder she was going to make Brian quit Justinian."

"Go on."

"It took her a long time. But last Saturday afternoon, late, she stopped by. She said she was pretty sure she had the full story, and it was murder, and she was going to face Brian with it that night. I asked her for details. She wouldn't tell me anything because she didn't think Brian was personally involved, and she was in duty bound to give him his chance to get clear of Justinian before she told.

"Then she was going to give the whole story to my Uncle Gilbert. She said he was big enough to fight Justinian."

And he was, plenty big enough. If he had even reasonable proof that his nephew had been murdered, he could go right over the heads of the local law, to where the Emperor Justinian of Fordstown had no influence at all. He could smash him into little pieces.

Reason enough for Justinian to silence Marjorie. Reason enough. But....

Sheila was still talking. "Marjorie did tell me one thing, Mr. Carver."

"What?"

"If Brian still insisted on sticking with Justinian, she was going to leave him. She said, 'I'll go back to Greg, if he still wants me.' That turned me cold all over. And she did. No, what am I saying? She didn't come, somebody brought her. Somebody. Who? Why?"

"Surely you must have guessed that by now, Mr. Carver."

"You tell me."

"Who it was exactly, of course, I don't know. But it was somebody who knows Marjorie's suicide was a lie. It was somebody who liked her and wanted the truth known. Somebody who thought that if he brought her to you, you would understand and do something about it."

Yes. I could see that.

"But why me? Why not lay her on Brian's doorstep? He was her husband."

"They probably felt that he would be too shocked and grieved to understand. Or perhaps they didn't trust him to fight Justinian. You wouldn't be involved either way. And you already have a grudge against Justinian." Oh yes, I had a grudge, all right. But who was this thoughtful someone? One of the killers? An accidental witness? And why did he have to pass the thing along to anyone? Why didn't he just come out and tell the truth himself?

That last one was easy. He was afraid.

Well, so was I.

Sheila was waiting. She was looking at me, expectant, confident. She was a pretty girl. She seemed like a nice girl, a loyal friend, a loving sister. She had had her troubles. I hated to let her down.

I said, "No sale. Marjorie killed herself. Let's just accept that and forget it. She stared at me with a slowly dawning astonishment. "After what I've just told you--you can still say that?"

"Yes," I said. "I can. In the first place, how would Marjorie find it out even if your brother was really murdered? Eddie Sego plans those things, and Eddie is not the babbling type. Not to anybody, including the boss's lawyer's wife."

"Eddie Sego had nothing to do with it. He was in the hospital then with a burst appendix. That's one thing that made it harder for Marjorie, because she didn't know where to start." She added, with angry certainty, "She did find out, somehow."

"Okay then. She found out. Maybe she found out even more. Maybe she discovered that Brian was so deeply involved that she couldn't tell. Maybe she was in such a mess that there wasn't any other way out of it but suicide. You don't know what happened after she left you." I got up and opened the door. "Go home, Miss Harding. Forget about it. Lead a long and happy life." She didn't go. She continued to look at me. "I understand," she said. "You're scared."

"Miss Harding," I said, "have you ever been set upon by large men with brass knuckles? Have you ever spent weeks in a hospital getting your face put back together again?"

"No. But I imagine it wasn't pleasant. I imagine they warned you that the next time it would be worse."

"A society doll with brains," I said. "You have the whole picture. Good night."

"I don't think you have the whole picture yet, Mr. Carver. If you could find the man who brought Marjorie's body to you, you would have a witness who could break Justinian."

"All right," I said, "we'll get right down to bedrock. I don't like Justinian any better than you do, but it's going to take somebody or something bigger than me to break him. I tried to once, and he did the breaking. As far as I'm concerned, that's it."

"I don't suppose," she said slowly, "that I have any right to call you a coward."

"No. You haven't." "Very well. I won't." And this time she went.

I closed the door and turned off the lights. Then I went to the window and looked down at the street, three floors below. I saw her come out of the building and get into a black and white convertible parked at the curb. She drove away. Before she was out of sight a man got out of a car across the street and then the car went off after her. The man who had been left behind loitered along the street, where he could watch the front of the building and my window.

Somebody was keeping tabs on what I did and who came to see me. Wade Hickey? Justinian? And why?

I began to think about Brian Ingraham, and wonder how deeply he might be involved. I began to think about Joe Justinian, and what might be done about him. The Marjorie-image came back into my

mind, and it was smiling. Then I thought of the brass knuckles and the taste of blood and oil on the old brick paving. I looked down at the loitering man. "The hell with it," I said, and I went and lay down on my bed.

But I couldn't sleep.

About midnight I quit trying. I smoked a couple of cigarettes, sitting by the window. I did not turn the lights on. I don't remember that I came to any conscious and reasoned decision, either. After a certain length of time I just got up and went.

I didn't go near my car. I knew they would be watching that, expecting me to use it. I slipped out the back entrance into the alley and across it to an areaway that ran alongside another apartment house to the next street. I was careful. I didn't see anybody I didn't want anybody to see me. I still thought I could quit on this thing any time it got too risky. At my age, and with my experience, I should have known better.

IV

THERE WERE STILL HONEST Cops on the force, plenty of them. They were hamstrung. As things

stood, they had two choices. They could resign and go to farming or selling shoes, or they could sweat it out, hoping for better days. One who was sweating it out was an old friend of mine, a detective named Carmen Prioletti. His house was pith-dark when I got to it, after a twenty-minute hike. I rang the bell, and pretty soon a light came on, and then Carmen, frowsy with sleep, stuck his head out the door and demanded to know what the hell.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

He let me in and we stood talking in low voices in the hall, so as not to wake the family.

"I want to borrow your car," I said. "No questions asked, and back in an hour. Okay?"

He looked at me narrowly. Then he said, "Okay." He got the keys and gave them to me.

"I'll need a flashlight, too," I said.

"There's one in the car." He added, "I'll wait up." I drove through quiet streets to the northern edge of town, and beyond it, into the country, where the air was cool and the dark roads were overhung with trees, and the summer mist lay white and heavy in the bottoms. I drove fast until I

came to Beaver Run Road, and then I went slower, looking for the logging cut. Beaver Run was a secondary road, unpaved, washboarded and full of potholes. Dust had coated the trees and brush on either side, so they showed up bleached and grayish.

I found the cut and turned into it, and stopped the motor. It became suddenly very still. I picked up the flashlight and got out. I walked down the rutted track.

They had taken Marjorie's car away, of course, and the comings and goings of men and tow trucks had pretty well flattened everything in sight. But I found where the car had been. I looked all around at the crushed brambles, the rank weeds and the Queen Anne's lace. Then I walked a little farther down the track where no one had been. I walked slowly, watching my feet. I circled around to the side of the track, as one would in walking around a car. My trouser legs were wet to the knees with dew. The briars caught in them and scratched my shins. I

went back to Prioletti's car and sat sideways, with the door open, picking a batch of prickly green beggar's lice out of my socks. The socks, and my shoes, were wet.

I backed out of the cut and drove into town again, to Prioletti's. He was waiting up for me, as he had promised. We sat in the kitchen, smoking, and all the time he watched me with his bright dark eyes.

"Carmen," I said, "suppose you're a girl. You're wearing an evening dress, sheer stockings, high-heeled shoes. You decide to kill yourself. You drive to a nice quiet spot, an old logging cut off a back road. You have brought a hose with you--"

Carmen's eyes were fairly glittering now, but wary. "Continue."

"You wish to attach that hose to the exhaust pipe, and then run it in through the front window. Now, to do this you have to get out of the car. You have to walk around it to the back, and then around it again to the front. Right?"

"Indubitably."

"All right. There are briar thickets, weeds, beggar's lice, unavoidable, and all soaked with dew. What happens to your nylons and your fancy shoes?"

"They're pretty much of a wreck."

"Hers were not."

"I see," said Carmen slowly. "You're sure of that? Absolutely sure."

"When I found her on my porch she was neat and pretty as a pin. Carmen, she never got out of that car until she was carried out, dead." I filled him in on Sheila Harding, and what she had told me.

Then we were both through talking for awhile. The electric clock on the wall touched two and went past it.

Carmen smoked and brooded.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked finally.

"That depends," I said. "How much are you willing to risk? The minute certain people around Headquarters realize you're suspicious, you'll be in trouble."

"Leave that to me. I used to be proud of my job, Greg. Now I tell my kids I'm not really a cop, I play piano in a disorderly house." He clenched his hands together on the table top, and shivered all over. "This might be it. This might just by the grace of God be it."

"You'll have to play it mighty close to the vest. Now, what I would like to know is whether the autopsy report mentioned any external marks, no matter how slight, around the wrists and ankles, and maybe the mouth. Or a bruise on the head, under the hair."

"I'll see what I can find out. We'd better not be seen meeting. How about north of the lake in Mill Creek Park, around three?" I nodded and got up.

I walked home. I didn't meet anyone along the way. When I got within a block or so of my apartment house I took extra pains to stay in the shadows. I figured to come in the way I had gone out, across the alley and through the back door. I figured the boys out front would never know I had been away. I was happy in that thought right up to the minute I actually opened the door. Inside, in the narrow well of the service stairs, a dim light was burning, and I saw a man there. A large man, with a crushed hat pulled down over his eyes. I saw him in the act of leaping toward me, and I let go of the door and turned to run,

and there was another man in back of me. He hit me as I turned, and then the man in the stairwell came out and banged me across the nape of the neck. I went down on my hands and knees in the alley, onto the uneven bricks, and there we were again. A visit with old friends. Justinian's boys. One of them pulled me up and wrenched my head back, and the other one gave me a fast chop over the Adam's apple. That was to stop me yelling.

Then he said, "Where were you?"

I coughed and choked. Nameless, who was holding my arm doubled up behind me, gave it an upward twist. I winced, and Faceless, who was in front of me, with his hat still pulled down so that nothing much showed in the dark of night, asked again, "Where were you?"

I whispered, "Out for a walk."

"Yeah," said Faceless, "I know that. You didn't take your car. So where'd you walk to?"

"Around. No place."

He hit me twice, once on the left cheekbone, once on the right.

"I'm asking you," he said. "Me. The dame came to see you, and right away you went sneaking out. I want to know why."

"No connection," I said. "She just dropped by. And it wasn't right away. I was restless and couldn't sleep. I went for a walk. So sue me." Nameless said conversationally, "I could break your arm." He showed me how easy it would be. I went down on my knees again. There was a taste of blood in my mouth. I thought my face was bleeding. I thought I could feel it running down my cheeks, hot and wet, to spatter on the bricks.

"If it hadn't been," said Faceless, "that we could hear your phone ringing and ringing through the open window, and you didn't answer it, we wouldn't never have known you'd gone. Now, that kind of thing can lead to trouble." He kicked me. "Get up, buddy. I don't like to have to bend over when I'm talking." I got up. I couldn't stand the feeling of blood on my face. I got up fast. I threw myself backward butting Nameless as hard as I could with my head. It must have been hard enough, because he grunted and let go. He fell, and I fell on top of him, whipped around with my feet under me, and went for Faceless. He looked very queer. He was cloud-shaped, huge and looming, and the alley and the building walls were all twisted and quivering as though I was seeing them through dark water. I hit him full on and he went over backward, floating, slow-motion, like something in a dream. The blood ran down my face, filling my eyes, my nose, my mouth. I thought, This is what it feels like to be crazy. I knocked his hat off and got hold of his head and beat it up and down, up and down, hard, hard on the alley bricks.

So Pale, So Cold, So Fair

It was nice, but it didn't last long. It hardly lasted at all. Nameless got up. He was mad. He hit me with something much harder than a fist, and pretty soon Faceless got up, and he was mad, too. They let me know it. I heard one of them wanting to kill me right now, but the other one said, "Not yet, not till we get the order." He shook me. "You get that, buddy? The order. It can come any minute. And when it does, you got nothing left to hope for." He threw me down and they went away, down a long black tunnel that lengthened until I got dizzy watching and shut my eyes. When I opened them again I was lying in the alley, alone. It was still dark. I wanted to go to my apartment. I know I started and I know I must have made it up two flights of the service stairs, because I was lying on the landing when Sheila found me....

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," she said and helped me up, and we walked together up the rest of the steps and down the hall to the apartment. I told her to pull the blind shut.

"They're watching the place," I said.

"I know it," she said. "Somebody followed me home." She took me into the bathroom and went to work.

"It's not bad at all," she said. "Just ordinary cuts and bruises. But why did they do this to you? What were you doing?"

"I went out on an errand," I said. "They'd never have known I was gone, but some clown had to call me on the telephone. They could hear it ringing and they knew I wasn't here. What's the matter?" She was already pretty white and tense. Now she put her hand over her mouth and her eyes got big and full of tears. "Oh Lord," she said. "Oh, Lord, that was me."

"You?"

"I got to thinking after I got home. I didn't have any right to expect you to do anything. I didn't have any right to reproach you. I wanted to tell you that. And I thought I ought to warn you that you were being watched. So I called. When you didn't answer I thought at first you'd--" She hesitated, and I said, "Passed out," and she nodded.

"Then I began to get really worried. I called again, and again, and then finally I had to come back to see if you were all right." She began to cry.

"And it was my fault."

"You didn't mean it," I said. "You were trying to help." My first impulse

was to kill her, but she looked so miserable. "Please, stop crying."

"I can't," she whispered, and looked at the bloody washrag she had in her other hand. "I think I'm going to faint." She looked as though she might. I put my arm around her and took her into the other room, and we sat together on the edge of the bed, with her face buried on my shoulder. I wound up kissing her.

I think both of us were surprised to find we liked it.

"You're a nice kid," said. "If you weren't so rich--" She said quickly, "Didn't you know? My side of the family doesn't have a million to its name. We're the poor Hardings. That's one reason my brother was so anxious to show off."

"You may be in danger yourself," I said, suddenly alarmed for her. "They're already curious about you."

"Since you're not going to do anything about Marjorie, I can't see that it matters," she said.

"Well--" I said.

"You have done something! What? Please tell me."

"No. You're in trouble enough already. Anyway, it isn't much." It wasn't, either, unless Prioletti could turn up something on that autopsy report. And even that would only be a first step, an opening wedge. "One thing I'd give a lot to know," I told her, "is where Brian Ingraham was the night his wife was killed."

"You don't think," she said, her face reflecting horror, "that Brian had anything to do with it."

"He's Justinian's man. Body and bank account."

"But his own wife!"

"This is a hard world we live in."

She shivered. "And Marjorie said she'd given the maid the night off, so they'd be alone, and she was going to make herself beautiful so Brian would have to choose her instead of Justinian. She was vain, poor Marjorie. I just can't believe--Well, it doesn't matter what I believe, does it? Anyway, I know where Brian was that night, or at least where Marjorie thought he was. She was going to have to wait until he got home to talk to him."

"Go ahead," I said. "Where was he?"

"At the Roman Garden, with Justinian."

V

SIN IN A MIDDLE-WESTERN STEEL town is organized, functional, and realistic. It is not like in the movies. The necessary furniture is there, and nothing more. No velvet drapes, no gilt mirrors, no ultramodernistic salons, no unbelievably beautiful females. The houses are just houses, and the whores are just whores. Numbers slips can be bought in almost any dingy little sandwich shop, pool hall, or corner grocery, and anyone can play, even the kids with as little as a penny. The night clubs and gambling palaces, like the Roman Garden, are businesslike structures wasting no time on the fancy junk. There's a bar, and there are the gambling layouts, and that's that. Food, entertainment, and decor are haphazard. The bosses don't figure that's what you came for. At nine o'clock on a hot morning the Roman Garden looked downright dreary. It was primarily a big, barny, old two-and-a-half-story frame house, with a new front

tacked on it, yellow glazed brick with glass-brick insets and a neon sign. There was a parking lot around back. A couple of cars were already in it. The sports car I knew was Eddie Sego's.

I went in through the back door. No one followed me. No one had followed me since the two musclemen left me in the alley. I had escorted Sheila to her apartment, making her promise that she would go to her uncle's first thing in the morning, and there had not been a sign of a tail, nor was there now. I wished I knew why.

I walked down the hall and pushed open the door that said OFFICE.

A thoroughly respectable-looking, middle-aged female was sitting at a desk, writing busily. I went past her to the door marked PRIVATE and went through it before she could do more than squawk.

Eddie Sego was in the inner office. He was busy, too. There's a lot of paper work in any business, and he had a stack of it. He was wearing a magnificent silk sports shirt, and a pair of hornrimmed glasses. With his hairy forearms and thick, low-growing black hair, the glasses made him look like a studious gorilla.

He leaped up, startled. Then he saw who it was and sat down again, and swore. He took his glasses off.

"You ought to know better than that, Carver," he said. "Bursting in without warning. I might have thought it was a heist and shot you." He looked at me with his head on one side. "What are you doing here, anyway? And what hit you?"

"You know damn well what hit me," I said. "Eddie, it isn't fair. I've played ball. The Emperor wanted me to shut up, and I did. What more does he want?"

"Look," said Eddie, "I'm no mind reader. What's this all about?"

"Of course," I said, "you're not going to admit you know. Okay, I'll spell it out. Last night a girl came to visit me. A mutual friend just died, and she was looking for sympathetic conversation. Everything was going fine with us until she went home. Then I found out my place was being watched. A big goon followed her and scared the wits out of her, and then when I left my room for a breath of air two guys jumped me. They wanted to know where I was going and why, and then they threatened to kill me, when they got the order. And I haven't done a damned thing. Everybody's got a limit, even me. And I'm pretty close to it."

"Are you?" said Eddie. He got up and came around the desk to me. He looked at me for close to a moment. Then he hit me, fast as a coiled snake, in the pit of the belly. He watched me double up and move back, and his lip curled. He stood there with his hands at his sides, almost as though he was giving me an invitation.

I didn't take it, and Eddie said, "Limit! You've got no limit. You haven't got anything." He turned his back on me. "You don't even have a reason to come whining to me. I didn't send anybody around. I don't care what dames you see, and I can't imagine Justinian does, either." He sounded as though he really had not sent anybody. In the small corner of my mind that was not concerned with the pain in my gut, I wondered if Justinian was playing this one over Eddie's head. It was possible. I managed to say,

"They were his boys, just the same. The same two that beat me before." Eddie didn't even bother to answer that. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. I started to go, and he gave me a black look and said, "Stick around."

"Why? What are you doing?"

"I'm calling the cops."

I stared at him, feeling my face go wide open and foolish. "You're what?"

"Calling the cops. They're looking for you--didn't you know that? I got the word just a few minutes ago."

I stopped holding my belly. I turned and went out of there, paying no attention to Eddie's shouts. I burned rubber going away. So the cops were after me. This was a switch. This I had not looked for. I thought now that that was why the musclemen had been withdrawn. Justinian liked to keep his right hand and his left from getting tangled up. But I couldn't figure what possible charge they could have against me. Of course, under the present setup, they didn't really need one.... I thought it was about time somebody did something about cleaning up this town.

I decided to go across the line into Pennsylvania for the rest of the day, until it was time to meet Prioletti. From Fordstown, Pennsylvania is less than thirty miles. I had a lot of time to kill, and nothing to do but hug my bruises and think. I thought of Marjorie, and of young Harding. I thought of the way

Justinian's corporation was set up. Two main branches--gambling and prostitution, under separate heads, with separate organizations. Gambling subdivided into three--regular lay-outs like the Roman Garden, horse rooms, and the bug. The bug, day in and day out, probably brought in more money than all the rest put together. I thought of Eddie Sego, who was almost boss of all the gambling rackets, next under Justinian himself.

When it was time, I went back over the state line, using the farm roads, dusty and quiet in the heat of the afternoon. At three o'clock I

was in Mill Creek Park, in a grove of trees north of the little lake with the swans on it. Prioletti was already there.

"I didn't know if you'd make it," he said. He looked haggard and excited. "You know I'm supposed to be looking for you?"

"Yeah," I said. "But what for?"

"Investigation. That's a big word. It can cover a lot of things. It can keep you out of circulation for a while, and it can demand answers to questions." He peered around nervously. "I got a look at that report."

"Any luck?"

"Minor contused area on the scalp, minor abrasions at the mouth corners and cuts on the inside of the lips. There were also bruises and other minor abrasions on both wrists. No explanation."

"What would you say, Carmen?"

"Coupled with your other evidence, I would say it indicates that the girl was hit on the head, gagged and bound to prevent any outcry, and then driven to the logging cut, where her car was rigged for the fake suicide." I felt a qualm of sickness. I had known that was how it must have been, but put into words that way it sounded so much more brutal.

"Poor kid," I said. "I hope she never came to."

"Yeah," said Carmen. "But we've almost got it, Greg. Brian Ingraham is the key. If he knew that Justinian--"

He broke off, looking over my shoulder. "I was afraid of that," he said. He reached out and grabbed me fiercely. "Hit me. Hit me hard and then run. Hickey's cops."

He said that as though it was a dirty word, and it was. I hit him, and he let go, and I ran. Hickey's cops ran after me, but they were still a long way back, and I knew the park intimately from boyhood days. They shouted and one of them fired a shot, but it was in the air. I guess the order hadn't come yet. Anyway, I shook them and got back to my car. For the second time that day I burned rubber, going away.

I headed for the Country Club section, and Brian Ingraham's home. What Carmen had started to say was that if Brian, believing his wife a suicide, were to find out that Justinian had had her killed, he could be expected to turn on Justinian.

What Carmen had not said was that if Brian already knew it, and was co-operating with Justinian, his reaction would be quite different. I went in the long drive to the house, set far back among trees. I rang the bell, and Brian opened the door, and I walked in after him down the hall. Brian looked like a ghost. He seemed neither pleased nor displeased to see me. He didn't even ask me why I had come. He led me into the living room and then just stood there, as though he had already forgotten me.

"Brian, I've come about Marjorie."

He looked at me, in the same queer, twisted, other-dimensional way he had in Hickey's office that day. "You didn't have to," he said. "I know." And I thought, Well, here it is, and I'm finished, and so is the case. But something about his face made me ask him, "What do you know?"

"Why she killed herself. It was me." He said it simply, honestly, almost as though I was his conscience and he was trying to get straight with me. "I said she was happy, but she wasn't. For a long time she wanted me to quit and go back into regular practice, but I wouldn't. I

laughed at her. Kindly, Greg. Kindly, as you would laugh at a child. But she wasn't a child. She could see me quite clearly. As I have been seeing myself since Sunday morning." Lee paused. Then, still in that heartbreakingly simple way, he said, "I loved her. And I killed her."

He couldn't be lying. Not with that face and manner. It wasn't possible. I felt weak in the knees with relief. "You had nothing to do with it," I said.

"Justinian killed her, to save his neck." He stood still, and his eyes became very wide and strange. "Justinian? Killed her?"

"Sit down," I said, "and I'll tell you how it was done." We sat in the quiet house, with the hot afternoon outside the French windows, and I talked. And Brian listened.

When I was all through he said, "I see." Then he was silent a long time. His face had altered, becoming stony and hard, and there was a dim, cold spark at the back of his eyes.

"I remember Sheila Harding. I didn't know about her brother. That side of Justinian's business is in Eddie Sego's hands, and Eddie is not talkative."

"No," I said. "But Eddie was in the hospital then. Justinian had to attend to that emergency himself. And somehow Marjorie found out."

"Marjorie was my wife," said Brian softly. "He had no right to touch her." He stood up, and his voice became suddenly very loud. "He had no right. Marjorie. My wife."

I thought I heard a car, coming up the long drive and coming fast, but Brian was shouting so I couldn't be sure. I tried to shut him up, but he

was coming apart at the seams in a way that couldn't be stopped. I couldn't blame him, but I wished he would make sense. I put my hands on his shoulders and shook him.

"For God's sake, Brian! We don't have all year--" We didn't even have the rest of the afternoon. Two big men came in through the French windows, with guns in their hands. My old friends of the alley. Between them came a third man, with no gun. He never carried a gun. He didn't need one. He was Justinian, the Emperor of Fordstown.

Brian saw him. Instantly he became silent, poised, his eyes shining like the eyes of an animal I once saw, mangled by dogs and dying. He sprang at Justinian.

It was Eddie Sego, entering through the door behind us, who slugged Brian on the back of the head and put him down.

VI

THE LONG, FULL DRAPERIES were drawn across the French windows. The doors were locked. The cars, mine and Justinian's, had been taken around to the back, out of sight of any chance caller. The house itself stood in the middle of two wooded acres, and so did the houses on either side. In this section you paid for seclusion, and you got it.

Justinian was talking. He was a tall man, gray at the temples, distinguished-looking, dressed by the best tailors. He had immense charm. Women fell over fainting when he smiled at them, and then were always astonished to discover that the underlying ruthlessness in his steel-trap mouth and bird-of-prey eyes was the real Justinian. He was not bothering now to be charming. He was entirely the

business man, cerebral, efficient.

"It's a pity I didn't get here a little sooner," he said. "I might have stopped Carver. As it is--" He shrugged.

Brian looked up at him from the chair where he was sitting, with Eddie Sego behind him. "Then you admit you killed Marjorie. Justinian shook his head. "I haven't admitted anything, and I don't intend to. The thing is, you believe I killed her, or that I might have killed her. The doubt has been planted. I could go to a lot of trouble to convince you you're wrong, but I couldn't make you stop wondering. I could never trust you again, Brian, any more than you would trust me. So your usefulness to me is ended." He turned to glare at me. "That's all you've accomplished, Carver."

"Oh, I understand," said Brian. "I've understood all along. Why else was all the business done in your office, and all records kept in your safe? You wanted to be able to eliminate me at any time, with no danger of incriminating papers lying around where you couldn't get at them. So that angle is covered. But I'm a pretty important man, Joe. Won't there be some curiosity?"

"If the bereaved husband takes his own life? I don't think so."

"I see," said Brian. "Just like Marjorie."

"And what about me?" I asked.

Justinian shrugged. "We planned that on the way. It will appear that Brian shot you first, before killing himself. You see? The old lover, accusing the husband of having driven his wife to.... " Brian whimpered and rose up, and Eddie Sego knocked him down again.

"All right," Justinian said. "He keeps his gun in the desk in the next

room. Go get it."

Eddie nodded. "Cover him," he said to Faceless. He went out. I said, "There's a couple of things wrong with your plan, Joe."

"I'm listening."

"Other people know the whole story. You can't kill off everybody in town."

"If you mean Miss Harding, she doesn't know anything, not at firsthand. Suspensions are a dime a dozen. If you mean Prioletti, he'll forget. He has a family to consider."

"You're overlooking the most important person of all," I said.

"Who's that?"

"The guy who brought me Marjorie's body. He knows." Justinian's face tightened ominously. "A crank, that's all. Doesn't mean a thing." Eddie Sego had come back from the next room. He was holding Brian's gun. Brian was hunched over in his chair, but he was staring at me intently. The two large men stood still and listened.

"You don't believe that, Joe," I said. "You're saying it because you haven't been able to find out who the man is, and you don't want your underlings to get panicky about it."

"If he had anything to tell he'd have told it by now," said Justinian.

"Anyway, I'll find him. One thing at a time."

"You'd better find him fast, Joe," I said, "because he belongs to you. You've got a traitor in your own camp."

Justinian said, "Hold it a minute, Eddie." He moved a step or two closer to me. "That's an interesting thought. Go on with it."

"Well," I said, "a casual crank would have had to just accidentally stumble on the car with Marjorie's body in it. He would also have to have known who she was, and that she had once been engaged to me. He would have had to know I was on vacation, and where. Now, does that all seem likely?" He shook his head impatiently. "Go on."

"I'm just laying it out for you. Okay, we forget the crank. We say instead it was somebody who was fond of Marjorie and wanted her avenged, but was afraid to come out and tell the truth. So he figured that handing me the body would sic me onto what really happened to her."

"This sounds better."

"But still not good enough. If he was just a friend of Marjorie's, how did he know about the murder? Guess at it, stumble on it, happen to follow the cars into the logging cut and then wait around unseen while the thing was being done, when he could have been calling for help? Not likely. If it was one of the killers suddenly getting conscience-stricken, that fills all the requirements except one. Would he deliberately sic someone onto himself, to get himself hanged?"

Very briefly, Justinian's eyes flicked from Nameless to Faceless and back again to me. "No. This I can tell you."

"So what does that leave? It leaves a man who knew about Marjorie's murder, but was personally clear of it. A man who was clear on the Harding murder, too--so clear he could afford to talk about it. A man who wanted the murderer brought to justice, but who didn't want to appear in the business himself. Too dangerous, if something went wrong. So he handed the job to me. Not to Brian, because he was

too close to it, but to me. See? If I got killed, he hadn't lost anything but this chance, and there'd be another some day. But if I succeeded in pulling you down, he--"

Nameless fired, past Justinian.

The noise was earsplitting. Justinian, with the instinct of an old campaigner, dropped flat on the floor. Eddie Sego, behind him and across the room, was already down and rolling for the shelter of a sofa. He wasn't hit. He did not intend to be hit, either.

"He was gonna shoot you in the back, Boss," said Nameless, on a note of stunned surprise. "He was gonna--"

I tipped my chair over onto him, and we went staggering down together, with my hands on his wrist. I wanted his gun. I wanted it bad. He wasn't going to give it up without a struggle. We got tangled in the furniture and when I got a look around again I saw Justinian, kneeling behind a big armchair. He was paying no attention to us. He had bigger things on his mind, like the gun he was too proud to carry. Faceless was crouched over in an attitude of indecision, his gun wavering between me and Eddie Sego. He couldn't see Eddie, and he couldn't shoot me without very likely killing his friend. Eddie solved his problem for him. He fired from the opposite end of the sofa and Faceless fell over with a sort of heavy finality. Brian Ingraham sat where he was, in the middle of it, watching with the blank gaze of a stupid child.

I saw a heavy glass ashtray on the floor where we had knocked it off an end table. I let go with one hand and grabbed it and hit Nameless with it. He relaxed, and then the gun was quite easy to take out of his fingers. I took it and whirled around.

Justinian was moving his armchair shield, inch by inch, toward the

gun that Faceless had dropped.

I said, "Hold it, Joe."

He gave me a hot, blind look of feral rage, but he held it, and I picked up the gun. Justinian looked from me to where Eddie Sego was, and he cursed him in a short, violent burst, and then grew calm again.

"That was a crummy way to do it, Eddie. You didn't have guts enough to face up to me yourself."

Eddie stood up now. He shrugged. "Why should I commit suicide? I figured Carver ought to be mad enough to do something." He glanced at me. "I just about gave you up this morning. I was really going to turn you in."

"How did you find out?" asked Justinian. "I didn't tell you anything. The Harding job, yes. But about Marjorie. I didn't tell anybody."

"A guy like me," said Eddie, "can find out an awful lot if he sets his mind to it. Besides, I'd been feeding Marjorie what she wanted to know about Harding."

"Sure," I said. "How else could she have found out? You've been taken, Joe. You're through."

I motioned him to get up. And then Brian remembered who Justinian was, and what he had just admitted he had done, and he got up and rushed in between us and flung him-self on Justinian, and I was helpless. They rolled together, making ugly sounds. They rolled out from the shelter of the chair into the open center of the room. And I saw Eddie Sego raise his gun.

"Eddie," I said. "Let them alone."

"What the hell," he said, "now he knows what I did I have to get him, or he'll drag me right along with him. I'm clean on those killings, but there's plenty else."

"Eddie," I said. "No."

He said, "I can do without you, too," and I saw the black, cold glitter come in his eyes.

I shot him in the right elbow.

He spun around and dropped the gun. He doubled up for a minute, and then he began to whimper and claw with his left hand for his own gun, in a holster under his left shoulder. I went closer to him and shot him again, carefully, through the left arm.

He crumbled down onto the floor and sat there, looking at me with big tears in his eyes. "What did you have to do that for?" he said. "You wanted him dead, too."

"Not that way. And not Brian, too."

"What do you care about Brian?" He rocked back and forth on the floor, hugging his arms against his sides and crying.

"You make me sick," I said.

I went to where Justinian and Brian were in the center of the room, locked together, quiet now with deadly effort. I didn't look to see who was killing who. "You make me sick," I said. "All of you make me sick." I kicked them until they broke apart.

I felt sorry for Brian, but he still made me sick. "Get up. Brian, you get on the phone and call the police. Prioletti and the decent cops, not

Hickey's. They've been waiting a long time for this. Go on!" He went, and I told Justinian to sit down, and he sat. He looked at Eddie Sego and laughed.

"Empires aren't so easy to inherit after all, are they, Eddie?" he said. Eddie was still looking at me. "I just don't see why you did it.

"I'll tell you," I said. "Because I want to see you hang right along with the others. Did you think I was going to do your dirty work for you, for free?" I turned to Justinian. "How did you find out Marjorie was so close to you on the Harding thing?"

"Why," he said, "I guess it was a remark Eddie made that got me worried."

"A remark that got Marjorie killed. But you didn't care, did you, Eddie?

What's another life, more or less, to you?" His face had turned white, with fear instead of pain. Justinian was looking at me with a sort of astonishment. And then Brian came and took my arm, and I stepped back and shook my head, and we sat down and waited until Prioletti came. When they were all gone and the house was empty and quiet again, I stood for a minute looking around at all the things that had been Marjorie's, and there was a peacefulness about them now. I went out softly and closed the door, and drove away down the long drive.

The Road to Sinharat

I

2038

The door was low, deep-sunk into the thickness of the wall. Carey knocked and then he waited, stooped a bit under the lintel stone, fitting his body to the meager shadow as though he could really hide it there. A few yards away, beyond cracked and tilted paving-blocks, the Jekkara Low Canal showed its still black water to the still black sky, and both were full of stars. Nothing moved along the canal site. The town was closed tight, and this in itself was so unnatural that it made Carey shiver. He had been here before and he knew how it ought to be. The chief industry of the Low Canal towns is sinning of one sort or another, and they work at it right around the clock. One might have thought that all the people had gone away, but Carey knew they hadn't. He knew that he had not taken a single step unwatched. He had not really believed that they would let him come this far, and he wondered why they had not killed him. Perhaps they remembered him. There was a sound on the other side of the door.

Carey said in the antique High Martian, "Here is one who claims the guest-right." In Low Martian, the vernacular that fitted more easily on his tongue, he said, "Let me in, Derech. You owe me blood." The door opened narrowly and Carey slid through it, into lamplight and relative warmth. Derech closed the door and barred it, saying, "Damn you, Carey. I knew you were going to turn up here babbling about blood-debts. I swore I wouldn't let you in."

He was a Low Canaller, lean and small and dark and predatory. He wore a red jewel in his left earlobe and a totally incongruous but

comfortable suit of Terran synthetics, insulated against heat and cold. Carey smiled.

"Sixteen years ago," he said, "you'd have perished before you'd have worn that."

"Corruption. Nothing corrupts like comfort, unless it's kindness. Derech sighed. "I knew it was a mistake to let you save my neck that time. Sooner or later you'd claim payment. Well, now that I have let you in, you might as well sit down." He poured wine into a cup of alabaster worn thin as an eggshell and handed it to Carey. They drank, somberly, in silence. The flickering lamplight showed the shadows and the deep lines in Carey's face. Derech said, "How long since you've slept?"

"I can sleep on the way," said Carey, and Derech looked at him with amber eyes as coldly speculative as a cat's.

Carey did not press him. The room was large, richly furnished with the bare, spare, faded richness of a world that had very little left to give in the way of luxury. Some of the things were fairly new, made in the traditional manner by Martian craftsmen. They were almost indistinguishable from the things that had been old when the Reed Kings and the Bee Kings were little boys along the Nile-bank.

"What will happen," Derech asked, "if they catch you?"

"Oh," said Carey, "they'll deport me first. Then the United Worlds Court will try me, and they can't do anything but find me guilty. They'll hand me over to Earth for punishment, and there will be further investigations and penalties and fines and I'll be a thoroughly broken man when they've finished, and sorry enough for it. Though I think they'll be sorrier in the long run."

"That won't help matters any," said Derech.

"No."

"Why," asked Derech, "why is it that they will not listen?"

"Because they know that they are right."

Derech said an evil word.

"But they do. I've sabotaged the Rehabilitation Project as much as I possibly could. I've rechanneled funds and misdirected orders so they're almost two years behind schedule. These are the things they'll try me for. But my real crime is that I have questioned Goodness and the works thereof. Murder they might forgive me, but not that."

He added wearily, "You'll have to decide quickly. The UW boys are working closely with the Council of City-States, and Jekkara is no longer untouchable. It's also the first place they'll look for me."

"I wondered if that had occurred to you." Derech frowned. "That doesn't bother me. What does bother me is that I know where you want to go. We tried it once, remember? We ran for our lives across that damned desert. Four solid days and nights." He shivered.

"Send me as far as Barrakesh. I can disappear there, join a southbound caravan. I intend to go alone."

"If you intend to kill yourself, why not do it here in comfort and among friends? Let me think," Derech said. "Let me count my years and my treasure and weigh them against a probable yard of sand." Flames hissed softly around the coals in the brazier. Outside, the wind got up and started its ancient work, rubbing the house walls with tiny grains of dust, rounding off the corners, hollowing the window-places. All

over Mars the wind did this, to huts and palaces, to mountains and the small burrow-heaps of animals, laboring patiently toward a day when the whole face of the planet should be one smooth level sea of dust. Only lately new structures of metal and plastic had appeared beside some of the old stone cities. They resisted the wearing sand. They seemed prepared to stay forever. And Carey fancied that he could hear the old wind laughing as it went.

There was a scratching against the closed shutter in the back wall, followed by a rapid drumming of fingertips. Derech rose, his face suddenly alert. He rapped twice on the shutter to say that he understood and then turned to Carey. "Finish your wine."

He took the cup and went into another room with it. Carey stood up. Mingling with the sound of the wind outside, the gentle throb of motors became audible, low in the sky and very near.

Derech returned and gave Carey a shove toward an inner wall. Carey remembered the pivoted stone that was there, and the space behind it. He crawled through the opening.

"Don't sneeze or thrash about," said Derech. "The stonework is loose, and they'd hear you."

He swung the stone shut. Carey huddled as comfortably as possible in the uneven hole, worn smooth with the hiding of illegal things for countless generations. Air and a few faint gleams of light seeped through between the stone blocks, which were set without mortar as in most Martian construction. He could even see a thin vertical segment of the room. When the sharp knock came at the door, he discovered that he could hear quite clearly.

Derech moved across his field of vision. The door opened. A man's voice demanded entrance in the name of the United Worlds and the

Council of Martian City-States. "Please enter," said Derech.

Carey saw, more or less fragmentarily, four men. Three were Martians in the undistinguished cosmopolitan garb of the City-States. They were the equivalent of the FBI. The fourth was an Earthman, and Carey smiled to see the measure of his own importance. The spare blond, good-looking man with the sunburn and the friendly blue eyes might have been an actor, a tennis player, or a junior executive on holiday. He was Howard Wales, Earth's best man in Interpol. Wales let the Martians do the talking, and while they did it he drifted unobtrusively about, peering through doorways, listening, touching, feeling. Carey became fascinated by him, in an unpleasant sort of way. Once he came and stood directly in front of Carey's crevice in the wall. Carey was afraid to breathe, and he had a dreadful notion that Wales would suddenly turn about and look straight in at him through the crack.

The senior Martian, a middle-aged man with an able look about him, was giving Derech a briefing on the penalties that awaited him if he harbored a fugitive or withheld information. Carey thought that he was being too heavy about it. Even five years ago he would not have dared to show his face in Jekkara. He could picture Derech listening amiably, lounging against something and playing with the jewel in his ear. Finally Derech got bored with it and said without heat, "Because of our geographical position, we have been exposed to the New Culture." The capitals were his. "We have made adjustments to it. But this is still Jekkara and you're here on sufferance, no more. Please don't forget it."

Wales spoke, deftly forestalling any comment from the City-State. "You've been Carey's friend for many years, haven't you?"

"We robbed tombs together in the old days."

" 'Archaeological research' is a nicer term, I should think."

"My very ancient and perfectly honorable guild never used it. But I'm an honest trader now, and Carey doesn't come here." He might have added a qualifying "often," but he did not. The City-State said derisively, "He has or will come here now."

"Why?" asked Derech.

"He needs help. Where else could he go for it?"

"Anywhere. He has many friends. And he knows Mars better than most Martians, probably a damn sight better than you do."

"But," said Wales quietly, "outside of the City-states all Earthmen are being hunted down like rabbits, if they're foolish enough to stay. For Carey's sake, if you know where he is, tell us. Otherwise he is almost certain to die."

"He's a grown man," Derech said. "He must carry his own load."

"He's carrying too much..." Wales said, and then broke off. There was a sudden gabble of talk, both in the room and outside. Everybody moved toward the door, out of Carey's vision, except Derech, who moved into it, relaxed and languid and infuriatingly self-assured. Carey could not hear the sound that had drawn the others but he judged that another flier was landing. In a few minutes Wales and the others came back, and now there were some new people with them. Carey squirmed and craned, getting closer to the crack, and he saw Alan Woodthorpe, his superior, Administrator of the Rehabilitation Project for Mars, and probably the most influential man on the planet. Carey knew that he must have rushed across a thousand miles of desert from his headquarters at Kahora, just to be here at this moment.

Carey was flattered and deeply moved.

Woodthorpe introduced himself to Derech. He was disarmingly simple and friendly in his approach, a man driven and wearied by many vital matters but never forgetting to be warm, gracious, and human. And the devil of it was that he was exactly what he appeared to be. That was what made dealing with him so impossibly difficult.

Derech said, smiling a little, "Don't stray away from your guards."

"Why is it?" Woodthorpe asked. "Why this hostility? If only your people would understand that we're trying to help them."

"They understand that perfectly," Derech said. "What they can't understand is why, when they have thanked you politely and explained that they neither need nor want your help, you still refuse to leave them alone."

"Because we know what we can do for them! They're destitute now. We can make them rich, in water, in arable land, in power—we can change their whole way of life. Primitive people are notoriously resistant to change, but in time they'll realize..."

"Primitive?" said Derech.

"Oh, not the Low Canallers," said Woodthorpe quickly. "Your civilization was flourishing, I know, when Proconsul was still wondering whether or not to climb down out of his tree. For that very reason I cannot understand why you side with the Drylanders."

Derech said, "Mars is an old, cranky, dried-up world, but we understand her. We've made a bargain with her. We don't ask too much of her, and she gives us sufficient for our needs. We can depend on her. We do not want to be made dependent on other

men."

"But this is a new age," said Woodthorpe. "Advanced technology makes anything possible. The old prejudices, the parochial viewpoints, are no longer..."

"You were saying something about primitives."

"I was thinking of the Dryland tribes. We had counted on Dr. Carey, because of his unique knowledge, to help them understand us. Instead, he seems bent on stirring them up to war. Our survey parties have been set upon with the most shocking violence. If Carey succeeds in reaching the Drylands there's no telling what he may do. Surely you don't want..."

"Primitive," Derech said, with a ring of cruel impatience in his voice.

"Parochial. The gods send me a wicked man before a well-meaning fool. Mr. Woodthorpe, the Drylanders do not need Dr. Carey to stir them up to war. Neither do we. We do not want our wells and our water courses rearranged. We do not want our population expanded. We do not want the resources that will last us for thousands of years yet, if they're not tampered with, pumped out and used up in a few centuries. We are in balance with our environment; we want to stay that way. And we will fight, Mr. Woodthorpe. You're not dealing with theories now. You're dealing with our lives. We are not going to place them in your hands."

He turned to Wales and the Martians. "Search the house. If you want to search the town, that's up to you. But I wouldn't be too long about any of it." Looking pained and hurt, Woodthorpe stood for a moment and then went out, shaking his head. The Martians began to go through the house. Carey heard Derech's voice say, "Why don't you join them, Mr. Wales?" Wales answered pleasantly, "I don't like

wasting my time." He bade Derech good night and left, and Carey was thankful.

After a while the Martians left too. Derech bolted the door and sat down again to drink his interrupted glass of wine. He made no move to let Carey out, and Carey conquered a very strong desire to yell at him. He was getting just a touch claustrophobic now. Derech sipped his wine slowly, emptied the cup and filled it again. When it was half empty for the second time a girl came in from the back.

She wore the traditional dress of the Low Canals, which Carey was glad to see because some of the women were changing it for the cosmopolitan and featureless styles that made all women look alike, and he thought the old style was charming. Her skirt was a length of heavy orange silk caught at the waist with a broad girdle. Above that she wore nothing but a necklace and her body was slim and graceful as a bending reed. Twisted around her ankles and braided in her dark hair were strings of tiny bells, so that she chimed as she walked with a faint elfin music, very sweet and wicked.

"They're all gone now," she told Derech, and Derech rose and came quickly toward Carey's hiding place.

"Someone was watching through the chinks in the shutters," he said as he helped Carey out. "Hoping I'd betray myself when I thought they were gone." He asked the girl, "It wasn't the Earthman, was it?"

"No." She had poured herself some wine and curled up with it in the silks and warm furs that covered the guest-bench on the west wall. Carey saw that her eyes were green as emerald, slightly tilted, bright, curious and without mercy. He became suddenly very conscious of his unshaven chin and the gray that was beginning to be noticeable at his temples, and his general soiled and weary condition.

"I don't like that man Wales," Derech was saying. "He's almost as good as I am. We'll have him to reckon with yet."

"We," said Carey. "You've weighed your yard of sand?" Derech shrugged ruefully. "You must have heard me talking myself into it. Well, I've been getting a little bored with the peaceful life." He smiled the smile Carey remembered from the times they had gone robbing tombs together in places where murder would have been a safer occupation. "And it's always irked me that we were stopped that time. I'd like to try again. By the way, this is Arrin. She'll be going with us as far as Barrakesh."

"Oh." Carey bowed, and she smiled at him from her nest in the soft furs. Then she looked at Derech. "What is there beyond Barrakesh?"

"Kesh," said Derech. "And Shun."

"But you don't trade in the Drylands," she said impatiently. "And if you did, why should I be left behind?"

"We're going to Sinharat," Derech said. "The Ever-living."

"Sinharat?" Arrin whispered. There was a long silence, and then she turned her gaze on Carey. "If I had known that, I would have told them where you were. I would have let them take you." She shivered and bent her head.

"That would have been foolish," Derech said, fondling her. "You'd have thrown away your chance to be the lady of one of the two saviors of Mars."

"If you live," she said.

"But my dear child," said Derech, "can you, sitting there, guarantee to

me that you will be alive tomorrow?"

"You will have to admit," said Carey slowly, "that her odds are somewhat better than ours."

II

The barge was long and narrow, buoyed on pontoon-like floats so that it rode high even with a full cargo. Pontoons, hull, and deck were metal. There had not been any trees for shipbuilding for a very long time. In the center of the deck was a low cabin where several people might sleep, and forward toward the blunt bow was a fire-pit where the cooking was done. The motive power was animal, four of the scaly-hided, bad-tempered, hissing beasts of Martian burden plodding along the canal bank with a tow cable. The pace was slow. Carey had wanted to go across country direct to Barrakesh, but Derech had forbidden it.

"I can't take a caravan. All my business goes by the canal, and everyone knows it. So you and I would have to go alone, riding by night and hiding by day, and saving no time at all." He jabbed his thumb at the sky. "Wales will come when you least expect him and least want him. On the barge you'll have a place to hide, and I'll have enough men to discourage him if he should be rash enough to interfere with a trader going about his normal and lawful business."

"He wouldn't be above it," Carey said gloomily.

"But only when he's desperate. That will be later." So the barge went gliding gently on its way southward along the thread of dark water that was the last open artery of what had once been an ocean. It ran snow-water now, melted from the polar cap. There were villages beside the canal, and areas of cultivation where long fields showed a

startling green against the reddish-yellow desolation. Again there were places where the sand had moved like an army, overwhelming the fields and occupying the houses, so that only mounded heaps would show where a village had been. There were bridges, some of them sound and serving the living, others springing out of nowhere and standing like broken rainbows against the sky. By day there was the stinging sunlight that hid nothing, and by night the two moons laid a shifting loveliness on the land. And if Carey had not been goaded by a terrible impatience he would have been happy.

But all this, if Woodthorpe and the Rehabilitation Project had their way, would go. The waters of the canals would be impounded behind great dams far to the north, and the sparse populations would be moved and settled on new land. Deep-pumping operations, tapping the underground sources that fed the wells, would make up the winter deficit when the cap was frozen. The desert would be transformed, for a space anyway, into a flowering garden. Who would not prefer it to this bitter marginal existence? Who could deny that this was Bad and the Rehabilitation Project Good? No one but the people and Dr. Matthew Carey. And no one would listen to them.

At Sinharat lay the only possible hope of making them listen.

* * *

The sky remained empty. Arrin spent most of her time on deck, sitting among the heaped-up bales. Carey knew that she watched him a great deal but he was not flattered. He thought that she hated him because he was putting Derech in danger of his life. He wished that Derech had left her behind. On the fourth day at dawn the wind dropped to a flat calm. The sun burned hot, setting sand and rock to shimmering. The water of the canal showed a surface like polished glass, and in the east the sharp line of the horizon thickened and blurred and was lost in a yellow haze. Derech stood sniffing like a

hound at the still air, and around noon he gave the order to tie up. The crew, ten of them, ceased to lounge on the bales and got to work, driving steel anchor pins for the cables, rigging a shelter for the beasts, checking the lashings of the deck cargo. Carey and Derech worked beside them, and when he looked up briefly from his labors Carey saw Arrin crouched over the fire-pit cooking furiously. The eastern sky became a wall, a wave curling toward the zenith, sooty ocher below, a blazing brass-color at its crest. It rushed across the land, roared, and broke upon them.

They helped each other to the cabin and crouched knee to knee in the tight space, the twelve men and Arrin, while the barge kicked and rolled, sank down deep and shot upward, struggling like a live thing under the blows of the wind. Dust and sand sifted through every vent-hole, tainting the air with a bitter taste. There was a sulfurous darkness, and the ear was deafened. Carey had been through sandstorms before, and he wished that he was out in the open where he was used to it, and where he did not have to worry about the barge turning turtle and drowning him idiotically on the driest world in the System. And while all this was going on, Arrin was grimly guarding her pot. The wind stopped its wild gusting and settled to a steady gale. When it appeared that the barge was going to remain upright after all, the men ate from Arrin's pot and were glad of the food. After that most of them went down into the hold to sleep because there was more room there. Arrin put the lid back on the pot and weighted it to keep the sand out, and then she said quietly to Derech, "Why is it that you have to go--where you're going?"

"Because Dr. Carey believes that there are records there that may convince the Rehabilitation people that our 'primitives' know what they are talking about." Carey could not see her face clearly in the gloom, but he thought she was frowning, thinking hard.

"You believe," she said to Carey. "Do you know?"

"I know that there were records, once. They're referred to in other records. Whether they still exist or not is another matter. But because of the peculiar nature of the place, and of the people who made them, I think it is possible." He could feel her shiver. "But the Ramas were so long ago." She barely whispered the name. It meant Immortal, and it had been a word of terror for so long that no amount of time could erase the memory. The Ramas had achieved their immortality by a system of induction that might have been likened to the pouring of old wine into new bottles, and though the principle behind the transplanting of a consciousness from one host to another was purely scientific, the reactions of the people from among whom they requisitioned their supply of hosts was one of simple emotional horror. The Ramas were regarded as vampires. Their ancient island city of Sinharat lay far and forgotten now in the remotest desolation of Shun, and the Drylanders held it holy, and forbidden. They had broken their own taboo just once, when Kynon of Shun raised his banner, claiming to have rediscovered the lost secret of the Ramas and promising the tribesmen and the Low Canallers both eternal life and all the plunder they could carry. He had given them only death and since then the taboo was more fanatically enforced than ever.

"Their city has not been looted," Carey said. "That is why I have hope."

"But," said Arrin, "they weren't human. They were only evil."

"On the contrary. They were completely human. And at one time they made a very great effort to atone."

She turned again to Derech. "The Shunni will kill you."

"That is perfectly possible."

"But you must go." She added shrewdly, "If only to see whether you can." Derech laughed. "Yes."

"Then I'll go with you. I'd rather see what happens to you than wait and wait and never know." As though that settled it, she curled up in her bunk and went to sleep.

Carey slept too, uneasily, dreaming shadowed dreams of Sinharat and waking from them in the dusty claustrophobic dark to feel hopelessly that he would never see it.

By mid-morning the storm had blown itself out, but now there was a sandbar forty feet long blocking the channel. The beasts were hitched to scoops brought up from the hold and put to dredging, and every man aboard stripped and went in with a shovel.

Carey dug in the wet sand, his taller stature and lighter skin perfectly separating him from the smaller, darker Low Canallers. He felt obvious and naked, and he kept a wary eye cocked toward the heavens. Once he got among the Drylanders, Wales would have to look very hard indeed to spot him. At Valkis, where there was some trade with the desert men, Derech would be able to get him the proper clothing and Carey would arrive at the Gateway, Barrakesh, already in the guise of a wandering tribesman. Until then he would have to be careful, both of Wales and the local canal-dwellers, who had very little to choose between Earthmen and the Drylanders who occasionally raided this far north, stripping their fields and stealing their women. In spite of Carey's watchfulness, it was Derech who gave the alarm. About the middle of the afternoon he suddenly shouted Carey's name. Carey, laboring now in a haze of sweat and weariness, looked up and saw Derech pointing at the sky. Carey dropped his shovel and dived for the water. The barge was close by, but the flier came so fast that by the time he had reached the ladder

he knew he could not possibly climb aboard without being seen. Arrin's voice said calmly from overhead, "Dive under. There's room." Carey caught a breath and dived. The water was cold, and the sunlight slanting through it showed it thick and roiled from the storm. The shadow of the barge made a total darkness into which Carey plunged. When he thought he was clear of the broad pontoons he surfaced, hoping Arrin had told the truth. She had. There was space to breathe, and between the pontoons he could watch the flier come in low and hover on its rotors above the canal, watching. Then it landed. There were several men in it, but only Howard Wales got out. Derech went to talk to him. The rest of the men kept on working, and Carey saw that the extra shovel had vanished into the water. Wales kept looking at the barge. Derech was playing with him, and Carey cursed. The icy chill of the water was biting him to the bone. Finally, to Wales' evident surprise, Derech invited him aboard. Carey swam carefully back and forth in the dark space under the hull, trying to keep his blood moving. After a long long time, a year or two, he saw Wales walking back to the flier. It seemed another year before the flier took off. Carey fought his way out from under the barge and into the sunlight again, but he was too stiff and numb to climb the ladder. Arrin and Derech had to pull him up.

"Anyone else," said Derech, "would be convinced. But this one—he gives his opponent credit for all the brains and deceitfulness he needs." He poured liquor between Carey's chattering teeth and wrapped him in thick blankets and put him in a bunk. Then he said, "Could Wales have any way of guessing where we're going?"

Carey frowned. "I suppose he could, if he bothered to go through all my monographs and papers."

"I'm sure he's bothered."

"It's all there," Carey said dismally. "How we tried it once and failed—"

and what I hoped to find, though the Rehabilitation Act hadn't come along then, and it was pure archaeological interest. And I have, I know, mentioned the Ramas to Woodthorpe when I was arguing with him about the advisability of all these earth-shattering--mars-shattering--changes. Why? Did Wales say something?"

"He said, 'Barrakesh will tell the story.' "

"He did, did he?" said Carey viciously. "Give me the bottle." He took a long pull and the liquor went into him like fire into glacial ice. "I wish to heaven I'd been able to steal a flier."

Derech shook his head, "You're lucky you didn't. They'd have had you out of the sky in an hour."

"Of course you're right. It's just that I'm in a hurry." He drank again and then he smiled, a very unscholarly smile. "If the gods are good to me, someday I'll have Mr. Wales between my hands."

* * *

The local men came along that evening, about a hundred of them with teams and implements. They had already worked all day clearing other blocks, but they worked without question all that night and into the next day, each man choosing his own time to fall out and sleep when he could no longer stand up. The canal was their life, and their law said that the canal came first, before wife, child, brother, parent, or self, and it was a hanging matter. Carey stayed out of sight in the cabin, feeling guilty about not helping but not too guilty. It was backbreaking work. They had the channel clear by the middle of the morning, and the barge moved on southward.

Three days later a line of cliffs appeared in the east, far away at first but closing gradually until they marched beside the canal. They were

high and steep, colored softly in shades of red and gold. The faces of the rock were fantastically eroded by a million years of water and ten millennia of wind. These were the rim of the sea basin, and presently Carey saw in the distance ahead a shimmering line of mist on the desert where another canal cut through it. They were approaching Valkis.

It was sunset when they reached it. The low light struck in level shafts against the cliffs. Where the angle was right, it shone through the empty doors and window holes of the five cities that sprawled downward over the ledges of red-gold rock. It seemed as though hearthfires burned there, and warm lamplight to welcome home men weary from the sea. But in the streets and squares and on the long flights of rock-cut steps only slow shadows moved with the sinking sun. The ancient quays stood stark as tombstones, marking the levels where new harbors had been built and then abandoned as the water left them, and the high towers that had flown the banners of the Sea-Kings were bare and broken.

Only the lowest city lived, and only a part of that, but it lived fiercely, defiant of the cold centuries towering over it. From the barge deck Carey watched the torches flare out like yellow stars in the twilight, and he heard voices, and the wild and lovely music of the double-banked harps. The dry wind had a smell in it of dusty spices and strange exotic things. The New Culture had not penetrated here, and Carey was glad, though he did think that Valkis could stand being cleaned up just a little without hurting it any. They had two or three vices for sale there that were quite unbelievable.

"Stay out of sight." Derech told him, "till I get back." It was full dark when they reached their mooring, at an ancient stone dock beside a broad square with worn old buildings on three sides of it. Derech went into the town and so did the crew, but for different reasons. Arrin

stayed on deck, lying on the bales with her chin on her wrists, staring at the lights and listening to the noises like a sulky child forbidden to play some dangerous but fascinating game. Derech did not allow her in the streets alone. Out of sheer boredom, Carey went to sleep.

He did not know how long he had slept, a few minutes or a few hours, when he was wakened sharply by Arrin's wildcat scream.

III

There were men on the deck outside. Carey could hear them scrambling around and cursing the woman, and someone was saying something about an Earthman. He rolled out of his bunk. He was still wearing the Earth-made coverall that was all the clothing he had until Derech came back. He stripped it off in a wild panic and shoved it far down under the tumbled furs. Arrin did not scream again but he thought he could hear muffled sounds as though she were trying to. He shivered, naked in the chill dark.

Footsteps came light and swift across the deck. Carey reached out and lifted from its place on the cabin wall a long-handled ax that was used to cut loose the deck cargo lashings in case of emergency. And as though the ax had spoken to him, Carey knew what he was going to do.

The shapes of men appeared in the doorway, dark and huddled against the glow of the deck lights.

Carey gave a Dryland war-cry that split the night. He leaped forward, swinging the ax.

The men disappeared out of the doorway as though they had been jerked on strings. Carey emerged from the cabin onto the deck,

where the torchlight showed him clearly, and he whirled the ax around his head as he had learned to do years ago when he first understood both the possibility and the immense value of being able to go Martian. Inevitably he had got himself embroiled in unscholarly, unarchaeological matters like tribal wars and raiding, and he had acquired some odd skills. Now he drove the dark, small, startled men ahead of the ax-blade. Yelling, he drove them in the torchlight while they stared at him, five astonished men with silver rings in their ears and very sharp knives in their belts.

Carey quoted some Dryland sayings about Low Canallers that brought the blood flushing into their cheeks. Then he asked them what their business was. One of them, who wore a kilt of vivid yellow, said, "We were told there was an Earthman hiding."

And who told you? Carey wondered. Mr. Wales, through some Martian spy? Of course, Mr. Wales—who else? He was beginning to hate Mr. Wales. But he laughed and said, "Do I look like an Earthman?"

He made the ax-blade flicker in the light. He let his hair grow long and ragged, and it was a good desert color, tawny brown. His naked body was lean and long-muscled like a desert man's, and he had kept it hard. Arrin came up to him, rubbing her bruised mouth and staring at him as surprised as the Valkisians.

The man in the yellow kilt said again, "We were told..." Other people had begun to gather in the dockside square, both men and women, idle, curious, and cruel.

"My name is Marah," Carey said. "I left the Wells of Tamboina with a price on my head for murder." The Wells were far enough away that he need not fear a fellow-tribesman rising to dispute his story. "Does anybody here want to collect it?"

The people watched him. The torch flames blew in the dry wind, scattering the light across their upturned faces. Carey began to be afraid. Close beside him Arrin whispered, "Will you be recognized?"

"No." He had been here three times with Dryland bands but it was hardly likely that anyone would remember one specific tribesman out of the numbers that floated through.

"Then stand steady," Arrin said.

He stood. The people watched him, whispering and smiling among themselves. Then the man in the yellow kilt said, "Earthman or Drylander, I don't like your face."

The crowd laughed, and a forward movement began. Carey could hear the sweet small chiming of the bells the women wore. He gripped the ax and told Arrin to get away from him. "If you know where Derech's gone, go after him. I'll hold them as long as I can."

He did not know whether she left him or not. He was watching the crowd, seeing the sharp blades flash. It seemed ridiculous, in this age of space flight and atomic power, to be fighting with ax and knife. But Mars had had nothing better for a long time, and the UW Peace and Disarmament people hoped to take even those away from them someday. On Earth, Carey remembered, there were still peoples who hardened their wooden spears in the fire and ate their enemies. The knives, in any case, could kill efficiently enough. He stepped back a little from the rail to give the ax free play, and he was not cold any longer, but warm with a heat that stung his nerve-ends. Derech's voice shouted across the square.

The crowd paused. Carey could see over their heads to where Derech, with about half his crew around him, was forcing his way

through. He looked and sounded furious.

"I'll kill the first man that touches him!" he yelled. The man in the yellow kilt asked politely, "What is he to you?"

"He's money, you fool! Passage money that I won't collect till I reach Barrakesh, and not then unless he's alive and able to get it for me. And if he doesn't, I'll see to him myself." Derech sprang up onto the barge deck. "Now clear off. Or you'll have more killing to do than you'll take pleasure in." His men were lined up with him now along the rail, and the rest of the crew were coming. Twelve tough armed men did not look like much fun. The crowd began to drift away, and the original five went reluctantly with them. Derech posted a watch and took Carey into the cabin.

"Get into these," he said, throwing down a bundle he had taken from one of the men. Carey laid aside his ax. He was shaking now with relief and his fingers stumbled over the knots. The outer wrapping was a thick desert cloak. Inside was a leather kilt, well worn and adorned with clanking bronze bosses, a wide bronze collar for the neck and a leather harness for weapons that was black with use.

"They came off a dead man," Derech said. "There are sandals underneath." He took a long desert knife from his girdle and tossed it to Carey. "And this. And now, my friend, we are in trouble."

"I thought I did rather well," Carey said, buckling kilt and harness. They felt good. Perhaps someday, if he lived, he would settle down to being the good gray Dr. Carey, archaeologist emeritus, but the day was not yet. "Someone told them there was an Earthman here."

Derech nodded. "I have friends here, men who trust me, men I trust. They warned me. That's why I routed my crew out of the brothels, and unhappy they were about it, too."

Carey laughed. "I'm grateful to them." Arrin had come in and was sitting on the edge of her bunk, watching Carey. He swung the cloak around him and hooked the bronze catch at the throat. The rough warmth of the cloth was welcome.

"Wales will know now that I'm with you. This was his way of finding out for sure."

"You might have been killed," Arrin said.

Carey shrugged. "It wouldn't be a calamity. They'd rather have me dead than lose me, though of course none of them would dream of saying so. Point is, he won't be fooled by the masquerade, and he won't wait for Barrakesh. He'll be on board as soon as you're well clear of Valkis and he'll have enough force with him to make it good."

"All true," said Derech. "So. Let him have the barge." He turned to Arrin. "If you're still hell-bent to come with us, get ready. And remember, you'll be riding for a long time."

To Carey he said, "Better keep clear of the town. I'll have mounts and supplies by the time Phobos rises. Where shall we meet?"

"By the lighthouse," Carey said. Derech nodded and went out. Carey went out too and waited on the deck while Arrin changed her clothes. A few minutes later she joined him, wrapped in a long cloak. She had taken the bells from her hair and around her ankles, and she moved quietly now, light and lithe as a boy. She grinned at him. "Come, desert man. What did you say your name was?"

"Marah."

"Don't forget your ax."

They left the barge. Only one torch burned now on the deck. Some of the lights had died around the square. This was deserted, but there was still sound and movement in plenty along the streets that led into it. Carey guided Arrin to the left along the canal bank. He did not see anyone watching them, or following them. The sounds and the lights grew fainter. The buildings they passed now were empty, their doors and windows open to the wind. Deimos was in the sky, and some of the roofs showed moonlight through them, shafts of pale silver touching the drifted dust that covered the floors. Carey stopped several times to listen, but he heard nothing except the wind. He began to feel better. He hurried Arrin with long strides, and now they moved away from the canal and up a broken street that led toward the cliffs. The street became a flight of steps cut in the rock. There were roofless stone houses on either side, clinging to the cliffs row on ragged row like the abandoned nests of sea-birds. Carey's imagination, as always, peopled them, hung them with nets and gear, livened them with lights and voices and appropriate smells. At the top of the steps he paused to let Arrin get her breath, and he looked down across the centuries at the torches of Valkis burning by the canal.

"What are you thinking?" Arrin asked.

"I'm thinking that nothing, not people nor oceans, should ever die."

"The Ramas lived forever."

"Too long, anyway. And that wasn't good, I know. But still it makes me sad to think of men building these houses and working and raising their families, looking forward to the future."

"You're an odd one." Arrin said. "When I first met you I couldn't understand what it was that made Derech love you. You were so—quiet. Tonight I could see. But now you've gone all broody and soft

again. Why do you care so much about dust and old bones?"

"Curiosity. I'll never know the end of the story, but I can at least know the beginning."

They moved on again, and now they were walking across the basin of a harbor, with the great stone quays towering above them, gnawed and rounded by the wind. Ahead on a crumbling promontory the shaft of a broken tower pointed skyward. They came beneath it, where ships had used to come, and presently Carey heard the jingling and padding of animals coming toward them. Before the rise of Phobos they were mounted and on their way.

"This is your territory," said Derech. "I will merely ride."

"Then you and Arrin can handle the pack animals." Carey took the lead. They left the city behind, climbing to the top of the cliffs. The canal showed like a ribbon of steel in the moonlight far below, and then was gone. A range of mountains had come down here to the sea, forming a long curving peninsula. Only their bare bones were left, and through that skeletal mass of rock Carey took his little band by a trail he had followed once and hoped that he remembered.

They traveled all that way by night, lying in the shelter of the rocks by day, and three times a flier passed over them like a wheeling hawk, searching. Carey thought more than once that he had lost the way, though he never said so, and he was pleasantly surprised when they found the sea bottom again just where it should be on the other side of the range, with the ford he remembered across the canal. They crossed it by moonlight, stopping only to fill up their water bags. At dawn they were on a ridge above Barrakesh. They looked down, and Derech said, "I think we can forget about our southbound caravan."

Trade was for times of peace, and now the men of Kesh and Shun

were gathering for war, even as Derech had said, without need of any Dr. Carey to stir them to it.

They filled the streets. They filled the serais. They camped in masses by the gates and along the banks of the canal and around the swampy lake that was its terminus. The vast herds of animals broke down the dikes, trampled the irrigation ditches and devoured the fields. And across the desert more riders were coming, long files of them with pennons waving and lances glinting in the morning light. Wild and far away, Carey heard the skirling of the desert pipes.

"The minute we go down there," he said, "we are part of the army. Any man that turns his back on Barrakesh now will get a spear through it for cowardice." His face became hard and cruel with a great rage. Presently this horde would roll northward, sweeping up more men from the Low Canal towns as it passed, joining ultimately with other hordes pouring in through the easterly gates of the Drylands. The people of the City-States would fall like butchered sheep, and perhaps even the dome of Kahora would come shattering down. But sooner or later the guns would be brought up, and then the Drylanders would do the falling, all because of good men like Woodthorpe who only wanted to help. Carey said, "I am going to Sinharat. But you know how much chance a small party has, away from the caravan track and the wells."

"I know," said Derech.

"You know how much chance we have of evading Wales, without the protection of a caravan."

"You tell me how I can go quietly home, and I'll do it."

"You can wait for your barge and go back to Valkis."

"I couldn't do that," Derech said seriously. "My men would laugh at me. I suggest we stop wasting time. Here in the desert, time is water."

"Speaking of water," Arrin said, "how about when we get there? And how about getting back?"

Derech said, "Dr. Carey has heard that there is a splendid well at Sinharat."

"He's heard," said Arrin, "but he doesn't know. Same as the records." She gave Carey a look, only half scornful.

Carey smiled briefly. "The well I have on pretty good authority. It's in the coral deep under the city, so it can be used without actually breaking the taboo. The Shunni don't go near it unless they're desperate, but I talked to a man who had."

He led them down off the ridge and away from Barrakesh. And Derech cast an uneasy glance at the sky.

"I hope Wales did set a trap for us there. And I hope he'll sit a while waiting for us to spring it."

There was a strict law against the use of fliers over tribal lands without special permission, which would be unprocurable now. But they both knew that Wales would not let that stop him.

"The time could come," Carey said grimly, "that we'd be glad to see him." He led them a long circle northward to avoid the war parties coming into Barrakesh. Then he struck out across the deadly waste of the sea bottom, straight for Sinharat.

He lost track of time very quickly. The days blurred together into one

endless hell wherein they three and the staggering animals toiled across vast slopes of rock up-tilted to the sun, or crept under reefs of rotten coral with sand around them as smooth and bright as a burning-glass. At night there was moonlight and bitter cold, but the cold did nothing to alleviate their thirst. There was only one good thing about the journey, and that was the thing that worried Carey the most. In all that cruel and empty sky, no flier ever appeared.

"The desert is a big place," Arrin said, looking at it with loathing. "Perhaps he couldn't find us. Perhaps he's given up."

"Not him," said Carey.

Derech said, "Maybe he thinks we're dead anyway, and why bother." Maybe, Carey thought. Maybe. But sometimes as he rode or walked he would curse at Wales out loud and glare at the sky, demanding to know what he was up to. There was never any answer.

The last carefully-hoarded drop of water went. And Carey forgot about Wales and thought only of the well of Sinharat, cold and clear in the coral. He was thinking of it as he plodded along, leading the beast that was now almost as weak as he. The vision of the well so occupied him that it was some little time before the message from his bleared and sun-struck eyes got through it and registered on his brain. Then he halted in sudden wild alarm. He was walking, not on smooth sand, but in the trampled marks of many riders.

IV

The others came out of their stupor as he pointed, warning them to silence. The broad track curved ahead and vanished out of sight beyond a great reef of white coral. The wind had not had time to do more than blur the edges of the individual prints.

Mounting and whipping their beasts unmercifully, Carey and the others fled the track. The reef stood high above them like a wall. Along its base were cavernous holes, and they found one big enough to hold them all. Carey went on alone and on foot to the shoulder of the reef, where the riders had turned it, and the wind went with him, piping and crying in the vast honeycomb of the coral.

He crept around the shoulder and then he saw where he was. On the other side of the reef was a dry lagoon, stretching perhaps half a mile to a coral island that stood up tall in the hard clear sunlight, its naked cliffs beautifully striated with deep rose and white and delicate pink. A noble stairway went up from the desert to a city of walls and towers so perfectly built from many-shaded marble and so softly sculptured by time that it was difficult to tell where the work of men began and ended. Carey saw it through a shimmering haze of exhaustion and wonder, and knew that he looked at Sinharat, the Ever-Living.

The trampled track of the Shunni warriors went out across the lagoon. It swept furiously around what had been a parked flier, and then passed on, leaving behind it battered wreckage and two dark sprawled shapes. It ended at the foot of the cliffs, where Carey could see a sort of orderly turmoil of men and animals. There were between twenty-five and thirty warriors, as nearly as he could guess. They were making camp.

Carey knew what that meant. There was someone in the city. Carey did not move for some time. He stared at the beautiful marble city shimmering on its lovely pedestal of coral. He wanted to weep, but there was not enough moisture left in him to make tears, and his despair was gradually replaced by a feeble anger. All right, you bastards, he thought. All right!

He went back to Derech and Arrin and told them what he had seen.

"Wales just came ahead of us and waited. Why bother to search a whole desert when he knew where we were going? This time he'd have us for sure. Water. We couldn't run away." Carey grinned horribly with his cracked lips and swollen tongue. "Only the Shunni found him first. War party. They must have seen the flier go over--came to check if it landed here. Caught two men in it. But the rest are in Sinharat."

"How do you know?" asked Derech.

"The Shunni won't go into the city except as a last resort. If they catch a trespasser there they just hold the well and wait. Sooner or later he comes down."

Arrin said, "How long can we wait? We've had no water for two days."

"Wait, hell," said Carey. "We can't wait. I'm going in." Now, while they still had a shred of strength. Another day would be too late. Derech said, "I suppose a quick spear is easier than thirst."

"We may escape both," said Carey, "if we're very careful. And very lucky." He told them what to do.

An hour or so later Carey followed the warriors' track out across the dry lagoon. He walked, or rather staggered, leading the animals. Arrin rode on one, her cloak pulled over her head and her face covered in sign of mourning. Between two of the beasts, on an improvised litter made of blankets and pack lashings, Derech lay wrapped from head to foot in his cloak, a too-convincing imitation of a corpse. Carey heard the shouts and saw the distant riders start toward them, and he was frightened. The smallest slip, the most minor mistake, could give them away, and then he did not think that anything on Mars could save them. But thirst was more imperative

than fear. There was something more. Carey passed the two bodies in the sand beside the wrecked flier. He saw that they were both dark-haired Martians, and he looked at the towers of Sinharat with wolfish eyes. Wales was up there, still alive, still between him and what he wanted. Carey's hand tightened on the ax. He was no longer entirely sane on the subject of Howard Wales and the records of the Ramas.

When the riders were within spear range he halted and rested the ax head in the sand, as a token. He waited, saying softly, "For God's sake now, be careful."

The riders reined in, sending the sand flying. Carey said to them, "I claim the death right."

He stood swaying over his ax while they looked at him, and at the muffled woman, and at the dusty corpse. They were six, tall, hard fierce-eyed men with their long spears held ready. Finally one of them said, "How did you come here?"

"My sister's husband." said Carey, indicating Derech, "died on the march to Barrakesh. Our tribal law says he must rest in his own place. But there are no caravans now. We had to come alone, and in a great sandstorm we lost the track. We wandered for many days until we crossed your trail."

"Do you know where you are?" asked the Drylander. Carey averted his eyes from the city. "I know now. But if a man is dying it is permitted to use the well. We are dying."

"Use it, then," said the Drylander. "But keep your ill omen away from our camp. We are going to the war as soon as we finish our business here. We want no corpse-shadow on us."

"Outlanders?" Carey asked, a rhetorical question in view of the flier and the un-Dryland bodies.

"Outlanders. Who else is foolish enough to wake the ghosts in the Forbidden City?"

Carey shook his head. "Not I. I do not wish even to see it." The riders left them, returning to the camp. Carey moved on slowly toward the cliffs. It became apparent where the well must be. A great arching cave-mouth showed in the rose-pink coral and men were coming and going there, watering their animals. Carey approached it and began the monotonous chant that etiquette required, asking that way be made for the dead, so that warriors and pregnant women and persons undergoing ritual purifications would be warned to go aside. The warriors made way. Carey passed out of the cruel sunlight into the shadow of an irregular vaulted passage, quite high and wide, with a floor that sloped upward, at first gently and then steeply, until suddenly the passage ended in an echoing cathedral room dim-lit by torches that picked out here and there the shape of a fantastic flying buttress of coral. In the center of the room, in a kind of broad basin, was the well. Now for the first time Arrin broke her silence with a soft anguished cry. There were seven or eight warriors guarding the well, as Carey had known there would be, but they drew away and let Carey's party severely alone. Several men were in the act of watering their mounts, and as though in deference to taboo Carey circled around to get as far away from them as possible. In the gloom he made out the foot of an age-worn stairway leading upward through the coral. Here he stopped.

He helped Arrin down and made her sit, and then dragged Derech from the litter and laid him on the hard coral. The animals bolted for the well and he made no effort to hold them. He filled one of the bags for Arrin and then he flung himself alongside the beasts and drank

and soaked himself in the beautiful cold clear water. After that he crouched still for a few moments, in a kind of daze, until he remembered that Derech too needed water. He filled two more bags and took them to Arrin, kneeling beside her as though in tender concern as she sat beside her dead. His spread cloak covered what she was doing, holding the water bag to Derech's mouth so that he could drink. Carey spoke softly and quickly. Then he went back to the animals. He began to fight them away from the water so that they should not founder themselves. The activity covered what was going on in the shadows behind them. Carey led them, hissing and stamping, to where Arrin and Derech had been, still using them as a shield in case the guards were watching. He snatched up his ax and the remaining water bag and let the animals go and ran fast as he could up the stairway. It spiraled, and he was stumbling in pitch-darkness around the second curve before the guards below let out a great angry cry. He did not know whether they would follow or not. Somebody fumbled for him in the blackness and Derech's voice muttered something urgent. He could hear Arrin panting like a spent hound. His own knees shook with weakness and he thought what a fine militant crew they were to be taking on Wales and his men and thirty angry Shunni. Torchlight flickered against the turn of the wall below and there was a confusion of voices. They fled upward, pulling each other along, and it seemed that the Shunni reached a point beyond which they did not care to go. The torchlight and the voices vanished. Carey and the others climbed a little farther and then dropped exhausted on the worn treads. Arrin asked, "Why didn't they follow us?"

"Why should they? Our water won't last long. They can wait."

"Yes," said Arrin. And then, "How are we going to get away?" Carey answered, "That depends on Wales."

"I don't understand."

"On whether, and how soon, somebody sends a flier out here to see what happened to him." He patted the water bags. "That's why these are so important. They give us time."

They started up the stair again, treading in the worn hollows made by other feet. The Ramas must have come this way for water for a very long time. Presently a weak daylight filtered down to them. And then a man's voice, tight with panic, cried out somewhere above them, "I hear them! They're coming...."

The voice of Howard Wales answered sharply. "Wait!" Then in English it called down, "Carey. Dr. Carey. Is that you?"

"It is," Carey shouted back.

"Thank Heaven," said Wales. "I saw you, but I wasn't sure.... Come up, man, come up, and welcome. We're all in the same trap now."

V

Sinharat was a city without people, but it was not dead. It had a memory and a voice. The wind gave it breath, and it sang, from the countless tiny organ-pipes of the coral, from the hollow mouths of marble doorways and the narrow throats of streets. The slender towers were like tall flutes, and the wind was never still. Sometimes the voice of Sinharat was soft and gentle, murmuring about everlasting youth and the pleasures thereof. Again it was strong and fierce with pride, crying, You die, but I do not! Sometimes it was mad, laughing and hateful. But always the song was evil. Carey could understand now why Sinharat was taboo. It was not only because of an ancient dread. It was the city itself, now, in the sharp sunlight or

under the gliding moons. It was a small city. There had never been more than perhaps three thousand Ramas, and this remote little island had given them safety and room enough. But they had built close, and high. The streets ran like topless tunnels between the walls and the towers reached impossibly thin and tall into the sky. Some of them had lost their upper stories and some had fallen entirely, but in the main they were still beautiful. The colors of the marble were still lovely. Many of the buildings were perfect and sound, except that wind and time had erased the carvings on their walls so that only in certain angles of light did a shadowy face leap suddenly into being, prideful and mocking with smiling lips, or a procession pass solemnly toward some obliterated worship.

Perhaps it was only the wind and the half-seen watchers that gave Sinharat its feeling of eerie wickedness. Carey did not think so. The Ramas had built something of themselves into their city, and it was rather, he imagined, as one of the Rama women might have been had one met her, graceful and lovely but with something wrong about the eyes. Even the matter-of-fact Howard Wales was uncomfortable in the city, and the three surviving City-State men who were with him went about like dogs with their tails tight to their bellies. Even Derech lost some of his cheerful arrogance, and Arrin never left his side. The feeling was worse inside the buildings. Here were the halls and chambers where the Ramas had lived. Here were the possessions they had handled, the carvings and faded frescoes they had looked at. The ever-young, the Ever-living immortals, the stealers of others' lives, had walked these corridors and seen themselves reflected in the surfaces of polished marble, and Carey's nerves quivered with the nearness of them after all this long time.

There were traces of a day when Sinharat had had an advanced technology equal to, if not greater, than any Carey had yet seen on Mars. The inevitable reversion to the primitive had come with the

exhaustion of resources. There was one rather small room where much wrecked equipment lay in crystal shards and dust, and Carey knew that this was the place where the Ramas had exchanged their old bodies for new. From some of the frescoes, done with brilliantly sadistic humor, he knew that the victims were generally killed soon, but not too soon, after the exchange was completed.

Still he could not find the place where the archives had been kept. Outside, Wales and his men, generally with Derech's help and Arrin as a lookout, were sweating to clear away rubble from the one square that was barely large enough for a flier to land in. Wales had been in contact with Kahora before the unexpected attack. They knew where he was, and when there had been too long a time without a report from him they would certainly come looking. If they had a landing place cleared by then, and the scanty water supply, severely rationed, kept them alive, and the Shunni did not become impatient, they would be all right.

"Only," Carey told them, "if that flier does come, be ready to jump quick. Because the Shunni will attack then."

He had not had any trouble with Howard Wales. He had expected it. He had come up the last of the stairway with his ax ready. Wales shook his head. "I have a heavy-duty shocker," he said. "Even so, I wouldn't care to take you on. You can put down the ax, Dr. Carey."

The Martians were armed too. Carey knew they could have taken him easily. Perhaps they were saving their charges against the Shunni, who played the game of war for keeps.

Carey said, "I will do what I came here to do." Wales shrugged. "My assignment was to bring you in. I take it there won't be any more trouble about that now--if any of us get out of here. Incidentally, I saw what was happening at Barrakesh, and I can testify that you could not

possibly have had any part in it. I'm positive that some of my superiors are thundering asses, but that's nothing new, either. So go ahead. I won't hinder you."

* * *

Carey had gone ahead, on a minimum of water, sleep, and the dry desert rations he had in his belt-pouch. Two and a half days were gone, and the taste of defeat was getting stronger in his mouth by the hour. Time was getting short, no one could say how short. And then almost casually he crawled over a great fallen block of marble into a long room with rows of vault doors on either side, and a hot wave of excitement burned away his weariness. The bars of beautiful rustless alloy slid easily under his hands. And he was dazed at the treasure of knowledge that he had found, tortured by the realization that he could only take a fraction of it with him and might well never see the rest of it again.

The Ramas had arranged their massive archives according to a simple and orderly dating system. It did not take him long to find the records he wanted, but even that little time was almost too much.

Derech came shouting after him. Carey closed the vault he was in and scrambled back over the fallen block, clutching the precious spools. "Flier!" Derech kept saying. "Hurry!" Carey could hear the distant cries of the Shunni. He ran with Derech and the cries came closer. The warriors had seen the flier too and now they knew that they must come into the city. Carey raced through the narrow twisting street that led to the square. When he came into it he could see the flier hanging on its rotors about thirty feet overhead, very ginger about coming down in that cramped space. Wales and the Martians were frantically waving. The Shunni came in two waves, one from the well-stair and one up the cliffs. Carey picked up his ax. The shockers began to crackle. He hoped they would hold the Drylanders off

because he did not want to have to kill anyone, and he particularly did not want to get killed, not right now.

"Get to the flier!" Wales yelled at him, and he saw that it was just settling down, making a great wind and dust. The warriors in the forefront of the attack were dropping or staggering as the stunning charges hit them, sparking off their metal ornaments and the tips of their spears. The first charge was broken up, but no one wanted to stay for the second. Derech had Arrin and was lifting her bodily into the flier. Hands reached out and voices shouted unnecessary pleas for haste. Carey threw away his ax and jumped for the hatch. The Martians crowded in on top of him and then Wales, and the pilot took off so abruptly that Wales' legs were left dangling outside. Carey caught him and pulled him in. Wales laughed, in an odd wild way, and the flier rose up among the towers of Sinharat in a rattle of flung spears.

The technicians had had trouble regearing their equipment to the Rama microtapes. The results were still far from perfect, but the United Worlds Planetary Assistance Committee, hastily assembled at Kahora, were not interested in perfection. They were Alan Woodthorpe's superiors, and they had a decision to make, and little time in which to make it. The great tide was beginning to roll north out of the Drylands, moving at the steady marching pace of the desert beasts. And Woodthorpe could no longer blame this all on Carey.

Looking subdued and rather frightened, Woodthorpe sat beside Carey in the chamber where the hearing was being held. Derech was there, and Wales, and some high brass from the City-States who were getting afraid for their borders, and two Dryland chiefs who knew Carey as Carey, not as a tribesman, and trusted him enough to come in. Carey thought bitterly that this hearing should have been held long ago. Only the Committee had not understood the potential

seriousness of the situation. They had been told, plainly and often. But they had preferred to believe experts like Woodthorpe rather than men like Carey, who had some specialized knowledge but were not trained to evaluate the undertaking as a whole.

Now in a more chastened mood they watched as Carey's tapes went whispering through the projectors.

They saw an island city in a blue sea. People moved in its streets. There were ships in its harbors and the sounds of life. Only the sea had shrunk down from the tops of the coral cliffs. The lagoon was a shallow lake wide-rimmed with beaches, and the outer reef stood bare above a feeble surf. A man's voice spoke in the ancient High Martian, somewhat distorted by the reproduction and blurred by the voice of a translator speaking Esperanto. Carey shut his ears to everything but the voice, the man, who spoke across the years.

"Nature grins at us these days, reminding us that even planets die. We, who have loved life so much that we have taken the lives of countless others in order to retain it, can now see the beginning of our inevitable end. Even though this may yet be thousands of years in the future, the thought of it has had strange effects. For the first time some of our people are voluntarily choosing death. Others demand younger and younger hosts, and change them constantly. Most of us have come to have some feeling of remorse, not for our immortality but for the method by which we achieved it.

"One murder can be remembered and regretted. Ten thousand murders become as meaningless as ten thousand love affairs or ten thousand games of chess. Time and repetition grind them all to the same dust. Yet now we do regret, and a naive passion has come to us, a passion to be forgiven, if not by our victims then perhaps by ourselves.

"Thus our great project is undertaken. The people of Kharif, because their coasts are accessible and their young people exceptionally handsome and sturdy, have suffered more from us than any other single nation. We will try to make some restitution."

The scene shifted from Sinharat to a desolated stretch of desert coastline beside the shrunken sea. The land had once been populous. There were the remains of cities and towns, connected by paved roads. There had been factories and power stations, all the appurtenances of an advanced technology. These were now rusting away, and the wind blew ochre dust to bury them.

"For a hundred years," said the Rama voice, "it has not rained." There was an oasis, with wells of good water. Tall brown-haired men and women worked the well-sweeps, irrigating fields of considerable extent. There was a village of neat huts, housing perhaps a thousand people.

"Mother Mars has killed far more of her children than we. The fortunate survivors live in 'cities' like these. The less fortunate..." A long line of beasts and hooded human shapes moved across a bitter wasteland. And the Dryland chiefs cried out, "Our people!"

"We will give them water again." said the Rama voice. The spool ended. In the brief interval before the next one began, Woodthorpe coughed uneasily and muttered, "This was all long ago, Carey. The winds of change..."

"Are blowing up a real storm, Woodthorpe. You'll see why." The tapes began again. A huge plant now stood at the edge of the sea, distilling fresh water from the salt. A settlement had sprung up beside it, with fields and plantations of young trees.

"It has gone well," said the Rama voice. "It will go better with time, for

their short generations move quickly."

The settlement became a city. The population grew, spread, built more cities, planted more crops. The land flourished.

"Many thousands live," the Rama said, "who would otherwise not have been born. We have repaid our murders."

The spool ended.

Woodthorpe said, "But we're not trying to atone for anything. We..."

"If my house burns down," said Carey, "I do not greatly care whether it was by a stroke of lightning, deliberate arson, or a child playing with matches. The end result is the same."

The third spool began.

A different voice spoke now. Carey wondered if the owner of the first had chosen death himself, or simply lacked the heart to go on with the record. The distilling plant was wearing out and metals for repair were poor and difficult to find. The solar batteries could not be replaced. The stream of water dwindled. Crops died. There was famine and panic, and then the pumps stopped altogether and the cities were stranded like the hulks of ships in dry harbors.

The Rama voice said, "These are the consequences of the one kind act we have ever done. Now these thousands that we called into life must die as their forebears did. The cruel laws of survival that we caused them to forget are all to be learned again. They had suffered once, and mastered it, and were content. Now there is nothing we can do to help. We can only stand and watch."

"Shut it off," said Woodthorpe.

"No," said Carey, "see it out."

They saw it out.

"Now," said Carey, "I will remind you that Kharif was the homeland from which most of the Drylands were settled." He was speaking to the Committee more than to Woodthorpe. "These so-called primitives have been through all this before, and they have long memories. Their tribal legends are explicit about what happened to them the last time they put their trust in the transitory works of men. Now can you understand why they're so determined to fight?" Woodthorpe looked at the disturbed and frowning faces of the Committee. "But," he said, "it wouldn't be like that now. Our resources...."

"Are millions of miles away on other planets. How long can you guarantee to keep your pumps working? And the Ramas at least had left the natural water sources for the survivors to go back to. You want to destroy those so they would have nothing." Carey glanced at the men from the City-States. "The City-States would pay the price for that. They have the best of what there is, and with a large population about to die of famine and thirst..." He shrugged, and then went on, "There are other ways to help. Food and medicines. Education, to enable the young people to look for greener pastures in other places, if they wish to. In the meantime, there is an army on the move. You have the power to stop it. You've heard all there is to be said. Now the chiefs are waiting to hear what you will say."

The Chairman of the Committee conferred with the members. The conference was quite brief.

"Tell the chiefs," the Chairman said, "that it is not our intent to create wars. Tell them to go in peace. Tell them the Rehabilitation Project for Mars is canceled."

The great tide rolled slowly back into the Drylands and dispersed. Carey went through a perfunctory hearing on his activities, took his reprimand and dismissal with a light heart, shook hands with Howard Wales, and went back to Jekkara, to drink with Derech and walk beside the Low Canal that would be there now for whatever ages were left to it in the slow course of a planet's dying.

And this was good. But at the end of the canal was Barrakesh, and the southward-moving caravans, and the long road to Sinharat. Carey thought of the vaults beyond the fallen block of marble, and he knew that someday he would walk that road again.

Shannach--The Last

I

It was dark in the caves under Mercury. It was hot, and there was no sound in them but the slow plodding of Trevor's heavy boots.

Trevor had been wandering for a long time, lost in this labyrinth where no human being had ever gone before. And Trevor was an angry man. Through no fault or will of his own he was about to die, and he was not ready to die. Moreover, it seemed a wicked thing to come to his final moment here in the stifling dark, buried under alien mountains high as Everest. He wished now that he had stayed in the valley. Hunger and thirst would have done for him just the same, but at least he would have died in the open like a man, and not like a rat trapped in a drain.

Yet there was not really much to choose between them as a decent place to die. A barren little hell-hole the valley had been, even before the quake, with nothing to draw a man there except the hope of finding sun-stones, one or two of which could transform a prospector into a plutocrat. Trevor had found no sun-stones. The quake had brought down a whole mountain wall on his ship, leaving him with a pocket torch, a handful of food tablets, a canteen of water, and the scant clothing he stood in. He had looked at the naked rocks, and the little river frothing green with chemical poisons, and he had gone away into the tunnels, the ancient blowholes of a cooling planet, gambling that he might find a way out of the valleys. Mercury's Twilight Belt is cut into thousands of cliff-locked pockets, as a honeycomb is cut into cells. There is no way over the mountains, for the atmosphere is shallow, and the jagged peaks stand up into airless space. Trevor knew that only one more such pocket lay

between him and the open plains. If he could get to and through that last pocket, he had thought... But he knew now that he was not going to make it.

He was stripped to the skin already, in the terrible heat. When the weight of his miner's boots became too much to drag, he shed them padding on over the rough rock with bare feet. He had nothing left now but the torch. When the light went, his last hope went with it.

After a while it went.

The utter blackness of the grave shut down. Trevor stood still, listening to the pulse of his own blood in the silence, looking at that which no man needs a light to see. Then he flung the torch away and stumbled on, driven to fight still by the terror which was greater than his weakness. Twice he struck against the twisting walls, and fell, and struggled up again. The third time he remained on hands and knees, and crawled. He crept on, a tiny creature entombed in the bowels of a planet. The bore grew smaller and smaller, tightening around him. From time to time he lost consciousness, and it became increasingly painful to struggle back to an awareness of the heat and the silence and the pressing rock. After one of these periods of oblivion he began to hear a dull, steady thunder. He could no longer crawl. The bore had shrunk to a mere crack, barely large enough for him to pass through worm-like on his belly. He sensed now a deep, shuddering vibration in the rock. It grew stronger, terrifying in that enclosed space. Steam slipped wraithlike into the smothering air. The roar and the vibration grew to an unendurable pitch. Trevor was near to strangling in the steam. He was afraid to go on, but there was no other way to go. Quite suddenly his hands went out into nothingness. The rock at the lip of the bore must have been rotten with erosion. It gave under his weight and pitched him headfirst into a thundering rush of water that was blistering hot and going somewhere in a great

hurry through the dark. After that Trevor was not sure of anything. There was the scalding heat and the struggle to keep his head up and the terrible speed of the sub-Mercurian river racing on to its destiny. He struck rock several times, and once he held his breath for a whole eternity until the roof of the tunnel rose up again. He was only dimly aware of a long sliding fall downward through a sudden brightness. It was much cooler. He splashed feebly, because his brain had not told his body to stop, and the water did not fight him. His feet and hands struck solid bottom. He floundered on, and presently the water was gone. He made one attempt to rise. After that he lay still. The great mountains leaned away from the Sun. Night came, and with it violent storm and rain. Trevor did not know it. He slept, and when he woke the savage dawn was making the high cliffs flame with white light. Something was screaming above his head.

Aching and leaden still with exhaustion, he roused up and looked about him. He sat on a beach of pale gray sand. At his feet were the shallows of a gray-green lake that filled a stony basin some half-mile in breadth. To his left the underground river poured out of the cliff-face, spreading into a wide, riffling fan of foam. Off to his right, the water spilled over the rim of the basin to become a river again somewhere below, and beyond the rim, veiled in mist and the shadow of a mountain wall, was a valley. Behind him, crowding to the edge of the sand, were trees and ferns and flowers, alien in shape and color but triumphantly alive. And from what he could see of it, the broad valley was green and riotous with growth. The water was pure, the air had a good smell, and it came to Trevor that he had made it. He was going to live a while longer, after all.

Forgetting his weariness, he sprang up, and the thing that had hissed and screamed above him swooped down and passed the claw tip of a leathery wing so close to his face that it nearly gashed him. He stumbled backward, crying out, and the creature rose in a soaring

spiral and swooped again. Trevor saw a sort of flying lizard, jet black except for a saffron belly. He raised his arms to ward it off, but it did not attack him, and as it swept by he saw something that woke in him amazement, greed, and a peculiarly unpleasant chill of fear.

Around its neck the lizard-thing wore a golden collar. And set into the scaly flesh of its head--into the bone itself, it seemed--was a sun-stone. There was no mistaking that small vicious flash of radiance. Trevor had dreamed of sun-stones too long to be misled. He watched the creature rise again into the steamy sky and shivered, wondering who, or what, had set that priceless thing into the skull of a flying lizard--and why.

It was the why that bothered him the most. Sun-stones are not mere adornments for wealthy ladies. They are rare, radioactive crystals, having a half-life one third greater than radium, and are used exclusively in the construction of delicate electronic devices dealing with frequencies above the first octave. Most of that relatively unexplored superspectrum was still a mystery. And the strangely jeweled and collared creature circling above him filled Trevor with a vast unease.

It was not hunting. It did not wish to kill him. But it made no move to go away.

From far down the valley, muted by distance to a solemn bell note that rolled between the cliffs, Trevor heard the booming of a great song. A sudden desire for concealment sent him in among the trees. He worked his way along the shore of the lake. Looking up through the branches he saw the black wings lift and turn, following him.

The lizard was watching him with its bright, sharp eyes. It noted the path of his movements through the ferns and flowers, as a hawk watches a rabbit. He reached the lip of the basin where the water

poured over in a cataract several hundred feet high. Climbing around the shoulder of a rocky bastion, Trevor had his first clear look at the valley.

Much of it was still vague with mist. But it was broad and deep, with a sweep of level plain and clumps of forest, locked tight between the barrier mountains. And as he made out other details, Trevor's astonishment grew out of all measure.

The land was under cultivation. There were clusters of thatched huts among the fields, and in the distance was a rock-built city, immense and unmistakable in the burning haze of dawn.

Trevor crouched there, staring, and the winged lizard swung in lazy circles, watching, waiting, while he tried to think.

A fertile valley such as this was rare enough in itself. But to find fields and a city was beyond belief. He had seen the aboriginal tribes that haunt some of the cliff-locked worlds of the Twilight Belt—sub-human peoples who live precariously among the bitter rocks and boiling springs, hunting the great lizards for food. None of this was ever built by them. Unless, in this environment, they had advanced beyond the Age of Stone... The gong sounded again its deep challenging note. Trevor saw the tiny figures of mounted men, no larger than ants at that distance, come down from the city and ride out across the plain.

Relief and joy supplanted speculation in Trevor's mind. He was battered and starving, lost on an alien world, and anything remotely approaching the human and the civilized was better luck than he could have dreamed or prayed for. Besides, there were sun-stones in this place. He looked hungrily at the head of the circling watcher, and then began to scramble down the broken outer face of the bastion.

The black wings slipped silently after him down the sky. About a

hundred feet above the valley floor he came to an overhang. There was no way past it but to jump. He clung to a bush and let himself down as far as he could, and then dropped some four or five yards to a slope of springy turf. The fall knocked the wind out of him, and as he lay gasping a chill doubt crept into his mind.

He could see the land quite clearly now, the pattern of the fields, the far-off city. Except for the group of riders, nothing stirred. The fields, the plain were empty of men, the little villages still as death. And he saw, swinging lazily above a belt of trees by the river, a second black-winged shadow, watching.

The trees were not far away. The riders were coming toward them and him. It seemed to Trevor now that the men were perhaps a party of hunters, but there was something alarming about the utter disappearance of all other life. It was as though the gong had been a warning for all to take cover while the hunt was abroad.

The sharp-eyed lizards were the hounds that went before to find and flush the game. Glancing up at the ominous sentinel above his own head, Trevor had a great desire to see what the quarry was that hid in the belt of trees. There was no way back to the partial security of the lake basin. The overhang cut him off from that. The futility of trying to hide was apparent, but nevertheless he wormed in among some crimson ferns. The city was at his left. To the right, the fertile plain washed out into a badland of lava and shattered rock, which narrowed and vanished around a shoulder of purple basalt. This defile was still in deep shadow.

The riders were still far away. He saw them splash across a ford, toy figures making little bursts of spray.

The watcher above the trees darted suddenly downward. The quarry was breaking cover.

Trevor's suspicions crystallized into an ugly certainty. Horror-struck, he watched the bronzed, half-naked figure of a girl emerge from the brilliant undergrowth and run like an antelope toward the badland. The flying lizard rose, swooped, and struck.

The girl flung herself aside. She carried a length of sapling bound with great thorns, and she lashed out with it at the black brute, grazed it, and ran on. The lizard circled and came at her again from behind. She turned. There was a moment of vicious confusion, in which the leathery wings enveloped her in a kind of dreadful cloak, and then she was running again, but less swiftly, and Trevor could see the redness of blood on her body.

And again the flying demon came.

The thing was trying to head her, turn her back toward the huntsmen. But she would not be turned. She beat with her club at the lizard, and ran, and fell, and ran again. And Trevor knew that she was beaten. The brute would have the life out of her before she reached the rocks.

Every dictate of prudence told Trevor to stay out of this. Whatever was going on was obviously the custom of the country, and none of his business. All he wanted was to get hold of one of these sun-stones and then find a way out of this valley. That was going to be trouble enough without taking on any more. But prudence was swept away in the fury that rose in him as he saw the hawk swoop down again, with its claws outspread and hungry for the girl's tormented flesh. He sprang up, shouting to her to fight, to hang on, and went running full speed down the slope toward her.

She turned upon him a face of such wild, fierce beauty as he had never seen, the eyes dark and startled and full of a terrible determination. Then she screamed at him, in his own tongue, "Look

out!" He had forgotten his own nemesis. Black wings, claws, the lash of a scaly tail striking like a whip, and Trevor went down, rolling over and staining the turf red as he rolled.

From far off he heard the voices of the huntsmen, shrill and strident, lifted in a wild halloo.

2

For some reason the assault steadied Trevor. He got to his feet and took the club out of the girl's hands, regretting the gun that was buried under a ton of rock on the other side of the mountains.

"Keep behind me," he said. "Watch my back." She stared at him strangely, but there was no time for questions. They began to run together toward the badland. It seemed a long way off. The lizards screamed and hissed above them. Trevor hefted the club. It was about the size and weight of a baseball bat. He had once been very good at baseball.

"They're coming," said the girl.

"Lie down flat," he told her, and went on, more slowly. She dropped behind him in the grass, her fingers closing over a fragment of stone. The wide wings whistled down.

Trevor braced himself. He could see the evil eyes, yellow and bright as the golden collars, and the brilliant flash of the sun-stones against the jetty scales of the head. They were attacking together, but at different angles, so that he could not face them both.

He chose the one that was going to reach him first, and waited. He let it get close, very close, diving swiftly with its scarlet tongue forking out

of its hissing mouth and its sharp claws spread. Then he swung the club with all his might.

It connected. He felt something break. The creature screamed, and then the force of its dive carried it on into him and he lost his footing in a welter of thrashing wings and floundering body. He fell, and the second lizard was on him.

The girl rose. In three long strides she reached him and flung herself upon the back of the scaly thing that ravaged him. He saw her trying to pin it to the ground, hammering methodically at its head with the stone. He kicked off the wounded one. He had broken its neck, but it was in no hurry to die. He caught up the club and presently the second brute was dead. Trevor found it quite easy to pick up the sun-stone.

He held it in his hand, a strange, tawny, jewel-like thing, with a scrap of bone still clinging to it. It glinted with inner fires, deep and subtle, and an answering spark of wild excitement was kindled in Trevor from the very touch and feel of it, so that he forgot where he was or what he was doing, forgot everything but the eerie crystal that gleamed against his palm. It was more than a jewel, more even than wealth, that he held there. It was hope and success and a new life.

He had thrown years away prospecting the bitter Mercurian wastes. This trip had been his last gamble, and it had ended with his ship gone, his quest finished, and nothing to look forward to even if he did get back safely, but to become one of the penniless, aging planet-drifters he'd always pitied. Now all that was changed. This single stone would let him go back to Earth a winner and not a failure. It would pay off all the dreary, lonesome, hazardous years. It would...

It would do so many things if he could get out of this Godforsaken valley with it! If!

The girl had got her breath again. Now she said urgently, "Come! They're getting near!"

Trevor's senses, bemused by the sun-stone, registered only vaguely the external stimuli of sight and sound. The riders had come closer. The beasts they rode were taller and slighter than horses. They were not hoofed, but clawed. They had narrow, vicious-looking heads with spiny crests that stood up erect and arrogant. They came fast, carrying their riders lightly. The men were still too far away to distinguish features, but even at that distance Trevor sensed something peculiar about their faces, something unnatural. They wore splendid harness, and their half-clad bodies were bronzed, but not nearly so deeply as the girl's.

The girl shook him furiously, stirring him out of his dream. "Do you want to be taken alive? Before, the beasts would have torn us apart, and that is quickly over. But we killed the hawks, don't you understand? Now they will take us alive!"

He did not understand in the least, but her obvious preference for a very nasty death instead of capture made him find reserves of strength he thought he had lost in the underground river. There was also the matter of the sun-stone. If they caught him with it they would want it back. Clutching the precious thing he turned with the girl and ran. The lava bed was beginning to catch the sun now. The splintered rock showed through, bleak and ugly. The badland and the defile beyond seemed like an entrance into hell, but it did offer shelter of a sort if they could make it. The drumming of padded feet behind was loud in his ears. He glanced over his shoulder, once. He could see the faces of the huntsmen now. They were not good faces, in either feature or expression, and he saw the thing about them that he had noticed before, the unnatural thing.

In the center of each forehead, above the eyes, a sun-stone was set into flesh and bone.

First the hawk-lizards, and now these...

Trevor's heart contracted with an icy pang. These men were human, as human as himself, and yet they were not. They were alien and wicked and altogether terrifying, and he began to understand why the girl did not wish to come alive into their hands.

Fleet, implacable, the crested mounts with their strange riders were sweeping in upon the two who fled. The leader took from about his saddle a curved throwing stick and held it, poised. The sun-stone set in his brow flashed like a third, and evil eye.

The lava and the fangs of rock shimmered in the light. Trevor yearned toward them. The brown girl running before him seemed to shimmer also. It hurt very much to breathe. He thought he could not go any farther. But he did, and when the girl faltered he put his arm around her and steadied her on. He continued to keep an eye out behind him. He saw the curved stick come hurtling toward him and he managed to let it go by. The others were ready now as they came within range. It seemed to Trevor that they were watching him with a peculiar intensity, as though they had recognized him as a stranger and had almost forgotten the girl in their desire to take him. His bare feet trod on lava already growing hot under the sun. A spur of basalt reared up and made a shield against the throwing sticks. In a minute or two Trevor and the girl were hidden in a terrain of such broken roughness as the man had seldom seen. It was as though some demoniac giant had whipped the molten lava with a pudding-spoon, cracking mountains with his free hand and tossing in the pieces. He understood now why the girl had waited for daylight to make her break. To attempt this passage in the dark would be suicidal. He listened nervously for sounds of pursuit. He could not hear any, but he

remained uneasy, and when the girl flung herself down to rest, he asked,

"Shouldn't we go farther? They might still come." She did not answer him at once, beyond a shake of the head. He realized that she was looking at him almost as intently as the riders had. It was the first chance she had had to examine him, and she was making the most of it. She noted the cut of his hair, the stubble of beard, the color and texture of his skin, the rags of his shorts that were all he had to cover him. Very carefully she noted them, and then she said in an odd slow voice, as though she were thinking of something else,

"Mounted, the Korins are afraid of nothing. But afoot, and in here, they are afraid of ambush. It has happened before. They can die, you know, just the same as we do."

Her face, for all its youth, was not the face of a girl. It was a woman who looked at Trevor, a woman who had already learned the happy, the passionate, and the bitter things, who had lived with pain and fear and knew better than to trust anyone but herself.

"You aren't one of us," she said.

"No. I came from beyond the mountains." He could not tell whether she believed him or not. "Who, or what, are the Korins?"

"The lords of Korith," she answered, and began to tear strips from the length of white linen cloth she wore twisted about her waist. "There will be time to talk later. We still have far to go. Here, this will stop the bleeding." In silence they bound each other's wounds and started off again. If Trevor had not been so unutterably weary, and the way so hard, he would have been angry with the girl. And yet there was nothing really to be angry about except that he sensed she was somehow suspicious of him.

Many times they had to stop and rest. Once he asked her, "Why were they--the Korins--hunting you?"

"I was running away. Why were they hunting you?"

"Damned if I know. Accident, perhaps. I happened to be where their hawks were flying."

The girl wore a chain of iron links around her neck, a solid chain with no clasp, too small to be pulled over the head. From it hung a round tag with a word stamped on it. Trevor took the tag in his hand.

"Galt," he read. "Is that your name?"

"My name is Jen. Galt is the Korin I belong to. He led the hunt." She gave Trevor a look of fierce and challenging pride and said, as though she were revealing a secret earldom, "I am a slave."

"How long have you been in the valley, Jen? You and I are the same stock, speaking the same language. Earth stock. How does it happen, a colony of this size that no one ever heard of?"

"It's been nearly three hundred years since the Landing," she answered. "I have been told that for generations my people kept alive the hope that a ship would come from Earth and release them from the Korins. It never came. And, except by ship, there is no way in or out of the valley." Trevor glanced at her sharply. "I found a way in, all right, and I'm beginning to wish I hadn't. And if there's no way out, where are we going?"

"I don't know myself," said Jen, and rose. "But my man came this way, and others before him."

She went on, and Trevor went with her. There was no place else to

go. The heat was unbearable, and they crept in the shadows of the rocks wherever they could. They suffered from thirst, but there was no water. The shoulder of purple basalt loomed impossibly tall before them, and seemed never to grow nearer.

For most of the day they toiled across the lava bed, and at last, when they had almost forgotten that they had ever dreamed of doing it, they rounded the shoulder and came staggering out of the badland into a narrow canyon that seemed like the scar of some cataclysmic wound in the mountain. Rock walls, raw and riven, rose out of sight on either side, the twisted strata showing streaks of crimson and white and sullen ochre. A little stream crawled in a stony bed, and not much grew beside it.

Jen and Trevor fell by the stream. And while they were still sprawled on the moist gravel, lapping like dogs at the bitter water, men came quietly from among the rocks and stood above them, holding weapons made of stone. Trevor got slowly to his feet. There were six of these armed men. Like the girl, they wore loin cloths of white cotton, much frayed, and like her they were burned almost black by a lifetime of exposure to a brutal sun. They were all young, knotted and sinewy from hard labor, their faces grim beyond their years. All bore upon their bodies the scars of talons. And they looked at Trevor with a cold, strange look.

They knew Jen, or most of them did. She called them gladly by name, and demanded, "Hugh. Where is Hugh?"

One of them nodded toward the farther wall. "Up there in the caves. He's all right. Who is this man, Jen?"

She turned to study Trevor.

"I don't know. They were hunting him, too. He came to help me. I

couldn't have escaped without him. He killed the hawks. But..." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "He says he came from beyond the mountains. He knows of Earth and speaks our tongue. And when he killed the hawks he smashed the skull of one and took the sun-stone."

All six started at that. And the tallest of them, a young man with a face as bleak and craggy as the rocks around them, came toward Trevor.

"Why did you take the sun-stone?" he asked. His voice held an ugly edge. Trevor stared at him. "Why the devil do you suppose? Because it's valuable." The man held out his hand. "Give it to me."

"The hell I will!" cried Trevor furiously. He backed away, just a little, getting set.

The young man came on, and his face was dark and dangerous.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen.

Saul didn't wait. He kept right on coming. Trevor let him get close before he swung, and he put every ounce of his strength behind the blow. The smashing fist took Saul squarely in the belly and sent him backward, doubled up. Trevor stood with hunched shoulders, breathing hard, watching the others with feral eyes.

"What are you?" he snarled. "A bunch of thieves? All right, come on! I got that stone the hard way and I'm going to keep it!" Big words. A big anger. And a big fear behind them. The men were around him in a ring now. There was no chance of breaking away. Even if he did he was so winded they could pull him down in minutes. The stone weighed heavy in his pocket, heavy as half a lifetime of sweat and hunger and hard work, on the rockpiles of Mercury.

Saul straightened up. His face was still gray, but he bent again and picked up a sharp-pointed implement of rock that he had dropped. Then he moved forward. And the others closed in, at the same time, quite silently. There was a bitter taste in Trevor's mouth as he waited for them. To get his hands on a sun-stone at last, and then to lose it and probably his life too, to this crowd of savages! It was more than anybody ought to be asked to bear.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen again, pushing in front of him. "He saved my life! You can't just..."

"He's a Korin. A spy."

"He can't be! There's no stone in his forehead. Not even a scar." Saul's voice was flat and relentless. "He took a sun-stone. Only a Korin would touch one of the cursed things."

"But he says he's from outside the valley! From Earth, Saul. From Earth!

Things would be different there."

Jen's insistence on that point had at least halted the men temporarily. And Trevor, looking at Saul's face, had suddenly begun to understand something.

"You think the sun-stones are evil," he said. Saul gave him a somber glance. "They are. And the one you have is going to be destroyed. Now."

Trevor swallowed the bitter anguish that choked him, and did some fast thinking. If the sun-stones had a superstitious significance in this benighted pocket of Mercury--and he could imagine why they might, with those damned unnatural hawks flying around with the equally

unnatural Korins--that put a different light on their attitude.

He knew just by looking at their faces that it was "give them the sun-stone or die." Dying at the hands of a bunch of wild fanatics didn't make sense. Better let them have the stone and gamble on getting it back again later. Or on getting another one. They seemed plentiful enough in the valley!

Sure, let's be sensible about it. Let's hand over a lifetime of hoping to a savage with horny palms, and not worry about it. Let's... Oh, hell.

"Here," he said. "All right. Take it." It hurt. It hurt like giving up his own heart.

Saul took it without thanks. He turned and laid it on a flat surface of rock, and began to pound the glinting crystal with the heavy stone he had meant to use on Trevor's head. There was a look on his lined, young, craggy face as though he was killing a living thing--a thing that he feared and hated. Trevor shivered. He knew that sun-stones were impervious to anything but atomic bombardment. But it made him a little sick, none the less, to see that priceless object being battered by a crude stone club.

"It won't break," he said. "You might as well stop." Saul flung down his weapon so close to Trevor's bare feet that he leaped back. Then he picked up the sun-stone and hurled it as far as he could across the ravine. Trevor heard it clicking faintly as it fell, in among the rocks and rubble at the foot of the opposite cliff. He strained to mark the spot.

"You idiot!" he said to Saul. "You've thrown away a fortune. The fortune I've spent my life trying to find. What's the matter with you? Don't you have any idea at all what those things are worth?"

Saul ignored him, speaking bleakly to the others. "No man with a sun-

stone is to be trusted. I say kill him."

Jen said stubbornly, "No, Saul. I owe him my life."

"But he could be a slave, a traitor, working for the Korins."

"Look at his clothes," said Jen. "Look at his skin. This morning it was white, now it's red. Did you ever see a slave that color? Or a Korin, either. Besides, did you ever see him in the valley before? There aren't as many of us as that."

"We can't take any chances," Saul said. "Not us."

"You can always kill him later. But if he is from beyond the mountains, perhaps even from Earth--" She said the word hesitantly, as though she did not quite believe there was such a place. "He might know some of the things we've been made to forget. He might help us. Anyway, the others have a right to their say before you kill him."

Saul shook his head. "I don't like it. But--" He hesitated, scowling thoughtfully. "All right. We'll settle it up in the cave. Let's move." He said to Trevor, "You go in the middle of us. And if you try to signal anyone..."

"Who the devil would I signal to?" retorted Trevor angrily. "Listen, I'm sorry I ever got into your bloody valley."

But he was not sorry. Not quite.

His senses were on the alert to mark every twist and turn of the way they went, the way that would bring him back to the sun-stone. The ravine narrowed and widened and twisted, but there was only one negotiable path, and that was beside the stream bed. This went on for some distance, and then the ravine split on a tremendous cliff of

bare rock that tilted up and back as though arrested in the act of falling over. The stream flowed from the left-hand fork. Saul took the other one.

They kept close watch on Trevor as he slipped and clambered and sprawled along with them. The detritus of the primeval cataclysm that had shaped this crack in the mountains lay where it had fallen, growing rougher and more dangerous with every eroding storm and cracking frost.

Above him, on both sides, the mountain tops went up and still up, beyond the shallow atmosphere. Their half-seen summits leaned and quivered like things glimpsed from under water, lit like torches by the naked blaze of the sun. There were ledges, lower down. Trevor saw men crouched upon them, among heaps of piled stones. They shouted, and Saul answered them. In this narrow throat no man could get through alive if they chose to stop him. After a while they left the floor of the ravine and climbed a path, partly natural and partly so roughly hewn that it seemed natural. It angled steeply up the cliff-face, and at its end was a narrow hole. Saul led the way through it. In single file the others followed, and Trevor heard Jen's voice echoing in some great hollow space beyond, calling Hugh.

There was a cave inside, a very large cave with dim nooks and crannies around its edges. Shafts of sunlight pierced it here and there from cracks in the cliff-face high above, and far at the back of it, where the floor tipped sharply down, a flame burned. Trevor had seen flames like that before on Mercury, where volcanic gases blowing up through a fissure had ignited from some chance spark. It was impressive, a small bluish column twisting upward into rock-curtained distance and roaring evilly. He could feel the air rush past him as the burning pillar sucked it in.

There were people in the cave. Less than a hundred, Trevor thought,

not counting a handful of children and striplings. Less than a third of those were women. They all bore the same unmistakable stamp. Hard as life must be for them in the cave, it had been harder before.

He felt his legs buckling under him with sheer weariness. He stood groggily with his back against the rough cave wall.

A stocky young man with knotted shoulder-muscles and sun-bleached hair was holding Jen in his arms. That would be Hugh. He, and the others, were shouting excitedly, asking and answering questions.

Then, one by one, they caught sight of Trevor. And gradually a silence grew and spread.

"All right," said Saul harshly, looking at Trevor. "Let's get this settled."

"You settle it," said Trevor. "I'm tired." He glared at Saul and the unfriendly staring crowd, and they seemed to rock in his vision. "I'm an Earthman. I didn't want to come into your damned valley, and I've been here a night and a day and haven't slept. I'm going to sleep." Saul started to speak again but Jen's man, Hugh, came up and stood in front of him.

"He saved Jen's life," Hugh said. "Let him sleep." He led Trevor away to a place at the side where there were heaps of dried vines and mountain creepers, prickly and full of dust but softer than the cave floor. Trevor managed a few vague words of thanks and was asleep before they were out of his mouth.

Hours, weeks, or perhaps it was only minutes later, a rough persistent shaking brought him to again. Faces bent over him. He saw them through a haze, and the questions they asked penetrated to him slowly, and without much meaning.

"Why did you want the sun-stone?"

"Why wouldn't I want it? I could take it back to Earth and sell it for a fortune."

"What do they do with sun-stones on Earth?"

"Build gadgets, super-electronic, to study things. Wave-lengths too short for anything else to pick up. Thought-waves, even. What do you care?"

"Do they wear sun-stones in their foreheads, on Earth?"

"No..." His voice trailed off, and the voices, or the dream of voices, left him.

It was still daylight when he woke, this time normally. He sat up, feeling stiff and sore but otherwise rested. Jen came to him, smiling, and thrust a chunk of what he recognized as some species of rock-lizard into his hands. He gnawed at it wolfishly while she talked, having discovered that this was not the same day, but the next one, and quite late.

"They have decided," she said, "to let you live."

"I imagine you had a lot to do with that. Thanks." She shrugged her bare shoulders, with the raw wounds on them where the hawk-lizards had clawed her. She had that exhausted, let-down look that comes after tremendous stress, and her eyes, even while she spoke to Trevor, followed Hugh as he worked at some task around the cave.

"I couldn't have done anything if they hadn't believed your story," she told him. "They questioned you when you were too far gone to lie." He had a very dim memory of that. "They didn't understand your answers

but they knew they were true ones. Also they examined your clothes. No cloth like that is woven in the valley. And the things that hold them together--" he knew she meant the zippers "--are unknown to us. So you must have come from beyond the mountains. They want to know exactly how, and if you could get back the same way."

"No," said Trevor, and explained. "Am I free to move around, then--go where I want to?"

She studied him a moment before she spoke. "You're a stranger. You don't belong with us. You could betray us to the Korins just as easily as not."

"Why would I do that? They hunted me, too."

"For sun-stones, perhaps. You're a stranger. They would take you alive. Anyway, be careful. Be very careful what you do." From outside came a cry.

"Hawks! Take cover, hawks!"

3

Instantly everyone in the cave fell silent. They watched the places in the cave wall where the sunlight came in, the little cracks in the cliff-face. Trevor thought of the hawk-creatures, and how they would be wheeling and slipping along the ravine, searching.

Outside, the rough rock looked all alike. He thought that in that immensity of erosions and crevices they would have a hard time finding the few tiny chinks that led into the cave. But he watched, too, tense with a feeling of danger. No sound at all came now from the ravine. In that utter stillness, the frightened whimper of a child came

with the sudden loudness of a scream. It was instantly hushed. The shafts of sunlight crept slowly up the walls. Jen seemed not to breathe. Her eyes shone, like an animal's. A black shadow flickered across one of the sunlight bars-flickered, and then was gone. Trevor's heart turned over. He waited for it to come back, to occlude that shaft of light, to slip in along it and become a wide-winged demon with a sun-stone in its brow. For a whole eternity he waited, but it didn't come back, and then a man crept in through the entry hole and said,

"They're gone."

Jen put her head down on her knees. She had begun to tremble all over, very quietly, but with spasmodic violence. Before Trevor could reach her, Hugh had her in his arms, talking to her, soothing her. She began to sob then, and Hugh glanced at Trevor across her shoulders.

"She's had a little too much."

"Yes." Trevor looked at the shafts of sunlight. "Do the hawks come very often?"

"They send them every once in a while hoping to catch us off guard. If they could find the cave they could hunt us out of it, drive us back into the valley. So far they haven't found it."

Jen was quiet now. Hugh stroked her with big awkward hands. "She told you, I guess. About yourself, I mean. You've got to be careful."

"Yes," said Trevor. "She told me." He leaned forward. "Listen, I still don't know how you people got here or what it's all about. After we got away from the Korins, Jen said something about a landing, three hundred years ago. Three hundred Earth years?"

"About that. Some of us have remembered enough to keep track."

"The first Earth colonies were being started on Mercury about then, in two or three of the bigger valleys. Mining colonies. Was this one of them?" Hugh shook his head. "No. The story is that there was a big ship loaded with people from Earth. That's true, of course, because the ship is still here, what's left of it. And so are we. Some of the people on the ship were settlers and some were convicts."

He pronounced the word with the same hatred and scorn that always accompanied the name "Korin." Trevor said eagerly,

"They used to do that in the early days. Use convict labor in the mines. It made so much trouble they had to stop it. Were the Korins...!"

"They were the convicts. The big ship crashed in the valley but most of the people weren't killed. After the crash the convicts killed the men who were in charge of the ship, and made the settlers obey them. That's how it all started. And that's why we're proud we're slaves--because we're descended from the settlers."

Trevor could see the picture quite clearly now, the more so because it had happened before in one way or another. The emigrant ship bound for one of the colonies, driven off its course by the tremendous magnetic disturbances that still made Mercury a spaceman's nightmare.

They couldn't even have called for help or given their position. The terrible nearness of the Sun made any form of radio communication impossible. And then the convicts had broken free and killed the officers, finding themselves unexpectedly in command of a sort of paradise, with the settlers to serve them.

A fairly safe paradise, too. Mercury has an infinite number of these Twilight valleys, all looking more or less alike from space, half hidden

under their shallow blankets of air, and only the few that are both accessible and unmistakable because of their size have permanent colonies. Straight up and down, by spaceship, is the only way in or out of most of them, and unless a ship should land directly on them by sheer chance, the erstwhile prisoners would be safe from discovery.

"But the sun-stones?" asked Trevor, touching his forehead.

"What about the sun-stones and the hawks? They didn't have the use of them when they landed."

"No, they came later." Hugh looked around uneasily. "Look, Trevor, it's a thing we don't talk about much. You can see why, when you think what it's done to us. And it's a thing you shouldn't talk about at all."

"But how did they get them in their heads? And why? Especially, why do they waste them on the hawks?"

Jen glanced at him somberly from the circle of Hugh's arm. "We don't know, exactly. But the hawks are the eyes and ears of the Korins. And from the time they used the first sun-stone we've had no hope of getting free from them." The thing that had been buried in Trevor's subconscious since last night's questioning came suddenly to the surface.

"Thought-waves, that's it! Sure!" He leaned forward excitedly, and Jen told him frantically to lower his voice. "I'll be damned. They've been experimenting with sun-stones for years on Earth-ever since they were discovered, but the scientists never thought of..."

"Do they have the stones on Earth, too?" asked Jen, with loathing.

"No, no, only the ones that are brought from Mercury. Something about Mercury being so close to the Sun, overdose of solar radiation

and the extremes of heat, cold, and pressure while the planet was being made, that formed that particular kind of crystal here. I guess that's why they're called sun-stones."

He shook his head. "So that's how they work it--direct mental communication between the Korins and the hawks, by means of the stones. Simple, too. Set them right in the skull, almost in contact with the brain, and you don't need all the complicated machines and senders and receivers they've been monkeying with in the labs for so long." He shivered. "I'll admit I don't like the idea, though. There's something repulsive about it."

Hugh said bitterly, "When they were only men, and convicts, we might have beaten them some day, even though they had all the weapons. But when they became the Korins--" He indicated the darkling alcoves of the cave. "This is the only freedom we can ever have now."

Looking at Hugh and Jen, Trevor felt a great welling-up of pity, for them, and for all these far-removed children of Earth who were now only hunted slaves to whom this burrow in the rock meant freedom. He thought with pure hatred of the Korins who hunted them, with the uncanny hawks that were their far-ranging eyes and ears and weapons. He wished he could hit them with... He caught himself up sharply. Letting his sympathies run away with him wasn't going to do anybody any good. The only thing that concerned him was to get hold of that sun-stone again and get out of this devil's pocket. He'd spent half a life hunting for a stone, and he wasn't going to let concern over perfect strangers sidetrack him now.

The first step would be getting away from the cave.

It would have to be at night. No watch was kept then on the ledges, for the hawks did not fly in darkness, and the Korins never moved without the hawks. Most of the people were busy in those brief hours of

safety. The women searched for edible moss and lichens. Some of the men brought water from the stream at the canyon fork, and others, with stone clubs and crude spears, hunted the great rock-lizards that slept in the crevices, made sluggish by the cold.

Trevor waited until the fourth night, and then when Saul's water party left, he started casually out of the cave after them.

"I think I'll go down with them," he told Jen and Hugh. "I haven't been down that far since I got here."

There seemed to be no suspicion in them of his purpose. Jen said, "Stay close to the others. It's easy to get lost in the rocks." He turned and went into the darkness after the water party. He followed them down to the fork, and it was quite easy then to slip aside among the tumbled rock and leave them, working his way slowly and silently downstream. After several days in the dimness of the cave, he found that the star-shine gave him light enough to move by. It was hard going, even so, and by the time he reached the approximate place where Saul had tried to kill him he was bruised and cut and considerably shaken. But he picked his spot carefully, crossed the stream, and began to search.

The chill deepened. The rocks that had been hot under his hands turned cold, and the frost-rime settled lightly on them, and Trevor shivered and swore and scrambled, fighting the numbness out of his body, praying that none of the loose rubble would fall on him and crush him. He had prospected on Mercury for a long time. Otherwise he would not have lived.

He found it more easily than he could have done by day, without a detector. He saw the cold pale light of it gleaming, down among the dark broken rock where Saul had thrown it.

He picked it up.

He dandled the thing in his palm, touching it with loving finger tips. It had a certain cold repellent beauty, glimmering in the darkness--a freakish by-product of Mercury's birth-pangs, unique in the solar system. Its radioactivity was a type and potency harmless to living tissue, and its wonderful sensitivity had made it possible for physicists to explore at least a little into those unknown regions above the first octave. In a gesture motivated by pure curiosity he lifted the stone and pressed it tight against the flesh between his brows. Probably it wouldn't work this way. Probably it had to be set deep into the bone...

It worked, oh God, it worked, and something had him, something caught him by the naked brain and would not let him go.

Trevor screamed. The thin small sound was lost in the empty dark, and he tried again, but no sound would come. Something had forbidden him to scream. Something was in there, opening out the leaves of his brain like the pages of a child's book, and it wasn't a hawk, or a Korin. It wasn't anything human or animal that he had ever known before. It was something still and lonely and remote, as alien as the mountain peaks that towered upward to the stars, and as strong, and as utterly without mercy.

Trevor's body became convulsed. Every physical instinct was driving him to run, to escape, and he could not. In his throat now there was a queer wailing whimper. He tried to drop the sun-stone. He was forbidden. Rage began to come on the heels of horror, a blind protest against the indecent invasion of his most private mind. The whimpering rose to a sort of catlike squall, an eerie and quite insane sound in the narrow gorge, and he clawed with his free hand at the one that held the sun-stone, tight against his brows. He tore it loose.

A wrench that almost cracked his brain in two. A flicker of surprise, just before the contact broke, and then a fading flash of anger, and then nothing. Trevor fell down. He did not quite lose consciousness, but there was an ugly sickness in him and all his bones had turned to water. It seemed a long time before he could get to his feet again. Then he stood there shaking. There was something in this accursed valley. There was something or someone who could reach out through the sun-stones and take hold of a man's mind. It did that to the Korins and the hawks, and it had done it for a moment to him, and the horror of that alien grasp upon his brain was still screaming inside him.

"But who--?" he whispered hoarsely. And then he knew that the word was wrong.

"What--?"

For it was not human, it couldn't be human, whatever had held him there wasn't man or woman, brute or human. It was something else, but what it was he didn't want to know, he only wanted to get out--out--

Trevor found that he had begun to run, bruising his shins against rocks. He got a grip on himself, forcing himself to stand still. His breath was coming in great gasps.

He still had the sun-stone clenched in his sweating palm, and he had an almost irresistible desire to fling the thing away with all his strength. But even in the grip of alien horror a man could not throw away the goal of half a lifetime, and he held it, and hated it.

He told himself that whatever it was that reached through the sun-stones could not use them unless they were against the forehead, close to the brain. The thing couldn't harm him if he kept it away from his head. A terrible thought renewed Trevor's horror. He thought of

the Korins, the men who wore sun-stones set forever in their brows. Were they, always and always, in the icy, alien grip of that which had held him? And these were the masters of Jen's people?

He forced that thought away. He had to forget everything except how to get free of this place.

He started at once, still shaken. He couldn't go far before daylight, and he would have to lie up in the rocks through the day and try to make it to the valley wall the next night.

He was glad when daylight came, the first fires of sunrise kindling the peaks that went above the sky.

It was at that moment that a shadow flickered, and Trevor looked up and saw the hawks.

Many hawks. They had not seen him, they were not heeding the rocks in which he crouched. They were flying straight up the ravine, not circling or searching now but going with a sure purpose-fullness, back the way he had come. He watched them uneasily. There were more than he had ever seen together before. But they flew on up the ravine without turning, and were gone.

"They weren't looking for me," he thought. "But..." Trevor should have felt relieved, but he didn't. His uneasiness grew and grew, stemming from an inescapable conclusion.

The hawks were going to the cave. They were heading toward it in an exact line, turning neither to right nor left, and this time they were not in any doubt. They, or whoever or whatever dominated them, knew this time exactly where to find the fugitives.

"But that's impossible," Trevor tried to tell himself. "There's no way

they could suddenly learn exactly where the cave is after all this time." No way?

A thing was forcing its way up into Trevor's anxious thoughts, a realization that he did not want to look at squarely, not at all. But it would not be put down, it would not stop tormenting him, and suddenly he cried out to it, a cry of pain and guilt, "No, it couldn't be! It couldn't be through me they learned!" It fronted him relentlessly, the memory of that awful moment in the canyon when whatever had gripped him through the sun-stone had seemed to be turning over the leaves of his brain like the pages of a book. The vast and alien mind that had gripped his in that dreadful contact had read his own brain clearly, he knew. And in Trevor's brain and memories it had found the secret of the cave. Trevor groaned in an agony of guilt. He crawled out of his rock-heap and began to run back up the ravine, following the path the hawks had taken. There might still be time to warn them. Stumbling, running, he passed the canyon fork. And now from above him in the canyon he heard the sounds he dreaded--the sounds of women screaming and men shouting hoarsely in fury and despair. Farther on, over the rocks, scrambling, slipping, gasping for breath, he came to the cave-mouth and the sight he had dreaded.

The hawks had gone into the cave and driven out the slaves. They had them in the canyon now, and they were trying to herd them together and drive them down toward the lava beds. But the slaves were fighting back. Dark wings beat and thundered in the narrow gorge between the walls of rock. Claws struck and lashing tails cut like whips. Men struggled and floundered and trampled each other. Some died. Some of the hawks died too. But the people were being forced farther down the canyon under the relentless swooping of the hawks. Then Trevor saw Jen. She was a little way from the others. Hugh was with her. He had shoved her into a protecting hollow and was standing over her with a piece of rock in his hands, trying to beat

off a hawk. Hugh was hurt badly. He was not doing well.

Trevor uttered a wild cry that voiced all the futile rage in him, and bounded over a slope toward them.

"Hugh, look out!" he yelled. The hawk had risen, and then had checked and turned, to swoop down straight at Hugh's back.

Hugh swung partly around, but not soon enough. The hawk's claws were in his body, deep. Hugh fell down.

Jen was screaming when Trevor reached them. He didn't stop to snatch up a rock. He threw himself onto the hawk that had welded itself to Hugh's back. There was a horrid slippery thrashing of wings under him, and the scaly neck of the thing was terribly strong between Trevor's hands. But not strong enough. He broke it.

It was too late. When his sight cleared, Jen was staring in a strange wild way at the man and hawk lying tangled together in the dust. When Trevor touched her she fought him a little, not as though she saw him really, not as though she saw anything but Hugh's white ribs sticking out.

"Jen, for God's sake, he's dead." Trevor tried to pull her away. "We've got to get away from here."

There might be a chance. The black hawks were driving the humans down the canyon a little below them now, and if they could make the tumbled rocks below the cliff, there was a chance.

4

He had to drag Jen. Her face had gone utterly blank.

In the next minute he realized that they would never reach the rocks, and that there was no chance, none at all. Back from the winged whirl that was driving the humans, two of the hawks came darting at them.

Trevor swung Jen behind him and hoped fiercely that he could get another neck between his hands before they pulled him down.

The dark shadows flashed down. He could see the sun-stones glittering in their heads. They struck straight at him...

But at the last split second they swerved away.

Trevor waited. They came back again, very fast, but this time it was at Jen they struck, and not at him.

He got her behind him again in time. And once more the hawks checked their strike.

The truth dawned on Trevor. The hawks were deliberately refraining from hurting him.

"Whoever gives them their orders, the Korins or that Other, doesn't want me hurt!"

He caught up Jen in his arms and started to run again toward the rocks. Instantly the hawks struck at Jen. He could not swing her clear in time. Blood ran from the long claw-marks they left in her smooth, tanned shoulders. Jen cried out. Trevor hesitated. He tried again for the rocks, and Jen moaned as a swift scaly head snapped at her neck.

So that's it, Trevor thought furiously. I'm not to be hurt, but they can drive me through Jen.

And they could, too. He would never get Jen to the concealment of

the rocks alive, with those two wide-winged shadows tearing at her. He had to go the way they wanted or they would leave her as they had left Hugh.

"All right!" Trevor yelled savagely at the circling demons. "Let her alone!"

"I'll go where you want."

He turned, still carrying Jen, plodding after the other slaves who were being herded down the canyon.

All that day the black hawks drove the humans down the watercourse, around the shoulder of basalt and out onto the naked sun-seared lava bed. Some of them dropped and lay where they were, and no effort of the hawks could move them on again. Much of the time Trevor carried Jen. Part of the time he dragged her. For long vague periods he had no idea what he did.

He was in a daze in which only his hatred still was vivid, when he felt Jen pulled away from him. He struggled, and was held—and he looked up to see a ring of mounted men around him. Korins on their crested beasts, the sun-stones glittering in their brows.

They looked down at Trevor, curious, speculative, hostile, their otherwise undistinguished human faces made strangely evil and other-worldly by the winking stones.

"You come with us to the city," one of them said curtly to Trevor. "That woman goes with the other slaves."

Trevor glared up at him. "Why me, to the city?" The Korin raised his riding whip threateningly. "Do as you're ordered! Mount!" Trevor saw that a slave had brought a saddled beast to him and was holding it,

not looking either at him or the Korins.

"All right," he said. "I'll go with you." He mounted and sat waiting, his eyes bright with the hatred that burned in him, bright as blown coals. They formed a circle around him and the leader gave a word. They galloped off toward the distant city. Trevor must have dozed as he rode, for suddenly it was sunset, and they were approaching the city.

Seeing it as he had before, far off and with nothing to measure it against but the overtopping titan peaks, it had seemed no more than a city built of rock. Now he was close to it. Black shadows lay on it, and on the valley, but half way up the opposite mountain wall the light still blazed, reflected downward on the shallow sky, so that everything seemed to float in some curious dimension between night and day. Trevor stared, shut his eyes, and stared again.

The size was wrong.

He looked quickly at the Korins, with the eerie feeling that he might have shrunk to child-size as he slept. But they had not changed—at least, relative to himself. He turned back to the city, trying to force it into perspective. It rose up starkly from the level plain. There was no gradual guttering out into suburbs, no softening down to garden villas or rows of cottages. It leaped up like a cliff and began, solemn, massive, squat, and ugly. The buildings were square, set stiffly along a square front. They were not tall. Most of them were only one story high. And yet Trevor felt dwarfed by them, as he had never felt dwarfed by the mightiest of Earth's skyscrapers. It was an unnatural feeling, and one that made him curiously afraid. There were no walls or gateways, no roads leading in. One minute the beasts padded on the grass of the open plain. The next, their claws were clicking on a stone pave and the buildings closed them in, hulking, graceless, looking sullen and forlorn in the shadowed light. There was no sound in them anywhere, no gleaming of lamps in the black embrasures of

cavernous doors. The last furious glare of the hidden sun seeped down from the high peaks and stained their upper walls, and they were old--half as old, Trevor thought, as the peaks themselves.

It was the window embrasures, the doors, and the steps that led up to them that made Trevor understand suddenly what was wrong. And the latent fear that had been in him sprang to full growth. The city, and the buildings in it, the steps and the doors and the height of the windows, were perfectly in proportion, perfectly normal--if the people who lived there were twenty feet high.

He turned to the Korins. "You never built this place. Who built it?" The one called Galt, who was nearest him, snarled, "Quiet, slave!" Trevor looked at him, and at the other Korins. Something about their faces and the way they rode along the darkening empty street told him they too were afraid.

He said, "You, the Korins, the lordly demigods who ride about and send your hawks to hunt and slay--you're more afraid of your master than the slaves are of you!"

They turned toward him pallid faces that burned with hatred. He remembered how that other had gripped his brain back in the canyon. He remembered how it had felt. He understood many things now. He asked, "How does it feel to be enslaved, Korins? Not just enslaved in body, but in mind and soul?"

Galt turned like a striking snake. But the blow never fell. The upraised hand with the heavy whip suddenly checked, and then sank down again. Only the eyes of the Korin glowed with a baleful helplessness under the winking sun-stone. Trevor laughed without humor. "It wants me alive. I guess I'm safe, then. I guess I could tell you what I think of you. You're still convicts, aren't you?"

After three hundred years. No wonder you hate the slaves." Not the same convicts, of course. The sun-stones didn't give longevity. Trevor knew how the Korins propagated, stealing women from among the slaves, keeping the male children and killing the female. He laughed again.

"It isn't such a good life after all, is it, being a Korin? Even hunting and killing can't take the taste out of your mouths. No wonder you hate the others! They're enslaved, all right, but they're not owned." They would have liked to kill him but they could not. They were forbidden. Trevor looked at them, in the last pale flicker of the afterglow. The jewels and the splendid harness, the bridles of the beasts heavy with gold, the weapons--they looked foolish now, like the paper crowns and glass beads that children deck themselves with when they pretend to be kings. These were not lords and masters. These were only little men, and slaves. And the sun-stones were a badge of shame.

The cavalcade passed on. Empty streets, empty houses with windows too high for human eyes to look through and steps too tall for human legs to climb. Full dark, and the first stunning crash of thunder, the first blaze of lightning between the cliffs. The mounts were hurrying now, almost galloping to beat the lightning and the scalding rain.

They were in a great square. Around it was a stiff rectangle of houses, and these were lighted with torchlight, and in the monstrous doorways here and there a little figure stood, a Korin, watching.

In the exact center of the square was a flat low structure of stone, having no windows and but a single door.

They reined the beasts before that lightless entrance. "Get down," said Galt to Trevor. A livid reddish flaring in the sky showed Trevor the Korin's face, and it was smiling, as a wolf smiles before the kill.

Then the thunder came, the downpour of rain, and he was thrust bodily into the doorway. He stumbled over worn flagging in the utter dark, but the Korins moved sure-footedly as cats. He knew they had been here many times before, and he knew that they hated it. He could feel the hate and the fear bristling out from the bodies that were close to his, smell them in the close hot air. They didn't want to be here but they had to. They were bidden. He would have fallen head-foremost down the sudden flight of steps if someone had not caught his arm. They were huge steps. They were forced to go down them as small children do, lowering themselves bodily from tread to tread. A furnace blast of air came up the well, but in spite of the heat Trevor felt cold. He could feel how the hard stone of the stairs had been worn into deep hollows by the passing of feet. Whose feet? And going where?

A sulphurous glow began to creep up through the darkness. They went down what seemed a very long way. The glow brightened, so that Trevor could once more make out the faces of the Korins. The heat was overpowering, but still there was a coldness around Trevor's heart.

The steps ended in a long low hall, so long that the farther end of it was lost in vaporous shadow. Trevor thought that it must have been squared out of a natural cavern, for here and there in the rocky floor small fumaroles burned and bubbled, giving off the murky light and a reek of brimstone. Along both sides of the hall were rows of statues seated in stone chairs. Trevor stared at them, with the skin crawling up and down his back. Statues of men and women--or rather, of creatures manlike and womanlike--sitting solemn and naked, their hands folded in their laps, their eyes, fashioned of dull, reddish stone, looking straight ahead, their features even and composed, with a strange sad patience clinging to the stony furrows around mouth and cheek. Statues that would be perhaps twenty feet tall if they were

standing, carved by a master's chisel out of a pale substance that looked like alabaster. Galt caught his arm. "Oh, no, you won't run away. You were laughing, remember?"

Come on, I want to see you laugh some more."

They forced him along between the rows of statues. Quiet statues, with a curiously ghostly look of thoughtfulness--of thoughts and feelings long vanished but once there, different from those of humans, perhaps, but quite as strong. No two of them were alike, in face or body. Trevor noted among them things seldom seen in statues, a maimed limb, a deformity, or a completely nondescript face that would offer neither beauty nor ugliness for an artist to enlarge upon. Also, they seemed all to be old, though he could not have said why he thought so.

There were other halls opening off this main one. How far they went he had no means of guessing, but he could see that in them were other shadowy rows of seated figures.

Statues. Endless numbers of statues, down here in the darkness underneath the city...

He stopped, bracing himself against his captors, gripping the hot rock with his bare feet.

"This is a catacomb," he said. "Those aren't statues, they're bodies, dead things sitting up,"

"Come on," said Galt. "Come on, and laugh!" They took him, and there were too many to fight. And Trevor knew that it was not them he had to fight. Something was waiting for him down in that catacomb. It had had his mind once. It would--

They were approaching the end of the long hall. The sickly light from the fumaroles showed the last of the lines of seated figures-had they died there like that, sitting up, or had they been brought here afterward? The rows on each side ended evenly, the last chairs exactly opposite each other. But against the blank end wall was a solitary seat of stone, facing down the full gloomy length of the hall and on it sat a manlike shape of alabaster, very still, the stony hands folded rigidly upon the stony thighs. A figure no different from the others, except... .

Except that the eyes were still alive.

The Korins dropped back a little. All but Galt. He stayed beside Trevor, his head bent, his mouth sullen and nervous, not looking up at all. And Trevor stared into the remote and somber eyes that were like two pieces of carnelian in that pale alabaster face, and yet were living, sentient, full of a deep and alien sorrow.

It was very silent in the catacomb. The dreadful eyes studied Trevor, and for just a moment his hatred was tempered by a strange pity as he thought what it must be like for the brain, the intelligence behind those eyes, already entombed, and knowing it.

"A long living and a long dying. The blessing and the curse of my people." The words were soundless, spoken inside his brain. Trevor started violently. Almost he turned to flee, remembering the torture of that moment in the canyon, and then he found that while he had been staring, a force as gentle and stealthy as the gliding of a shadow had already invaded him. And he was forbidden.

"At this range I do not need the sun-stones," murmured the silent voice within him. "Once I did not need them at all. But I am old." Trevor stared at the stony thing that watched him, and then he thought of Jen, of Hugh lying dead with a dead hawk in the dust, and the

strangeness left him, and his bitter passion flared again.

"So you hate me as well as fear me, little human? You would destroy me?" There was a gentle laughter inside Trevor's mind. "I have watched generations of humans die so swiftly. And yet I am here, as I was before they came, waiting."

"You won't be here forever," snarled Trevor. "These others like you died. You will!"

"Yes. But it is a slow dying, little human. Your body chemistry is like that of the plants, the beasts, based upon carbon. Quick to grow. Quick to wither away. Ours was of another sort. We were like the mountains, cousin to them, our body cells built of silicon, even as theirs. And so our flesh endures until it grows slow and stiff with age. But even then we must wait long, very long, for death."

Something of the truth of that long waiting came to Trevor, and he felt a shuddering thankfulness for the frailty of human flesh.

"I am the last," whispered the silent voice. "For a while I had companionship of minds, but the others are all gone before me, long ago." Trevor had a nightmare vision of Mercury, in some incalculable future eon, a frozen world taking its last plunge into the burned-out sun, bearing with it these endless rows of alabaster shapes, sitting in their chairs of stone, upright in the dead blackness underneath the ice.

He fought back to reality, clutching his hatred as a swimmer clings to a plank, his voice raw with passion and bitterness as he cried out.

"Yes, I'll destroy you if I can! What else could you expect after what you've done?"

"Oh, no, little human, you will not destroy me. You will help me." Trevor glared. "Help you? Not if you kill me!"

"There will be no killing. You would be of no use to me dead. But alive you can serve me. That is why you were spared."

"Serve you--like them?" He swung to point to the waiting Korins, but the Korins were not waiting now, they were closing in on him, their hands reaching for him.

Trevor struck out at them. He had a fleeting thought of how weird this battle of his with the Korins must look, as they struck and staggered on the stone paving beneath the looming, watching thing of stone.

But even as he had that thought, the moment of struggle ended. An imperious command hit his brain, and black oblivion closed down upon him like the sudden clenching of a fist.

5

Darkness. He was lost in it, and he was not himself any more. He fled through the darkness, groping, crying out for something that was gone. And a voice answered him, a voice that he did not want to hear... . Darkness. Dreams.

Dawn, high on the blazing mountains. He stood in the city, watching the light grow bright and pitiless, watching it burn on the upper walls and then slip downward into the streets, casting heavy shadows in the openings of door and window, so that the houses looked like skulls with empty eyeholes and gaping mouths. The buildings no longer seemed too big. He walked between them, and when he came to steps he climbed them easily, and the window ledges were no higher than his head. He knew these buildings. He looked at each

one as he passed, naming it, remembering with a long, long memory. The hawks came down to him, the faithful servants with the sunstones in their brows. He stroked their pliant necks, and they hissed softly with pleasure, but their shallow minds were empty of everything but that vague sensation. He passed on through the familiar streets, and in them nothing stirred. All through the day from dawn to sunset and in the darkness that came afterward, nothing stirred, and there was a silence among the stones. He could not endure the city. His time was not yet, though the first subtle signs of age had touched him. But he went down into the catacombs and took his place with those others who were waiting and could still speak to him with their minds, so that he should not be quite alone with the silence. The years went by, leaving no traces of themselves in the unchanging gloom of the mortuary halls.

One by one those last few minds were stilled until all were gone. And by that time age had chained him where he was, unable to rise and go again into the city where he had been young, the youngest of all... Shannach, they had named him--The Last.

So he waited, alone. And only one who was kin to the mountains could have borne that waiting in the place of the dead.

Then, in a burst of flame and thunder, new life came into the valley. Human life. Soft, frail, receptive life, intelligent, unprotected, possessed of violent and bewildering passions. Very carefully, taking its time, the mind of Shannach reached out and gathered them in.

Some of the men were more violent than the others. Shannach saw their emotions in patterns of scarlet against the dark of his inner mind. They had already made themselves masters, and a number of these frail sensitive brains had snapped out swiftly because of them. "These I will take for my own," thought Shannach. "Their mind-patterns are crude, but strong, and I am interested in death."

There had been a surgeon aboard the ship but he was dead. However, there was no need of a surgeon for what was about to be done. When Shannach had finished talking to the men he had chosen, telling them of the sun-stones, telling them the truth, but not all of it--when those men had eagerly agreed to the promise of power--Shannach took complete control. And the clumsy convict hands that moved now with such exquisite skill were as much his instruments as the scalpels of the dead surgeon that they wielded, making the round incision and the delicate cutting of the bone.

Who was the man that lay there, quiet under the knife? Who were the ones that bent above him, with the strange stones in their brows? Names. There are names and I know them. Closer, closer. I know that man who lies there with blood between his eyes...

Trevor screamed. Someone slapped him across the face, viciously and with intent. He screamed again, fighting, clawing, still blinded by the visions and the dark mists, and that voice that he dreaded so much spoke gently in his mind, "It's all over, Trevor. It is done."

The hard hand slapped him again, and a rough human voice said harshly, "Wake up. Wake up, damn it!"

He woke. He was in the middle of a vast room, crouched down in the attitude of a fighter, shivering, sweating, his hands outstretched and grasping nothing. He must have sprung there, half unconscious, from the tumbled pallet of skins against the wall. Galt was watching him.

"Welcome, Earthman. How does it feel to be one of the masters?" Trevor stared at him. A burning flood of light fell in through the tall windows so high above his head, setting the sun-stone ablaze between the Korin's sullen brows. Trevor's gaze fixed on that single point of brilliance.

"Oh, yes," said Galt. "It's true." It struck Trevor with an ugly shock that Galt's lips had not moved, and that he had made no audible sound.

"The stones give us a limited ability," Galt went on, still without speaking aloud. "Not like His, of course. But we can control the hawks, and exchange ideas between us when we want to if the range isn't too far. Naturally, our minds are open to Him any time he wants to pry."

"There's no pain," Trevor whispered, desperately trying to make the thing not be so. "My head doesn't ache."

"Of course not. He takes care of that."

Shannach? If it isn't so, how do I know that name? And that dream, that endless nightmare in the catacombs.

Galt winced. "We don't use that name. He doesn't like it." He looked at Trevor. "What's the matter, Earthman? Why so green? You were laughing once, remember? Where's your sense of humor now?"

He caught Trevor abruptly by the shoulders and turned him around so that he faced a great sheet of polished glassy substance set into the wall. A mirror for giants, reflecting the whole huge room, reflecting the small dwarfed figures of the men.

"Go on," said Galt, pushing Trevor ahead of him. "Take a look." Trevor shook off the Korin's grasp. He moved forward by himself, close to the mirror. He set his hands against the chill surface and stared at what he saw there. And it was true.

Between his brows a sun-stone winked and glittered. And his face, the familiar, normal, not-too-bad face he had been used to all his life,

was transformed into something monstrous and unnatural, a goblin mask with a third, and evil eye.

A coldness crept into his heart and bones. He backed away a little from the mirror, his hands moving blindly upward, slowly toward the stone that glistened between his brows. His mouth was twisted like a child's, and two tears rolled down his cheeks.

His fingers touched the stone. And then the anger came. He sank his nails into his forehead, clawing at the hard stone, not caring if he died after he had torn it out.

Galt watched him. His lips smiled but his eyes were hateful. Blood ran down the sides of Trevor's nose. The sun-stone was still there. He moaned and thrust his nails in deeper, and Shannach let him go until he had produced one stab of agony that cut his head in two and nearly dropped him. Then Shannach sent in the full force of his mind. Not in anger, for he felt none, and not in cruelty, for he was no more cruel than the mountain he was kin to, but simply because it was necessary.

Trevor felt that cold and lonely power roll down on him like an avalanche. He braced himself to meet it, but it broke his defenses, crushed them, made them nothing, and moved onward against the inmost citadel of his mind. In that reeling, darkened fortress all that was wholly Trevor crouched and clung to its armament of rage, remembering dimly that once, in a narrow canyon, it had driven back this enemy and broken free. And then some crude animal instinct far below the level of conscious thought warned him not to press the battle now, to bury his small weapon and wait, letting his last redoubt of which he was yet master go untouched and perhaps unnoticed by his captor.

Trevor let his hands drop limply and his mind go slack. The cold black

hide of power paused, and then he felt it slide away, withdrawing from those threatened walls. Out of the edges of it, Shannach spoke.

"Your mind is tougher than these valley-bred Korins. They're well conditioned, but you—you remember that you defied me once. The contact was imperfect then. It is not imperfect now. Remember that too, Trevor." Trevor drew in a long, unsteady breath. He whispered, "What do you want of me?"

"Go and see the ship. Your mind tells me that it understands these things. See if it can be made to fly again."

That order took Trevor completely by surprise. "The ship! But why . . .?" Shannach was not used to having his wishes questioned, but he answered patiently, "I have still a while to live. Several of your short generations. I have had too much of this valley, too much of these catacombs. I want to leave them."

Trevor could understand that. Having had that nightmare glimpse into Shannach's mind, he could perfectly understand. For one brief moment he was torn with pity for this trapped creature who was alone in the universe. And then he wondered, "What would you do if you could leave the valley? What would you do to another settlement of men?"

"Who knows? I have one thing left to me--curiosity."

"You'd take the Korins with you, and the hawks?"

"Some. They are my eyes and ears, my hands and feet. But you object, Trevor."

"What difference does that make?" said Trevor bitterly. "I'll go look at the ship."

"Come on," said Galt, taking up an armful of torches. "I'll show you the way." They went out through the tall door into the streets between the huge square empty houses. The streets and houses that Trevor had known in his dream, remembering when there were lights and voices in them. Trevor noticed only that Galt was leading him out on the opposite side of the city, toward the part of the valley he had never visited. And then his mind reverted to something that not even the shock of his awakening could drive out of his consciousness. Jen.

A sudden panic sprang up in him. How long had it been since the darkness fell on him there in the catacomb? Long enough for almost anything to happen. He envisioned Jen being torn by hawks, of her body lying dead as Hugh's had lain, and he started to reach out for Galt, who had owned them both. But abruptly Shannach spoke to him, in that eerie silent way he was getting used to. "The woman is safe. Here, look for yourself."

His mind was taken firmly and directed into a channel completely new to him. He felt a curious small shock of contact, and suddenly he was looking down from a point somewhere in the sky at a walled paddock with a number of tiny figures in it. His own eyes would have seen them as just that, but the eyes he was using now were keen as an eagle's, though they saw no color but only black and white and the shadings in between. So he recognized one of the distant figures as Jen.

He wanted to get closer to her, much closer, and rather sulkily his point of vision began to circle down dropping lower and lower. Jen looked up. He saw the shadow of wide wings sweep across her and realized that of course he was using one of the hawks. He pulled it back so as not to frighten her, but not before he had seen her face. The frozen stoniness was gone, and in its place had come the look of a wounded tigress.

"I want her," Trevor said to Shannach.

"She belongs to Galt. I do not interfere."

Galt shrugged. "You're welcome. But keep her chained. She's too dangerous now for anything but hawk-meat."

The ship was not far beyond the city. It lay canted over on its side, just clear of a low spur jutting out from the barrier cliff. It had hit hard, and some of the main plates were buckled, but from the outside the damage did not seem irreparable, if you had the knowledge and the tools to work with. Three hundred years ago it might have been made to fly again, only those who had the knowledge and the will were dead. And the convicts wanted to stay where they were.

The tough metal of the outer skin, alloyed to resist friction that could burn up a meteor, had stood up pretty well under three centuries of Mercurian climate. It was corroded, and where the breaks were the inner shells were eaten through with rust, but the hulk still retained the semblance of a ship.

"Will it fly?" asked Shannach eagerly.

"I don't know yet," Trevor answered.

Galt lighted a torch and gave it to him. "I'll stay out here." Trevor laughed. "How are you ever going to fly over the mountains?"

"He'll see to that when the time comes," Galt muttered. "Take the rest of these torches. It's dark in there."

Trevor climbed in through the gaping lock, moving with great caution on the tilted, rust-red decks. Inside, the ship was a shambles. Everything had been stripped out of it that could be used, leaving only

bare cubicles with the enamel peeling off the walls and a moldering litter of junk. In a locker forward of the air lock he found a number of space-suits. The fabric was rotted away, but a few of the helmets were still good and some half score of the oxygen bottles had survived, the gas still in them. Shannach urged him on impatiently. "Get to the essentials, Trevor!" The bridge room was still intact though the multiple thickness of glassite in the big ports showed patterns of spidery cracks. Trevor examined the controls. He was strictly a planetary spacer, used to flying his small craft within spitting distance of the world he was prospecting, and there were a few gadgets here he didn't understand, but he could figure the board well enough.

"Not far, Trevor. Only over the mountains. I know from your mind--and I remember from the minds of those who died after the landing--that beyond the mountain wall there is a plain of dead rock, more than a hundred of your reckoning in miles, and then another ridge that seems solid but is not, and beyond that pass there is a fertile valley twenty times bigger than Korith, where Earthmen live."

"Only partly fertile, and the mines that brought the Earthmen are pretty well worked out. But a few ships still land there, and a few Earthmen still hang on."

"That is best. A small place, to begin..."

"To begin what?"

"Who can tell? You don't understand, Trevor. For centuries I have known exactly what I would do. There is a kind of rebirth in not knowing." Trevor shivered and went back to studying the controls. The wiring, protected by layers of impervioplast insulation and conduit, seemed to be in fair shape. The generator room below had been knocked about, but not too badly. There were spare batteries.

Corroded, yes, but if they were charged, they could hold for a while.

"Will it fly?"

"I told you I don't know yet. It would take a lot of work."

"There are many slaves to do this work."

"Yes. But without fuel it's all useless."

"See if there is fuel."

The outlines of that hidden thing in Trevor's secret mind were coming clearer now. He didn't want to see them out in the full light where Shannach could see them too. He thought hard about generators, batteries, and the hooking up of leads.

He crept among the dark bowels of the dead ship, working toward the stern. The torch made a red and smoky glare that lit up deserted wardrooms and plundered holds. One large compartment had a heavy barred and bolted door that had bent like tin in the crash. "That's where they came from," Trevor thought, "like wolves out of a trap."

In the lower holds that had taken the worst of the impact were quantifies of mining equipment and farm machinery, all smashed beyond use but formidable looking none the less, with rusty blades and teeth and queer hulking shapes. They made him think of weapons, and he let the thought grow, adorning it with pictures of men going down under whirring reapers. Shannach caught it.

"Weapons?"

"They could be used as such. But the metal in them would repair the hull." He found the fuel bunkers. The main supply was used to the last

grain of fissionable dust, but the emergency bunkers still showed some content on the mechanical gauges. Not much, but enough.

6

A hard excitement began to stir in Trevor, too big to be hidden in that secret corner of his mind. He didn't try. He let it loose, and Shannach murmured.

"You are pleased. The ship will fly, and you are thinking that when you reach that other valley and are among your own people again, you will find means to destroy me. Perhaps, but we shall see."

In the smoky torchlight, looking down from a sagging catwalk above the firing chambers and the rusty sealed-in tubes, Trevor smiled. A lie could be thought as well as spoken. And Shannach, in a manner of speaking, was only human.

"I'll need help. All the help there is."

"You'll have it."

"It'll take time. Don't hurry me and don't distract me. Remember, I want to get over the mountains as bad as you do."

Shannach laughed.

Trevor got more torches and went to work in the generator room. He felt that Shannach had withdrawn from him, occupied now with rounding up the Korins and the slaves. But he did not relax his caution. The open areas of his mind were filled with thoughts of vengeance to come when he reached that other valley. Gradually the exigencies of wrestling with antiquated and partly ruined machinery

drove everything else away. That day passed, and a night, and half another day before all the leads were hooked the way he wanted them, before one creaky generator was operating on one-quarter normal output, and the best of the spare batteries were charging.

He emerged from the torchlit obscurity into the bridge, blinking mole-like in the light, and found Galt sitting there.

"He trusts you," the Korin said, "but not too far." Trevor scowled at him. Exhaustion, excitement, and a feeling of fate had combined to put him into an unreal state where his mind operated more or less independently. A hard protective shell had formed around that last little inner fortress so that it was hidden even from himself, and he had come almost to believe that he was going to fly this ship to another valley and battle Shannach there. So he was not surprised to hear Shannach say softly in his mind,

"You might try to go away alone. I wouldn't want that, Trevor." Trevor grunted. "I thought you controlled me so well I couldn't spit if you forbade it."

"I am dealing with much here that I don't comprehend. We were never a mechanical people. Therefore some of your thoughts, while I read them clearly, have no real meaning for me. I can handle you, Trevor, but I'm taking no chances with the ship."

"Don't worry," Trevor told him. "I can't possibly take the ship up before the hull's repaired. It would fall apart on me." That was true, and he spoke it honestly.

"Nevertheless," said Shannach, "Galt will be there, as my hands and feet, an extra guard over that object which you call a control-bank, and which your mind tells me is the key to the ship. You are forbidden to touch it until it is time to go."

Trevor heard Shannach's silent laughter.

"Treachery is implicit in your mind, Trevor. But I'll have time. Impulses come swiftly and cannot be read beforehand. But there is an interval between the impulse and the realization of it. Only a fraction of a second, perhaps, but I'll have time to stop you."

Trevor did not argue. He was shaking a little with the effort of not giving up his last pitiful individuality, of fixing his thoughts firmly on the next step toward what Shannach wanted and looking neither to the right nor to the left of it. He ran a grimy hand over his face, shrinking from the touch of the alien disfigurement in his forehead, and said sullenly,

"The holds have to be cleared. The ship won't lift that weight any more, and we need the metal for repairs." He thought again strongly of weapons. "Send the slaves."

"No," said Shannach firmly. "The Korins will do that. We won't put any potential weapons in the hands of the slaves."

Trevor allowed a wave of disappointment to cross his mind, and then he shrugged. "All right. But get them at it."

He went and stood by the wide ports looking out over the plain toward the city. The slaves were gathered at a safe distance from the ship, waiting like a herd of cattle until they should be needed. Some mounted Korins guarded them while the hawks wheeled overhead.

Coming toward the ship, moving with a resentful slowness, was a little army of Korins. Trevor could sense the group thought quite clearly. In all their lives they had never soiled their hands with labor, and they were angry that they had now to do the work of slaves.

Digging his nails into his palms, Trevor went aft to show them what to do. He couldn't keep it hidden much longer, this thing that he had so painfully concealed under layers of half-truths and deceptions. It had to come out soon, and Shannach would know.

In the smoky glare of many torches the Korins began to struggle with the rusting masses of machinery in the after holds.

"Send more down here," Trevor said to Shannach. "These things are heavy."

"They're all there now except those that guard the slaves. They cannot leave."

"All right," said Trevor. "Make them work." He went back up along the canting decks, along the tilted passages, moving slowly at first, then swifter, swifter, his bare feet scraping on the flakes of rust, his face, with the third uncanny eye, gone white and strangely set. His mind was throwing off muddy streams of thought, confused and meaningless, desperate camouflage to hide until the last second what was underneath.

"Trevor!"

That was Shannach, alert, alarmed.

It was coming now, the purpose, out into the light. It had to come, it could not be hidden any longer. It burst up from its secret place, one strong red flare against the darkness, and Shannach saw it, and sent the full cold power of his mind to drown it out.

Trevor came into the bridge room, running.

The first black wave of power hit him, crushed him. The bridge room

lengthened out into some weird dimension of delirium, with Galt waiting at the far end. Behind Galt the one small, little key that needed to be touched just once. The towering might of Shannach beat him back, forbidding him to think, to move, to be. But down in that beleaguered part of Trevor's mind the walls still held, with the bright brand of determination burning in them. This was the moment the time to fight. And he dug up that armament of fury he had buried there. He let it free, shouting at the alien force, "I beat you once! I beat you!"

The deck swam under his feet. The peeling bulkheads wavered past like veils of mist. He didn't know whether he was moving or not, but he kept on while the enormous weight bore down on his quivering brain, a mountain tilting, falling, seeking to smother out the fury that was all he had to fight with. Fury for himself, defiled and outraged. Fury for Jen, with the red scars on her shoulders. Fury for Hugh lying dead under an obscene killer, fury for all the generations of decent people who had lived and died in slavery so that Shannach's time of waiting might be lightened.

He saw Galt's face, curiously huge, close to his own. It was stricken and amazed. Trevor's bared teeth glistened.

"I beat him once," he said to the Korin.

Galt's hands were raised. There was a knife in his girdle, but he had been bidden not to use it, not to kill. Only Trevor could make the ship to fly. Galt reached out and took him but there was an un-sureness in his grip, and his mind was crying out to Shannach, "You could not make him stop! You could not!"

Trevor, who was partly merged with Shannach now, heard that cry and laughed. Something in him had burst wide open at Galt's physical touch. He had no control now, no sane thought left, but only a

wild intense desire to do two things, one of which was to destroy this monster that had hold of him.

"Kill him," said Shannach suddenly. "He's mad, and no one can control an insane human."

Galt did his best to obey. But Trevor's hands were already around the Korin's throat, the fingers sinking deep into the flesh. There was a sharp snapping of bone.

He dropped the body. He could see nothing now except one tiny point of light in a reeling darkness. That single point of light had a red key in the center of it. Trevor reached out and pushed it down. That was the other thing. For a short second nothing happened. Trevor sagged down across Galt's body. Shannach was somewhere else, crying warnings that came too late. Trevor had time to draw one harsh triumphant breath and brace himself. The ship leaped under him. There was a dull roar, and then another, as the last fuel bunkers let go. The whole bridge room rolled and came to rest with a jarring shock that split the ports wide open, and the world was full of the shriek and crash of metal being torn and twisted and rent apart. Then it quieted. The ground stopped shaking and the deck settled under Trevor. There was silence.

Trevor crawled up the new slope of the bridge room floor, to the shattered lock and through it, into the pitiless sunlight. He could see now exactly what he had done. And it was good. It had worked. That last small measure of fuel had been enough.

The whole after part of the hulk was gone, and with it had gone all but a few of Shannach's Korins, trapped in the lower holds.

And then, in pure surprise, Shannach spoke inside Trevor's mind. "I grow old indeed! I misjudged the toughness and the secrecy of a

fresh, strong mind. I was too used to my obedient Korins."

"Do you see what's happening to the last of them?" Trevor asked savagely. "Can you see?"

The last of the Korins who had been outside with the slaves seemed to have been stunned and bewildered by the collapse of their world. And with the spontaneity of a whirlwind, the slaves had risen against this last remnant of their hated masters. They had waited for a long, long time, and now the Korins and the hawks were being done to death.

"Can you see it, Shannach?"

"I can see, Trevor. And--they're coming now for you!" They were. They were coming, blood-mad against all who wore the sun-stone, and Jen was in the forefront of them, and Saul, whose hands were red. Trevor knew that he had less than a half-minute to speak for his life. And he was aware that Shannach, still withdrawn, watched now with an edged amusement. Trevor said harshly to Saul and all of them, "So I give you your freedom, and you want to kill me for it?"

Saul snarled, "You betrayed us in the cave, and now..."

"I betrayed you, but without intent. There was someone stronger than the Korins, that even you didn't know about. So how should I have known?" Trevor talked fast, then, talking for his life, telling them about Shannach and how the Korins themselves were enslaved.

"A lie," spat Saul.

"Look for yourselves in the crypts underneath the city! But be careful." He looked at Jen, not at Saul. After a moment Jen said slowly, "Perhaps there is a Shannach. Perhaps that's why we were never

allowed in the city, so the Korins could go on pretending that they were gods."

"It's another of his lies, I tell you!"

Jen turned to him. "Go and look, Saul. We'll watch him." Saul hesitated. Finally, he and a half-dozen others went off toward the city. Trevor sat down on the hot, scorched grass. He was very tired, and he didn't like at all the way the withdrawn shadow of Shannach hovered just outside his mind.

The mountains leaned away from the Sun, and the shadows crawled up the lower slopes. Then Saul and the others returned.

Trevor looked up at their faces and laughed without mirth. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Saul, and shivered. "Yes..."

"Did he speak to you?"

"He started to. But—we ran."

And Saul suddenly cried, out of the depths of fear this time and not of hate,

"We can never kill him. It's his valley. And oh God, we're trapped in here with him, we can't get out."

"We can get out," said Trevor.

7

Saul stared at him sickly. "There's no way over the mountains. There

isn't even air up there."

"There's a way. I found it in the ship."

Trevor stood up, speaking with a sudden harshness. "Not a way for us all, not now, but if three or four of us go, one may live to make it. And he could bring back men with ships for the others."

He looked at Saul. "Will you try it with me?" The gaunt man said hoarsely, "I still don't trust you, Trevor! But anything--anything, to get away from that..."

"I'll go too," Jen said suddenly. "I'm as strong as Saul." That was true, and Trevor knew it. He stared at her for a long minute, but he could not read her face.

Saul shrugged. "All right."

"But it's all craziness," murmured a voice. "You can't breathe up there on the ridges. There's no air!"

Trevor climbed painfully into what was left of the twisted wreck, and brought out the helmets and oxygen bottles that had survived for just this purpose.

"We'll breathe," he said. "These-" He tried for a word that would explain to them, "--these containers hold an essence of air. We can take them with us and breathe."

"But the cold?"

"You have tanned skins, haven't you? And gums? I can show you how to make us protective garments. Unless you'd rather stay here with Shannach." Saul shivered a little. "No, we'll try it." In all the hours that followed--while the women of the slaves worked with soft tanned

skins and resinous gums, while Trevor labored over the clumsy helmets they must have--in all that time, Shannach was silent. Silent, but not gone. Trevor felt that shadow on his mind, he knew that Shannach was watching. Yet the Last One made no attempt upon him. The slaves watched him, too. He saw the fear and hatred still in their eyes as they looked at the sun-stone between his brows.

And Jen watched him, and said nothing, and he could read nothing at all in her face. Was she thinking of Hugh and how the hawks had come?

By mid-afternoon they were ready. They started climbing slowly, toward the passes that went up beyond the sky. He and Saul and Jen were three grotesque and shapeless figures, in the three-layered garments of skin that were crudely sealed with gum, and the clumsy helmets that were padded out with cloth because there was no collar-rest to hold them. Their faces were wrapped close, and they held the ends of the oxygen tubes in their mouths because no amount of ingenuity could make the helmets space-tight.

The evening shadow flowed upward from the valley floor as they climbed, and the men who had come to help them dropped back. These three went on, with Saul leading the way and Trevor last.

And still Shannach had not spoken.

The atmosphere slipped behind them. They were climbing into space now, tiny creatures clambering up an infinity of virgin rock, in the utter black between the blazing peaks above and the flaring lightning's of the evening storm below.

Up and up toward the pass, toiling forward painfully with each other's help where no man could have made it alone, through a numbing and awful cold and silence. Three clumsy, dragging figures, up here

above the sky itself, walking in the awfulness of infinity, where the rocks their feet dislodged rushed away as noiseless as a dream, where there was no sound, no light, no time. Trevor knew they must have reached the pass, for on both sides now there rose up slopes that had never been touched by wind or rain or living root. He staggered on, and presently the ground began to drop and the way was easier. They had passed the crest. And the oxygen was almost gone. Downward now, stumbling, slipping, sliding, yearning toward the air below. And they were on the other side of the mountain, above the plain of rock that led to...

And then, at last, Shannach--laughed.

"Clever," he said. "Oh, very clever, to escape without a ship! But you will come back, with a ship, and you will take me to the outside world. And I will reward you greatly."

"No," said Trevor, in his mind. "No, Shannach. If we make it, the sun-stone comes out, and we'll come back for the slaves, not for you!"

"No, Trevor." The gentle finality of that denial was coldly frightening. "You are mine now. You surprised and tricked me once, but I know the trick now. Your whole mind is open to me. You cannot withstand me ever again." It was cold, cold in the darkness below the pass, and the chill went deep into Trevor's soul and froze it.

Saul and Jen were below him now, stumbling down along the rock-strewn lip of a chasm, into the thin high reaches of the air, into sound and life again. He saw them tear away their helmets. He followed them, pulling off his own, gasping the frigid breath into his starved lungs. Shannach said softly,

"We do not need them any longer. They would be a danger when you reach other men. Dispose of them, Trevor."

Trevor started a raging refusal, and then his mind was gripped as by a great hand, shaken and turned and changed. And his fury flowed away into blankness. But of course, he thought. There are many boulders, and I can topple them into the chasm so easily...

He started toward a jagged stone mass, one that would quite neatly brush the two clumsy figures below him into the abyss.

"That is the way, Trevor! But quickly--!"

Trevor knew that Shannach had spoken truth, and that this time he was conquered.

"No, I won't!" he cried to himself, but it was only a weak echo from a fading will-power, a dying self.

"You will, Trevor! And now! They suspect."

Saul and Jen had turned. Trevor's face, open now to the numbing cold which he could scarcely feel, must have told them everything. They started scrambling back up toward him. Only a short distance, but they would be too late. Trevor shrieked thinly, "Look out--Shannach... !" He had his hands on it now, on the boulder he must roll to crush them. But there was another way! He was Shannach's while he lived, but there was a way to avoid again betraying Jen's people, and that way was to live no longer. He used the last of his dying will to pitch himself toward the brink of the chasm. Hundreds of feet below a man could lie quiet on the rocks through all eternity.

"Trevor, no! No!"

Shannach's powerful command halted him as he swayed on the very edge. And then Jen's arms caught him from behind.

He heard Saul's voice crying, thin and harsh in that upper air, "Push him over! He's a Korin. You saw his face!"

Jen answered, "No! He tried to kill himself for us!"

"But Shannach has him!" Saul cried out.

Shannach had him, indeed, stamping down that final flicker of Trevor's revolt, fiercely commanding him.

"Slay the woman and the man!"

Trevor tried to. He was all Shannach's now. He tried earnestly and with all his strength to kill them, but both the woman and the man had hold of him now. They were too strong for him, and he could not obey the Last One as he wanted to.

"Tie his arms!" Jen was shouting. "We can take him, and he can't do us any harm!"

The anger of Shannach flooded through Trevor, and he raged and struggled, and it was useless. Strips of hide secured his arms and they were dragging him on down out of the mountains, and he could not obey. He could not!

And then he felt the anger of Shannach ebb away into a terrible hopelessness. Trevor felt his own consciousness going, and he went into the darkness bearing in his mind the echo of that last bitter cry,

"I am old--too old..."

8

Trevor awakened slowly, rising above the dark sea of oblivion only to

sink again, conscious in those brief intervals that he lay in a bed and that his head ached.

There came a time when he rose, not to sink again. After a while his eyes opened, and he saw a metal ceiling.

"We made it," he said.

"Yes, you made it," said a friendly voice. "This is Solar City. You've been here quite a while."

Trevor turned his head to the voice, to the white-jacketed doctor beside his bed. But he didn't see the man or the room. Not at first. He saw only, upon the bedside table in a tray, a tawny eye that winked and glittered at him. A sun-stone.

His hand started to rise weakly to his face. The doctor forestalled him.

"Don't bother. It's out. And a delicate job getting it out, it was. You'll have a headache for a while, but anyone would take a headache for a sun-stone!"

Trevor didn't answer that. He said suddenly, "Jen--and Saul... ?"

"They're here. Pretty odd folk they are, too. Won't talk to any of us. You're all a blazing mystery, you know."

He went away. When he came back, Jen and Saul were with him. They wore modern synthecloth garments now. Jen looked as incongruous in hers as a leopardess in a silk dress.

She saw the smile in his eyes and cried, "Don't laugh at me--ever!" It occurred to Trevor that civilizing her would take a long time. He doubted if it would ever be done. And he was glad of that.

She stood looking gravely down at him and then said, "They say you can get up tomorrow."

"That's good," said Trevor.

"You'll have to be careful for a while."

"Yes. I'll be careful."

They said no more than that, but in her steady, grave gaze Trevor read that Hugh and the hawks were forgiven, not forgotten but forgiven, that they two had touched each other and would not let go again.

Saul cried anxiously, "Days we've waited! When can we go back to the valley with a ship for the others?"

Trevor turned to the curiously watching doctor. "Can I charter a ship here?"

"A man with a sun-stone can get almost anything he wants, Trevor! I'll see about it."

The chartered ship that took them back to the valley had a minimum crew, and two mining technicians Trevor had hired. They set down outside the ancient city, and the slaves came surging toward them, half in eagerness, half in awe of this embodiment of misty legend.

Trevor had told Saul what to do. Out up the valley, in the skulls of slain Korins, were sun-stones worth many fortunes. They were going out with the slaves.

"But they're evil--evil!" Saul had cried.

"Not in the outside worlds," Trevor told him. "You people are going to need a start somewhere."

When that was done, when they were all in the ship, Trevor nodded to the two mining technicians.

"Now," he said. "The entrance to the catacomb is right over there." The two went away, carrying their bulky burden slung between them. Presently they came back again without it.

Trevor took his sun-stone from his pocket. Jen clutched his arm and cried,

"No!"

"There's no danger now," he said. "He hasn't time enough left to do anything with me. And--I feel somehow that I should tell him--" He put the sun-stone to his brow, and in his mind he cried,

"Shannach!"

And into his mind came the cold, tremendous presence of the Last One. In an instant it had read Trevor's thoughts.

"So this is the end, Trevor?"

"Yes," Trevor said steadily. "The end." He was braced for the wild reaction of alarm and passion, the attempt to seize his mind, to avert doom.

It didn't come. Instead, from the Last One, came a stunning pulse of gladness, of mounting joy.

"Why--why, you want me to do this?" Trevor cried.

"Yes, Trevor! Yes! I had thought that the centuries of waiting for death would be long yet, and lonely. But this, this will free me now!" Dazed by surprise, Trevor slowly made a gesture, and their ship throbbed upward into the sky. Another gesture, and the technician beside him reached toward the key of the radio-detonator.

In that moment he felt the mind of Shannach crying out as in a vast, mingled music, a glad chorus of release against chords of cosmic sorrow for all that had been and would never be again, for the greatest and oldest of races that was ending.

The receding city below erupted flame and rock around the catacomb mouth as the key was pressed.

And the song of Shannach ebbed into silence, as the last of the children of mountains went forever into night.

Mars Minus Bisha

2016

It was close on midnight. Both moons were out of the sky, and there was only blackness below and the mighty blaze of stars above, and between them the old wind dragging its feet in the dust. The Quonset stood by itself, a half mile or so from the canal bank and the town that was on it. Fraser looked at it, thinking what an alien intrusion both it and he were in this place, and wondering if he could stick out the four and a half months still required of him.

The town slept. There was no help for him there. An official order had been given, and so he was tolerated. But he was not welcome. Except in the big trading cities, Earthmen were unwelcome almost anywhere on Mars. It was a lonesome deal.

Fraser began to walk again. He walked a lot at night. The days were ugly and depressing and he spent them inside, working. But the nights were glorious. Not even the driest desert of Earth could produce a sky like this, where the thin air hardly dimmed the luster of the stars. It was the one thing he would miss when he went home.

He walked, dressed warmly against the bitter chill. He brooded, and he watched the stars. He thought about his diminishing whiskey supply and the one hundred and forty-six centuries of written history gone into the dust that blew and tortured his sinuses, and after a while he saw the shadow, the dark shape that moved against the wind, silent, purposeful, and swift. Out of the northern desert someone was riding.

For the space of three heartbeats Fraser stood rigid and frozen, squinting through the darkness and the starshine at that moving

shape. Then he turned and ran for the Quonset. He was not allowed to possess a weapon, and if some of the fanatic northern tribesmen had decided to come and cleanse their desert of his defiling presence, there was little he could do but bar the door and pray.

He did not go inside, just yet. It was unwise to show fear until you had to. He stood by the open door, outside the stream of light that poured from it. He waited, tensed for that final leap.

There was only a single rider, mounted on one of the big scaly beasts the Martian nomads use as the Earthly desertfolk use camels. Fraser relaxed a little, but not too much. One man with a spear could be enough. The stranger came slowly into the light, wrapped and muffled against the night, curbing with a strong hand the uneasy hissings and shying of the beast at the unfamiliar smells that came to it from the Quonset. Fraser leaned forward, and suddenly the weakness of relief came over him. The rider was a woman, and she carried before her on the saddle pad a child, almost hidden in the folds of her cloak.

Fraser gave her the courteous Martian greeting. She looked down at him, tall and fierce-eyed, hating and yet somehow desperate, and presently she said,

"You are the Earthman, the doctor."

"Yes."

The child slept, its head lolled back against the woman's body. There was something unnatural in the way it slept, undisturbed by the light or the voices. Fraser said gently, "I am here only to help." The woman's arm tightened around the child. She looked at Fraser, and then in through the open door at the unfamiliar alien things that were there. Her face, made grim and hard by hunger and long marches, and far too proud for weeping, crumpled suddenly toward tears. She lifted

the bridle chain and swung the beast around, but before he had gone his own length she curbed him again. When she had turned once more toward Fraser she was calm as stone.

"My child is--ill," she said, very quietly, hesitating over that one word. Fraser held up his arms. "I'll see what I can do." The child--a girl Fraser saw now, perhaps seven years old--did not stir even when she was lifted down from the saddle pad. Fraser started to carry her inside, saying over his shoulder to the woman, "I'll need to ask some questions. You can watch while I examine--"

A wild harsh cry and a thunder of padded hooves drowned out his words. He whirled around, and then he ran a little way, shouting, with the child in his arms, but it was no use. The woman was bent low in the saddle, urging the beast on with that frantic cry, digging in the spurs, and in a minute she was gone, back into the desert and the night. Fraser stood staring after her, openmouthed, and swearing, and looking helplessly at the girl. There was an ominous finality about the way the woman had left. Why? Even if the child was dying, wouldn't a mother wait to know? Even if the sickness was contagious, would she ride the Lord knew how many miles across the desert with her, and then run?

There were no answers to those questions. Fraser gave up and went into the Quonset, kicking the door shut behind him. Passing through his combination living quarters and office, he went into the tiny infirmary which adjoined his equally small but well-equipped lab. Neither office nor infirmary had had many customers. The Martians preferred their own methods, their own healers. Fraser was not supposed, anyway, to be the local G.P. The Medical Foundation grant and the order of the Martian authorities permitting him to be here both stated that he was engaged in research on certain viruses. Noncooperation of the populace had not made his work any easier.

He became suddenly hopeful about the child.

Some two hours later he put her, still sleeping, into the neat white bed and sat down in the room outside, where he could watch her through the open door. He had a drink, and then another, and lighted a cigarette with hands that had trouble putting flame and tip together.

She was sound as a dollar. Thin, a bit undersized and undernourished like most Martian youngsters, but healthy. There was nothing whatever the matter with her, except that someone had thoroughly drugged her. Fraser rose and flung open the outer door. He went out, staring with a kind of desperation into the north, straining his ears for a sound of hooves. Dawn was not far off. The wind was rising, thickening the lower air with dust, dimming the stars. Out on the desert nothing moved, nor was there any sound. For the rest of that night and most of the morning that came after it, Fraser sat unmoving by the child's bed, waiting for her to wake. She did it quietly. One moment her face was as it had been, remote and secret, and in the next she had opened her eyes. Her small body stirred and stretched, she yawned, and then she looked at Fraser, very solemnly but without surprise. He smiled and said, "Hello."

She sat up, a dark and shaggy-haired young person, with eyes the color of topaz, and the customary look of premature age and wisdom that the children of Mars share with the children of the Earthly East. She asked hesitantly, "My mother--?"

"She had to go away for a while," Fraser said, and added with false assurance,

"but she'll be back soon." He was comforting himself as much as the child. She took even that shred of hope from him. "No," she said. "She will not come back." She laid her head between her knees and began to cry, not making any fuss about it. Fraser put his arm around

her.

"Here," he said. "Here now, don't do that. Of course she'll come back for you; she's your mother."

"She can't."

"But why? Why did she bring you here? You're not sick; you don't need a doctor."

The child said simply, "They were going to kill me." Fraser was silent for a long time. Then he said, "What?" The thin shoulders quivered under his arm. "They said I made the sickness that was in our tribe. The Old Men came, all together, and they told my father and mother I had to be killed. The Old Men are very powerful in magic, but they said they could not make me clean." She broke off, choking over a sob. "My mother said it was her right to do the thing, and she took me way off into the desert. She cried. She never did that before. I was frightened, and then she told me she wasn't going to hurt me, she was going to take me where I would be safe. She gave me some bitter water to drink, and told me not to be afraid. She talked to me until I went to sleep."

She looked up at Fraser, a frightened and bewildered little girl, and yet with a dignity about her, too.

"My mother said our gods have cursed me, and I would never be safe with my own people any more. But she said Earthmen have different gods, who wouldn't know me. She said you wouldn't kill me. Is that true?" Fraser said something under his breath, and then he told her, "Yes. That's true. Your mother is a wise woman. She brought you to the right place." His face had become perfectly white. He stepped back from the bed and asked,

"What's your name?"

"Bisha."

"Are you hungry, Bisha?"

She hesitated, still gulping down sobs. "I don't know."

"You think about it. Your clothes are there--put them on. I'll fix some breakfast."

He went out into the next room, sick and shaking with rage such as he had never experienced before. Superstition, ignorance, the pious cruelty of the savage. Get an epidemic going and when the magic of the Old Man fails, find a scapegoat. Call a child accursed, and send its own mother to slaughter it. Mentally, Fraser bowed to the fierce-eyed woman who had been too tough for those cowardly old men. Poor devil, only the certainty of death could have made her abandon her child to an Earthman--a creature alien and unknown, but having different gods--

"Why would they curse me?" asked Bisha, close behind him. "Our gods, I mean." Dressing was an easy proposition for her, with one thick garment to pull over her head, and sandals for her feet. Her hair hung over her face and the tears still dripped, and now her nose was running, and Fraser didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "They didn't," he said, and picked her up. "It's only superstitious nonsense--"

He stopped. That was not going to do. Seven years, a lifetime of training and belief, were not going to be wiped out by a few words from a stranger. He stood scowling, trying hard to think of a way to reach her, and then he became aware that she was looking at him with a child's intense and wondering stare, sitting quite stiffly in his arms. He asked, "Are you afraid of me?"

"I--I've never seen anyone like you before."

"Hm. And you've never seen a house like this one, either?" She glanced around, and shook her head. "No. It's--" She had no words for what it was, only a shiver of awe.

Fraser smiled. "Bisha, you told me the Old Men of your tribe were very powerful in magic."

"Oh, yes!"

He set her down and took her hand firmly in his. "I'm going to show you a few things. Come on."

He didn't know whether child psychologists and other ethical persons would approve of his method, but it was the only one he could think of. With the imposing air of one performing wonders, he introduced the child of the nomad tents to the miracles of modern gadgetry, from running water to record music and micro-books. As a climax, he permitted her to peer in through the door of the laboratory, at the mystic and glittering tangle of glass and chrome. And he asked her, "Are your Old Men greater in magic than I?"

"No." She had drawn away from him, her hands clutched tightly around her as though to avoid the accident of touching anything. Behind her from the living quarters Wagner's Fire Music still roared and rippled, out of a tiny spool of wire. Suddenly Bisha was down on her knees in an attitude of complete submission. "You are the greatest doctor in the world." Her word for "doctor" meant the same as "shaman." Fraser felt contrite and ashamed. It seemed a shabby trick to impress a child. But he stuck to it, saying solemnly, "Very well, Bisha. And now that that is understood, I tell you that curses have no power in this place, and I want no more talk of them." She listened,

not raising her head.

"You are safe here. You are not to be afraid. Look up at me, Bisha. Do you promise not to be afraid?"

She looked up. He smiled, and after a little she smiled back. "I promise."

"Good," he said, and held out his hand. "Let's eat." About then it dawned on Fraser that he was saddled with a child. For the four and a half months that remained of his term here he would have to feed, look after her and keep her hidden. The people of the town would hardly shelter her--Bisha's mother hadn't trusted them, certainly--and if they did, the nomads would only find her again when they came in for the fall trading. The only other alternative was the central government at Karappa, which would surely not condone ritual murder, but that was three hundred miles away. He had a trac-car, but the work going forward in the lab would not wait for him to trundle a slow six hundred miles up and down the desert. He could not possibly leave it.

Four and a half months. He looked down at the small figure pattering beside him, and wondered what in the devil he was going to do with her all that time.

* * *

At the end of a week he would have been lost without her. The awful loneliness and isolation of the Quonset was gone. There was another voice in the place, another presence, somebody to sit across the table from him, somebody to talk to. Bisha was no trouble. She had been brought up not to be a trouble, in a hard school where survival was the supreme lesson, and that same school had impressed on her young mind the wisdom of making the best of things. She was no

trouble at all. She was company, the first he had had in nearly nine months. He liked her.

Mostly she was cheerful and alert, too much engrossed in a new world of marvels to brood about the past. But she had her moods. Fraser found her one afternoon huddled in a corner, dull and spiritless, in the depths of a depression that seemed almost too deep for tears. He thought he knew what the trouble was. He took her on his lap and said, "Are you lonesome, Bisha?" She whispered, "Yes."

He tried to talk to her. It was like talking to a blank wall. At last he said helplessly, "Try not to miss them too much, Bisha. I know I'm not the same as your own family, and this place is strange to you, but try."

"You're good," she murmured. "I like you. It isn't that. I was lonesome before, sometimes."

"Lonesome for what, Bisha?"

"I don't know. Just--lonesome."

Queer little tyke, thought Fraser, but then most kids are queer to adult eyes, full of emotions so new and untried that they don't know quite how to come out. And no wonder she's depressed. In her spot, who wouldn't be?

He put her to bed early, and then, feeling unusually tired after a long day's work, he turned in himself.

He was awakened by Bisha, shaking him, sobbing, calling his name. Leaden and half dazed, he started up in alarm, asking her what was the matter, and she whimpered, "I was afraid. You didn't wake up."

"What do you mean, I didn't wake up?" He sank back again, weighted down with the sleep he had not finished, and began to bawl her out. Then he happened to look at the clock.

He had slept a trifle over fourteen hours.

Mechanically he patted Bisha and begged her pardon. He tried to think, and his brain was wrapped in layers of cotton wool, dull, lethargic. He had had one drink before going to bed, not enough to put anyone out for one hour, let alone fourteen. He had not done anything physically exhausting. He had been tired, but nothing the usual eight hours wouldn't cure. Something was wrong, and a small pinpoint of fear began to prick him.

He asked, "How long have you been trying to wake me?" She pointed to a chair that stood beside the window. "When I began, its shadow was there. Now it is there."

As near as he could figure, about two hours. Not sleep, then. Semi-coma. The pinprick became a knife blade.

Bisha said, so low that he could hardly hear her, "It is the sickness that was in our tribe. I have brought it to you."

"You might have at that," Fraser muttered. He had begun to shiver, from the onset of simple panic. He was so far away from help. It would be so easy to die here, walled in by the endless miles of desert.

The child had withdrawn herself from him, "You see," she said, "the curse has followed me."

With an effort, Fraser got hold of himself. "It hasn't anything to do with curses. There are people we call carriers-- Listen, Bisha, you've got

to help me. This sickness--did any of your tribesmen die of it?"

"No--"

Fraser trembled even more violently, this time from sheer relief. "Well, then, it's not so bad, is it? How does it--"

"The Old Men said they would die unless I was taken away and killed." She had retreated even farther now, to the other side of the room, to the door. Suddenly she turned and ran.

It was a minute before Fraser's numbed brain understood. Then he staggered up and followed her, out into the dust and the cold light, shouting her name. He saw her, a tiny figure running between the blue-black sky and the dull red desolation, and he ran too, fighting the weakness and the lassitude that were on him. He seemed to run for hours with the chill wind and the dust, and then he overtook her. She struggled, begging to be let go, and he smacked her. After that she was quiet. He picked her up, and she wailed, "I don't want you to die!"

Fraser looked out across the pitiless desert and held her tight. "Do you love me that much, Bisha?"

"I have eaten your bread, and your roof has sheltered me--" The old ceremonial phrases learned from her elders sounded odd in her young mouth, but perfectly sincere. "You are my family now, my mother and my father. I don't want my curse to fall on you."

For a moment Fraser found it hard to speak. Then he said gently, "Bisha, is your wisdom greater than mine?"

She shook her head.

"Is it your right to question it?"

"No."

"What is your right, Bisha, as a child?"

"To obey."

"You are never to do this again. Never, no matter what happens, are you to run away from me. Do you hear me, Bisha?"

She looked up at him. "You're not afraid of the curse, even now?"

"Not now, or any other time."

"You want me to stay?"

"Of course I do, you poor wretched little idiot!" She smiled, gravely, with the queer dignity he had seen in her before. "You are a very great doctor," she said. "You will find a way to lift the curse. I'm not afraid, now."

She lay warm and light in the circle of his arms, and he carried her back to the Quonset, walking slowly, talking all the way. It was odd talk, in that time and place. It was about a far-off city called San Francisco, and a white house on a cliff that looked out over a great bay of blue water. It was about trees and birds and fishes and green hills, and all the things a little girl could do among them and be happy. In the past few minutes Fraser had forgotten Karappa and the authorities of Mars. In the past few minutes he had acquired a family.

Back in the lab Fraser began work. He questioned Bisha about the sickness as she had seen it in her tribe. Apparently the seizures came at irregular intervals and involved nothing more than the comatose sleep, but he gathered that the periods of

unconsciousness had been much shorter, often no more than a few minutes. That could be accounted for by acquired resistance on the part of the Martians. Bisha, of course, had never had the sickness, and Fraser imagined that the accident of natural immunity had caused her to be picked for the tribal scapegoat.

His own symptoms were puzzling. No temperature, no pain, no physical derangement, only the lassitude and weakness, and by next morning they had passed off. He consulted his books on Martian pathology. There was nothing in them. He ran a series of exhaustive tests, even to a spinal tap on Bisha, which she took to be a very potent ritual of exorcism. He would rather have done one on himself, but that was impossible, and there might be evidence in the child of some latent organism.

The test was negative. All the tests were negative. He and Bisha were as healthy as horses.

Baffled but intensely relieved, Fraser began to think of other explanations for the ailment. It was not a disease, so it must be a side-effect of some physical condition, perhaps the light gravitation or pressure, or the thin atmosphere, or all three, that affected Martians as well as Earthmen, but in a lesser degree. He made a detailed report, thrusting into the back of his mind as a small worry that no such side-effect had ever been observed before. He waited nervously for a recurrence. It didn't come, and as the work in the lab demanded more and more of his attention he began to forget about it. The time that he woke up in his chair with an untasted drink beside him and no memory of having gone to sleep he put down resolutely to weariness and overwork. Bisha had retired with another fit of the blues, so she knew nothing about that, and he didn't mention it. She seemed to be getting over the curse fixation, and he wanted to keep it that way.

More time went by. Bisha was learning English, and she could name all the trees that stood around that house in San Francisco. The confinement in the small hut was getting them both down, and she was as anxious to leave as Fraser, but apart from that everything was going well. And then the nomads came in from the desert for the fall trading. Fraser barred the doors and drew the blinds. For three days and nights of the trading he and Bisha hid inside, with the distant sound of the pipes and the shouting coming to them muffled but poignant, the music and the voices of Bisha's own people, her own family among the tribes. They were hard days. At the end of them Bisha retired again into the remoteness of her private grief, and Fraser let her alone. On the fourth morning the nomads were gone. Fraser thanked whatever gods there were. Weary and dragged out, he went into the lab, hating the work now because it took so much out of him, anxious to have it finished. He started across the room to open the blind--

He was lying on the floor. The lights were on and it was night. Bisha was beside him. She seemed to have been there a long time. His arm ached. There were clumsy wrappings on it, stained with blood. Shards of glass littered the end of the lab bench and the floor. The familiar leaden numbness pervaded his whole body. It was hard to move, hard to think. Bisha crept to him and laid her head on his chest, silently, like a dog.

Very slowly Fraser's head cleared, and thoughts came into it. I must have fallen across the bench. Good God, what if I had broken the virus cultures?

Not only us, the whole town-- I might have bled to death, and what would happen to Bisha? Suppose I did die, what would happen to her? It took longer this time to return to normal. He stitched up the cuts in his arm, and the job was not neat. He was afraid. He was

afraid to leave his chair, afraid to smoke, afraid to operate the stove. The hours crawled by, the rest of the night, another day, another evening. He felt better, but fear had grown into desperation. He had only Bisha's word that this illness was not fatal. He began to distrust his own tests, postulating alien organisms unrecognizable to the medical science he knew. He was afraid for himself. He was terrified for Bisha.

He said abruptly, "I am going into the town."

"Then I will come with you."

"No. You'll stay right here. I'll be all right. There is a doctor in the town, a Martian healer. He may know--"

He went out, into the bitter darkness and the blazing of the stars. It seemed a long way to the town.

He passed the irrigated land, stripped of its harvest, and came into the narrow streets. The town was not old as they go on Mars, but the mud brick of the walls had been patched and patched again, fighting a losing battle with the dry wind and the scouring dust. There were few people abroad. They looked at Fraser and passed him by, swarthy folk, hot-eyed and perpetually desperate. The canal was their god, their mother and their father, their child and their wife. Out of its dark channel they drew life, painfully, drop by drop. They did not remember who had cut it, all the long miles from the polar cap across the dead sea bottoms, across the deserts and through the tunnels underneath the hills. They only knew that it was there, and that it was better for a man to sin the foulest sin than to neglect the duty that was on him to keep the channel clear. A cruel life, and yet they lived it, and were content. There were no torches to light the streets, but Fraser knew the house he wanted. The door of corroded metal opened reluctantly to his knock and closed swiftly behind him. The room was

small, lit by a smoky lamp and barely warmed by a fire of roots, but on the walls there were tapestries of incalculable age and incredible value.

Tor-Esh, the man of healing, did well at his trade. His robe was threadbare, but his belly protruded and his chops were plump unusual things among his lean people. He was fetish-priest, oracle, and physician, and he was the only man of the town who had shown any interest in Fraser and his work. It was not necessarily a friendly interest.

He gave Fraser the traditional greeting, and Fraser said stiffly, "I need your help. I have contracted an illness--"

Tor-Esh listened. His eyes were shrewd and penetrating, and the smile that was habitually on his face left them untouched. As Fraser talked, even that pretense of a smile went gradually away.

When he was finished, Tor-Esh said, "Again. More slowly, please, your Martian is not always clear."

"But do you know what it is? Can you tell me--" Tor-Esh said, "Again!"

Fraser repeated the things he had said, trying not to show the fear that was in him. Tor-Esh asked questions. Accurate questions. Fraser answered them. For a little bit Tor-Esh was silent, heavy-faced and grim in the flickering light, and Fraser waited with his heart pounding in his throat. Tor-Esh said slowly, "You are not ill. But unless a certain thing is done, you will surely die."

Fraser spoke in anger. "Talk sense! A healthy man doesn't fall off his feet. A healthy man doesn't die, except by accident."

"In some ways," said Tor-Esh very softly, "we are an ignorant people. It is not because we have not learned. It is because we have forgotten."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-- Look, I came to you for help. This is something I don't understand, something I can't cope with."

"Yes." Tor-Esh moved to the window, dark in the thickness of the wall. "Have you thought of the canal? Not only this one, but the many canals that bind Mars in a great net. Have you thought how they must have been built? The machines, the tremendous power that would have been needed, to make a dying world live yet a little longer. We are the children of the men who conceived and built them, and yet nothing is left to us but the end product of their work, and we must grub with our hands in the channel, digging out the blown sand."

"I know," said Fraser impatiently. "I've studied Martian history. But what--"

"Many centuries," said Tor-Esh, as though he had not heard. "Nations and empires, wars and pestilences, and kings beyond the counting. Learning. Science. Growth and splendor, and weariness, and decay. Oceans have rolled away into dust, the mountains have fallen down, and the sources of power are used up. Can you conceive, you who come from a young world, how many races have evolved on Mars?"

He turned to face the Earthman. "You have come with your thundering ships, your machines and your science, giving the lie to our gods, who we thought had created no other men but us. You look upon us as degraded and without knowledge--and yet you too are an ignorant people, not because you have forgotten, but because you have not yet learned. There are many sciences, many kinds of knowledge. There have been races on Mars who could build the canals. There were others who could see without eyes and hear without ears, who

could control the elements and cause men to live or die as they willed it, who were so powerful that they were stamped out because men feared them. They are forgotten now, but their blood is in us. And sometimes a child is born--" Fraser stiffened.

Tor-Esh said quietly, "There was talk among the nomads about a child." Nerves, drawing tight in Fraser's belly. Fear-nerves, and a chill sweat. I never mentioned Bisha. How could he know--

"I'm not interested in folklore. Just tell me--"

"There was a certain evil in the tribe. When the child was taken away, the evil departed. Now it is in your house. It seems that the mother lied. The child is not dead. She is with you."

"Witchcraft and sorcery," Fraser snarled. "Curses and cowardice. I thought you knew better, Tor-Esh." He started for the door. "I was a fool to come here." Tor-Esh moved swiftly and placed his hand on the latch, that it might not be lifted until he was through.

"We are ignorant folk, but still we do not kill children because we find pleasure in it. As for witchcraft and sorcery--words are words. Only facts have meaning. If you wish to die, that is your affair. But when you are dead the child must come into the town--and that is our affair. I will send word to the nomads. The girl is theirs, and the duty belongs to them; we do not wish it. But until they come I will set a wall around your house. You are likely to die quite soon. There were twenty in her tribe to share the curse, but you are alone, and we can take no chances."

Seeing, perhaps, the absolute horror in Fraser's face, Tor-Esh added, "It will be done mercifully. We bear the child no hate." He lifted the latch, and Fraser went into the narrow street. He turned toward the desert, and when he had crossed the plowed land he began to

run. He ran fast, but a rider passed him, speeding into the desert on the track of the caravan.

Bisha was waiting for him, sleepily anxious. He said, "You know where the food is. Pack as much as you can in the trac-car. Blankets, too. Hurry up, we're leaving."

He went into the laboratory. In violent haste, but with the utmost care, he destroyed the work of months, tempted as he did so to forget ethics and scatter his virus cultures broadcast into the town. Evil. Superstition. Legendary warlocks, tales of mighty wizards. He had read some of the old imaginative stories, written before space flight, in which ruthless Earthmen were pictured trampling innocent Mars under their feet. Logic and logistics both had made that impossible, when it came to the unromantic reality, and he was almost sorry. He would have liked to trample some Martians under his feet. When the laboratory was cleansed, he threw his notes together in a steel box and took them into the dust-tight shed at the back of the Quonset where the trac-car was housed. Bisha, tear-streaked and silent, had been patiently lugging supplies. He checked them rapidly, added a few more, and swung the child up into the cab. She looked at him, and he realized then that she was frightened. "Don't worry," he told her. "We're going to be all right."

"You're not taking me back?"

He said savagely, "I'm taking you to the Terran consulate at Karappa, and after that I'm taking you to San Francisco. And nobody had better try to stop me."

He flung open the shed door and climbed in beside her. The trac-car rolled out clanking across the sand. And already there were lines of torches, streaming out from the town, flung across his way.

He said, "Crouch down on the floor, Bisha, and stay there. You won't get hurt."

He poured on the power. The trac-car lurched forward, snorting and raising a great cloud of dust. He headed it straight for the wavering line of torches, ducking his head instinctively so that he was pressed close to the wheel. The cab was metal, and the glass parts of it were theoretically unbreakable, but he could see now in the torchlight the bright metal throwing-sticks of the townsmen, the swift boomerangs that could take off a man's head as neatly as a knife blade. He ducked.

Something hit the window beside him, starring it with a million cracks. Other things whacked and rattled viciously against the car. The torches fell away from in front of him, taking with them the dark startled faces of the men who held them. He was through the line. The open desert was before him. Three hundred miles, Karappa, and civilization.

If he could beat the nomads.

He had better beat them. It was his neck as well as Bisha's. He needed care. He needed it fast, from somebody who did not believe in curses. Dawn came, cold in a dark sky, veiled in dust. There was no canal between them and Karappa, no town, nothing but the fine dry sand that flowed like water under the wind.

"Look here," he said to Bisha. "If I should suddenly fall asleep--" He showed her how to stop the trac-car. "At once, Bisha. And stay inside the cab until I wake again." She nodded, her lips pressed tight with the effort of concentration. He made her do it several times until he was sure she would not forget.

The miles flowed out before and behind, to left and to right,

featureless, unbroken. How long would it take a single rider to catch a laden caravan? How long for the desert men on their fleet beasts to find a trail? The sand was soft and the clanking treads sank in it, and no matter how much you wanted to hurry you could go no faster than the desert would let you. Bisha had been thinking hard. Suddenly she said, "They will follow us." She was smart, too smart for her own good. Fraser said, "The nomads? We can beat them. Anyway, they'll soon give up."

"No, they'll follow. Not you, but me. And they will kill us both." Fraser said, "We're going to Earth. The men of Mars, and the gods of Mars, can't reach there."

"They are very powerful gods-- Are you sure?"

"Very sure. You'll be happy on Earth, Bisha." She sat close to him, and after a while she slept. There was a compass on the dash, a necessity in that place of no roads and no landmarks. Fraser kept the needle centered, setting a course as though with a ship. Time and the sand rolled on, and he was tired.

Tired.

You are likely to die quite soon--there were twenty in her tribe to share the curse--

The desert whispered. The sounds of the trac-car were accepted and forgotten by the ear, and beyond them the desert whispered, gliding, sliding, rippling under the wind. Fraser's vision blurred and wavered. He should not have pushed himself so hard at the work. Tired, no resistance to the sickness. That was why it had been light among the hardy nomads, more serious in him, an alien already worn down by months of confinement and mental strain. That was why.

--twenty in her tribe to share it--but you, alone--

Three hundred miles isn't so far. Of course you can make it. You've made it in an afternoon, on Earth.

This isn't Earth. And you didn't make it in a cold creeping desert. You, alone--

Damn Tor-Esh!

"Bisha, wake up. We need some food. And first off, I need that bottle." With a drink and some food inside him he felt better. "We'll keep on all night. By morning, easy, we'll be in Karappa. If the nomads are following, they'll never catch up."

Mid-afternoon, and he was driving in a daze. He lost track of the compass. When he noticed it again he was miles off his course. He sat for some minutes trying to remember the correct reading, trembling. Bisha watched him.

"Don't look so frightened," he said. His voice rose. "I'm all right. I'll get us there!"

She hung her head and looked away from him.

"And don't cry, damn it! Do you hear? I've got enough on my neck without you being doleful."

"It is because of me," she said. "You should have believed the words of the Old Men."

He struck her, the first time he had ever laid his hand on her in anger. "I don't want any more of that talk. If you haven't learned better in all this time--"

She retreated to the other side of the seat. He got the trac-car going again, in the right direction, but he did not go far. He had to rest. Just an hour's sleep would help. He stopped. He looked at Bisha, and like something that had happened years ago he remembered that he had slapped her.

"Poor little Bisha," he said, "and it isn't any of it your fault. Will you forgive me?"

She nodded, and he kissed her, and she cried a little, and then he went to sleep, telling her to wake him when the hand on the dashboard clock reached five. It was hard to rouse when the time came, and it was full dark before the trac-car was lurching and bucking its way out of the sand that had drifted around it. Fraser was not refreshed. He felt worse, if anything, sapped and drained, his brain as empty as an upturned bucket.

He drove.

He was off his course again. He must have dozed, and the car had made a circle to the south. He turned angrily to Bisha and said, "Why didn't you stop the car? I told you--"

In the faint glow from the dashboard he saw her face, turned toward the desert, and he knew the look on it, the withdrawal and the sadness. She did not answer. Fraser swore. Of all the times to pick for a fit of the blues, when he needed her so badly! She had enough to make her moody, but it was getting to be a habit, and she had no right to indulge her emotions now. She had already cost them precious hours, precious miles. He reached out and shook her.

It was like shaking a rag doll. He spoke to her sharply. She seemed not to hear. Finally he stopped the car, furious with her stubbornness, and wrenched her around to face him. For the second time he

slapped her. She did not weep. She only whispered, "I can't help it. They used to punish me too, but I can't help it."

She didn't seem to care. He couldn't touch her, couldn't penetrate. He had never tried to shake her out of these moods before. Now he found that he could not. He let her sink back into the corner, and he looked at her, and a slow corrosive terror began to creep through him because of the times before--the times that she had been like this.

The times immediately preceding the periods of blackness, the abnormal sleep. A pattern. Every time, the same unvaried pattern.

But it made no sense. It was only coincidence.

Coincidence, three times repeated? And how had Tor-Esh known so certainly that the child was with him?

Three times, the pattern. If it happened a fourth time, it could not be coincidence. If it happened a fourth time, he would know. Could he afford a fourth time?

Crazy. How could a child's moods affect a man?

He grabbed her again. A desperation came over him. He treated her roughly, more roughly than he could ever have dreamed of treating a child. And it did no good. She looked at him with remote eyes and bore it without protest, without interest.

Not a mood, then. Something else.

What?

Sometimes a child is born--

Fraser sent the trac-car rushing forward along the beam from its

headlights, a bright gash in the immemorial dark.

He was afraid. He was afraid of Bisha. And still he would not believe. Get to Karappa. There's help there. Whatever it is there'll be somebody to know the truth, to do something. Keep awake; don't let the curtain fall again. Think. We know it isn't a curse; that's out. We know it isn't a disease. We know it isn't side-effects; they'd have been observed. Besides, Tor-Esh understood.

What was it he said about old races? What did they teach us about them in the colleges? Too much, and not enough. Too many races, and not enough time. They could see without eyes and hear without ears, they could control the elements--

He tried to remember, and it was a pain and a torment. He looked at the child. Old races. Recessive genes, still cropping out. But what's the answer? ESP is known among the Martians, but this isn't ESP. What, then?

A remnant, a scrap of something twisted out of shape and incomplete?

What is she so lonesome for, that she doesn't know? The answer came to him suddenly, clear as the ringing of a bell. A page from a forgotten textbook, hoarded all these years in his subconscious, a casual mention of a people who had tried to sublimate the conditions of a dying world by establishing a kind of mental symbiosis, living in a tight community, sharing each others' minds and their potentials, and who had succeeded in acquiring by their mass effort such powers of mental control that for several centuries they had ruled this whole quadrant of Mars, leaving behind them a host of legends. And a child. A child normal and healthy in every way but one. Her brain was incomplete, designed by a cruel trick of heredity to be one of a community of interdependent minds that no longer existed. Like a

battery, it discharged its electrical energy in the normal process of thinking and living, and like a run-down battery it must be charged again from outside, because its own regenerative faculty was lacking. And so it stole from the unsuspecting minds around it, an innocent vampire draining them whenever it felt the need. It was draining his now. There had been twenty in her tribe, and so none of them had died as yet. But he was alone. And that was why the intervals had shortened, because he could no longer satisfy her need. And the Martians in their ignorance were right. And he in his wisdom had been wrong.

If he put her out now, and left her in the desert, he would be safe. He stopped the car and looked at her. She was so little and helpless, and he had come to love her. It wasn't her fault. Something might still be done for her, a way might be found, and in a city she would not be so deadly. Could he survive another plunge into the darkness?

He didn't know. But she had run away once of her own accord, for his sake. He could do no less than try.

He took her into his arms.

The curtain dropped.

Fraser woke slowly, in brazen sunshine and a great silence. As one creeping back from the edge of an abyss he woke, and the car was very still. There was no one in it with him. He called, but there was no answer. He got out of the car. He walked, calling, and then he saw the tracks. The tracks of the nomads' beasts, coming toward the car from behind. The small tracks of Bisha's feet, going back to meet them.

He stopped calling. The sound of his voice was too loud, too terrible. He began to run, back along that trail. It ended in a little huddle of clothing that had no life in it.

She had broken her promise to him. She had disobeyed and left him, asleep and safe, to meet the riders by herself, the riders who were following her, not him.

So small a grave did not take long to dig.

Fraser drove on. There was no more danger now, but he drove fast, seeing the desert in a blur, wanting only Earth—but not a white house there that for him would be forever haunted.

The Truants

Chapter I

Prelude to Nightmare

The farmhouse was tall and white. For eighty-three years it had stood in the green countryside where the shaggy Pennsylvania hills slope down to the meadows of Ohio. It was a wise house and a kindly one. It knew all there was to know of the wheeling seasons, birth and death, human passion, human sorrow.

But now something had come into the night that it did not know. From the starry sky it came, a sound and presence not of the Earth. The house listened and was afraid...

PRELUDE to nightmare. Hugh Sherwin was to remember very clearly, in the days that followed every second of those last calm precious minutes before his familiar world began to fall about him.

He sat in the old farmhouse living room, smoking and drowsily considering the pages of a dairy equipment catalogue. From outside in the warm May night came a chorus of squeals, yelps and amiable growlings where Janie played some complicated game with the dogs.

He remembered that the air was soft, sweet with the smell of the rain that had fallen that afternoon. He remembered the chirping of the crickets. He remembered thinking that summer was on its way at last. Lucy Sherwin looked up from her sewing. "I swear," she said, "that child grows an inch every day. I can't keep her dresses down to save me." Sherwin grinned. "Wait another five years. Then you can really

start worrying about her clothes."

His pipe had gone out. He lit it again. Janie whooped with laughter out on the lawn. The dogs barked. Lucy went on with her sewing. Sherwin turned the pages of the catalogue. After a time he realized, without really thinking of it, that the sounds from outside had stopped. The child, the dogs, the shrilling crickets, all were silent. And it seemed to Sherwin, in the stillness, that he heard a vast strange whisper hissing down the sky.

A gust of wind blew sharp and sudden, tearing at the trees. The frame of the old house quivered. Then it was gone and Lucy said, "It must be going to storm."

Janie's voice lifted up in a sudden cry. "Daddy! Daddy! Come quick!" Sherwin groaned. "Oh, Lord," he said. "What now?" He leaned over and called through the open window. "What do you want?"

"Come here, Daddy!"

Lucy smiled. "Better go, dear. Maybe she's found a snake."

"Well, if she has she can let it go again." But he rose, grumbling, and went out the door, snapping on the yard light.

"Where are you, Janie? What is it?"

He heard her voice from the far side of the yard, where the light did not reach. He started toward her. The dogs came running to him, a brace of lolling spaniels and a big golden retriever. They panting happily. Sherwin called again.

"Jane!"

She did not answer. He had passed out of the light now but there was

part of a moon and presently he saw her, a thin intense child with dark hair and very blue eyes, standing perfectly still and staring toward the west. She said breathlessly, "It's gone now, down in the woods." Sherwin followed her intent gaze, across the little creek that ran behind the house and the great white dairy barn, across the wide meadow beyond it, and farther still to the woods.

The thick stand of oak and maple and sycamore covered acres of marshy bottomland too low for pasture. Sherwin had never cleared it. The massed darkness of the trees lay silent and untroubled in the dim moonlight. The crickets had begun to sing again.

"What's gone?" demanded Sherwin. "I don't see anything."

"It came down out of the sky," Janie said. "A big dark thing, like an airplane without any wings. It went down into the woods."

"Nonsense. There haven't been any planes around and if one had crashed in the woods we'd all know it."

"It didn't crash. It just came down. It made a whistling noise." She all but shook him in her excitement "Come on! Let's go see what it is!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Jane! That's ridiculous. You saw a cloud or a big bird. Now forget it."

HE started back to the house. Janie danced in the long grass, almost weeping.

"But I saw it! I saw it!"

Sherwin said carelessly, "Well, it'll keep till tomorrow. Go down and make sure the gate's locked where the new calf is. The cow has been thinking about getting back to the pasture."

He had locked the gate himself but he wanted to get Janie's mind off her vision. She could be very insistent at times.

"All right," she answered sulkily. "But you wait. You'll see!" She went off toward the pen. Sherwin returned to his catalogue and his comfortable chair.

An hour later he called her to go to bed and she was gone. He hunted her around the barn and outbuildings, thinking she might have fallen and been hurt, but she was not there. The dogs too were missing. He stood irresolute and then a thought occurred to him and he looked toward the woods. He saw a tiny gleam of light--a flashlight beam shining through the black fringes of the trees.

Sherwin went down across the creek into the meadow. The dogs met him. They were subdued and restless and when he spoke to them they whined and rubbed against him.

Janie came out from the pitch darkness under the trees. She was walking slowly and by the torchbeam Sherwin saw that her face was rapt and her eyes wide and full of wonder. There was such a queer breathless hush about her, somehow, that he checked his first angry words. She whispered, "They came out of the ship, all misty and bright. I couldn't see them very well but they had wings, beautiful fiery wings. They looked like angels."

Her gaze turned upon him, not really seeing him. She asked, "Do you think they could be angels truly?"

"I think," said Sherwin, "that you're going to get a thrashing, young lady." He caught her arm and began to march her back across the meadow. "You know perfectly well that you're forbidden to go into the woods after dark!" She wasn't listening to him. She said, in the same odd distant voice, "Do you think they could be, Daddy?" "What are

you talking about?"

"Them. Could they be angels?"

"Angels!" Sherwin snorted. "I don't know why angels should turn up in our woods and if they did they wouldn't need a ship to fly around in."

"No," said Janie. "No, I guess they wouldn't."

"Angels! If you think you can excuse yourself with a story like that you're mistaken." He quickened the pace. "March along there, Miss Jane! My palm is itching."

"Besides," murmured Janie, "I don't think angels laugh--and they were laughing."

Sherwin said no more. There seemed to be nothing more to say. He was still baffled at the end of a stormy session in the living room. Jane clung stubbornly to her story, so stubbornly that she was on the verge of hysterics, and no amount of coaxing, reasoning or threatened punishment could shake her. Lucy sent her sobbing off to bed.

"I can't understand the child," she said. "I've never seen her like this before."

Sherwin shrugged. "Oh, kids get funny streaks sometimes. She'll forget it." He had forgotten it himself by morning. He saw Janie go off to school with Richard Allerton, the boy from the neighboring farm. They always walked together, trudging the half mile into the village. Janie was chattering sixteen to the dozen and now and again she whirled about in a sort of dance, holding out her arms like wings.

Toward noon Lucy called him in from the barn. "Miss Harker just

phoned," she told him. "She wanted to know if Janie had come home." Sherwin frowned. "You mean she isn't in school?"

"No--not after recess. Miss Harker said a number of children were missing. Hugh, I'm worried. You don't suppose--?"

"Nonsense. The little devil's playing hooky, that's all." He said angrily,

"What's got into the kid all of a sudden, anyway? All that cutting up last night--hey!" He turned and looked at the woods.

After a moment he said, "I'll bet that's it, Lucy. I'll bet she's taken her pals down to look at the angels'."

Lucy said anxiously, "I wish you'd go and see."

"That," said Sherwin, "is exactly what I'm going to do--right now!" THE dogs came with him, chasing each other merrily after imaginary rabbits. But when he reached the edge of the wood they stopped and would come no farther.

He remembered that they had not gone in with Janie the night before and he could not understand what was the matter with them. The woods were full of small game and normally the dogs spent half their time there, hunting by themselves.

He called, whistled and swore but they hung back, whimpering. Finally he gave up and went on alone, shaking his head.

First his child, now his dogs--everything seemed to have gone queer at once.

The day was leaden, heavy with the threat of rain. Under the thick-laced branches of the trees it was almost as dark as though it were night. The air was moist, dank with the smell of the marshes. Sherwin

forced his way through the undergrowth. From time to time he shouted Janie's name. Once, some distance away, he thought he heard a chorus of voices, the shrill laughter of a number of children. But the trees clashed and rustled in the wind so that he could not be sure--and Janie did not answer his call. Gradually, creeping in some secret way along the channels of his nerves, the realization came to him that he was not alone.

He began to move more slowly, looking about him. He could see nothing and yet his heart pounded and the sweat turned cold on his body. Presently he stopped.

The dark woods seemed to close around him, a smothering weight of foliage. He called again once or twice, quite sharply. And then he caught a flicker of motion among the trees.

He thought at first that it was the child, hiding from him, and that he had glimpsed her dress moving. But as he went toward it there was a subtle stirring in the underbrush that was never made by human feet. And as the green fronds were disturbed he saw a muted flash of fire and something, large and misty and glowing bright, darted swiftly through the lower branches. The leaves were shaken and there was a sound as of the beating of wings.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of it. He was not sure of anything about it, its shape, size or substance. He knew only that it was not Earthly. Sherwin opened his mouth but no cry came. Speechless, breathless, he stood for a moment utterly still. Then he turned and bolted.

Chapter II

Nightmare by Daylight

SHERWIN had not gone very deep into the woods. Within a few minutes he came plunging out into the open meadow and fetched up in the midst of part of his dairy herd. The cows went lumbering away in alarm and Sherwin stopped, beginning to be ashamed of himself.

He turned to look back. Nothing had followed. The dogs sighted him--he, had come out of the trees lower down, toward Allerton's land--and ran to greet him. He patted their rough reassuring bodies with a shaking hand and as his brief panic left him he became angry.

"It was only a trick of light among the trees," he told himself. "A wisp of ground fog, with the sun touching it." .

But there was no sun, no fog either.

He had seen something.

He would admit that. His pride forced him to admit it. That he should take to his heels, in his own woods...! But his mind, which he had found adequate for forty years of successful living, began to function normally, to reject the impossible thing it had thought such a short time before. The thing had startled him, the stealthy movement, the sudden glowing flash. That was why he had--imagined. Some great tropical bird, strayed far north, hiding frightened in the unfamiliar woods, rocketing away at his approach. That was what he had seen. That had been Janie's 'angel.' A big, strange bird.

His mind was satisfied. And yet his body trembled still and some inner sense told him that he lied. He ignored it. And he started only slightly when a man's voice hailed him loudly from across the meadow. He turned to see Allerton approaching. The man was like a large edition of his son, stocky, sunburned, with close-cropped head. Sherwin could see on his face all the signs of a storm gathered and

ready to break.

"Saw you down here, Hugh," said Allerton. "Is Rich at your place? The teacher says he's cut school."

Sherwin shook his head. "Jane's up to the same tricks. I'm pretty sure they're in the woods, Sam. Jane found something there last night--" He hesitated. Somehow his tongue refused to shape any coherent words. Allerton demanded impatiently, "Just what do you mean, she found something?"

"Oh, you know how kids are. They run a high fever over a new kind of bird. Anyway, I'm sure they're in there. I heard them awhile ago."

"Well," said Allerton, "what are we waiting for? That boy of mine has got some questions to answer!"

He started off immediately. Sherwin fought down a great reluctance to go again into the shadows under the trees and followed.

"Which way?" asked Allerton.

"I don't know," Sherwin said. "I guess we'll just have to call them." He called. Both men called. There was no answer. There was no sound at all except the wind in the treetops.

Shouting at intervals the names of their children the men went deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. In spite of himself Sherwin started nervously now and again when the branches were shaken by a sharper gust, letting the gray daylight flicker through. But he saw nothing. After a long time they splashed through an arm of the swamp and scrambled up onto a ridge covered with a stand of pines. Allerton halted and would go no farther.

"Blast it, Hugh, the kids aren't in here! I'm going back." But Sherwin was bent forward, listening. "Wait a minute. I thought I heard--"

The tall pines rocked sighing overhead. And then, through the rustle and murmur of the trees there came a burst of laughter and the cries of children busy with some game.

Sherwin nodded. "I know now where they are. Come on." He scrambled down the far side of the ridge, heading south and west. There was a knoll of higher ground where some ancient trees had fallen in a winter's storm, carrying the lighter growth with them. The children's voices had come from the direction of the clearing.

He went perhaps a hundred yards and then paused, frowning. He began to work back and forth in the undergrowth, growing more and more perplexed and somehow frightened. The heavy gloom melted away oddly between the trees and his vision seemed blurred.

"I can't find the clearing," he said.

"You've missed it. You took the wrong direction."

"Listen, these are my woods. I know them." He pointed. "The clearing should be ahead there but I can't see it. Look at the tree trunks, Sam. Look how they shimmer."

Allerton grunted. "Just a trick of the light." Sherwin had begun to shiver. He cried out loudly, "Jane! Jane, answer me!" HE began to thrash about in the underbrush and as he approached the strangely shimmering trees he was overcome by dizziness and threw his arm across his eyes.

He took a step or two forward blindly. Suddenly almost under his feet there was a crackle and a swish of something moving in haste, a

sharp, breathless giggle. "Hey!" said Allerton. "Hey, that's Rich!" He plunged forward angrily now, yelling, "Richard! Come here, you!" As he came up beside Sherwin he too was stricken with the queer giddiness. The two men clung to each other a moment and there came a squeal of laughter out of nowhere and the voice of a little girl whispering.

"They look so funny!"

Sherwin moved back carefully until he and Allerton were out of the space where the light seemed so oddly distorted. The dizziness left him immediately and he could see clearly again. A sort of desperate calm came over him.

"Jane," he called. "Will you answer me? Where are you?" He heard her voice--the teasing impish voice of a child having a wonderfully good time.

"Come and find me, Daddy!"

"All right," he said. "I will."

There began an eerie game of hide and seek.

The children were close at hand. The men could hear them plainly, the giggling and muffled whispers of a number of boys and girls, but they were not to be seen or found.

"They're hiding behind the trees in the undergrowth," said Allerton. He was angry now, thoroughly angry and baffled. He planted his feet, refusing to hunt any more. He began to roar at Richard.

"You've got to come out sometime," he shouted, "and the sooner you do, the better it'll be for you." He held up his wristwatch. "I'll give you

just two minutes to show up!"

He waited. There was a great whispering somewhere. A small boy's voice said scornfully, "All right, scairdycat! Go on." Richard's voice mumbled something in answer and then Richard himself appeared, oddly as though he had materialized out of the empty space between two maples. He shuffled slowly up to his father. Allerton grabbed him. "Now, then, young man! What are you up to?"

"Nothing, Pa."

"What's going on here? Who's with you?"

"I don't know. I was just--playing."

"I'll teach you to play games with me," said Allerton and laid on. Richard howled.

Without warning, from out of nowhere, terrifyingly bright and beautiful in the shadowy darkness, two misty shapes of flame came rushing. Sherwin caught a glimpse of Allerton's face, stark white, his mouth fallen open. Then the men were enveloped in a whirling of fiery wings. This time there was no doubt. The creatures were not birds. They were not anything Sherwin had ever seen or dreamed of before. They were not of this world.

A chill of absolute horror came over him. He flung up his hands to ward the things away and then the buffeting of the flaring pinions drove him to his knees. The wings were neither flame nor fire but flesh as solid as his own. The brightness was in their substance, a shining of inner light. But even now, close as they were, he could not see the creatures clearly, could not tell exactly the shape of their bodies.

Tiny lightnings stabbed from them at the men. Allerton yelled in mingled pain and panic. He let go of Richard and the boy fled away into the undergrowth. A chorus of frightened cries rose out of the blankness among the trees and Janie's voice screamed, "Don't you hurt my Daddy!" A last rough thrashing of the wings, a final warning thrust of the queer small lightnings and the things were gone. A great silence descended on the woods, broken only by furtive rustlings where the unseen children crept away. Allerton stared at his hand, which showed a livid burn across the back.

Presently he raised his head. Sherwin had never seen a man so utterly shaken.

"What were they?" he whispered.

SHERWIN drew a deep, unsteady breath. The beating of his heart rocked him where he stood. He tried several times before he could make the words come.

"I don't know. But they want the kids, Sam. Whatever they are they want the kids."

"Richard," said Allerton. "My boy!" He caught Sherwin's arm in a painful grasp. "We've got to stop those things. We've got to get help!" He went away, crashing like a bull through the underbrush, tearing at the branches that impeded him. Sherwin followed. After what seemed an eternity he saw gray daylight ahead and the open field.

"Sam," he said, "wait a minute. Who are we going to ask for help? Who's going to believe us?"

"I'm going to call the sheriff and he blasted well better believe me!"

"He won't," said Sherwin heavily. "He'll laugh in your face. What are

you going to tell him, Sam? Are you going to say you saw angels or devils or things that came out of the sky in a ship you can't find and can't see?" Allerton's jaw set hard. "I'm going to try anyway. I'm not going to let Them get hold of my kid!"

"All right," Sherwin said. "My place is closer. Use my phone." He ran beside Allerton across the meadow but he was dreadfully afraid and without hope.

Lucy was waiting in the yard. She gave a little scream when she saw their faces and Sherwin said sharply, "Jane's all right. Go ahead and make your call, Sam. I'll wait here."

He put his arm around Lucy. "The kid's perfectly safe this time. But—" How to say it, even to your own wife? How to tell her, without sounding insane even to yourself?

"Listen, Lucy, there's some kind of—animal in the woods. I don't know what it is yet. Something mighty queer. Janie mustn't go in there again, not for one minute. You've got to help me watch her."

He was still evading her questions when Allerton came out again, red-faced and furious.

"He didn't believe a word of it. He told me to get off the bottle." Something desperate came into Allerton's eyes. He sat down on the steps. "We've got to think, Hugh. We've got to think what we're going to do. If it was fall we could burn the woods."

"But it isn't fall," said Sherwin quietly, "it's spring. The kids are coming now. I'm going to talk to them." 330

A raggle-taggle of small forms had appeared among the fringe of trees. They dispersed in various directions and Richard and Jane

came on alone toward the house. They walked very close together, bent over some object that Jane held in her hands.

"Yes," said Sherwin, "they're the only ones that can help us. Let me handle this. I don't want them frightened off."

The children came on, slowly and reluctantly now that they saw their parents waiting. They had . straightened up rather guiltily and stepped apart a little and Sherwin noticed that Janie now held one hand behind her back.

Her face had a peculiar expression. It was as though she looked with pity upon adults, who had got somehow far beneath her--so far that even their laws and punishments could not affect her much. "What have you got there, Jane?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"May I have it, please?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated, her chin set stubbornly, and then she said, "I can't, Daddy. They made it for me, for my very special own. It won't even work unless I want it to."

Sherwin felt a chill contraction of the nerves. He held his voice steady.

"Who are They?"

"Why, Them," she said, and nodded toward the woods. "I found Them, you know. I was first. That's why They gave me the present." Suddenly she burst out, "Daddy, They didn't mean to frighten you just now. They're sorry They burned Mr. Allerton's hand. They thought he was hurting Richard." Lucy, whose face had grown quite pale, was on the verge of speaking. Sherwin gave her a stern look and said to the

child, "That's all right, Janie. May I see your present?"

Still doubtful, but very proud, she extended her hand. In it was a flat smooth oval of the clearest crystal Sherwin had ever seen.

"Lean over, Daddy. There, like that. Now watch. I'm going to make it work." She placed her hands in a certain way, holding the crystal between them. At first he could see nothing but the reflection of the cloudy sky. Then, slowly, the crystal darkened, cleared...

Chapter III

Terror from Outside

THE Ohio farmland vanished, forgotten. Sherwin bent closer over the uncanny thing held in the hands of his child.

He was looking at another world.

Pictured small and far-away in the tiny oval, he glimpsed a city built all of some glassy substance as pure and bright as diamond, half veiled in a misty glory of light.

The high slim towers swam in a sort of lambent haze, catching soft fire from the clouds that trailed their low-hung edges over them, rose and purple' and burning gold. Above in the glowing sky two suns poured out muted, many-colored lights as of an eternal sunset.

And through that shining city that was never built for human kind shackled to the land, flame-winged creatures soared--creatures large and small, coming and going between the diamond spires. As from a remote distance Sherwin heard Janie's voice, wistful and eager.

"It's where They live, Daddy, way off in the sky. Isn't it just like

fairyland? And look at this!"

The scene shifted as she spoke. Sherwin looked into a nightmare gulf of black and utter emptiness. He seemed to be racing through it at incredible speed, watching the red and green and yellow stars go plunging and streaming past.

"It's what They saw on Their way! Oh, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?" It was the tone of the child's voice, far more than the unearthly vision in the crystal, that sent the pang of fear like a knife into Sherwin's heart. He reached out and struck the thing from her hands, and when it fell he kicked it away in the long grass. Before she could cry out her anguish he had caught her fast.

"What do They want with you?" he demanded. "Why do They give you things to tempt you? What do They want with you?"

"They only want to be friends!" She pulled free of his grasp, her eyes blazing with tears and anger. "Why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to spoil everything? They haven't hurt anybody. They haven't done a thing wrong. They gave me a better present than anybody ever gave me before and now you've gone and broken it!"

She would have hunted for the crystal but Sherwin stopped her. "Go to your room, Jane. Lucy, go with her. Try to get her calmed down." Looking at his daughter's white rebellious face, Sherwin felt that he had blundered badly. He had roused her antagonism where he wanted to help. But the unhealthy excitement in her voice had frightened him. He had not realized that Their hold on her was already so strong. With full force the realization of what he had seen in the evil little toy came over him. He was not an imaginative man. He had never before looked up at the sky and shuddered, thinking what lay beyond it. He felt suddenly naked and defenseless, very small before huge unknown powers. Even the green familiar land did not comfort

him. They were in the woods. And if They could come, then there were no harriers against anything. He saw Allerton scuffling about in the grass. Presently he found what he was looking for and stamped it methodically to bits under his heavy boots.

"I saw into it too," he said, "over your shoulder. I don't know what kind of devilment it is but it's no fit thing to have around." Thud, thud, went the great earth-caked boots. Richard was crying.

"They thought pictures into it," he said. "They were going to make me one too." He glared at his father, and at Sherwin. "Janie's right. You just want to be mean."

Allerton finished his task and went to Richard. There was something almost pathetic in his expression.

"Rich," he said, "did They promise you anything else? Did They ask you to do anything?"

Richard shook his head, looking sulky and mulish, and Sherwin could not tell whether or not the boy was holding back.

"Can They talk to you, Rich?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

"I don't know. You can hear Them, sort of, inside your head. They can make you see pictures too, anything They want you to see. Stars and comets and all kinds of funny places with funny-looking people and animals and sometimes no people at all."

His round tear-streaked face was taking on that same remote, rapt look that had upset Sherwin so in Janie. He whispered, "I'd sure like

to ride in that ship, right across the sky. I'll bet it goes faster than a jet plane. I'd go to all those places and get a lot of things nobody ever saw before and then I'd--"

He broke off in the middle of a dream. Allerton had caught him by the arm.

"You're not going anywhere but home," he said. "And I'll lock you in, if I have to, to keep you there." His eyes met Sherwin's. "See you later, Hugh." He took the boy away down the road. Sherwin went into the house. He locked the door behind him and loaded his shotgun and set it by. then he sat down and put his head in his hands and listened dully to the beating of his own heart and wondered.

LUCY came downstairs. "I gave her some aspirin," she said. "She's sleepy now." She sat on the floor at Sherwin's feet and put her arms around his waist. "Hugh, you've got to tell me what's going on!" He told her slowly, past caring whether she believed him or not.

"Sam and I both saw Them. I thought They were going to kill us, but They only burned Sam's hand. That's why the kids played truant today, to go to Them. There was a whole bunch there, laughing--" He did not tell Lucy that somehow They had made the children, Themselves and the clearing invisible. Her face was white enough already. She did not say much. She rose and stood for a moment with her hands clasped hard together. Then she ran back up the stairs and Sherwin heard the door of Janie's room open and then shut tight.

Toward evening he called Allerton. "I gave Rich a good thrashing," Allerton said. "He's shut in his room and his mother's with him. They'll be all right, Hugh. As long as we watch them the kids will be all right." His voice did not carry much conviction. Sherwin hung up. He sat in the big chair in the bay window overlooking the woods. He did not

turn on the lights. The clouds had broken under the rising wind and the moon threw a pale beam into the high-ceilinged room, touching the ivy wallpaper and the tall white doors. Sherwin waited, as a man waits in dubious refuge, crouched in the chair, trembling from time to time. The silence of the old house was painful in his ears.

He must have dozed, for when suddenly he started up in alarm the moon was gone. And They had come out of the woods.

Even through his hatred and his fear Sherwin sensed that They were glad to be free of the confinement of the trees. The wind swept strong across the open meadow and They rose and swooped upon it, a number of Them, their cloudy wings streaking across the rifted stars in wheeling arcs of fire. He took the shotgun across his knees. His hands were quite steady, but very cold. He watched Them and he could not help thinking, How beautiful They are!--and he loathed Them for their beauty because it was luring his child away from him.

His child, Allerton's child--the children of the farms, the village, the other ones who had gone secretly into the woods. What could They want with the human children, these creatures from outside? What dreadful game were They playing, the bright-winged demons with Their hellish toys?

You can hear them talking inside your head. They can make you see pictures too--anything They want you to see.

Suppose They could control the minds of the children? What would you do then? How would you fight it?

Tears came into Sherwin's eyes. He sat with the shotgun in his lap and watched Them frolic with the dark sky and the wind and he waited. But They did not come near the house. Suddenly They darted away, high up, and were gone. He did not see Them again that night.

He debated in the morning whether to send Jane to school at all. Then he thought that she would be better there than cooped up brooding in the house, within sight of the woods. He drove her in himself--a silent, resentful little girl with whom he found it difficult to speak--and passed Allerton's car on the road. Both men were taking the same precautions. They took the children into the small white schoolhouse and spoke to Miss Harker about keeping a careful eye on them. Then the men went home to their work. The day was oppressive and still with great clouds breeding ominously in the sultry air. Sherwin's uneasiness increased as the hours went by. He called the school twice to make sure Jane was there and he was back again a full hour before the last bell, waiting to take her home. He sat for a time in the car, growing more and more nervous. The leaves of the trees hung utterly motionless. He was drenched with sweat and the heavy humid air was stifling.

A thunderhead gathered in the west, pushing its boiling crest with terrible swiftness across the sky. He watched it spread and darken to the color of purple ink and then the little ragged wisps of dirty white began to blow underneath its belly and the wind came with sudden violence across the land.

He knew it was going to be a bad one. He left the car and went into the schoolhouse. It was already too dark to see inside the building and the lights came on as he pushed open the door to Janie's classroom. Miss Harker glanced up and then smiled.

"It's going to storm," he said rather inanely. "I thought I'd wait inside."

"Why of course," she answered and pointed out a chair. He sat down. Miss Harker shook her head, remarking on the blackness of the sky. Two boys were shutting the windows. It was very hot and close. Richard and Janie sat in their places but Sherwin noticed that several seats were empty.

"More truancy?" he asked, trying to be casual. Miss Harker peered sternly at the class.

"I'm ashamed of them. They've spoiled a perfect record for attendance and they seem to have infected the whole school. There are several missing from other classes today. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble unless this stops!"

"Yes," said Sherwin. "Yes, I'm afraid there is." THE first bolt of lightning streaked hissing out of the gloom with thunder on its heels. The little girls squealed. Rain came in a solid mass and then there was more lightning, coming closer, the great bolts striking down with a snarl and a crack. Thunder shook the sky apart and abruptly the lights went out.

Instantly there was turmoil in the dark room. Miss Harker's voice spoke out strongly. The children quieted somewhat. Sherwin could see them dimly, a confusion of small forms milling about, gathering toward the windows. There was a babble of excited whispering and all at once a smothered but triumphant laugh that he knew came from Janie.

Then a positive fury of whispers out of which he heard the words, "Billy said he'd tell Them we couldn't come!"

Sherwin rose. He looked over the crowding heads out the window. A blue-white flare, a crash that made the walls tremble and then he saw shapes of fire tossing and wheeling in the sky.

They had come into the village under cover of the storm. They were circling the schoolhouse, peering in, and the children knew it and were glad.

"What strange shapes the lightning takes!" said Miss Harker's cheerful voice. "Come away from the windows, children. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

She marshalled them to their seats again and Sherwin clung to the window frame, feeling a weakness he could not control, watching the bright wings play among the blazing bolts.

They did not try to enter the school. They moved away as the storm moved, swooping and tumbling along the road and across the fields, overturning hayricks, putting the frightened cows to flight, ripping slates from the roofs of houses and whirling them on the wind. Even Miss Harker watched, fascinated, and he thought surely she must realize what They were. But she only said in a rather shaken voice, "I never saw lightning behave like that before!"

The flashes grew more distant, the thunder lessened and she sighed "My, I'm glad that's over."

She went hack to her desk and began to straighten up the ends of the day's schoolwork. Even the rain had stopped when Sherwin took Janie and Richard out to the car and drove them both home. But the sky was still leaden and fuming and all that afternoon and evening distant storms prowled on the horizon and the air was heavy with thunder.

Sherwin watched his daughter. His nerves were drawn unbearably taut as by long tension growing toward a climax. He smoked his pipe incessantly and started at every flicker of far-off lightning.

Shortly after nine, from the village, there came a sound like the final clap of doom and immediately afterward the trees and even the house itself seemed to be pulled toward the source of the sound by a powerful suction of air.

It was all over in a minute or two. Sherwin ran outside but there was nothing to see except a violent boiling of the clouds. He heard the phone ring and then Lucy cried out, "Hugh, there's been a tornado in the village!"

Sherwin hesitated briefly. Then he returned to the house and locked Janie carefully in her room and gave Lucy instructions about the doors.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told her. "I've got to see what's happened."

She was thinking of Them, playing in the heart of the storm. Before he could get his own car out he heard Allerton sand his horn from the road.

"Tornado, huh?" said Allerton. "What it looked like, alright. I figured they might need help. Climb in." They had no trouble finding the center of damage. There was a crowd already there and growing larger every second, shouldering, staring, making a perfect explosion of excited talk. The schoolhouse was gone, lifted clean from the foundations. Sherwin felt a cold and heavy weight within him. He lotted at Allerton and then he began to question the men there.

Nothing else had been touched by the freak tornado--only the schoolhouse and that was not wrecked but gone. Several people had seen what they took to be lightning striking all around the building just before it vanished with the clap of thunder and the violent sucking of air. Sherwin took Allerton by the arm and drew him aside. He told him what he had seen that afternoon.

"They didn't like the school, Sam. It kept the kids away from Them." He stared at the bare foundations, the gaping hole of the cellar. "They

didn't like it, so it's gone."

A MAN came running up to the crowd. "Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, my wife just got a call from her sister down by the state line. You know what that wind did? It took the schoolhouse clear down there and sat it on a hill, just as clean as a whistle!"

A chill and desperate strength came to Sherwin. "This has got to be stopped, Sam. The devil alone knows what They're up to but it'll be the kids next. I'm going to try something. Are you with me?"

"All the way."

Sherwin fought his way through the crowd. He got to the center of it and began to yell at the men and women until they turned to look at him. A story had come into his head—a wild one but less wild than the truth and he told it to them.

"Listen, while you're all here together! This doesn't have anything to do with the tornado but it's more important. How many of you have had kids playing hooky out of school?"

A lot of them had and said so.

"I can tell you where they're going," Sherwin said. "Down in my woods. There's somebody hiding out in there. Escaped convicts maybe, or men running from the law. They've got the kids bringing them food, helping them out. That's why they're ducking school. Isn't that so, Sam?" Allerton took his cue. "It sure is! Why, my boy's locked up in his room right now to keep him out of trouble."

The crowd began to mutter. A woman cried out shrilly. Sherwin raised his voice. There was a deadly earnestness about him that carried more conviction than any mere words.

"I'm afraid for my daughter," he said. "I'm afraid for all our children unless we clean those--those criminals out of the woods! I'm going home and get my gun. Do any of you men want to come with me?" They roared assent. They forgot the freak wind and the vanished schoolhouse. This was something that threatened them and their homes and families, something they could understand and fight.

"Call the sheriff!" somebody yelled. "Come on, you guys! I'm not going to have my kids murdered."

"We'll use my house as a starting point," Sherwin told them. "Come as soon as you can."

The men of the village and the nearby farms dispersed, calming their women. Sherwin wondered how they would feel when they learned the truth. He wondered if bullets would kill Them. At any rate, it was something to try, a hope.

Allerton drove him home, racing down the dark road. He dropped Sherwin off and went on to his own place to get his rifle. Sherwin ran into the house. He found Lucy sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Her eyes had a dreadful vacant look. He shook her and it was like shaking a corpse.

"Lucy!" he cried. "Lucy!" He began to slap her face, not hard, and plead with her.

After a bit she saw him and whispered, "I heard a little noise, just a little noise, and I went upstairs to Janie's room..." Tears came then. He left her crying and went with great strides up the stairs. The door to Janie's room was open. He passed through it. The room was in perfect order, except that the northwest corner had been sheared clean away, making a narrow doorway into the night.

The child was gone.

Chapter IV

Truant's Reckoning

HE had looked for Janie's body on the ground below her room. He had not found it. He had known it would not be there. He had given Lucy sedatives and talked her into quietness with words of reassurance he did not feel himself.

Now the men from the village were coming. The cars blocked the drive, formed long lines on the road. The men themselves gathered on the lawn, hefting their rifles and their shotguns and their pistols, talking in undertones that held an ugly note, looking toward the black woods. Some of them were afraid. Sherwin knew they were afraid but they were angry too and they were going. They had a peaceful lawful place to live and they were willing to go into the woods by night with their guns to keep it so.

He came out on the steps and spoke to them. "They've taken my daughter," he said. "They came and took her from the house." They looked at his face in the glare of the yard light and after their first outraged cry they were silent. Presently one said, "I called my kid but I couldn't find him."

There was more than one father then who remembered that he had not seen his child at home. And now they were all afraid but not for themselves. Sherwin went down the steps. "Let's go." He was halfway across the little bridge when Allerton came running, crying Sherwin's name. "They took Richard," he said. "My boy is gone." The men poured out across the meadow, going like an army on the march, running in the long grass--running to where the cloudy moon

was lost beneath the branches of the trees.

"Head toward the knoll," cried Sherwin. He told them the direction. "I think that's where They are. And be careful of the swamp." They went in among the close-set trees, laboring through the undergrowth, the beams of their flashlights leaping in the utter dark. Sherwin knew the woods. He rushed on ahead and Allerton clung close behind him. Neither man spoke. Lightning still danced faintly on the horizon and now and again there was a growl of thunder. The mists were rising from the marsh. Abruptly Sherwin stopped. From behind him came a yell and then the crash and roar of a falling tree. There was silence then and he shouted and a distant voice answered.

"Tree struck by lightning, right in front of us. No one hurt!" He could hear them thrashing around as they circled the fallen tree. And then there was a second crash, and another, and still another. Sherwin said, "It's Them. They're trying to block the way." Muffled voices swore. The men were trying to scramble out of the trap that had been made for them. Sherwin hurried on, Allerton panting at his side. He could not wait for the men. He could not wait now for anything. A swoop and a flash of light, an ominous cracking--and ahead a giant maple toppled to the earth, bearing down the younger trees, creating an impassable barrier.

"All right," said Sherwin to an unseen presence. "I know another way." He turned aside toward the river. In a minute or two he was ankle deep in mud and water, splashing heavily along an arm of the swamp. Reeds and saplings grew thick but there were no trees here to be thrown down against them.

The men went fast, careless of how they trod, and all at once Allerton cried out and fell. He floundered in the muck, trying to rise. Sherwin lifted him up and he would have gone on but he went to his hands and knees again, half fainting.

"I've hurt my ankle. A loose stone--it turned!" He had lost his rifle. Sherwin got an arm around him and held him up. He was a big man and heavy. It was hard going after that and very slow. Sherwin would have left him but he was afraid that Allerton might faint and drown in the inches of sour water.

The ridge loomed up before them, the tall pines black against a brooding sky. The men staggered out onto hard ground and Sherwin let his burden drop.

"Wait here, Sam. I'm going on alone."

Allerton caught at him. "Look!"

Cloudy wings soared above them, swift as streaming fire and one by one the tall pines went lordly down, struck by the lightning. They carried in Their hands. The ridge was blocked.

When the night was still again, and empty, Allerton said, "I guess that does it, Hugh. We're licked."

Sherwin did not answer. He remained motionless, standing like an old man, his shoulders bent, his head sunk forward on his breast. THE earth began to vibrate underneath his feet. A sound, more felt than heard, went out across the woods--deep, powerful throbbing that entered Sher-win's heart and shook it and brought his head up sharply.

"You hear that, Sam?"

"What is it? Thunder?"

"It's machinery," Sherwin whispered. "Motors, starting up." Unfamiliar

motors, so strong and mighty that they could shake the ground and still be silent. Their motors. Their ship!

"They're getting ready, Sam. They're going to leave. But what about the kids? Sam--what about Janie and the kids?"

He turned and fled back into the swamp, along the ridge and around it, and faced a wide expanse of stinking mud and mist. He started out across it. The marsh quaked beneath him. Going slowly and by day he would have been afraid, wary of the bog-holes and the sucking sands. He did not think of them now. He could not think of anything but that vast and evil thrumming that filled the air, of what it meant to his child--his child, that might have died already, or might be...

Sherwin had said. And then Sherwin heard a silent voice speaking within his mind.

He knew that the children could hear it far more clearly than he. Their minds were young and plastic, open wide to all things. But he could hear it well enough.

What are you afraid of? it said. Come on! There are all sorts of worlds beside this one. We'll show them to you. We'll show you how the stars look, out beyond your sky. We'll teach you how to run the ship. Think of the fun we can have together, all across the galaxy!

OTHER voices joined in, telling of colored Suns and bright strange planets, of toys and pets and treasures, of adventures unthinkable. Child's talk, couched in the language of children--cunningly wrought to lure them on with promises that set their heads whirling with wonder and delight. Suppose you do get punished when we bring you back? Are you going to miss it all just because you're afraid of a little punishment?

"That's right," said Janie, turning to the others. "Think what They're going to catch when They get home and They're not afraid. They didn't let Their parents stop them!"

"No sir!" said Richard. "They weren't scared." Slowly, very slowly, Sherwin said, "Their parents? Jane, did you say --Their parents?"

"Yes, Daddy. They ran away and They've had all kinds of fun and haven't got hurt a bit and They weren't any older than we are. And if They can do it, so can we!"

Parents!

They ran away, and They aren't any older than we....

Sherwin said nothing for a long moment.

At last he whispered, "Do you mean that They are children, too?"

"Why, of course," she answered. "I thought you knew." Sherwin began to laugh. It was not healthy laughter and he made himself stop it at once.

Children!

The fright, the anguish, the pain of the past two days and nights—a whole village in arms, terrified parents combing the woods for the missing, the awful dread of the unknown that had beset him and Allerton!

Children. Children had done all this!

He looked at Them and he could not believe it. "It's a lie," he said. "It's a lie They've told you to lead you on."

Jane said impatiently, "Don't be silly, Daddy. Why would They want to play with us if They were grown up?"

He remembered the winged creatures, large and small, going between the diamond towers of the city he had glimpsed on the world of a distant star. Large and small, old and young...

Why not?

A race that could build such ships to ply between the Suns, a race that could put thought into crystals and make themselves unseen, that could cause whole buildings to vanish and topple trees at will--would not their young be children still in spite of a vaster knowledge?

He heard Them laugh, soundless gleeful laughter, as though They had played an excellent trick upon him to frighten him so, and he knew that it was true.

Children--these unhuman creatures with all their unholy powers. Truant children, like his own!

A queer sort of anger came to Sherwin then and with it a faint and desperate hope. He straightened up and turned to face the two that held him. He told Them sternly, "Let me go!"

They relaxed their grasp but the others had come closer now and were around him, mingled with the children of Earth.

Sherwin was thinking, The species doesn't matter, even a lion cub will obey. Maybe--Maybe!

He spoke to Them. "You're telling our children not to be afraid of punishment. What are your own elders going to say to you when you get back?"

They rustled Their wings and did not answer. "You're being very brave, aren't you? You're just going to go on having fun. Well, I know kids, and I know different. You're afraid. You're afraid to go home!" Their voices reached him in defiant chorus.

No! We are not afraid!

"Oh, yes you are. You're scared stiff. You've stolen a ship and run away and there'll be the devil to pay about it and you know it." He stepped toward Them, forcing himself to be stern and assured, the single adult among a group of children, the angry adult asserting his authority. He hoped They could not read the fear that threatened to choke the words in his throat.

"If I were you," he told Them, "I'd get home and face the music before you make things any worse. The longer you stay away, the harder it'll be for you. And you might as well know right now, nobody's going with you!" He turned to his own. "Come here to me, Jane. The rest of you, get home as fast as you can make it. Your fathers are coming and you know what you'll get if they catch you here!"

He waited. There was nothing more to do but wait. For a moment no one moved nor spoke. The children hung their heads and looked at each other sidelong and it seemed to Sherwin that the wings of the strangers drooped a little.

Imperceptibly the two groups began to draw apart.

The little girl who had spoken before ran suddenly into the woods, crying. And They commenced to mutter among Themselves.

They were speaking only to each other now and Sherwin could not hear Their thoughts but it seemed that They were quarreling, some hanging back, others arguing with flashing motions of Their wings.

Jane came slowly and stood beside Sherwin. Her eyes were on the earth. She did not raise them.

They began to drift toward the ship. They were not talking now. They stopped beside the hatchway and looked back. Most of the human children had already melted into the darkness between the trees. Sherwin took Jane's hand and held it. They must have called to her, for she said good-by and They went slowly and gloomily into the ship. The hatchway closed.

Sherwin took his daughter into his arms and carried her away. Behind him the heavy throbbing deepened and then seemed to rise and fade. Looking upward through a rift in the branches he saw a dark shape sweep out across the stars and vanish, bearing those other children to their homeplace far across the sky.

Janie was crying, her head pressed hard against his shoulder. A little later he met the other men.

"Whoever was in the woods has gone away," he said. "Everything's all right now and the truants--all of them--are going home."

The Citadel Of Lost Ages

Chapter I. Strange Awakening

DARKNESS--nothingness--a void and a voice that spoke to him across the muffled deeps. "Remember! Think, and remember! Who are you?" It was painful to be thus aroused. And yet he tried to answer and could not. He said, "I don't know."

"Yes, you know. You can remember if you will. Who are you?" The voice continued to torture him, calm and insistent, and in order to quiet it he tried desperately to remember. It seemed that he should know. He had known, once.

"I am..."

A pause, a groping and then, "I am--Fenway."

"Ah!" said the voice. "Good! You see, you do know you can remember. Now--where are you, Fenway?"

Where?"

Again he answered, "I don't know." The mists were thick and he was growing tired.

But the voice went on. "You are walking, Fenway. There is a street, buildings, people. Where are you going?" Suddenly he knew. Of course he knew! He must have been asleep or dreaming not to know. He was walking down the Avenue of the Americas. He had just left his

office in Rockefeller Center. It was dusk and a thin snow was falling.

He could see the immense towers of the city leaping skyward, their ledges rimmed with white, their myriad windows blazing and above them in the smother the blinking lights of the airways.

He said, answering the voice, "I am in New York, It is winter and I am going home."

"Good! Now the year. What year, Fenway?"

"I'm tired," he said. "I want to sleep."

"Tell me the year, Fenway. The year!"

He said uncertainly, "The year I was born, the year I married, the year my son was born. The year, this year. I don't... Yes, nineteen hundred and eighty-seven."

He was tired. The voice was growing faint, the restful dark increasing.

"Fenway!" It seemed to him that the voice quivered with a terrible excitement. "Fenway, the Citadel! Do you know of the Citadel?"

"The Citadel?" Some chord within him stirred to the touch of that word, a chord of fear, of doom and desolation.

"Perhaps it won't happen," he murmured. "Perhaps they're wrong. The Citadel--I can't think about the Citadel. Let me sleep!" He let himself drift into the enfolding darkness. From far off he heard the voice clamoring his name and another voice that cautioned, "Softly. Don't force him! You know the danger of force."

For a brief instant, blurred and gigantic in the void above him, he thought he saw their faces, bearded, bright and hateful--the faces of torment. He thought he heard the voice say softly in triumph, "One

more time. Once more and he will remember!"

Then it was all gone--sight and sound and sense. There was only slumber, the deep deep night of silence and forgetting.

DAYLIGHT--a narrow shaft of it, red and rusty on the stone floor. He lay for a long time looking at the light, not understanding it, not understanding anything. His head was heavy, as though weighted with iron bands. He was enclosed in a small chamber of stone. It was very still. Except for the single spear of light it was dark. He could not remember having seen this place before. He looked at the light, and wondered, and his wondering was slow and vague.

He wondered who he was and where he was and why. Once he had known. Once he had had a name and a place and a reason.

They were gone beyond remembering. He felt that this should have frightened him but it did not. He was puzzled and worried but not afraid. Not very much afraid.

He stood up suddenly, trembling, bathed in a chill sweat. Dim broken images whirled across his mind, too formless for grasping, and he cried out,

"I can't remember!"

The cry was only a groan. It echoed dully from the stones with a sound like heavy laughter.

He looked down at himself. He saw his feet, shod in rawhide sandals. His legs, brown and long-thighed and muscular, were marked here and there with old scars. A strip of white cloth was wound tight around narrow loins, above that was a flat brown midriff.

He studied his hands. They were strong but they had no meaning for him. He lifted them and felt his face, the hard high ridges of bone, the hollow planes of flesh. He ran his fingers through short-cropped hair and did not know the color of it nor the color of his eyes--nor his name. It was an evil thing, to be shut in a place of stone without a name. He stood still until the spasm passed.

The narrow shaft of light drew him, three slow unsteady steps. He leaned his face to the slit in the wall and looked out--out and down and far away. And again

there came the chill sweat and the trembling, the poignant sense of memory hiding just beyond the threshold of his mind. A copper Sun hung in the sky and the sky was cop coppery and thick, streaked with clouds of reddish died that deepened into crimson where they touched the fat off hills.

He looked at the sky and something said within him, The sky is wrong. It did not tell him how.

Below him, at the foot of granite cliffs that seemed to fall forever down from where he stood, there was a city.

It was a great city. There were many buildings, some huge and built of stone, some built of wood, some of clay brick and endless crowding masses of little huts that seemed like lumps of earth itself. It was a bright city, blazing with sullen color under the copper sky.

It was a rich city. He could see the market places, the patterns of the streets and lanes and huddled alleys thronged with men and beasts, the pens and paddocks and the roads that led in and out. The sound of it rose up to him, soft with distance--the speaking of many voices and of much motion.

A large rich busy city--but again the inner something told him, it is wrong. And he visioned white towers rearing godlike, thundering with light and sound, roaring with a great voice of wheels and motors and swift wings in the sunset sky.

He visioned them as a man sees a wisp of smoke erased by the wind. And they were gone, without form or meaning, as though they had never been. He stood where he was, gazing dully at the city and the wide land that spread beyond it, patched with forest and cleared meadows and the roofs of villages. There were streams and three broad roads that led away toward the hills. The roads were hung with dust where men and horses moved. The shadows did not change. The Sun hung unmoving in the sky. He did not know how long he stood. There no time. And that too was somehow wrong, that unstirring Sun in a dusty sky.

From somewhere above him, as though on the roof of whatever place this was, there came the brazen thunder of a gong.

The stone walls shuddered with it. He could hear the echoes rolling out across the land, solemn and fierce, and he thought it must be a great gong indeed, fashioned by giants. When the ringing strokes were ended the world seemed filled with silence.

Below him the city quieted. The voices were stilled, the streets and the market places grew empty. Out on the plain the caravans left the roadways and lay down under the shelter of the trees. The villages were silent. The world slept.

And still the sun had not shifted in its place.

HE began to be afraid again. The city and the plain seemed deathly, too quiet in the unchanging sunlight. He turned from the narrow window-place. There was an iron door in one wall, a low thing heavily

made. He hammered on it with his fists and shouted. He did this again and again until he was hoarse and his hands were bruised. There was no answer, not the slightest sound from beyond.

He went back to the couch where he had wakened. He saw a water jug on a ledge beside it and an earthen plate with meat and black bread. He was not hungry. He drank from the jug and then sat down and put his head between his hands and set himself to remember, to know. And that was as useless as the pounding.

His eyes fell again on the food and water. They glittered with a sudden realization.

"Someone will come," he whispered. "Sooner or later, someone will come with food. They will know. They will tell me who I am!"

Chapter II. Arika

WHATEVER it was he had hold of, it behaved like a small panther. He clamped one hand over its face to keep it from crying out and then he rose and dragged it, struggling, into the red shaft of daylight. He saw that he had caught a girl.

Her hair was black and her eyes were two dark points of fire looking at him over the rim of his hand. He held her so for a moment, watching the empty doorway, listening. Then he whispered:

"Stop struggling and I'll take my hand away. But if you make a sound I'll kill you!"

She nodded. Cautiously he lifted his hand from her face. He saw a pointed chin, a red mouth drawn into what was almost a snarl—a cat-face, predaceous, startled, capable.

Only for a moment did he see that face. Then it softened and the catlook was gone, and the hardness, so that he thought he had only imagined them. Her expression now was as sweet and plaintive as the voice that whispered:

"Why do you treat me so? Don't you remember me--Arika?"

"Arika," he repeated slowly. And again, "Arika?" His Hingers tightened on her arms. "No, I don't remember you, Arika." He began to shake her, not meaning to, hardly knowing that he did so. "I don't remember you. I don't remember anything. Who am I? Tell me who I am!" Soft pity welled in the dark eyes. "It was so before. But I thought you would remember me. I came only four nights ago to tell you that your escape was arranged."

She touched him, pleading. "Don't shake me so. I don't know who you are or where you came from or even why you're here. I only know you're human and a captive and--I hate the Numi."

With a part of his mind he heard that and was conscious of a crushing disappointment. But his brow was drawn and he stared at her, saying,

"Night? This is night?"

"You must have heard the gong."

"Night!" His gaze turned to the shaft of light. Tentatively he formed the word, "darkness."

HE felt the girl quiver. "Don't say that word. It's evil like the Numi. Let me go--we'll talk later when it's safe. Come now, we have a long way to go before the day-gong."

Slowly he released her. The full impact of what she had said about escape reached him. He had a terrible desire to be out of this cage of stone, yet he was afraid somehow of the world he had seen below the window-slit, the world that seemed so strangely wrong "Night," he said again.

Sunset, dusk and dark. A man walking in the (I going--somewhere.... His head swam and for a moment he thought the veil had lifted. He cried out hoarsely, "Fen... my name... Fen!" Then he covered his face with his hands and whispered, "I don't know. I can't remember. It's all gone. She picked up that syllable and used it. "You will remember--Fenn. But you must come now. I'm only a temple slave. If they catch me..." She finished with

shudder and added, "You'll never have another chant She pulled at his hand and he suffered himself to hit led through the iron door into a corridor shrouded in utter darkness. In his mind he turned the word Fella over and over and still he did not know.

Somehow it was worse than being nameless to be called by a name that had no meaning.

The girl Arika guided him surely. The corridor was short, little more than a landing. Then there were steps, cut in the living rock and leading steeply downward, When they reached the foot of the steps Arika's hand stayed him. "Make no sound," she whispered. "There is danger here." She moved forward a few cautious steps. Fenn could see nothing in the complete blackness. Then a crack of sombre light appeared and widened slowly and he saw that a block of stone had swung soundlessly on a pivot, revealing an opening large enough for a man to pass through. Arika made again an intense gesture of silence. She stepped through the doorway and Fenn followed. Behind him the block of stone swung shut and became an indistinguishable part of a massive wall.

Arika gave him a quick bright glance as though seeking acknowledgement of her cleverness and he gathered that the stone block, with the passage and cell beyond it, were very secret things that she should not have known existed.

They stood now in a space no more than three feet wide. Behind them was the wall. Before them was a hanging of some heavy black stuff. Overhead both wall end hanging vanished upward into shadow.

The girl beckoned him on, keeping close to the wall. Hest she should brush against the hangings and disturb them. Fenn copied her every movement with great care. The air was heavy and still and there was a quality in the silence that set his nerves prickling.

The wall curved and curved, it seemed, without end and they crept mouselike in that narrow space behind the black curtain that was as endless as the wall.

Fenn was consumed with a great curiosity as strong as his unease. At last Arika stopped and he brought his mouth close to her ear, pointing to the curtain.

"What is beyond it?" he breathed.

SHE hesitated. Then she smiled, a rather wicked smile. Without touching the hanging she studied it until she found the place where two sections overlapped. Very slowly, very carefully, she drew the edges apart the merest crack so that he might see through.

He looked out into a vault of glimmering darkness. How large it was, how high, he could not tell but it seemed to stretch up and away as high as the sky and as wide as half the Earth. And again painful submerged memories wrenched at him.

He knew that it was all a cheat. The black hangings covered ordinary walls of stone and the upper vault also would be shrouded in the sombre cloth. But the black "sky" burned with points of diamond fire, blazing, magnificent and sown so thick that all the space below was filled with a pale shining, reflected back from peaks and plains of purest white. Fenn knew that the peaks were only painted on the black cloth and that beneath the white substance ma foot there was only stone. But a shivering of awe anti recognition ran through him and a terrible giddiness that made him reel.

Somewhere, sometime before he had seen those fires in the night sky and known a whiteness on the Earth!

Arika's voice whispered in his ear, softer than thought, "This is the Temple of Eternal Night. See them sleeping there, the Numi priests, trying to appease their own dark gods?"

He saw them then and all sense of recognition or kin ship vanished. Whatever night or winter he had known, it had no part with this!

On pallets of white fur they slept, row upon row, the ones she had called the Numi priests. And they were not men.

Or were they? Their form was like his own except that the bodies of the Numi had a look of tremendous toughness and strength, more like the bodies of lions than of men. And like lions they were furred. He couHd see the soft gleaming pelts of them, their long hair and their silken beards. They were beautiful, lying there in their sleeping strength. Some were light and some were dark and some were reddish and some gray, exactly as color runs in the human hair. And in spite of their strength and their gleaming fur there was nothing beastlike about them. Rather they seemed to Fenn to be above men like himself, as he was above the brutes. It was their faces, he

thought--their cold wise cruel beautiful faces, so full of knowledge and power even in sleep.

A terrible anger swept suddenly over him. He had seen faces like that before. His clouded mind could not remember where but he knew that they were the faces of torment, of pain, of loss.

He lifted up his eyes then to the fireshot vault, the darkness and the glistening hills. He saw the awful savagery of that cunningly wrought landscape, the remote uncaring sky and the white peaks sharp as fangs to rend the flesh--a landscape that hated man.

A revulsion of fear and loathing shook him. He stepped back, turning his face away, and Arika dropped the edges of the curtain. He saw that she was still smiling that strange smile full of secret thoughts. She turned, her fingers gliding surely over the stones of the wall. Presently another silent door swung open and he followed her onto yet another lightless stairway, going down.

The descent was very long. Arika counted the treads with great care. Several times she guided him over traps, balanced stones that would have triggered death upon him had he stepped on them. Once he thought he heard her drop some soft thing as though deliberately but he did not speak to disturb her counting.

When at last they stood on the level again she laughed a little shakily and said, "The Numi built the temple with human slaves and then took care to kill them all so that the passages should be unknown. But we humans are clever too in our way."

She was proud of herself. Fenn laid a grateful hand on her shoulder. But his mind was on other things.

"Arika," he said, "what are the Numi?" He could feel her staring at

him and when she spoke her tone held incredulity. "Surely you haven't forgotten them?"

"But I have," he said. I have forgotten them and the world and myself. I live now but did I live before? When and where and how did I live before?

His hand tightened on Arika's shoulder. She seemed to understand and she did not rebuke him. "Numi means in their language New Men," she told him quietly. "They are the race that came from out of the Great Dark to conquer us. And you and I aren't free of them yet."

They came to the end of the short passage. A stopped and he heard her draw a deep breath. "Go carefully, Fenn," she whispered. "If we can pass the tomb of the Numi kings we'll be safe."

She opened the third pivoted door of stone.

Fenn stepped after her into a low square chamber lighted by a golden lamp that burned upon a tripod. The dressed blocks of the wall were hung with golden wreaths and inscribed with the names of men. Fenn thought at first this was the tomb Arika had mentioned. Then he looked through an archway that had been hidden from him by the outswung door. Arika's murmur reached him. "In here are the names of the honored ones, the favorites. There is the place of the kings." Fenn glided forward to peer cautiously around the sick of the arch. The space beyond was empty of life, steeped in a drowsing silence and a haze of red-gold light that came softly through hidden openings. It was a large space. It was grand and strong and somehow insolent in its sheer lack of adornment, as though the Numi needed nothing but themselves. And around its walls of sombre stone were ranked the kings of the New Men, embalmed and dressed in their crimson robes, buried upright in pillars of clear-shining crystal, a solemn company too proud to bend their necks even to the Lord of Death.

It seemed to Fenn that the bearded kings looked at him from out their upright crystal coffins and smiled with their handsome mouths, a chill and secret smile.

He heard Arika breathe a deep sigh. "The gods are with us, Fenn. Come on."

He had no desire to linger there. The human-unhuman faces of the dead filled him with a kind of horror. He followed more than halfway to the great arch at the far end when they heard the stamp of hoofs and the jingle of harness outside and then the sound of voices.

They remained poised for a moment, frozen. There were a number of voices. Many feet moved sharply in the dust and the horses stamped and snorted. Fenn glanced at Arika.

Her dark eyes had the fear of death in them but her mouth was set hard.

"Back into the alcove, Fenn--and pray!"

Chapter III

The Trap

RIGID and still as the dead kings they stood, pressed back into the corners on either side of the arch. By moving his head a little Fenn could see a part of what went on in the tomb.

They were all Numi who entered. Some of them wore the harness of soldiers and these remained by the outer door. Two came on, a man and a woman, walking slowly along the lines of crystal pillars. The man was golden-bearded, dressed in black robes frosted with silver.

The woman held herself regally, moving with the deliberate pace of age. She was gowned and cloaked in purple and her hair was white. Fenn noted that her face was as smooth as Arika's. It was haughty and sorrowful and her eyes were quite mad.

Neither of them spoke. They came on until Fenn thought surely they were not going to stop short of the alcove. Then the man--Fenn guessed from his robes that he was a priest--inclined his head and drew back, leaving the woman standing alone before the crystal-sheathed body of a tall king, big and black-bearded, with an eagle look about him even in death. For what seemed an endless time she stood there, her mad eyes studying the face of the dead king. Then she spoke. "You never change, my husband. Why do you not change? Why do you not grow old as I do?" The king regarded her with a lightless agate gaze and did not answer.

"Well," she said, "no matter. I have much to tell you. There is trouble in your kingdom, trouble, always trouble, and no one will listen to me. The human cattle grow insolent and your son, who does not fill your throne, my lord, is soft and will not punish them."

Her voice droned on and on, full of disquiet. An eerie qualm crept over Fenn. It began to seem to him that the dead king had a curious air of, listening.

The priest had withdrawn himself beyond Fenn's vision. The soldiers stood motionless by the outer door, bored and heavy-eyed. Fenn looked at Arika. The expression of catlike ferocity he had surprised before in the cell was on her face again--and this time there was no mistaking it. Her hands opened and closed like the flexing of claws and her body was drawn with tension. Fenn began to sweat.

The Numi queen talked. She told of endless slights and injuries, of the misdeeds and follies of the courts. She was a vain spiteful old

woman, mad as a March wind, and she would not have done with talking. Arika's lips moved. She made no sound but Fenn could read the words as she shaped them.

"Be still, be still! Gods above, make her be still and go! If we don't get into the city before the day-gong we are lost, both of us, and all because she won't shut up!"

Presently she went from prayers to curses and still the old queen talked. Arika glanced from time to time at Fenn and her eyes were desperate. Fenn himself began to feel the pressure

of moments passing. He did not clearly understand the reason but Arika's fury was convincing enough. Fenn's legs began to ache with standing in one place. The sweat trickled down his breast and back. It came to him that the air was hot and the old queen's unending words filled it like a swarm of bees.

Abruptly she said, "I am tired. And I do not think you listen. I shan't stay any longer. Good night, my lord!"

She turned and moved away in a whispering of purple robes. The priest appeared, hovering discreetly at her elbow. The guard formed ranks. Fenn glanced at Arika and her eyes warned him to be still. He found time to wonder what sort of girl she was and why she should be taking these risks for him.

The woman, the priest and the guards went out of the tomb. Fenn's knees grew weak with relief. He remained where he was, listening to the sounds that reached him from outside. At last he sighed.

"They've gone now, Arika. Hear the horses?" She nodded. "The old sow! I've heard that she comes here often at night to talk to him. But why, of all nights!"

"We're all right now," said Fenn soothingly. And as he spoke the priest returned alone into the temple. HE was moving fast, a man who has got rid of a confining duty and is on his way to better things. He reached out and struck one of the crystal pillars so that it rang and all the others picked up the sound and gave it back like the distant chiming of bells. The priest laughed. He strode on, straight for the alcove, and this time there was no hope. He was going up into the temple by the stairway in the rock.

As though they were doing it of themselves Fenn felt his muscles twitch and tighten. He held his breath that there should be no warning sound. Arika's eyes were two black narrow sparks and he saw that one hand had fallen to the girdle of yellow cloth she wore above her waist. The priest came through the archway, and Fenn made his leap from behind. He got one arm around the Numi's neck and his thighs locked tight around his loins. He had gauged the strength of the priest by the strength of a strong man and any man would have been borne over forward by the rush and the weight. But Fenn had forgotten that the Numi were not men. He had not realized that anything living could be so strong. The body under the black robes seemed not of flesh, but of granite and whalebone and steel. Instead of falling as he should have done the priest threw himself backward, crushing Fenn beneath him on the stone floor. The breath went out of him in a sickening grunt. His skull rang on the stone and for a moment he thought he was done for. From somewhere above him he heard Arika's voice and knew it had a deadly urgency but he could not grasp the words.

He was suddenly aware that he hated this golden-furred creature he had between his hands.

It was a hatred without memory or reason. But it was so red and furious that he found himself growling like a beast, forgetful of

everything except that he was going to kill. New strength poured into him and a terrible excitement. He locked his thighs tighter and made of his arm an iron vise to shut off voice and breath and the moving blood. He was no longer conscious of Arika. He had forgotten escape. There was nothing in the world but this straining powerful golden body that he was going to destroy. They were out of the alcove, thrashing among the crystal pillars where the red-robed kings looked down and watched them. The strength of the Numi priest was a wonderful thing. Fenn thought it was like trying to pinion a storm wind or ride the crest of a flood.

Their lunging bodies rolled and crashed against the ringing pillars. The robes of the Numi wrapped them both and presently there were stains of crimson against the black and silver. Fenn would not relax his grip. He was oblivious to pain. He knew that if he once let go he was lost and he would not let go.

The fingers of the priest clawed at his legs, threatened to tear the living muscle from his arms. He set his teeth in the gold-furred flesh and tasted blood and tightened, tightened, tightened the pressure of his limbs.

"Fenn!"

It was Arika's voice, far off. Arika, calling, touching him, urging. He was getting tired. He could not hold on much longer. Why did she bother him now before the priest was dead?

He turned his head to snarl at her. And he realized then that the Numi was very still in his arms, that there was no slightest movement between his straining thighs.

"Let him go, Fenn. He's dead. He's been dead for minutes. Oh Fenn, wake up and let him go!"

Very slowly, Fenn relaxed. The body of the Numi slipped heavily away from him. He watched it. After awhile he tried to rise. His muscles were palsied with tremors like the muscles of an old man. Dark streams of blood ran from his torn wrists and down his thighs and his bones ached. Arika helped him. She looked at him now with a kind of awe, mingled with something else that he was too tired to read. Doubt, perhaps, or even fear--a shrewd calculating something he did not like. It occurred to him to wonder again why she was so bent on his escape from the Numi. The dead priest wore a gown of fine white linen under his robe. Working very swiftly Arika ripped it and gave the worst of Fenn's wounds a hasty binding.

"You'd leave a trail a blind man could follow," she explained. "Now come!" She led him out of the tomb into the glare of the sullen copper Sun that never moved. A strong wind blew. It smelled of heat and dust and the edges of the world were veiled in crimson.

High above him Fenn could see the half-monolithic temple crowning the cliff. It looked an evil place to be prisoned in. Why had the Numi had him there? What did they want with him?

WHAT did Arika want with him? He was glad to be free of the temple. He stumbled after Arika down a slope clothed in tall trees that thrased in the wind. The tomb of the kings was built on a ledge of the cliff itself and almost beneath it the city began. It must still be night for no one was stirring in the streets.

Again that word "night" evoked a sense of wrongness and Fenn glanced at the burning sky and shook his head.

Halfway down the slope Arika stopped and brought forth from its hiding place in a thicket a bundle of cloth. "Here," she said, "wrap this around you. Over your head, Fenn! Keep your face hidden."

He struggled clumsily with the garment--a large shapeless length of cotton much smeared with dust and gray ash. Arika draped her own around her and helped him impatiently with his.

"What are these?" he asked her.

"Mourners' cloaks. Since humans are allowed to visit their burying grounds only at night no one will pay any attention to us if we're seen in the streets." She added wryly, "There are always mourners!"

"But why only at night?"

"Would you have them go by day and waste the time they should be working? The Numi don't keep humans just for pets!" She led off down the slope again, going almost at a run. Fenn could not keep up with her. A number of times she came back to him and urged him on, snapping

at him, cursing him in an agony of worry. Now and again she glanced upward at the temple and as the angle changed Fenn could see the cause of her apprehension--a great gong as tall as several men, glinting dully in the sunlight upon the temple roof.

They entered the city, slowing their pace to a walk. These were the mean quarters, the vast huddle of huts that girdled the magnificence of the palace and the opulent dwellings of the Numi like a muddy sea. Here were refuse and filth and the stuttering feet of rats. Here were twisting lanes and the ancient smells of humanity crowded and unwashed. Fenn snorted in disgust and Arika shot him a smouldering glance from under her ash-smeared hood.

"The air was cleaner in the cell, Fenn, but you'll live to breath this longer!" They did not speak again. The crumbling mud-brick houses slept under the dusty wind, their windows covered with bits of cloth or

hide. Here and there a child cried and an occasional cur-dog barked. They did not pass anyone in the bewildering tangle of lanes and if anyone saw them there was no sign of it. Arika's face was drawn and anxious and Fenn knew that she held herself from running only by the greatest restraint. She was cursing the old queen under her breath.

Up on the temple roof two black-robed priests appeared, tiny dolls in the distance.

Arika turned into an even narrower way, hardly more than a crack between the walls. Here she risked a faster pace, dragging Fenn without pity. The distant priests bent and a second later a great hammer swung on counterweights and the day-gong sent its first harsh sonorous stroke echoing over the land.

A low doorway curtained with greasy cloth appeared on Fenn's right. Arika thrust him through it, into a stifling dusk that was blinding after the light. Something large stirred in the shadows and a man's voice whispered, "All right?"

Arika said, "He killed a priest." And then to Fenn, "Stay here!" The curtain rose and fell again. Fenn turned, reaching out for her. But the mourner's cloak lay on the earthen floor, and Arika was gone. Again the large bulk moved, very lightly for its size. The shadow of a man came between Fenn and the curtain. He bent slowly and picked up the fallen cloak and as he straightened Fenn caught a glimpse of his face in the dusty gloom.

It was the face of a Numi.

Chapter IV

Remembered Doom

A KIND of bleak fury came over Fenn. He had had it in the back of his mind that Arika was engineering some treachery but this he had not expected. His two hands reached and encircled a corded throat, and under the vast booming of the gong he said the one word:

"Numi!"

The voice of the man said harshly, "Wait!" The curtain was lifted to admit a single beam of light. Gasping against Fenn's grip the man said, "Look again!"

Fenn looked. Uncertainly his fingers loosened. The man was beardless, his cheeks shaven close to smooth skin. His hair was cropped and his body, naked except for a twist of cloth, showed only a fine down and not the silken fur of the New Men.

And yet in the eyes, the shape of the head, the unmistakable cast of the features...

The man lifted his arms and struck Fenn's hands away. "I'm Malech. I'm Arika's brother."

"Arika's brother? And who is Arika? What does she want with me?" Fenn's hands were still raised, and hungrily curved. "What do you want with me, Malech? And why do you look like a Numi, a Numi plucked and stripped?"

"I'm a half-blood," Malech said sourly. "So is Arika. I can assure you we have no love for our fathers, who give us their blood and then despise us for it. As for the rest of it, it will have to wait until tonight.

"I'm a slave. I work in the palace gardens. If I don't go there at once I shall be flogged, with ten stripes extra because I'm half the breed of the masters. Arika has the same problems at the temple. Besides,

she might draw suspicion by her absence. So..."

He thrust Fenn ahead of him, into another room. It was not large but it was clean. There was a hearth, two box-beds filled with straw, a table, three or four rough benches.

"This is the house," said Malech. "All of it. Stay in it. Don't even look out the window. You'll find water, wine and food. Be quiet and trust us if you can. If you can't, after all we've risked to get you free--why, the priests will be delighted to have you back."

He swung on his heel to go, and then paused, turning to look again at Fenn as though he found in him something of special interest.

"So you killed a priest." Malech's eyes, which were lighter than Arika's, almost tawny, gleamed with an evil joy. "With a knife? A strangling cord?"

How?"

Fenn shook his head slowly. "I had no weapons."

"With your hands? Don't tell me with just your hands!" Malech's smile was the feral grin of a tiger. "May the gods of the humans beam upon you, my friend!"

At the door into the lean-to he said over his shoulder, almost casually, "As half-blood Numi, my sister and I--particularly my sister--share some of the mental peculiarities of our illustrious fathers. It's quite possible if you do decide to trust us, that we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost."

He was gone before the other could speak.

Fenn stood where he was for some time without moving, his gaze

fixed upon the doorway. The mighty voice of the gong was stilled and in its place came the numberless tongues of the waking city, jarring, clattering, settling at last to a steady beehive drone, punctuated by the shrill cries of children. But Fenn was conscious of nothing except those words of Malech's that were still ringing in his ears. ". . . we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost."

He sat down and tried to think but he was very weary. His wounds were stiffening and his body ached beyond endurance. He did not like Malech. He did not trust Arika. He understood nothing--why he had been imprisoned, why he was free. But whatever else happened he did not want to be taken back to the temple. And--if he could remember again, if he could have a name he knew was his own and a past that was longer than yesterday... If Malech had been a horned demon and Arika his sister Fenn would not have left that place.

He washed his cuts with wine and then drank off a good bit of what remained. He was seized with a desire to go after Malech, to drag him back and force him to do his magic now. He felt he could not wait for night. But he realized that was folly speaking. He lay down in one of the straw-filled beds but he could not sleep.

To remember! To be again a man with a whole mind, a whole life!

What kind of memories would they be? How would he appear to himself after he remembered? What stains would he find upon his hands?

Even evil memories would be better than none, better than his terrible groping into nothingness.

Suppose that Malech lied?

It was hot and the fumes of the wine were clouding his thoughts. His

body wanted rest even if his mind did not. The world began to slip away from him. He thought how strange it was that Arika was half Numi--such a handsome girl for all he did not trust her. Very handsome... He slept and in his dreams ghostly towers brightened against a dusky sky and the word "night" returned to plague him. Twice he spoke aloud, saying, "I am Fenway." Arika woke him. He had not heard the gong that marked off night from day nor had he heard the others return. Yet they must have been there for some time. A pot bubbled fragrantly on the hearth and the cloth was laid for supper. Outside the wind howled in the alleys, filling the air with dust. He rose, feeling stiff and sore but otherwise normal and ravenously hungry. Yet he hardly thought of food. He was shaken with an eager half-fearful excitement. He told Arika what Malech had said and demanded, "Is that true? Can you do it?"

"Not all at once perhaps--but I can try. You must eat now, Fenn. Otherwise the body will disturb the mind."

That seemed reasonable and he curbed his impatience. He watched the others for awhile in silence, trying to judge them, but there was something about their strange breed that was beyond his grasp. He demanded abruptly, "Why did you rescue me?"

"As I told you," answered Arika. "You were human and a captive of the Numi. This isn't the first time a human has vanished out of the Numi dungeons--though not, I'll admit, out of the temple. That was a brilliant feat, Fenn. You should appreciate it."

"I'd still like to know why."

"Does there have to be a reason?" asked Malech. "Haven't you ever done anything without a reason except that it was a good thing to do?" Fenn shot him a hard glance. "You don't have to remind me that I don't know the answer to that. However, I won't quarrel with your

motives--not now." He turned to Arika again. "What did the priests want of me? Why was I there?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't find out. RhamSinhe was your special jailor, Fenn--is a very brilliant man. He rules in the temple as the king rules in the palace and there is great rivalry between them.

"Whatever purpose he had with you, it was something of great importance to him, something he wanted to keep secret from the king and even from the other priests. Else you would not have been hidden away in that cell. The Numi are free to use humans in any way they wish, just as we use cattle, so there could be no other reason."

She met Fenn's gaze directly. "Perhaps that's why I rescued you, Fenn. I hate RhamSin. Remember, I've been a temple slave since I was old enough to climb there. Perhaps I wanted simply to cheat him of whatever success he was after just to make him sweat."

An expression of such diabolical hatred crossed her face that Fenn was convinced she had told at least a part of the truth. Suddenly she smiled. "All that being so--have you wondered why RhamSin hasn't searched the city for you?"

"Perhaps it's easier just to get another human."

"Maybe. But I made sure--partly, of course, to clear myself. Only the priests and the royal family and some of the nobles are supposed to know about those temple passages. So on the stair I dropped a girdle belonging to a man of the royal house--which Malech managed to steal for me. Therefore it will appear to RhamSin that he stole you away and took you directly to the palace. So I am safe and you are safe--at least for a while."

"You're a clever girl," said Fenn admiringly. "Very clever indeed."

Arika's smile broadened. And Fenn wondered silently, Just how clever are you, Arika? Too clever to trust? In one thing he was forced to trust, whether he would or not.

He got up with sudden violence. "I can't wait any longer! Get to work, blast you, do your magic--I can't wait any longer!"

"Softly, Fenn," said Arika. "All right." She pointed to the bed. "Lie down. Let your body relax. You'll have to help me, Fenn. I'm not like the Numi, who can do what they want to with the minds of men and beasts. You'll have to open the way for me Fenn. Don't fight me. Let your mind be easy." HE stretched out. He tried to do as she said, to relax his limbs and let his mind go free. Her face hovered above him, white in the shrouded light from the windows. She was handsome. Her eyes had strange dark fires in them. Her voice spoke to him softly.

"You'll have to trust me, Fenn, if you want to remember." Malech handed her a drinking cup and she held it to Fenn's lips. "There is a drug in this wine. It will not hurt you. It only makes the way easier and the time shorter. Drink it, Fenn."

He would not drink it. His muscles tensed again and he looked at her with narrow-eyed suspicion, almost ready to strike her aside and run. But she only took the cup away and said, "It's up to you. Your memory is your loss, not mine."

After a minute he said, "Give me the cup." He drank it. Again he lay still, listening to her voice, and now it was easier to relax. Gradually he lost all sense of time. Arika's eyes were huge and dark and full of little dancing lights. They drew him. They compelled pelled him. Soft folds of colorless mist slowly blotted out the face of Malech in the background, the mud-brick walls, the roof, Arika herself--all except her eyes.

Just at the last he felt the power that lay behind them but it was too late. They willed him into the final darkness and he could not but go. Deep, deep, timeless dark.

A voice...

Under the prodding of that voice he roused a bit as though from slumber. Another voice had spoken once, asking, asking--but this time it was easier to answer.

"My name is Fenway," he told the voice. "I am in New York." Yes, it was much easier to answer. He told about Times Square on a summer night, the blaze of light and the crowd. He told about Central Park in the morning after rain.

"And pretty soon it will all be gone," he said. "All the buildings and the subways and the people--gone, erased, forgotten." He laughed. "They're working on the Citadel. They're burying it deep in the rock above the Palisades. It's almost finished--and for what? What good is a citadel without men?"

He laughed again, dreadful laughter. " 'Repent ye, for the end is at hand!' I repent me that I had a son. I repent me, I repent me that I begot him just for death!"

"Fenway--Fenway!" The voice shook him, brought him to himself. "You must remember--yourself, New York, the Palisades. Draw it, Fenway. Draw the size and shape of New York, of the Palisades, so that when you wake you will remember."

Dully under the urging of the voice he began to draw. Whether he had pencil and paper he neither knew nor cared. He drew as one does in a dream, the familiar outlines, and as he did so he was filled with

sadness and a sense of loss and he began to weep.

"I will not draw," he said. "What good is drawing on the evening of Destruction?"

The voice called to him. It called again and again and he fled away from it. He was running beside the wide gray river. Night was closing down and from the darkling water the mist rose thick and cold, clinging round him, drowning out the world that was so soon to die.

Chapter V

Secret of Ages

THERE was a drawing, done with charcoal on a slab of wood. It was lopsided and clumsy and unfinished, showing a long, narrow little island between two rivers near the sea.

Fenn stared at it. His hands trembled. Arika said softly, "You told me its name was New York. Do you remember?"

"I—I don't know." His mouth was dry and it was difficult to talk. "My head feels queer. It's full of smoke. Sometimes I see things and then they're gone again."

He looked up, almost pleadingly, from Arika to Malech and back again.

"Where is this place I called New York?"

Malech shook his head. "I never heard of it." There was an odd tone to his voice, Arika rose and removed two bricks from the wall above the bed. From the cavity behind them she drew a bundle of parchment scrolls. Even in his distress Fenn could see that she was

laboring under some great excitement. She spread the scrolls beside him on the bed.

"When the Numi came out of the Great Dark and into the human part of the world they made pictures of the lands they passed through. I stole these from the temple long ago. Let us see if the pictures of the Numi show your island."

Fenn studied the maps. Strange maps of a strange Earth. The Numi must have traveled far. The names and inscriptions were in a tongue he did not know but Arika pointed out desert and jungle and mountains, forest land and sea, and there was nothing that resembled the island he had drawn while in that uncanny sleep.

"No," he said. "It isn't here."

A quick glance passed between Arika and Malech. She unrolled another scroll, the last.

"This," she said, "is the birthplace of the Numi. You remember the Hall of Eternal Night in the temple, Fenn? All their birthland is like that, I have heard, white and cruel and very cold. It is what humans call the Great Dark."

"I don't understand," said Fenn. "What is the Great Dark?"

"The other side of the world," she answered. "Its face is turned always away from the Sun, toward the black gods of night that men say spawned the Numi."

Fenn concentrated on that last map. Endless areas of whiteness, broken here and there by the dim outlines of continents. In imagination, remembering that hall that he had glimpsed, he could see the jagged mountains rearing under a black sky shot with fire and

at their feet the wrinkled ice of oceans.

It was Malech's quick eye that saw it first. "Here!" he said. Look here, see it!" He traced with his strong finger. "Away from the Sun, beyond even the Shadow, well into the Great Dark itself. Here is the edge of the sea and here--two rivers and an island!"

He laughed, a short harsh burst of merriment, and then was still. Arika whispered, "This is a thing of wonder. It is a miracle from the gods." And Fenn said, as he seemed always to be saying, "I don't understand."

"Nor do I! Listen to me, Fenn--listen carefully and try to remember." Her hand had caught his now, gripping it almost cruelly, as though she would grip his mind that way.

"I tried to call your memory back. I gave you the drug to throw down all your conscious barriers and I tried to draw aside the bars that keep your memory prisoned. I called to you and you answered, naming yourself Fenn-way, and you talked quite readily.

"But the things you spoke of were not of this world you stand in now! You told of great buildings and of things that roared in the sky and in the streets and under the earth. You told of day and night, of the things we have never seen--the moon, the stars, dawn, sunset." Her fingers tightened until her nails brought blood. "Fenn, your memories were of the world that was before the coming of the dark star--the world before Destruction!"

He was glad of her hand holding him. Because suddenly the solid earth dissolved beneath him and he was falling, spinning, crying through a reeling vortex.

He whispered, "I remember, I remember."

He put his face between his hands. He shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh, and presently the palms of his hands were wet with a salty moisture. I remember.

But did he? He still had no full memory of a past life. He had only flashes of a life, disjointed, infinitely strange--painful and yet somehow distant, somehow not of his flesh.

He asked hoarsely, "If I remember that far past, does that mean that I belong to that past? That RhamSin somehow dragged me out of it?" Arika shook her head. "It seems impossible. And yet the powers of the Numi priests are great."

Malech interrupted, asking him passionately, "Where are the Palisades?" Fenn was too numbed with horror to answer. He felt suspended over an abyss that yawned between two worlds, himself a stranger to them both. Malech's hands rose in a fierce aborted gesture and Arika warned him back. She said in the compelling voice that Fenn had answered in his dream,

"Fenn, show me the Palisades."

Without thought or volition, he placed a finger on the charcoal map. MALECH'S eyes suddenly blazed. He said in an exultant whisper, "It was what RhamSin was trying to get from him--the secret of the Citadel's location. And now we have it. In Fenn we have it!" Fenn had begun to talk. It was like a dead man slowly speaking.

"The dark star," he said to no one. "They looked at it through their telescopes. They watched it rushing closer and they told us that the world as we knew it would die. A dark star, coming out of space to kill the world." Arika whispered, "Do you remember the Destruction?"

"No. It was not to be--not just yet. The dark star would pass the Sun.

They had it charted, they knew what it would do. It would take away some of the planets, the outer ones, and go on--and the worlds that were left would be torn and changed."

He added slowly, "There was a terrible fear on the world. Not for ourselves but for our children. Sometimes we would not believe it could happen. We looked at the great cities and the mountains and the green land. We looked at the sea and we did not believe it could ever change."

"But it did," Arika said somberly. "Legend tells how it did--how when the dark star passed all Earth was rent and shaken and its spinning slowed, so there was no more day and night. How the cities were thrown down and the mountains moved and the seas ran wild and millions died."

"They knew what was coming," said Fenn in his dead strange voice. "It was why they built the Citadel, to preserve man's knowledge and power for those who might survive."

Malech was shaken with bitter mirth. "And the Numi have hunted for that legended Citadel without dreaming that it lay in the Great Dark from which they came! They mapped this place New York and didn't know the Citadel was there! And now, with Fenn's help, we shall find it!" Fenn looked at him and at Arika with hopeless eyes. "What difference does it make to me who wins the Citadel? The only world I can remember perished--how many thousand years ago?"

Arika's face flashed and she took his hands warmly, strongly, into hers.

"Fenn, don't you realize what you can do? You are human--all human. You've seen a little of how humans live in this world--slaves of the Numi here in the cities or as outlaw tribes in the wilds. That has gone

on since the Numi first came out of the darkness that bred them.

"But you can change all that, Fenn. You can free us from the Numi. You can make the world as it was before the Destruction--a good world for men to live in. You can give men back all their lost knowledge!"

"Or would you prefer," Malech said, "to give the Citadel to the Numi so that with the knowledge in it they can rivet fetters on us forever?" A blaze of anger leaped up in Fenn's mind. "No! Men built the Citadel, men like us--for men like us!"

He was remembering again the tragic last hope of that doomed world, the hope centered in the Citadel that was to be man's answer to the coming night.

"Then help us find it, that its secrets may belong to man!" Arika pressed.

"We can get you out of the city and the outlaw humans out in the wilds will aid us in this quest. Will you lead the way?"

Fenn felt iron resolution hardening swiftly in his mind, a resolve born as much of bitter hatred of the Numi as of loyalty to his own kind. He said between his teeth, "I will lead you. And if the Citadel has power in it--it will be used to destroy the Numi or to drive them back into their darkness."

He added eagerly, "And it may be that there at the Citadel, at the place New York that I remember so strangely, I shall remember all my past!" Malech was on his feet, his face flaring with excitement. "I'll begin preparations at once! We'll need to have horses ready and slip out of the city tomorrow 'night!'"

He swung aside the curtain to leave. As he did so, with startling suddenness, a man stumbled in from outside. He came as though the howling wind had brought him--a quite human man, with the marks of the lash on his back.

"Temple soldiers are searching the quarters!" he cried and then he caught sight of Fenn. His eyes widened and his mouth became an open oblong in his seamy face. He started to speak.

Malech stepped between them, reaching one hand to the small man's shoulder, turning him around as he demanded, "Which way are they coming?"

"From the tomb of the kings, ransacking every house. We're spreading the word."

The edge of Malech's free hand took him in a slicing blow under the ear. The little man folded quietly over his own middle and Malech shoved him behind a water cask in the lean-to.

Fenn crossed the room. He gripped Malech by the shoulders. "That man knew me," he said harshly. "Why would you not let him speak?"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Malech. "He saw a stranger and was surprised. He would have sold you to the Numi for a sack of corn." Arika's face was white with fury and despair. "RhamSin was too cunning to be completely deceived by my trick! If we had had but one day more...." FENN'S hard new determination would not let him share their despair. He said, "We are going to find the Citadel! Since we can't wait until tomorrow night we go now."

"But horses--" Malech objected.

Fenn cut him short. "I saw paddocks of horses near the gates. We

can steal mounts. Quickly!"

Arika gave him a startled glance as though revising her estimate of him. But she caught fire from his resolution. "He is right, Malech--we must risk it now!"

She brought forth the mourner's cloaks for them. While Malech was hastily improvising one for himself from a length of cotton smeared on the hearth, Arika rolled the map-scrolls and tied them in her girdle. Fenn led the way out. The narrow valley was deserted but in the distance they saw furtive figures running from house to house with the warning. The parching wind enveloped them in clouds of dust and the Sun burned red and evil in an ochre sky.

"Which gate?" snapped Fenn.

"This way," said Malech. "The Desert Gate." The driven dust made everything obscure as they went swiftly, their heads down. Temple and cliffs were veiled by the blowing haze. Fenn could see no soldiers yet.

They skirted the edge of a market square, deserted except for a few folk sleeping huddled in the stalls. Beyond the market were the great stock pens and the quartering places of the caravans lying inside the Desert Gate.

Next to the wall of the caravan building was the fenced horse-paddock. There were at least fifty horses in it, shaggy creatures patiently standing with their heads away from the wind-driven dust. There were also a half dozen saddled horses, powerful sleek animals, tethered separately.

"There are our mounts, waiting for us," Fenn said. "They're Numi horses!" Malech warned. "They don't like human riders and you'll

have trouble...."

"Don't worry--I'll manage," Fenn snapped. "But first I want a look at the gate."

From around the corner of the paddock fence he peered. He saw the road, hollowed deep by the wind, and the posts that marked the gateway and beyond them the way that led over the hills to the desert and freedom. A dozen Numi soldiers guarded the gate and their big, sleek steeds were picketed within the gateway. "We can't ride through them!" Malech said.

"It's hopeless!"

Fenn's eyes had begun to gleam with an unholy light. He said to Arika,

"Give me your dagger--and then you two mount and hold a horse ready for me."

Arika stared, then gave him the weapon. She and Malech slipped back to the corner of the paddock where the saddled Numi horses were tethered. Fenn sprang to the bars of the paddock gate. He took them down silently. Then he went through the shaggy horses to the rear of the paddock. He suddenly drew the dagger point in a long shallow scratch down the quarter of the nearest horse. The animal recoiled with a whinnying scream of pain and terror.

Fenn scratched another horse. It too screamed. The shaggy herd began to mill frightenedly, scared by the outcries and the smell of blood. Fenn suddenly cried out, a long shrill howl with an eerie wolf note in it, and leaped forward at the herd with his reddened dagger upraised. Instantly, the whole herd bolted out of the paddock.

There was only one way for them to go. They poured out with a great thundering of hoofs and an explosion of dust--fifty horses, stampeding in panic toward the Desert Gate.

The Numi had no chance against that onslaught. It came too suddenly even to give them time to run. The wild-eyed herd crashed over them broke their picket-line, carried their own steeds out with them. And close on the heels of that stampede, so close that they were almost a part of it, came Fenn and Malech and Arika.

Fenn had been fighting the Numi horse since the instant he had leapt on its back and only the fact that it too was panicky kept it from setting itself to throw him. "Swords!" he yelled to Malech. "Get swords!" Ahead of them in the gate sprawled the broken furry bodies of the Numi soldiers caught by the stampede. They would need the weapons that lay there but Fenn dared not check his own steed now.

Malech heard him and with catlike deftness pulled up his steed long enough to reach down for two of the Numi blades.

"Soldiers come!" warned Arika's cry.

A half-dozen Numi were running out from the horse-paddock, after them. Fenn laughed, as he caught the sword Malech tossed him and gave his bolting steed its head.

"We have their horses--let them catch us!"

They went full gallop down the road. The forefront of the stampede had gone on to wear itself out among the villages.

The road climbed to a low pass through the hills. Beyond the pass lay desolation--of copper Sun and coppery sky and under them the rusty barren earth.

"It is far to the Great Dark--and RhamSin will follow!" Arika warned.
"He will follow to the world's end for the Citadel!"

Chapter VI

The Quest of Yesterday

THEY had left the caravan track and struck out across the open desert. They had no guide but the gossip of the drovers that Malech had heard in the market place.

"Where or how far the place of the outlaw tribesmen may be I don't know," he told Fenn. "But it lies in this direction, away from the Sun." He pointed to his shadow stretching out before him.

Fenn asked, "How do you know these men will help us?"

"They have all suffered from the Numi. Every living human has in one way or another. And to find the Citadel--they'll help!" Fenn looked at the barren earth and said, "We had better find them soon." They went on, keeping their shadows always before them, pushing the horses as hard as they dared.

Fenn rode silently, withdrawn in his own thoughts. He had had it out with the Numi horse and won his battle and after that brief violence his mind had turned again to himself. He thought of the things that had been said between himself and Arika and Malech and the decision that he had made so swiftly and with such conviction.

His mood was not one of doubt or hesitation. It was only a hardening and clarifying of what was in his mind. In the city he had felt confused and driven, tortured by the blankness of his memory, raging against a world he could not understand. Here, where he was free of walls and

houses, he could think again.

He still did not know who he was or where he came from or how. He had a feeling that when he reached New York he would remember. But even if he did not he remembered other things--the world that was before the dark star and the Numi, the pride and the courage of the men who had built the Citadel so that knowledge might not perish from the Earth. It holds all the past of man, they said, and it will hold the future. The Citadel will stand forever, man's challenge to the coming night. Men had built it and it should be given back to man. A deep anger rose in Fenn against RhamSin, who had tried to steal knowledge that did not belong to him--human knowledge to use against humankind! Fenn's hatred of the Numi was a towering thing and it stood large over everything else--larger even than his passionate desire to know himself. He looked. He looked ahead across the desert, and he thought, Once this earth was green and men lived upon it and were free. It shall be so again!

He smiled at Arika and urged his horse a little faster, impatient of every step that lay between him and his goal.

Here there was no temple gong to tell them day and night. The angry Sun burned forever in the sky. The fierce wind lashed them and the dust-clouds rolled in red and ochre across the land and there was no time. They hungered and they thirsted and now and again they stopped to rest the horses and to sleep.

They had slept twice when Fenn looked back and saw atop a distant rise a plume of dust that was not made by any wind.

He said, "RhamSin."

Malech nodded. "They will have spare horses, food and water. They will push hard and the Numi are stronger than men."

Fenn smiled, an ugly smile. He began to lead by devious ways, covering and confusing the track, going on bare rock or on loose earth where the wind would blow away the prints of the horses' hoofs. And for a time they lost the distant plume of dust.

But Malech said, "They know our direction. They will follow without a track. And remember, RhamSin is a Numi and a priest. He may be able to touch our minds with his enough to guide him."

Fenn's mouth hardened. He said nothing and they went on across the bitter land. Hunger became a gnawing pain and then a weakness and an agony but it was till forgotten in the pangs of thirst. The splendid horses began to falter. Arika rode bowed and silent and the men were not much better. At rare intervals Fenn would stop and dig, wherever there was a shadow of green life in some sunken spot or the hollow of a dead watercourse. Sometimes a few drops of muddy water welled up to keep them alive. They stopped for the third time to rest. Fenn did not sleep. He sat looking over the desert with red-rimmed eyes, thinking of the Citadel and feeling an iron determination not to die.

The plume of dust showed itself again on the horizon. He cursed it and rose to wake the others.

They started on again. The wind blew, never ceasing, and all at once Fenn's horse lifted his head and snorted, pulling against the rein. The others snuffed the wind and they too began to go aside from the straight line they followed. A kind of madness seemed to have come over them. Their dragging pace quickened to a shambling gallop.

A RAW scarp of rock lifted from the desert. The ground sloped downward to form a ragged basin at its foot. Fenn saw that a sullen river ran from a cleft in the scarp and spread into a great marsh

before the thirsty desert drank it up. He set his heart on that vivid patch of green that seemed so far away and would not come closer.

Then he saw the men riding toward them--leathery sun-bitten men, well mounted and riding fast, carrying long spears that glinted red in the angry daylight.

There were half a dozen of them. They swept up and ringed the three fugitives round and made them stand, holding the plunging horses. They looked at Fenn and Arika and Malech and when they saw Malech their lips drew back as though they were wolves about to tear their prey. One said, harshly, "Numi!"

"Half-blood--slave." Malech's voice was a croaking whisper. He turned to let them see the old scars of the lash across his back and Fenn tried to crowd between him and the hungry spears.

"They saved my life," he said. He too was almost mute with thirst. "They saved me from the temple." Then, angrily, "Let us drink!" They studied Fenn a long time without answering.

Their hesitation alarmed him and he knew that Malech was the cause of it--Malech, who looked so much like the hated creature that had fathered him. The green marsh tortured Fenn with the promise of water. He looked at Arika's drawn face and the suffering horses and he became so furious that he lost all caution.

He reached out to the man who was holding his horse and caught him by his long hair and pulled him out of the saddle, shouting as loud as he could out of his swollen throat, "If we die, no one will ever find the Citadel! I know where it is. Do you hear that? I know!"

Arika whispered, "The Numi priests are hunting us to get the secret. We ask protection." She managed the ghost of a laugh. "What are

you afraid of? We are only three."

The cold suspicion did not leave the face of the outlaws but Fenn saw that they were uncertain now. The leader said, "No one knows that secret." Fenn met his hard gaze fairly. "All right. Kill us. Let the Numi rule forever over slaves and outlaws. You haven't the courage to be free." The leader looked again at Malech, saying, "You travel in bad company for an honest human. But I'll let Lannar decide this one. Give me your swords." When he had them he reined his horse around. "Come on." They started on again toward the marsh. It spread for several miles along the base of the scarp, wide, lush, dotted with islands of higher ground on which there were trees and thick scrub. It was beautiful, green, soft and moist under the red haze of the desert.

They were allowed to stop beside a shallow pool, to drink and wallow in brackish water that tasted to Fenn like the wine of heaven. Then they were made to mount again.

"Keep your horses exactly in line," said the outlaw. "One slip and you'll never be found again."

He began to thread an invisible path through mud and quaking bog and green water. Here and there submerged bridges had been laid, narrow things of slippery planks that could be taken up, Fenn guessed, to make the marsh impassable.

At first he saw no sign of any dwelling places. Then as they got deeper and deeper into the marsh he saw there were huts of mud and wattle under the trees of the larger hammocks. Men and women watched the strangers pass and naked children splashed out through the mud to shout at them. They came onto dry ground again, on a long narrow island close under the scarp. A man stood waiting for them. There were others behind him but Fenn saw only the one, a lean dark laughing man who looked all fire and acid and steel,

controlled and shaped by a keen intelligence. Fenn knew that this must be Lannar. He began to hope again. The man who had brought them in from the desert dismounted and began to speak. While he talked Lannar's gaze moved slowly over the three. The man finished, pointing to Fenn, "He says he knows the secret of the Citadel."

Imperceptibly the muscles of Lannar's face tightened until the lines of it were hard as iron. He looked up at Fenn, a gaunt parched man sitting on a jaded horse and waiting now with a strange sort of patience.

"Is that true?" asked Lannar.

"It is true."

A muscle began to twitch in Lannar's cheek. "Dismount. I want to talk to you." His gesture included all three. He turned away toward a large hut, first giving a rapid order or two that Fenn could not hear. FENN and the others got stiffly down and followed him. The men who had been with Lannar stared at them with a mixture of hostility and wolfish eagerness as they went with the three into Lannar's house.

The shadowy interior was furnished with a haphazard richness. Bright silks, rugs and furs and bits of ornate furniture and dishes of crystal and gold—the loot of the caravans that went between the Numi cities, consorting oddly with the mud walls and floor of beaten earth. Women came from somewhere in the back, bringing bread and dried meat, water and wine. Fenn and the others ate and drank voraciously. The portions seemed very small.

"You can have more later," Lannar said. "Too much now will make you sick." He leaned forward, his wiry body poised and unrelaxed in a gilded chair.

"Now! What is this about the Citadel?"

Fenn told him, speaking without haste. Lannar listened. His eyes glowed with a still hot light. The men in the shadows listened too. Fenn could hear their breathing, tense and short. From time to time Arika spoke and Malech. At last the scroll was spread out at Lannar's feet, showing the island that was lost in the Great Dark.

"There is the Citadel," Fenn said and was silent. Lannar voiced a harsh sigh. He rose and began to move back and forth, a catlike man suddenly drunk with hope but suspicious none the less, too old and hard to take anything for granted.

Abruptly he took Fenn's head by the hair and bent it back, studying his face with those hot shrewd eyes that saw everything.

"You tell the truth," said Lannar. "But perhaps it is a truth these Numi spawn have put into your head, so that you believe it."

"It is the truth," said Fenn steadily.

"Memories--dreams!" said Lannar, and let him go. "You cannot prove these things. There is no bone and flesh in them for a man to get his hands on." Arika said, "I can open his mind again. Then you can hear him speaking of the past he knows."

He glanced at her half contemptuously. "I know the tricks of the Numi, the things they can do with a man's mind. I would hear words but they would not prove themselves."

Malech asked quietly, "What have we to gain by such a deception?"

"I don't know. I cannot see a gain now but there may be one that is hidden from me." He faced the half-blood, saying with a vicious

softness, "I learned so long ago, with so much blood and pain, never to trust a Numi!"

"Numi," whispered Malech. "Numi!" He got up. He was a big man. He towered over Lannar. His eyes blazed with such a passion of fury that it seemed he would take the smaller man between his hands and tear him to bits. He laughed.

"Numi. That's funny, Lannar. You don't know the humor of it. All my life I have lived with that joke. The Numi spit upon me because I'm human and the humans want to kill me because I'm Numi."

He glanced at Arika with a flash of sheer hatred that startled Fenn. "My sister is more fortunate. She looks human." He turned again to Lannar, who had not moved or even raised his hands. Malech seemed to sense contempt in that very lack of fear. He laughed again, a short harsh ugly sound.

"If I stood over you, full-furred and bearded and wearing the trappings of a Numi, it would be different, Lannar. Oh, yes! But I am naked and shorn and therefore nothing." He sat down again abruptly, hunched sullenly over his knees. "Try your courage on RhamSin, Lannar. See if you can face him down!"

Lannar said, "RhamSin?" From the tone of his voice it was obvious that he held that name in great respect. Fenn rose.

"Yes," he said. "RhamSin. I have told you all the story, and it's a true one. RhamSin will prove it to you. He has followed me from the city to get the secret back."

He paused to let that sink in. And Lannar said to himself, "He would not do that for any ordinary captive nor for any slave." He began to pace again, more slowly. Fenn moved to stand before him.

"Give us the things we need, Lannar, and we'll go on alone."

"No," said Lannar. He was silent for a time, looking up into Fenn's gaunt face, his gaze narrowed and withdrawn. Then he murmured, "He has the stamp of the deserts on him, the same as I." He laughed. "No, Fenn --we'll go together. After all I gamble my life against every caravan I plunder--and even the chance of finding the Citadel is worth the risk. There are others here who will think so too."

Arika leaped up. She looked at Lannar but it seemed she could not speak. Her eyes were very bright and Fenn saw that there were tears in them. She turned suddenly and put her arms around him.

"The gods are with you, Fenn," she whispered. He found that he had caught her to him almost without knowing it. Over her shoulder he said fiercely to Lannar, "We will find it!" From outside came the heavy splashing of a horse through mud and water and a man's voice crying, "Lannar! Lannar! The Numi come!"

Chapter VII

The Great Dark

THE harsh braying of horns spread the alarm across the swamp. Two or three more riders came in from the desert, the last of the patrols. The bridges were taken

up. From among the trees of the island Fenn watched the company of the Numi come down to the edge of the green water and stop. Lannar laughed with savage humor.

"They have done this for generations, trying to wipe us out. But they can't pass the swamp." He pointed among the hammocks. "See how

our bowmen are placed? Even if, by treachery or miracle, the Numi were able to come in our arrows would kill them on the path. So they come and threaten us and offer bribes and go away again when their food runs out." His brows drew down. "All in the black and silver of the temple, eh? It seems you were not lying, Fenn!"

He turned aside, talking with rapid urgency to his chieftains. Fenn remained, watching the Numi. They were too far away to distinguish details. But there was one commanding figure robed in black and riding a black horse, and Fenn shivered.

Arika was close beside him. Her face was worried.

A captain of the Numi began to speak, using a trumpet of bark that magnified his voice. In the name of RhamSin, he offered pardon, power, and reward for the return of a runaway slave who had murdered a priest. There was no answer from the marsh. He repeated the offer three times and still there was no answer.

The distant figure that was RhamSin reached out and took the speaking tube.

The voice of RhamSin spoke, carrying clear across the silent marsh.

"Fenway! There is no escape from me. I brought forth your mind and it belongs to me. When the time comes I will call--and you will obey!" That voice seared into Fenn's brain like fire. He had heard it before, commanding, torturing. He had heard it and obeyed.

RhamSin wheeled his horse and galloped away and his men turned to follow.

Fear rose up and caught Fenn by the throat. He tried to shout defiance after the Numi priest but the words would not come. The hot

Sun burned him but he was cold and his face was damp with a clammy sweat.

"He lies, Fenn. He lies!" cried Arika but Fenn shook his head. He muttered, "I am not sure that RhamSin lies." He turned to Lannar and his eyes had a strange look. "How long will it take to be ready?"

"My men are already gathering horses and supplies." Lannar gave him a side-long glance that seemed to penetrate him like a sword-thrust but he did not mention RhamSin's words. He nodded toward the retreating Numi.

"They have drawn off so that we may feel free to go where we will. But they will watch and follow. However, we have a back door--a way up the scarp, hacked out long ago in case of need. The Numi will have to go many miles around to get up onto the plateau, so we'll have that much start of them."

He smiled, a nervous, vulpine baring of the teeth and Fenn knew that Lannar, too, was eager to be moving.

"I can't spare many men," he said. "But a light force moves faster and is easier to feed. But in the end we'll need help. The Numi are twice our number and better armed. So I have ordered messengers to go among the other outlaw tribes, asking them to follow."

He paused, and added, "This is all madness, Fenn. We can't live long in the Great Dark without warmth or sight of the Sun. But the Numi will be on their own ground. Even though RhamSin's generation may never have seen the homeland, it is the place that bred them as they are." He shrugged. "Well, we shall see what madmen can do! And now you had better sleep while you can."

In Lannar's house Fenn slept--a nervous slumber plagued with ugly

dreams. He was glad when the time came to mount and go. Malech was of the party. No one had suggested otherwise. But he rode a little apart with a proud sullen look, speaking to no one, and Fenn saw that Lannar kept a close eye upon him.

They scrambled up the steep trail to the plateau, twenty men armed with sword and bow and axe, and from every island in the swamp the eyes of men and women watched in fear and hope and wonder.

At the crest of the scarp, Fenn looked back across the vast emptiness of the desert, a wind-torn desolation under a copper sky. He had survived it and now it seemed familiar to him. He felt almost a sadness at leaving it to go into the trackless dark that was forbidden to humankind. He saw the dusty plume that marked the march of the Numi following the scarp, knew that they had already begun the chase.

Ahead, the plateau stretched to the short horizon. The rusty clouds seemed lower here, scudding close over the earth. Stiff grasses bent before the wind. They had climbed a long way up from the desert and it seemed to Fenn that the wind had an edge to it, a memory of cold. They formed their ranks for the long trail, twenty men and forty horses, heading outward toward the Shadow and the Great Dark. It was a strange and timeless journey. For some distance the way was known to Lannar. There was game on the plateau and good forage at certain times of the year and the men of the marshes made use of both. But they were soon beyond those limits, plodding across an endless dreary upland of tumbled hills. The shadows grew longer and the Sun sank lower and lower at their backs and the teeth of the whistling wind grew sharper. The country was too rough to let them see far along their backtrail. But they would spot from time to time the distant smoke of cooking fires and Fenn thought that they drew always closer.

The desert horses were small but tough and enduring and more used to short rations and hard work than the Numi beasts. Fenn loved the rough ill-tempered little brutes and that gave them this one advantage over the Numi.

"Wait though," said Lannar. "Wait until we are all on foot." The wind boomed ever stronger and colder and there were bursting storms of rain and then, at one sleep period, Fenn roused to find the whole earth mantled with a chill whiteness. From that time on the men grew more morose and silent and he knew that they were afraid. He was beginning to be afraid himself.

ARIKA clung close to him. She seemed very strong for her slight body, riding as long as the men and never complaining. When they slept, huddled together around the fires, it seemed natural that she should be near Fenn. They did not talk much--no one did. They rode and ate their meagre rations and slept and were too weary for anything else.

Malech kept always apart. He seemed to have taken a dislike even to his sister, who was tolerated if not web corned by the humans. His beard had grown and his hair was longer. He was wrapped in fur and leather like the others and with his body covered it was impossible to tell him now from a true Numi. He did not seem to need the warmth of the fire and he slept alone with an air of contemptuous strength.

And as Malech grew more like a Numi the tribesmen's distrust and hatred of him deepened. But Malech's strength and unhuman endurance helped enormously in the tight places of the trail. That held their aversion to him in check.

One of the horses died. They flayed him and dried the meat.

"They will all die," said Lannar grimly. "They will give us hides and

food for the rest of our journey." He was a desert man and did not like to watch the death of horses.

The Sun became a red ember on the horizon behind them. They went down into a valley filled with snow and darkness and when they reached the other side the Sun was gone beyond the higher hills. Arika whispered. "This is what men call the Shadow."

There was still light in the sky. The land began to slope gradually downward, flattening out. Here there were no trees, nor even the stunted scrub that had grown to the edge of the Shadow. The wind-swept rocks were covered with wrinkled lichens and the frozen earth was always white. One by one the horses died. The frozen meat was hidden by the way so that there should be food for the return march--if there was to be one. The men suffered from the cold. They were used to the dry heat of the deserts. Three of them sickened and died and one was killed by a fall. The Shadow deepened imperceptibly into night. The rolling rusty clouds of the dayside had become the greyer clouds of storm and fog. The men toiled through dimming mist and falling snow that turned at last to utter darkness.

Lannar turned a lined and haggard face to Fenn. "Madmen!" he muttered. And that was all.

They passed through the belt of storm. There came a time when the lower air was clear and a shifting wind began to tear away the clouds from the sky.

The pace of the men slowed, then halted altogether. They watched, caught in a stasis of awe and fear too deep for utterance. Fenn saw that there was a pallid eerie radiance somewhere behind the driving clouds. Arika's hand crept into his and clung there. But Malech stood apart, his head lifted, his shining eyes fixed upon the sky.

A rift, a great ragged valley sown with stars. It widened, and the clouds were swept away, and the sky crashed down upon the waiting men, children of eternal day who had never seen the night.

They stared into the black depths of space, burning with a million points of icy fire. And the demoniac face of the Moon stared back at them, pocked with great shadows, immense and leering, with a look of death upon it. Someone voiced a thin, wavering scream. A man turned and began to run along the backtrail, floundering, falling, clawing his way back toward the light he had left forever.

Panic took hold of the men. Some of them fell down and covered their heads. Some stood still, their hands plucking at sword and axe, all sense gone out of them. And Malech laughed. He leaped up on a hummock of ice, standing tall above them in the cold night so that his head seemed crowned with blazing stars, "What are you afraid of? You fools! It's the moon and stars. Your fathers knew them and they were not afraid!" The scorn and the strength that were in him roused the anger of the men, giving their fear an outlet. They rushed toward him and Malech would have died there in the midst of his laughter if Fenn and Lannar together had not turned them back.

"It's true!" Fenn cried. "I have seen them. I have seen the night as it was before the Destruction. There is nothing to fear." But he was as terrified as they.

Fenn and Lannar and the bearded Malech who had shed every trace of humanity, beat the men into line again and got them moving, fifteen of the twenty who had started, alone in the Great Dark. Tiny motes of life, creeping painfully across the dead white desolation under the savage stars. The cold Moon watched them and something of its light of madness came into their eyes and did not go away.

Fifteen--twelve of these lived to see the riven ice of the ocean, a

glittering chaos flung out across the world. Malech looked toward the east, where the Moon was rising.

Fenn heard him say, "From beyond the ocean, from the heartland of the Great Dark--that is where we came from, the New Men who conquered the earth!"

Following the tattered map they turned northward along the coast. They were scarecrows now, half starved, half frozen, forgetting that they had ever lived another -life under a warm Sun--almost forgetting why they had left that life behind them.

Nine of them lived to see an island between two frozen rivers near the frozen sea and on that island the skeletal towers of a city buried in the ice. Nine of them lived to see New York.

Chapter VIII

The Citadel

FENN stood alone with Arika on the high cliff above the river. The others waited at a distance and their waiting was a cruel thing. Their faces made him feel afraid.

Then he forgot them. He looked out across the white river, across white snow and reaches of gleaming ice to the island city lying silent under the stars and the black sky.

There was no light in that city now but the cold shining of the Moon. No voice spoke there but the voice of the wind. Yet even in death the grandeur was not gone from it. The shattered towers stood up proudly from the ice that shrouded them, the massive bulk and size were not lessened. New York was not a city. It was a dream of titans

and the destruction of half a world had not effaced it.

A feeling of pride and sorrow came over Fenn, mixed with a despair so deep that he could not bear it. Memories crowded in on him, fleeting pictures of another time, half seen but poignant with regret and longing. He whispered, "Once it lived!" And the tears ran down his cheeks and froze in glittering drops.

Arika said, "Remember, Fenn. Remember those days when the city lived. Remember this place and the building of the Citadel." Her face came before him, pale in its dark frame of fur. Her eyes were huge, filled with the frosty moonlight, compelling, inescapable.

"Here you can remember, Fenn-way. Here is your past. Look at the city. Remember!"

Her eyes probed deep into his brain and her voice spoke, ringing down dark hidden corridors. Fenn looked past her at the city. His face changed slowly. He was no longer Fenn. He was another man, seeing another world. He had come to see the Citadel. Everyone came. It was the ninth wonder, the greatest work of mankind. It drew them with an ugly fascination. It was the symbol of death but a death that would not come in their time and so they could find in it excitement and a gratifying pride. There were lights on the Palisades. There were crowds, children shouting in the summer night, vendors, music. Across the Hudson loomed the immense and blazing bulk of New York, thrusting giant shoulders against the sky. He began to walk. And as he walked he thought he saw also a phantom landscape, a place of ice and desolation, with the wreck of a city lifting broken girders through the snow.

He had come to see the Citadel. Floodlights, many people, many voices, guards in uniform, a man talking through a loudspeaker.

Sunk a half mile deep in solid rock--area larger than the Empire State Building--lined and reinforced with steel--earthquake-proof, floodproof--heat and air supplied by sealed atomic generators with an efficiency period of five thousand years..."

There wasn't much to see on the surface. Only the great uplifted valve of the door, a core of rustproof alloy many feet thick that fitted into a seat of similar metal sunk into the rock.

The voice of the loudspeaker talked on, explaining that valve, the compressed-air mechanism that would outwear time, the system of levers that would open the door again after it was sealed--after the Destruction. A system that needed no tool but the human hand and the intelligence to use it. An intelligence capable of operating that door would be on a level high enough to profit by the things that were behind it. The crowd moved on toward the entrance to go down into the Citadel. He moved with them. The doorway was before him. But he could not reach it. There was a barrier between him and the door, something cold and hard and shining.

He thought he must have fainted then. It was all very strange. He heard the sound of axes and sometimes there were glimpses of things flowing like smoke across his vision. He was frightened. He thought he must be very ill.

Voices--shouting, laughing, sobbing, praying. The voices of crazy men. The axes and the chopping sounds had stopped.

Another voice, saying clearly, "Fenn-way, open the door!" He could see it, then. It was closed. It had never been closed before. The round metal gleamed at the bottom of a ragged pit, hacked out of ice. Ice? But it was summer!

He slid down into the pit. The levers were countersunk, sealed

against freezing. But they were frozen. He put all his strength into it and one by one they moved, stiff, protesting. He heard the shrill hissing of compressed air...

The great valve swung slowly upward.

He saw light in the opening below it. Warm air touched his face. And then the world blanked out.

When his mind cleared again he found himself lying on a metal floor. Someone had taken off his furs. It was warm, blessedly warm--almost hot, after the gelid cold. Above him he could see a web of girders mighty enough to hold a mountain. There was light.

Arika bent over him. Her eyes shone with a feral joy. "You've done it, Fenn," she whispered. "We're in the Citadel!" His heart began to pound. He sat up, remembering that he had dreamed. Lannar was standing near him. He had been weeping, the hard man of the desert.

"I would have killed you," he said. "If you had failed I would have broken you in my hands."

HE reached out to Fenn and Fenn nodded. "I knew that." He took Lannar's hand and rose and the men crowded around him. They blazed now. They knew what they had done and it was a great thing.. They were proud. But they looked at Fenn with an awe that was close to veneration. Lannar said, "I have set guards at the door. The stair that leads down is narrow, and if the Numi come, they must do it one at a time." He frowned uneasily. "Is there no other entrance?"

"None."

"I don't like a place with only one door," said Lannar. Fenn laughed. "We have the Citadel. Let us not worry about doors!" He caught Arika

to him. He was wild with elation. He looked at the long still corridors that rayed away from the central place where they stood. He thought of the many levels below this one, and of all the knowledge and the strength that waited there, to build the world again. Tears stung his own eyes, and there was no room in him now for fear. He started to walk, and the others came with him. Like men in a dream they went through the silent halls of the Citadel that had waited twelve hundred years for their coming.

Twelve hundred years ago they had sealed this place, those men of the past who had known they were doomed. This was their gift--their last great offering to the future.

Fenn's mind wavered uncertainly between that time and this. Sometimes he was Fenn-way, going with a guided group through the myriad rooms. Sometimes he was Fenn, holding a half-Numi girl in the hollow of his arm, walking with the naked riders of the desert. Sometimes he understood fully all that he saw and again only native intelligence enabled him to guess at the nature and uses of the complex things about him. But whether he was Fenn or Fenn-way the sense of awe did not leave him. It grew and deepened with every step he took. And with the awe came pride--not for himself but for the blood that was in him, and Lannar and every son of man. He felt the heavy obligation they owed to those long-dead builders of the Citadel. He felt the challenge that was inherent in their gift.

Knowledge is a two-edge sword, they seemed to say.

We gave ourselves deep wounds. How will you use knowledge, you men of the future? To build or to destroy?

They had done their work well, the builders of the Citadel. There were books, countless microfilm volumes stored in countless rooms. There were objects, from the first crude axe of stone to a tiny complex

model of a cyclotron. There were a million working models of every conceivable type of machine. There were films.

Whole levels had been devoted to chemistry and physics, to engineering and agriculture, to medicine, to every science man had learned to help him live. The art and the music and the thought of a world were stored there too and the records of man's history and his hopes and dreams and follies. Only one thing had been left out.

There were no weapons.

Thinking of the Numi they searched for weapons, for strong implements of war to use against RhamSin and the conquerors they would have to fight after him. And there was nothing.

Frowning, groping for memory, Fenn said slowly, "I think--they said that in all the Citadel there would be no instrument of death." Lannar's hand tightened on his bow. He laughed, a bitter sound. "That was noble. But they reckoned without the Numi!"

A shadow of dread began to grow in all their minds. Fenn saw how carefully the incredible multitudes of books and models and diagrams had been arranged so that one could grasp the simple things first and use them as steps to climb on. Some knowledge still lived in the world. If nothing had survived but man's own vigor and intelligence the treasures of the Citadel could still have been used, so magnificently had every step been planned. They did not see more than a hundredth part of that colossal monument to the faith and courage of man.

Their own faith and courage had brought them half across a world to find it. They were tired and they had an enemy at their backs. Dazed, stricken with awe and wonder, they returned to the central hall.

The guards at the stairway had seen nothing.

"They will come," said Malech. He walked over to a globe of the world as tall as two men that occupied the center of the hall. Idly he set it spinning, watching the play of light and shadow on the countries and the seas. He had shed his wrappings and Fenn saw that the light down on his body had grown thicker. It was as though the intense cold had brought out the last of the latent Numi characteristics in Malech.

Fenn went to him. He asked a question he had asked before. "Malech--what are the Numi?"

Malech's large hand stopped the globe from spinning. His fingers rested on a land that had once been called Europe.

"Here," he said. "When the Earth's spinning slowed, all this side of it turned its face forever away from the Sun and was trapped in the Great Dark. The air here did not freeze, for there was still warmth from Earth's heart. But all else here froze and died.

"All except a very few men and women--a few strong enough to survive. These few survivors gathered together and found ways to live. They adapted themselves to the dark and cold, even growing furred against it and their minds sharpened by necessity."

Malech smiled and spun the globe again. "They were the New Men--the Numi. But they were men still and they remembered the Sun! And they came at last to take their place under it!"

Lannar had come soft-footed up behind them. "So they did," he said. "And where is your place, Malech? With the Numi or with us?" Malech turned slowly. Fenn thought of another time they two had faced each other and now Malech towered over the smaller man,

arrogant--and strong. The journey had not told on him too much.

"I made my decision long ago," he said to Lannar. "Tell me, Malech." But the tall man laughed and did not answer. He stood there looking down at Lannar and the globe spun

round and round behind him. The hand of the desert man dropped to his sword.

Fenn had gripped his own blade. And then there came the swift sharp twang of a bowstring, and a cry and a man pitched head first down the stairs.

He was a Numi, wearing the black and silver of RhamSin.

Chapter IX

The Courage of Fenn

ANOTHER soldier of the temple died on the stairway, and a third retreated with an arrow through his thigh.

Then there was silence. Fenn sprang to the foot of the narrow well.

"Come down!" he shouted. He cursed the Numi and bade them come and die. Above in the outer darkness, the voice of RhamSin spoke.

"When it is time we'll come!" He laughed. "What will you do with the Citadel now that you have it?"

"Keep it for mankind!" cried Fenn defiantly, and again RhamSin laughed.

"Mankind," he said, "is a long way off." He seemed to withdraw and Fenn heard the Numi making camp in a circle around the doorway.

Lannar plucked with hard fingers at his bowstring, making it thrum like the string of a harp. He looked

angrily around the great hall, including by inference the whole Citadel.

"In all this place, not a weapon. Nothing!" He had counted on the strength of the Citadel. Fenn realized that they all had.

Lannar continued bleakly, "They can't get in, we can't get out. They have food and snow to make water. We have a little food. They're cold and we're warm and the toughest hide will hold out the longest. I only hope the tribesmen don't linger on the way."

"If," said Fenn, "they had faith enough to come at all." He turned from the mocking stair, desperately searching his mind and the fragments of memory for something, anything, that could be used to help them. And he saw something huddled on the floor near the great globe of the world.

It was Arika.

She stirred in his arms as he lifted her and whispered, "Malech. I tried to stop him." There was a reddening welt on her temple where an iron fist had struck her.

Savagely angry Fenn looked around at the knot of men by the stair, at the huge empty hall.

Malech had disappeared.

A twang and hiss from somewhere up above and the man next to Lannar fell with an arrow through his body. Fenn thought that Lannar

would have died then except that he was sheltered by the stair. Malech's voice cried, "Clear the stair, you human dogs! Stand away!" The men scattered then, wildly, taking cover where they could behind the pillars that upheld the girders of the roof, and as they went a second shaft took one tribesman through the leg. A cat-squall of sheer animal rage came from Lannar and Fenn dragged the still dazed Arika close under the bulge of the globe.

He unslung his bow and set an arrow to the string and then he peered into the cold upper light of the hall, following the sound of Malech's voice. Some distance from the narrow well of the stair, a steel ladder climbed the wall to a small blind gallery set high among the sockets of the girders. Fenn guessed that behind that gallery was the chamber of the valve mechanism. The gallery itself was little more than a platform but it was large enough for Malech.

He glimpsed the dark bulk of Malech's body, half hidden in the shadows of the niche. He raised his bow,

then let it drop. He could not hope to hit him at that angle. He called to Lannar, and Lannar and his men answered with a flight of arrows that rattled against the corners and the railing of the gallery. Malech shouted, "Shoot away!"

He sounded as though he were enjoying himself. He had everything on his side, the light, the angle, the elevation. He covered the whole area around the stairway. He could keep it clear so that the next time the Numi could come down without too much interference.

He said as much, and Lannar cursed him for a traitor. Malech answered, "I was born to be one. The only choice I had was to betray-my mother or my father."

He laughed. "Arika decided for the mother's blood and cast her lot

with you humans. She told me on the trail and I knew it was because she loves Fenn.

"So, since she had mined our plans, I too made my choice on the trail. I knew which blood was strongest in me. I left a message, scrawled in charcoal on a strip of hide. RhamSin was sure to find it. Let the humans do the work, I told him. What matter? They are weak, and they will be weaker. I promised him the Citadel."

"What was your price?" asked Lannar bitterly. "What was the price of the human world?"

"To let it be forgotten that my blood is tainted! To be accepted for what I am--a Numi!"

Again his humming bow sent a shaft through the breast of a man who exposed himself to shoot.

FENN reached up and set the world-globe to whirling. Arika caught his arm but he flung her hand aside. He went low and fast, belly down, keeping the globe between him and the gallery. Malech called his name. "Will you die now, Fenn-way? Fenn-way! All that talk about time and the past and how the Citadel belonged to men. Listen to me, man without a memory! Do you know who found the Citadel? Not men, who had lost it! No. The Numi found it. Numi wisdom, Numi science!

You were only the little tool in the hands of RhamSin." He paused. Fenn had gained the far wall. He crouched behind a pillar, measuring the distance to the next. Malech said, "Don't bother, Fenn. Come here, where you want to be. I won't harm you."

Fenn did not move. Lannar shouted, "Don't!"

"Why not?" asked Malech. "It's his only chance. I will have killed him by the third pillar, if he works his way around."

Under the spinning globe Arika crouched and looked at Fenn with eyes that hurt him, full of fear and sorrow and none of it for herself. Fenn stepped out from behind the pillar. He began to walk toward the gallery, across the wide still hall. He held his bow slack, the arrow knocked point down. Malech kept back in the angle and the shadows. He did not show himself.

He talked. "You told me once that you wanted to remember. Very well, you shall. Why do you stop, Fenn? Are you afraid to remember?" Sweat glistened on Fenn's drawn face, on his naked breast. The muscles of his arms stood out like ropes.

"Or," asked Malech softly, "are you afraid to have the others know the truth? They're watching you, their great god Fenn-way, who led them to the Citadel. Don't you want them to know the truth about you, about humanity?"

Fenn started on again. He said, "I am not afraid." And it was a lie.

"Then I'll tell you the real story of the finding of the Citadel. You had lost it, you humans, and it would have been lost forever if it had not been for RhamSin. He took a rebel tribesman off the desert--another such as Lannar there, captured in a raid--and used his science on him, so carefully, so patiently, making the little mind of the captive a mirror of the past." He laughed softly. "Are you faltering again? You don't like to hear this, do you? You're so proud of your achievement!"

The bowstring burned Fenn's fingers. His heart was pounding. Somewhere in him was a sickness that grew and grew. He went on toward the gallery. Malech's voice continued relentlessly, like the biting of salt in a raw wound.

"Arika knew. She watched. She watched RhamSin blot out the memories of this tribesman's own life, closing the channels of his own remembrances. That opened the way. RhamSin probed hack then into memories that were not the tribesman's own--the memories of his fathers who had lived before him, ancestral memories, the inherited books of knowledge we do not know we possess but which are there, buried deep in the secret parts of the brain.

"Arika waited. And just before this raw sun-bitten rat of the deserts, under the power of RhamSin's mind, was about to speak with the voice of his long-dead ancestors, telling the secrets of the Citadel, she stole him away from the temple. And why? You wondered about that, Fenn. I will tell you. So that the Numi powers that she and I possess might gain that secret for ourselves to sell to the highest bidder!"

Fenn had stopped entirely. He stared up at Malech. Malech's bow was ready with an arrow aimed at his heart and his own arrow was on the string. But Fenn was

not concerned with killing in this moment. His mind was lost in a dark turmoil. It seemed that he could remember dimly the agony of that probing into his mind. RhamSin's voice, forbidding, commanding, opening hidden doors...

Ancestral memory--the Fenn-way of the past had known that term. There was a word to go with it--hypnosis.

Malech cried, "Look at your hero, you humans! We were only slaves and half-breeds, my sister and I--but hee was a tool in our hands! Now tell me who has the best right to the Citadel?"

A cold bleak anger took possession of Fenn. It drove away all thought

and emotion, all concern with himself. He began to raise his bow.

"It's too late, Fenn," said Malech, laughing. His own shaft pointed unwaveringly at Fenn's heart, ready to fly. "Too late--your masters are already here!"

It was true. From the corner of his eye Fenn saw the Numi soldiers coming one by one, swiftly down the narrow stair. Lannar and what men he had left had fallen back. Their arrows killed a few but they could not stop the Numi rush. Their only hope had been to hold the stair and Malech had prevented that.

Malech!

Fenn's eyes glittered with a hard malevolence. He dropped to one knee to let fly his arrow, knowing that Malech would instantly shoot. He expected instant death. But in that second a black shaft suddenly stood out from Malech's breast. The bow of the half-breed fell from his hands unused. He stood for a moment with the long arrow in him, staring over Fenn's head with a look of shocked incredulity.

Fenn heard the voice of RhamSin speak to Malech. "The man's mind can still be useful to me. And your usefulness is done."

MALECH went down on his knees. And Fenn laughed.

Two long strides took him to the ladder. He went up it with a bound and crouched behind the railing. Malech looked at him, still with that hurt disbelief.

He was quite dead. Fenn began to shoot into the ranks of the Numi around the stair.

He shouted, "Lannar! Up here!"

They made a bolt for it, Lannar and his men and Arika. From his vantage point Fenn gave them what cover he could. Lannar, Arika, and three men made it. Lannar and two others were wounded.

They were crowded on the gallery. Fenn shoved the body of Malech down the ladder and there was room enough for them to crouch together behind the railing.

"What use?" asked Lannar grimly. "We have shot away our arrows."

"Because," Fenn said with a queer desperate hope in his voice, "there may still be a weapon here! One that I can't quite remember." He was looking down into the hall at the Numi who were gathering there, at the globe of cold light that hung above them.

Cold light? What was it that he could not remember? He looked at the globe and the web of girders close above his head and his brows knit in a cruel effort.

The last of the Numi came down the stairs. RhamSin said, "Will you come down peaceably or must we come up after you?"

"Come if you will," snarled Lannar. "We still have our swords." Fenn turned to Arika. His fingers bit into her flesh. He whispered, "Help me to remember! The Citadel--the guide that took us through--something he. said..."

RhamSin's voice rang in her ears like the voice of doom. "I told you once that I would call you and you would come. I call you now. And I warn you--your use-fulness will not save your life if you anger me too far." Arika said, "Don't listen, Fenn! Remember!"

Her eyes burned deep into his. The voice of RhamSin called and Fenn felt a terrible compulsion to obey. But there was an iron fury in

him and he would not yield.

The Citadel, the crowd, the guide, talking--Cold light. Radioactive dust suspended in an inert liquid. Deadly compound, harnessed for the peaceful use of man. Bulbs of plastic that screened out harmful rays--absolutely safe

give light almost forever."Stay here," said Fenn to the others very softly. "Keep down. Don't move or lean out to look!"

He leaped up and caught the girder overhead, swinging upon it. Balancing precariously on that narrow bridge of steel he began to run. RhamSin shouted.

Arrows began to fly around Fenn--black arrows with barbed tips. But he was a hard mark to hit, running high among the interlacing shadows of the girders. And he had not far to go.

Below him he could see the Numi, their angry faces looking up, tall proud lords of conquest in a citadel of peace. He flung himself down across the girder. Here were bolted the chains that held the globe of radioactive light. He took his sword, a good keen blade of tempered

Numi steel. With every ounce of strength and madness that was in him he struck downward at a single chain.

It parted, helped by the weight of the massive bracket it upheld. And Fenn found it in his heart to laugh a little bitterly. Even in a citadel of peace the ingenious mind of man could find a means of killing!

The globe of light fell with the snapping of the chain. Out of the round bracket that swung now by one edge it fell--down, down, to smash upon the metal floor below.

Fenn hugged the girder. There was a crash and a burst of vicious light, a hissing, snarling explosion, and then...

He thought that even Numi did not deserve to die that way, in such corrosive agony of the body, in such shocked terror of the mind. He waited until the last one had stopped screaming. He did not look again at the seared scored twisted bodies. He worked his way back along the girder and this time he did not run. He was sick and shaken and full of a sense of guilt.

ARIKA and Lannar helped him back down onto the gallery. They too looked sick and pale from what they had seen on the floor below. "They are all dead," whispered Arika. "But how--"

Fenn said heavily, "The men of the far past built this Citadel to be a light in the darkness, a light of hope and peace and knowledge. And now war and death have come into it. And my hands are red."

"You were forced to do it, Fenn!"

He knew that she was right. And men would be forced to war against the Numi, and the knowledge of the Citadel would free them from that alien yoke. But after that...

He spoke and his whisper was not for those beside him but for men dead twelve hundred years, the men who had bequeathed them this heritage of the ages. "After that," he whispered, "we will learn to build and not destroy. I will redeem my guilt, men of the past." He would not be alone. There was Arika--and Lannar, a desert man like himself.

His own memories, of his life before RhamSin, might never return. But that did not seem to matter now. He could start a new life when before them lay a whole new world.