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# People of the Talisman by Leight Brackett

## *I*

THROUGH ALL the long cold hours of the Norland night the Martian had not moved nor spoken. At dusk of the day before Eric John Stark had brought him into the ruined tower and laid him down, wrapped in blankets, on the snow. He had built a fire of dry lichens, and since then the two men had waited, alone in the vast wasteland that girdles the polar cap of Mars.

Now, just before dawn, Camar the Martian spoke.

"Stark."

"Yes?"

"I am dying."

"Yes."

"I will not reach Kushat."

"No."

Camar nodded. He was silent again.

The wind howled down from the northern ice, and the broken walls rose up against the wind, brooding, gigantic, roofless now but so huge and

sprawling that they seemed less like walls than cliffs of ebon stone. Stark would not have gone near them but for Camar. They were wrong, somehow, with a taint of forgotten evil still about them.

The big Earthman glanced at Camar, and his face was sad. "A man likes to die in his own place," he said abruptly. "I am sorry."

"The Lord of Silence is a great personage," Camar answered. "He does not mind the meeting place. No. It was not for that I came back into the Norlands."

He was shaken by an agony that was not of the body. "But I will not reach Kushat."

Stark spoke quietly, using the courtly High Martian almost as fluently as Camar.

"I have known that there was a burden heavier than death upon my brother's soul."

He leaned over, placing one large hand on the Martian's shoulder. "My brother has given his life for mine. Therefore, I will take his burden upon myself, if I can."

He did not want Camar's burden, whatever it might be. But the Martian had fought beside him through a long guerrilla campaign far to the south, among the harried tribes of the Dryland borders. He was a good man of his hands, and in the end had taken the bullet that was meant for Stark, knowing quite well what he was doing. They were friends.

That was why Stark had brought Camar into this bleak north country, trying to reach the city of his birth. The Martian was driven by some secret demon. He was afraid to die before he reached Kushat.

And now he had no choice.

"I have sinned, Stark," he said softly. "I have stolen a holy thing."

Stark crouched beside him. "What thing?"

"You're an outlander, you would not know about Ban Cruach and the talisman that he left when he went away forever beyond the Gates of

Death."

Camar flung aside the blankets and sat up, his voice gaining a febrile strength.

"I was born and bred in the Thieves' Quarter under the Wall. I was proud of my skill. And the talisman was a challenge. It was a treasured thing, so treasured that hardly a man has touched it since the days of Ban Cruach. And that was in the days when men still had the luster on them, before they forgot that they were gods.

" 'Guard well the Gates of Death,' he said, 'that is the city's trust. And keep the talisman always, for the day may come when you will need its strength.' No enemy, you see, could ever harm Kushat as long as it was there.

"But I was a thief, and proud. And I stole the talisman."

His hands went to his girdle, a belt of worn leather with a boss of battered steel. But his fingers were already numb.

"Take it, Stark. Open the boss, there, on the side, where the beast's head is carved."

Stark took the belt from Camar and found the hidden spring. The rounded top of the boss came free. Inside it was something wrapped in a scrap of silk.

"I had to go away from Kushat," Camar whispered. "I could not ever go back. But it was enough, to have taken that."

He watched, shaken between awe and pride and remorse, as Stark unwrapped the bit of silk.

Stark had discounted most of Camar's talk as superstition, but even so he expected something more spectacular than the object he held in his palm.

It was a lens, some four inches across, and made with great skill, but still only a bit of crystal. He turned it about, frowning. It was not a simple lens. There was an intricate interlocking of many facets, incredibly complex. Far too complex, Stark would have thought, for the level of

technology that must have existed in Ban Cruach's time. He found that it was hypnotic if one looked at it too long.

"What is its use?" he asked of Camar.

"We are as children. We have forgotten. But it is surely a thing of great power. You will see that, Stark. There are some who believe that if Kushat were threatened it would call Ban Cruach himself back through the Gates of Death to lead us again. I do not know."

"Men seldom come back through the Gates of Death for any purpose," said Stark dryly. "Unless in Kushat those words have another meaning?"

Camar answered, "It is the name of a pass that opens into the black mountains beyond Kushat. The city stands guard before it. No man remembers why, except that it is a great trust."

His gaze feasted on the talisman, in agony and pride.

Stark said, "You wish me to take this to Kushat?"

"Yes. Yes!" Camar looked at Stark joyfully. Then his eyes clouded and he shook his head. "No. The North is not used to strangers. With me you might have been safe, but alone... No, Stark. You've risked too much already. Go back, out of the Norlands, while you can."

He lay back on the blankets. Stark saw that bluish pallor had come into the hollows of his cheeks.

"Camar," he said. And again, "Camar?"

"Yes?"

"Go in peace, Camar. I will take the talisman to Kushat."

The Martian sighed, and smiled, and Stark was glad he had made the promise.

"The riders of Mekh are wolves," said Camar suddenly. "They hunt these gorges. Look out for them."

"I will."

Stark's knowledge of the geography of this part of Mars was vague in the extreme, but he knew that the mountain valleys of Mekh lay ahead and to the north, between him and Kushat. Camar had told him about these upland warriors. He was willing to heed the warning.

And now Camar had done with talking. Stark knew that he did not have long to wait. The wind spoke with the voice of a great organ. The moons had set and it was very dark outside the tower, except for the white glimmering of the snow. Stark looked up at the brooding walls and shivered. There was a smell of death already in the air.

To keep from thinking, he bent closer to the fire, studying the lens. An ornament, he thought, probably worn as a badge of rank. Strange ornament for a barbarian king in the dawn of Mars. The firelight made tiny dancing sparks in the endless inner facets. It seemed to gather the light into itself, until it glowed with a kind of throbbing witch-fire, brightening, as though the thing were coming alive in his hands.

A pang of primitive and unreasoning fear shot through him. He fought it down. The part of him that had learned with much pain and effort to be civilized forced him to sit and consider the crystal, when what he really wanted to do was to rid himself of it by hurling it far away into the snow.

A talisman. A promise from a king long dead, the safety of a city. A piece of crystal, encrusted with legend and superstitious faith. That was all it was. The firelight, coupled with Camar's fervor and the approach of death, were making him imagine things.

Only a bit of crystal...

Yet it glowed brighter in his hands, a warm and living thing. It drew his gaze and held it. The wind talked in the hollow stone, and after a while it seemed to Stark that he heard other voices, very faint and distant, tiny thready things that plucked and slid along the edges of his mind. He started up, shaken by an eerie terror, listening, and when he listened all he could hear was the wind and the chafing of the hard snow blowing, and the painful breathing of Camar.

He looked at the crystal, forcing himself to hold it. But he turned away from the fire so that some of the light died slowly out of it and the quivering witch-fires were a little dimmed.

Imagination, he told himself. One might hear anything in a place like this. One might see anything...

Only still the crystal glowed, as though it might be taking life from his own living hands now that the fire was denied it. And the inner facets called his gaze down to dim depths that stretched into somewhere that was not space, into time perhaps, or...

The tiny voices spoke again, scratching, chittering spider-sounds coming from a million miles away where no ear could possibly hear them. But Stark heard them. He heard them this time just long enough to recognize a certain thing about them, and then he yelled and flung the crystal from him in blind atavistic fear, because suddenly he knew that wherever it came from and however it had gotten to Kushat, no human man had made it.

It fell into the banked snow by the doorway, vanishing without a sound. Stark stood shivering violently, and then in a minute or two he began rather uncertainly to curse himself for an idiot. The voices were gone again and he stretched his hearing, trying to catch them and reassure himself that they had been only his oversensitive capacity to find strange gods and evil spirits with every step he took. The primitive aboriginal was still very close under his skin. He knew and recognized it, finding it often a curse and only sometimes a blessing. The naked boy who had run with Tika and Old One among the haunted rocks on the edge of Darkside had been playing tricks again with Eric John Stark.

He stood still, cataloguing the sounds, the many shadings of the wind blowing far, blowing near, the chafing of the snow, Camar's breathing...

But Camar's breathing had stopped.

Stark went to him and knelt down, rather wishing now that he could retract his promise and knowing it was too late. He crossed Camar's hands in the ritual posture and then drew the tattered edge of his cloak across his face. He rose and gave Camar the gesture of farewell, and then turned to where he had thrown the talisman. He was on his knees groping for it in the drifted snow when one of the beasts tethered outside the tower started up from its sleep with a shrill hissing. Motionless he listened, and heard it answered.

Working desperately, Stark probed the icy drift with his fingers, felt the

smooth oval of the talisman and plucked it out, placing it in the boss of Camar's belt. He closed it and clasped the belt around his waist, and then, not hurrying now, he found the small flask that lay with his gear beside the fire and took a long pull at it.

Then he waited.

They came silently on padded feet, the rangy mountain brutes moving daintily through the rubble of the sprawling ruin. Their riders too were silent, tall men with fierce eyes and russet hair. They wore leather coats, and each man carried a long straight spear.

There were a score of them around the tower in the windy gloom. Stark did not bother to draw his gun. He had learned very young the difference between courage and idiocy.

He walked out toward them, moving slowly lest one of them be startled into spearing him, yet not slowly enough to denote fear. And he held up his right hand and gave them greeting.

They did not answer him. They sat their restive mounts and stared at him, and Stark knew that Camar had spoken the truth.

These were the riders of Mekh, and they were wolves.

## ***II***

STARK WAITED, until they should tire of their own silence.

Finally one demanded, "Of what country are you?" He answered, "I am called N'Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe."

This was the name his foster-folk had given him, the half human aboriginals who had found him orphaned and alone after an earthquake wiped out the mining community that had been his home; the folk who had raised him, in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of Mercury's Twilight Belt. It still seemed to Stark to be his true name.

"A stranger," said the leader, and smiled. He pointed to the dead Camar and asked, "Did you slay him?"

"He was my friend," said Stark. "I was bringing him home to die."

Two riders dismounted to inspect the body. One called up to the leader, "He was from Kushat, if I know the breed, Thord! And he has not been robbed." He proceeded to take care of that detail himself.

"A stranger," repeated the leader, Thord. "Bound for Kushat, with a man of Kushat. Well, I think you will come with us, stranger."

Stark shrugged. And with the long spears pricking him, he did not resist when the tall Thord plundered him of all he owned except his clothes and Camar's belt, which was not worth the stealing. His gun Thord flung contemptuously away.

One of the men brought Stark's beast and Camar's from where they were tethered and the Earthman mounted, as usual over the violent protest of the creature, which did not like the smell of him. They moved out from under the shelter of the walls, into the full fury of the wind.

For the rest of that night and through the next day and the night that followed it they rode eastward, stopping only to rest the beasts and chew on their rations of jerked meat. And to Stark, riding a prisoner, it came with full force that this was the North country, half a world away from the Mars of spaceships and commerce and visitors from other planets. The future had never touched these wild mountains and barren plains. Not even the present had reached them. The past held pride enough.

Far to the north, below the horizon, the polar pack made a glimmering white blink on the sky, and at night there were the cold flames of the aurora to burn out the stars. The wind blew down from the ice, through the mountain gorges, across the plains never ceasing. And here and there the cryptic towers rose, broken monoliths of stone, of unknown history and unguessed purpose. The men of Mekh could tell Stark nothing about them, though they seemed to prefer to avoid them.

Thord did not make any mention to Stark about where they were taking him, or why, and Stark did not ask. It would have been an admission of fear. Since there was nothing else he could do at the moment he exercised the patience of the chained beast, and simply waited. But there were times when he found it difficult. Camar's belt sat uncomfortably at his middle. He kept thinking about the talisman and wondering how much of its strangeness was his own imagination and how



much was real, and it made for uneasy thinking. All he wanted now was to get as quickly as possible to Kushat and be rid of the thing. And he cursed Thord and his riders, silently but with great viciousness.

In mid-afternoon of the second day they came to a lip of rock where the snow was swept clean, and below it was sheer drop into a narrow valley. Looking down, Stark saw that on the floor of the valley, up and down as far as he could see, were men and beasts and shelters of hides and brush, and fires burning. By the hundreds, by the several thousand, they camped under the cliffs and their voices rose up on the thin air in a vast deep murmur that was deafening after the silence of the plains.

A war party, gathered now, before the thaw. Stark smiled. He became curious to meet the leader of this army.

They found their way single file along a winding track that dropped down the cliff face. The wind stopped abruptly, cut off by the valley walls. They came in among the shelters of the camp.

Here the snow was churned and soiled and melted to slush by the fires. There were no women in the camp, no sign of the usual cheerful rabble that follows a barbarian army. There were only men, hillmen and warriors all, tough-handed killers with no thought but battle.

They came out of their holes to shout at Thord and his men, and stare at the stranger. Thord was flushed and jovial with his own importance.

"I have no time for you," he shouted back. "I go to speak with the Lord Ciaran."

Stark rode impassively, a dark giant with a face of stone. From time to time he made his beast curve, and laughed at himself inwardly for doing it.

They came at length to a shelter larger than the others but built exactly the same and no more comfortable. A spear was thrust into the snow beside the entrance, and from it hung a black pennant with a single bar of silver across it like lightning in a night sky. Beside it was a shield with the same device. There were no guards.

Thord dismounted, bidding Stark to do the same. He hammered on the shield with the hilt of his sword, announcing himself.

"Lord Ciaran! It is Thord, with a captive."

A voice, tonelessly and strangely muffled, spoke from within.

"Enter, Thord."

Thord pushed aside the hide curtain and went in, with Stark at his heels.

The dim daylight did not penetrate the interior. Cressets burned, giving off a flickering brilliance and a smell of strong oil. The floor of packed snow was carpeted with furs, much worn so that the bare hide showed through in places. Otherwise there was no adornment, and no furniture but a chair and a table, both dark with age and use, and a pallet of skins in one shadowy corner with what seemed to be a heap of rags thrown upon it.

In the chair sat a man.

He seemed very tall in the shaking light of the cressets. From neck to thigh his lean body was cased in black link mail, and under that a tunic of leather, dyed black. Across his knees he held a sable axe, a great thing made for the shearing of skulls, and his hands lay upon it gently, as though it were a toy he loved.

His head and face were covered by a thing that Stark had seen before only in very old paintings, but he recognized it. It was the ancient war-mask of the Inland Kings of Mars. Wrought of black and gleaming steel, it presented an inhuman visage of slitted eyeholes and a barred slot for breathing. At the top and back of the head it sprang out in a thin soaring sweep of curving metal like a dark wing edge-on in flight.

The intent, expressionless scrutiny of that mask was bent, not upon Thord, but upon Eric John Stark.

The hollow voice spoke again, from behind the mask. "Well?"

"We were hunting in the gorges to the south," said Thord. "We saw a fire..." He told the story of how they had found the stranger and the body of the man from Kushat.

"Kushat!" said the Lord Ciaran softly. "Ah! And why, stranger, were you

going to Kushat?"

"My name is Stark. Eric John Stark, Earthman, out of Mercury." He was tired of being called stranger. He was tired of the whole business, and the blank mask irritated him. "Why should I not go to Kushat? Is it against some law, that a man may not go there in peace without being hounded all over the Norlands? And why do the men of Mekh make it their business? They have nothing to do with the city."

Thord held his breath, watching with delighted anticipation.

The hands of the man in armor caressed the axe. They were slender hands, smooth and sinewy. Small hands, it seemed, for such a weapon.

"We make what we will our business, Eric John Stark." He spoke with a peculiar gentleness. "I have asked you. Why were you going to Kushat?"

"Because," Stark answered with equal restraint, "my comrade wanted to go home to die."

"It seems a long hard journey, just for dying." The black helm bent forward in an attitude of thought. "Only the condemned or the banished leave their cities, or their clans. Why did your comrade flee Kushat?"

A voice spoke suddenly from out of the heap of rags that lay on the pallet in the shadows of the corner. A man's voice, deep and husky, with the harsh quaver of age or madness in it.

"Three men besides myself have fled Kushat, over the years that matter. One died in the spring floods. One was caught in the moving ice of winter. One lived. A thief named Camar, who stole a certain talisman."

Stark said, "My comrade was called Greshi." The leather belt weighed heavy about him, and the iron boss seemed hot against his belly. He was beginning now to be afraid.

The Lord Ciaran spoke, ignoring Stark. "It was the sacred talisman of Kushat. Without it, the city is like a man without a soul."

As the Veil of Tanit was to Carthage, Stark thought, and reflected on the fate of that city after the Veil was stolen.

"The nobles were afraid of their own people," the man in armor said. "They did not dare to tell that it was gone. But we know."

"And," said Stark, "you will attack Kushat before the thaw, when they least expect you."

"You have a sharp mind, stranger. Yes. But the great wall will be hard to carry, even so. If I came, bearing in *my* hands the talisman of Ban Cruach..."

He did not finish, but turned instead to Thord. "When you plundered the dead man's body, what did you find?"

"Nothing, Lord. A few coins, a knife, hardly worth the taking."

"And you, Eric John Stark. What did you take from the body?"

With perfect truth he answered, "Nothing."

"Thord," said the Lord Ciaran, "search him."

Thord came smiling up to Stark and ripped his jacket open.

With uncanny swiftness, the Earthman moved. The edge of one broad hand took Thord under the ear, and before the man's knees had time to sag Stark had caught his arm. He turned, crouching forward, and pitched Thord headlong through the door flap.

He straightened and turned again. His eyes held a feral glint. "The man has robbed me once," he said. "It is enough."

He heard Thord's men coming. Three of them tried to jam through the entrance at once, and one of them had a spear. Stark took it out of his hands. He used the butt of it, not speaking nor making a sound except the hard cracking of wood on bone. He cleared the doorway and flung the spear contemptuously after the stunned barbarians.

"Now," he said to the Lord Ciaran, "will we talk as men?"

The man in armor laughed, a sound of pure enjoyment. It seemed that the gaze behind the mask studied Stark's savage face and then lifted to greet the sullen Thord who came back into the shelter, his cheeks flushed crimson with rage.

"Go," said the Lord Ciaran. "The stranger and I will talk."

Thord had his sword in his hands and was panting to use it. "But Lord, it is not safe..."

"My dark mistress looks after my safety," said Ciaran, lifting the ax across his knees, "and better than you have done. Go."

Thord went.

The man in armor was silent then, the blind mask turned to Stark, who met that eyeless gaze and was silent also. And the bundle of rags in the shadows straightened slowly and became a tall old man with rusty hair and beard, through which peeped craggy juts of bone and two bright small points of fire, as though some wicked flame burned within him.

He shuffled over and crouched at the feet of the Lord Ciaran, watching the Earthman. And the man in armor leaned forward.

"I will tell you something, Eric John Stark. I am a bastard, but I come of the blood of kings. My name and rank I must make with my own hands. But I will set them high, and my name will ring in the Norlands.

"I will take Kushat. Who holds Kushat holds the power and the riches that lie beyond the Gates of Death."

Ciaran paused, as though he might be dreaming, and then he said, "Ban Cruach came out of nowhere and made himself half a god. I will do the same."

The old man made a chuckling sound. "I told them, in Kushat. I said it was time to rouse themselves and regain their power. They could have done it easily then, when they still had the talisman. The city was dying, and I told them it was their last chance to live, but they were too content. They only laughed, and chained me. Now they will laugh in a different way. Ha! How they will laugh!"

Stark looked at him with distaste, but he, like Ciaran, was too occupied with his dreams to notice.

And Ciaran said, "Now the city is naked, and I will take it, and talisman or not, I will go beyond the Gates of Death to see what may be there."

He paused again, the dark mask inscrutable and compelling turned toward Stark.

"Ride with me," he said abruptly. "Yield up the talisman, if indeed you can, and be the shield at my back. I have offered no other man that honor."

Stark asked slowly, "Why do you choose me?"

"We are of one blood, Stark, though we are strangers."

The Earthman's cold eyes narrowed. "What would your red wolves say to that? And what would Otar say? Look at him, already stiff with jealousy and fear lest I answer 'Yes.' "

"I do not think you would be afraid of either of them."

"On the contrary," said Stark, "I am a prudent man." He studied Ciaran. "Very prudent. So much so that I will bargain with no man until I have looked into his eyes. Take off your helm, Ciaran. Then perhaps we will talk."

Otar's breath made a snakelike hissing between his toothless gums, and the hands of the Lord Ciaran tightened on the haft of the axe.

"No," he whispered. "That I can never do."

Otar rose to his feet, and for the first time Stark felt the full strength that lay in this strange old man.

"Would you look upon the face of destruction?" he thundered. "Do you ask for death? Do you think a thing is hidden behind a mask of steel without a reason, that you demand to see it?"

He turned. "My Lord," he said. "By tomorrow the last of the clans will have joined us. After that, we must march, as it was planned. But I think it likely that this man is lying. I think it likely that he knows where the talisman is. Give him to Thord for the time that remains."

The blank, blind mask was unmoving, and Stark thought that from behind it came a faint sound that might have been a sigh.

Then...

"Thord!" cried the Lord Ciaran, and lifted up the axe.

### *III*

THE FLAMES leaped high from the fire in the windless gorge. Men sat around it in a great circle. The wild riders out of the mountain valleys of Mekh, sitting with the curbed and quivering eagerness of wolves around a dying quarry. Their eyes were intent, and now and then their teeth showed in a kind of silent laughter.

"He is strong," they whispered, one to the other. "He will live the night out, surely!"

On an outcrop of rock sat the Lord Ciaran, wrapped in a black cloak, holding the great axe in the crook of his arm. Beside him, Otar huddled in the snow.

Close by, the long spears had been driven deep and lashed together to make a scaffolding, and upon this frame was hung a man. A big man, iron-muscled and very lean, the bulk of his shoulders filling the space between the bending shafts. Eric John Stark of Earth, out of Mercury.

He had already been scourged without mercy. He sagged of his own weight between the spears, breathing in harsh sobs, and the trampled snow around him was stained with red.

Thord was wielding the lash. He had stripped off his own coat and his body glistened with sweat in spite of the cold. He cut his victim with great care, making the long lash sing and crack. He was proud of his skill.

Stark did not cry out.

Presently Thord stepped back. He wiped the sweat from his face and looked at the Lord Ciaran. And the black helm nodded.

Thord dropped the whip. He went up to the big dark man and lifted his head by the hair.

"Stark," he said, and shook the head roughly. "Stranger!"

Eyes opened and stared at him, and Thord could not repress a slight shiver. It seemed that the pain and indignity had wrought some evil magic on this man. He had seen exactly the same gaze in a big snow-cat caught in a trap, and he felt suddenly that it was not a man he spoke to, but a predatory beast.

"Stark," he said. "Where is the talisman of Ban Cruach?"

The Earthman did not answer.

Thord laughed. He glanced up at the sky, where the moons rode low and swift.

"The night is only half gone. Do you think you can last it out?"

The cold, cruel, patient eyes watched Thord. There was no reply.

Some quality of pride in that gaze angered the barbarian. It seemed to mock him, who was so sure of his ability to loosen a reluctant tongue. It seemed to say, I have shamed you once before the Lord Ciaran; now I shame you again.

"You think I cannot make you talk," Thord said softly. "You don't know me, stranger. You don't know Thord, who can make the rocks speak out if he will."

With his free hand he struck Stark across the face.

It seemed impossible that anything so still could move so quickly. There was an ugly flash of teeth and Thord's wrist was caught above the thumb-joint. He bellowed, and the iron jaws closed down, worrying the bone.

Suddenly Thord screamed, not for pain but for panic. The rows of watching men swayed forward, and even the Lord Ciaran rose up, startled.

"Hear!" ran the whispering around the fire. "Hear how he growls!"

Thord had let go of Stark's hair and was beating him about the head with his clenched fist. His face was white.



"Werewolf!" he screamed. "Beast-thing! Let me go!"

But the dark man clung to Thord's wrist, snarling, and did not hear. After a bit there came the dull snap of bone.

Stark opened his jaws. Thord ceased to strike him. He backed off slowly, staring at the torn flesh. Stark had sunk down to the length of his arms.

With his left hand, Thord drew his knife.

The Lord Ciaran stepped forward. "Wait, Thord!"

"It is a thing of evil," whispered the barbarian. "Warlock. Werewolf. Beast."

He sprang at Stark.

The man in armor moved, very swiftly, and the great axe went whirling through the air. It caught Thord squarely where the cords of his neck ran into the shoulder, caught and shore on through.

There was a silence in the valley.

The Lord Ciaran walked slowly across the trampled snow and took up his axe again.

"I will be obeyed," he said. "And I will not stand for fear, not of god, man, nor devil." He gestured toward Stark. "Cut him down. And see that he does not die."

He strode away, and Otar began to laugh.

From a vast distance, Stark heard that shrill, wild laughter. His mouth was full of blood and he was mad with a cold fury.

A cunning that was purely animal guided his movements then. His head fell forward and his body hung inert against the thongs. He might almost have been dead.

A knot of men came toward him. He listened to them. They were hesitant and afraid. Then, as he did not move, they plucked up courage and came closer, and one of them prodded him gently with the point of his

spear.

"Prick him well," said another. "Let us be sure."

The sharp point bit a little deeper. A few drops of blood welled out and joined the small red streams that ran from the weals of the lash. Stark did not stir. The spearman grunted. "He is safe enough now."

Stark felt the knife blades working at the thongs. He waited. The rawhide snapped, and he was free.

He did not fall. He would not have fallen then if he had taken a death wound. He gathered his legs under him and sprang.

He picked up the spearman in that first rush and flung him into the fire. Then he began to run toward the place where the scaly mounts were herded, leaving a trail of blood behind him on the snow.

A man loomed up in front of him. He saw the shadow of a spear and swerved and caught the shaft in his two hands. He wrenched it free and struck down with the butt of it and went on. Behind him he heard voices shouting and the beginning of turmoil.

The Lord Ciaran turned and came back, striding fast. There were men before Stark now, many men, the circle of watchers breaking up because there had been nothing more to watch. He gripped the long spear. It was a good weapon, better than the flint-tipped stick with which the boy N'Chaka had hunted the giant lizard of the rocks.

His body curved into a half crouch. He voiced one cry, the challenging scream of a predatory killer, and went in among the men.

He did slaughter with that spear. They were not expecting attack. Most of them were not armed except for their knives, and they were caught off guard; Stark had sprung to life too quickly. And they were afraid of him. He could smell the fear on them. Fear not of a man like themselves, but of a creature less and more than man.

He killed, and was happy.

They fell away from him. They were sure now that he was a demon. He raged among them with the bright spear and they heard again that sound

that should not have come from a human throat, and their superstitious terror rose and sent them scrambling out of his path, trampling on each other in childish panic.

He broke through, and now there was nothing between him and escape but two mounted men who guarded the herd.

Being mounted, they had more courage. They felt that even a warlock could not stand against their charge. They came at him as he ran, the padded feet of their beasts making a muffled drumming in the snow.

Without breaking stride, Stark hurled his spear.

It drove through one man's body and tumbled him off so that he fell under his comrade's mount and fouled its legs. It staggered and reared up, hissing, and Stark fled on.

Once he glanced over his shoulder. Through the milling, shouting crowd of men he glimpsed a dark mailed figure with a winged mask, going through the ruck with a loping stride and bearing a sable axe raised high for the throwing.

Stark was close to the herd now. And they caught his scent.

The Norland brutes had never liked the smell of him, and now the reek of blood upon him was enough in itself to set them wild. They began to hiss and snarl uneasily, rubbing their reptilian flanks together as they wheeled around, staring at him with lambent eyes. He rushed them, before they should decide to break.

He was quick enough to catch one by the flesh comb that served it for a forelock. He held it with savage indifference to its squealing and leaped to its back. Then he let it bolt, and as he rode it he yelled a shrill brute cry that urged the creatures on to panic.

The herd broke, stampeding outward from its center like a bursting shell.

Stark was in the forefront. Clinging low on the scaly neck, he saw the men of Mekh scattered and churned and tramped into the snow by the flying pads. In and out of the shelters, kicking the brush walls down, lifting up their harsh reptilian voices, they went racketing through the camp,

leaving behind them wreckage as of a storm. And Stark went with them.

He snatched a cloak from off the shoulders of some petty chieftain as he went by and then, twisting cruelly on the fleshy comb and beating with his fist at the creature's head, he got his mount turned in the way he wanted it to go, down the valley.

He caught one last glimpse of the Lord Ciaran, fighting to hold one of the creatures long enough to mount it, and then a dozen striving bodies surged around him and hid him and he was gone.

Stark's beast did not slacken its pace. It seemed to hope that it could outrun the alien, bloody thing that clung to its back. The last fringes of the camp shot by and vanished in the gloom and the clean snow of the lower valley lay open before it. The creature laid its belly to the ground and went, the white spray spurting from its heels.

Stark hung on. His strength was all gone now, run out of him with the battle-madness. He became aware that he was sick and bleeding and that his body was one cruel pain. In that moment, more than in the hours that had gone before, he hated the black leader of the clans of Mekh.

The flight down the valley became a sort of ugly dream. Stark was aware of rock walls reeling past, and then they seemed to widen away and the wind came out of nowhere like the stroke of a great hammer, and he was on the open moors again. The beast began to falter and slow down. Presently it stopped.

Stark wanted simply to fall off and die, but it seemed a stupid thing to do after he had gone to so much trouble, and anyway if he did it here the Lord Ciaran would find his body and be pleased. So he managed to scoop up snow to rub on his wounds. He came near to fainting but the bleeding stopped and after that the pain was numbed to a dull ache. He wrapped the cloak around him and urged the beast to go on again, speaking to it gently this time, and after it had breathed it obeyed him, settling into the shuffling pace it could keep up for hours.

He was three days on the moors. Part of the time he rode in a stupor and part of the time he was feverishly alert and cunning, watching the skyline and taking pains to confuse his trail, not caring that the wind erased his tracks as soon as he had made them. Frequently he took the shapes of thrusting rocks for riders, and found cover until he was sure they

did not move. He made a halter for the beast out of the strips torn from the cloak, and he kept the end of it tied to Camar's belt which was still around his waist, so that when he fell or dismounted the beast would not get away from him. That was one of his worst fears. The other was that he would wake up out of a dark unconsciousness to find the Lord Ciaran looking down at him, holding the axe.

The ruined towers marched with him across the bitter land. He did not go near them.

He knew that he wandered a great deal, but he could not help it, and it was probably his salvation. In those tortured badlands, riven by ages of frost and flood, one might follow a man more or less easily on a straight track between two points. But to find a single rider lost in that wilderness was a matter of sheer luck, and this time the luck was riding with Stark. Twice in the distance he saw mounted men and knew they must be Ciaran's. Both times they passed him by a wide margin where he lay hid in snow-choked gullies with the cold white stuff thrown over him and the beast, negating both sight and scent.

And one evening at sunset he came out upon a plain that sloped upward to a black and towering scarp, notched with a single pass.

The light was level and blood-red, glittering on the frosty rock so that it seemed the throat of the pass was aflame with evil fires. To Stark's mind, essentially primitive and stripped now of all its acquired reason, that narrow cleft appeared as the doorway to the dwelling place of demons as horrible as the fabled creatures that roamed the Darkside of his native world.

He looked long at the Gates of Death, and a cold memory crept into his brain. Memory of that nightmare time when the talisman had seemed to bring him the echoes of unhuman voices, and the sly touch of unhuman hands.

The weary beast plodded on, and Stark saw as in a dream the great walled city that stood guard before the Gate. He watched it glide toward him through a crimson haze, and fancied that he could see the ages clustered like birds around the towers.

He set his hands on Camar's belt, stiff with blood around his waist, and felt the sweet cruel warmth of hate flood through him. "I will break you,"

he whispered to the wide moor and the blackmailed rider that was somewhere upon it. "Here in Kushat—or there..." He looked again at the pass and was not afraid, and his fingers clenched hard over the boss. "I will break you, Ciaran."

He rode on, trembling with eagerness, thinking of the power that lay beyond the Gates of Death.

## *IV*

HE STOOD in a large square lined about with huckster's stalls and the booths of wine-sellers. Beyond were buildings, streets, a city. Stark got a blurred impression of a grand and brooding darkness of stone, bulking huge against the mountains, as bleak and proud and quite as ancient as they, with many ruins and deserted quarters. He was not sure how he had come there. He had a vague memory of the city gate. It had been open and he had passed through it, he thought, behind a party of hunters bringing home their kill. After that he could not remember. But now he was standing on his own feet and someone was pouring sour wine into his mouth. He drank it, greedily. There were people around him, jostling, chattering, demanding answers to questions he had not heard. A girl's voice said sharply, "Let him be! Can't you see he's hurt?"

Stark looked down. His exalted mood, with its dreams of godlike vengeance, had left him. Reality came crowding back upon him, and reality was a slim and ragged girl with black hair and large eyes as yellow as a cat's. She held a leather bottle in her hand. She smiled and said, "I'm Thanis. Will you drink more wine?"

He did, and then managed to say, "Thank you, Thanis." He put his hand on her shoulder to steady himself. It was surprisingly strong. He felt light-headed and strange, but the wine was fusing a spurious sense of well-being into him and he was content to let that last as long as it would.

The crowd was still churning around him, growing larger, and now he heard the tramp of military feet. A small detachment of men in light armor pushed their way through.

A very young officer whose breastplate hurt the eye with brightness demanded to be told at once who Stark was and why he had come here.

"No one crosses the moors in winter," he said, as though that in itself were proof of evil intent.

"The clans of Mekh are crossing them," Stark answered. "An army, to take Kushat, a day, two days behind me."

The crowd picked that up. Excited voices tossed it back and forth and clamored for more news. Stark spoke to the officer.

"I will see your captain and at once."

"You'll see the inside of a prison, more likely!" snapped the young man. "What's this nonsense about the clans of Mekh?"

Stark regarded him. He looked so long and so curiously that the crowd began to snicker and the officer's beardless face flushed pink to the ears.

"I have fought in many wars," said Stark gently. "And long ago I learned that it was wise to listen when someone came to warn me of attack."

"Better take him to the captain, Lugh," cried Thanis. "It's our skins too, you know, if there's war."

The crowd began to shout. They were all poor folk, wrapped in threadbare cloaks or tattered leather. They had no love for the guards. And whether there was war or not, their winter had been long and dull and they were going to make the most of this excitement.

"Take him, Lugh! Take him! Let him warn Old Sowbelly!"

The young officer winced. And then from someone made anonymous by the crowd there rose a louder cry.

"Let him warn the nobles! Let them think how they'll defend Kushat now that the talisman is gone!"

There was a roar from the crowd. Lugh turned, his face suddenly grim, and motioned to his soldiers. Rather reluctantly, Stark thought, they levelled their spears and moved toward the crowd, which shrank back away from them and became quickly silent. Lugh's voice rang out, harsh

and strident.

"The talisman is there for all to see! And you know the penalty for repeating the lie."

Stark's small start of surprise must have communicated itself through his tightened fingers to the girl, for he saw her look at him sharply, with something close to alarm. Then Lugh had swung around and was gesturing angrily at him. "See if he's armed."

One of the soldiers stepped forward, but Stark was quicker. He slipped the thongs and let the cloak fall, baring his upper body.

"The clansmen have already taken everything I owned," he said. "But they gave me something in return."

The crowd stared at the half healed stripes that scarred him, and there was a drawing in of breath, and a muttering.

The soldier picked up the cloak and laid it over Stark's shoulders. And Lugh said sullenly, "Come, then. I'll take you to the captain."

The girl turned to help him with the cloak, leaning her head close to his while she fastened the thongs. Her voice reached him in a quick, fierce whisper. "Don't mention the talisman. It could mean your life!" The soldiers were reforming. The girl stood back, casual, finished with her small task. But Stark did not let her go.

"Thank you, Thanis," he said. "And now will you come with me? Otherwise, I must crawl."

She smiled at him and came, bearing Stark's unsteady weight with amazing strength. And Stark wondered. Camar, certainly, had not lied. Otar and Ciaran, certainly, had well known that it was gone. Yet here was this young popinjay bellowing that the talisman was there for all to see and threatening the suddenly-cowed mob with the penalty for denying it.

He remembered that Ciaran had said something about the nobles of Kushat being afraid to let their people know the truth. They would be, Stark thought, and a substitution would be the surest way of covering up the loss. In any case, he decided to heed the girl's warning, and began forcing his weary brain to the task of eliminating from his story not only



all mention of Camar but also of Otar and of Ciaran's references to the naked state of Kushat. A wrong word to the wrong person... He was too numb with exhaustion to think out all the possibilities, but he was suddenly and ironically aware that the talisman might prove to be more dangerous to him here in Kushat than it had been in Ciaran's camp.

The captain of the guards was a fleshy man with a smell of wine about him and a face already crumbling apart though his hair was not yet gray. He sat in a squat tower above the square, and he observed Stark with no particular interest.

"You had something to tell," said Lugh. "Tell it."

Stark told them, watching every word with care. The captain listened to all he had to say about the gathering of the clans of Mekh and then sat studying him with a bleary shrewdness.

"Of course you have proof of all this?"

"These stripes. Their leader Ciaran himself ordered them laid on."

The captain sighed and leaned back.

"Any wandering band of hunters could have scourged you," he said. "A nameless vagabond from the gods know where, and a lawless one at that if I'm any judge of men—you probably deserved it."

He reached for the wine and smiled. "Look you, stranger. In the Norlands, no one makes war in the winter. And no one ever heard of Ciaran. If you hoped for a reward from the city, you overshot badly."

"The Lord Ciaran," said Stark, grimly controlling his anger, "will be battering at your gates within two days. You will hear of him then."

"Perhaps. You can wait for him—in a cell. And you can leave Kushat with the first caravan after the thaw. We have enough rabble here without taking in more."

Thanis caught Stark by the cloak and held him back.

"*Sir*," she said, as though it were an unclean word, "I will vouch for the stranger."

The captain glanced at her. "You?"

"Sir, I am a free citizen of Kushat. According to the law, I may vouch for him."

"If you scum of the Thieves' Quarter would practise the law half as well as you prate it, we would have less trouble," grumbled the captain. "Very well, take the creature, if you want him. I don't suppose you've anything to lose."

Thanis' eyes blazed but she made no answer. Lugh laughed.

"Name and dwelling place," said the captain, and wrote them down. "Remember, he is not to leave the Quarter."

Thanis nodded. "Come," she said to Stark. He did not move, and she looked up at him. He was staring at the captain. His beard had grown in these last days, and his face was still scarred by Thord's blows and made wolfish with pain and fever. And now, out of this evil mask, his eyes were peering with a chill and a terrible intensity at the soft-bellied man who sat and mocked him.

Thanis laid her hand on his rough cheek. "Come," she said. "Come and rest."

Gently she turned his head. He blinked and swayed, and she took him around the waist and led him unprotesting to the door.

There she paused, looking back.

"Sir," she said, very meekly, "news of this attack is being shouted through the Quarter now. If it *should* come, and it were known that you had the warning and did not pass it on..." She made an expressive gesture and went out.

Lugh glanced uneasily at the captain. "She's right, sir. If by chance the man did tell the truth..."

The captain swore. "Rot. A rogue's tale. And yet..." He scowled indecisively, then shrugged and reached for parchment. "After all, it's a simple matter. Write it up, pass it on, and let the nobles do the worrying."

His pen began to scratch.

Thanis took Stark by steep and narrow ways, darkling now in the afterglow, where the city climbed and fell again over the uneven rock. Stark was aware of the heavy smells of spices and unfamiliar foods, and the musky undertones of a million generations swarmed together to spawn and die in these crowded tenements of slate and stone.

There was a house, blending into other houses, close under the loom of the great Wall. There was a flight of steps, hollowed deep with use, twisting crazily around outer corners. There was a low room, and a slender man named Balin, who said he was Thanis' brother and who stared with some amazement at Stark, his long thief's fingers playing delicately with the red jewel he wore in his left ear. There was a bed of skins and woven clothes and Stark's body yearned toward it. But he fought off the darkness, sitting on the edge of the bed while Thanis brought him wine and a bowl of food, making quick explanations to Balin while she did so. Stark was too tired for the food, but he drank the wine and it cleared the cobwebs out of his mind so that he could think rationally at least for a little while.

"Why," he asked Thanis, "is it dangerous to speak of the talisman?"

He was aware of Balin's brilliant gaze upon him, but he watched the girl's face.

"You heard Lugh when he answered the crowd," she said. "They have put some bit of glass in the shrine and called it the talisman, and those who say they are liars are made to regret it."

In a light and silken voice Balin said, "When the talisman vanished, we very nearly had a revolution in Kushat. The people resented losing it, and blamed the folk of the King City, where the shrine is, for not taking better care of it. Narrabhar and his nobles felt their high seats tottering under them, and the substitution was quickly made."

"But," said Stark, "if the people don't believe .. "

"Only we in the Thieves' Quarter really know. It was one of us who took it." There was an odd mingling of pride and condemnation in his tone. "The others—the artisans and shopkeepers, the ones with a little fat under their belts—they would rather believe the lie than bleed for the truth. So it

has worked." He added, "Thus far."

Looking Stark very steadily in the eye, Thanis said, "You're an outlander, yet you know about the talisman and you knew that it was gone. How?"

The old instinct of caution held him quiet. He understood now, quite clearly, that the possession of the talisman could be his death-warrant. So he said with perfect if fragmentary truth, "Ciaran of Mekh said it. There is an old man with him, a man of Kushat. His name is Otar..."

"Otar!" said Balin. "Otar? We supposed that he was dead."

Stark shook his head. "He has told Ciaran the talisman was stolen and because of that Kushat is ready for the taking." He recalled Ciaran's words and repeated them. "Like a man without a soul." He paused, frowning. "Does this bit of glass really have such power?"

Balin said, "The people believe that it has, and that is what matters."

Stark nodded. His brief period of grace was over now and the darkness was sweeping in. He stared at Balin, and then at Thanis, in a curiously blank and yet penetrating fashion, like an animal that thinks its own thoughts. He took a deep breath. Then, as though he found the air clean of danger, he lay back and went instantly to sleep.

Hands and voices called him back. Strong hands shaking him, urgent voices speaking his name. He started up, heart hammering and muscles tense, with a confused idea that he had slept only a moment or two, and then he saw that the light of a new sun was pouring in through the window. Thanis and Balin were bending over him.

"Stark," said the girl, and shook him. "There are soldiers coming."

## V

HE SHOOK his head, groaning with the stiffness of his body as he moved to rise. "Soldiers?" There was a clamor in the street outside, and a

rhythmic clinking of metal that meant armed men marching. Full consciousness came back with a rush. His gaze swept the room, marking the window, the door, an archway into an inner chamber, his muscles flexing. Balin took him by the shoulder.

"No. You can't escape. And anyway, there's no need. I think Old Sowbelly made his report, and now you'll be taken to the King City to answer more questions." He faced Stark, speaking sharply. "Now listen. Don't mention Otar or what Ciaran said about the city. They won't like it, and they might well take your head off to keep you from repeating the story to others. You understand? Tell them exactly what you told the captain, nothing more."

Stark nodded. "I understand." Air from the window curled icily around his body and he realized for the first time that he was naked. He had been shaved and washed, his wounds rubbed with salve. Thanis handed him his boots and trousers, carefully cleaned, and a garment he did not recognize, a tunic of golden fur tanned soft as silk.

"Balin stole it from the baths where the nobles go. He said you might as well have the best."

"And a devil of a time I had finding one big enough to fit you." Balin looked out the window. "They're coming up now. No need to hurry. Let them wait."

Stark pulled the clothes on and looked in quiet panic for Camar's belt. There came a pounding on the door and the remembered voice of Lugh demanding entrance. Balin lifted the bar and the room filled with soldiers.

"Good morning," Balin said, bowing with a flourish and wincing visibly at the light dancing on Lugh's breastplate. Lugh ignored the mockery. He was very soldierly and important this morning, a man with a duty to perform. "The Commander of the City will question you, stranger," he said to Stark, and gave a peremptory nod toward the doorway.

Thanis lifted Stark's cloak from the peg on the wall, revealing the belt under it. She brought them both to Stark. "You mustn't keep the Lord Rogain waiting," she said demurely, and smiled. She was wearing a red kirtle and a necklet of beaten metal intricately pierced, and her dark hair was combed out smooth and shining. Stark smiled back and thanked her, and buckled on the belt. Then he threw the cloak over his shoulders and

went out with Lugh.

There were people in the street below watching as Stark went down the crazy stairway with the soldiers in single file before and behind him and Lugh walking ahead of all like a young cock-pheasant. This time the people only watched and did not say much to the soldiers. The detachment formed up in the street, eight soldiers and an officer to escort one man. Stark thought that they would have been better used to patrol the Wall, but he did not say so. The crowd left them plenty of room. Stark could see the intent faces peering at him and hear the muttered undertone of talk, and he knew that the word he had brought of Ciaran's coming was all over the Quarter now, and probably over half the city.

Lugh did not speak to him again. They marched through the narrow twisting streets of the Quarter, and then left it for the somewhat broader but even more crowded avenues where the shops of the weavers and the armorers, the silversmiths and the potters, the blacksmiths and the stone-masons, all the multifarious crafts and trades necessary for civilized living, lined the ways that led to the King City. People passing by stopped to look curiously at Stark, and he looked at them, thinking of the riders of Mekh and wondering what their prosperous shops and neat houses would look like after another sun or two had passed.

Kushat was built in the immemorial pattern of Martian cities, a sort of irregular, sprawling wheel enclosed by a wall at its outer rim and with the King City at the hub, a walled enclave of its own containing the great towered hall of the king and the houses of the nobles. The dark turrets, some of them ruined and partly fallen, all of them stained and blackened with time, stood up grim and dreary in the cold sunlight, the faded banners whipping in the wind that blew down from the pass. Beyond them, blotting out the northern sky, were the black and ice-seamed cliffs for a backdrop.

Stark shivered, with more than the cold. He hated cities anyway. They were traps, robbing a man of his freedom, penning him in with walls and the authority of other men. They were full of a sort of people that he did not like, the mob-minded ones, the sheep-like ones and the small predators that used them. Yet he had been in cities that were at least exciting, the Low-Canal towns of Valkis and Jekkara far to the south, as old as Kushat but still throbbing with a wicked vitality. Perhaps it was the northern cold that cast such a pall over these streets.

Or was it something more? Stark looked up at the cliffs and the notch of the pass. Was it living so close under the Gates of Death, and fearing whatever it was that lay beyond them?

They passed into the King City through a narrow gate, challenged by the strong guard mounted there. Here the buildings of carved stone stood wide apart, with paved squares between them. Some were no more than skeletons, with blank archways and fallen roofs, but others showed rich curtains in their slitted windows and signs of activity in their courtyards. Lugh marched smartly, his back straight and his chin in the air, making precise military turns at the corners, going toward the towers of the king's hall.

They came out abruptly into the wide square in front of it. And Stark slowed his pace, staring.

The men behind him swore, stepping wide to avoid running into him. Lugh turned to see what the trouble was, prepared to be irritable. Then he saw what Stark was looking at, and decided instead to be condescending to the barbarian.

"That," he said, "is the shrine of the talisman, and the statue of Ban Cruach, who built Kushat."

The statue was the height of three tall men above its pedestal, massively and simply carved, and the weathering of centuries had smoothed away much of the finer detail. Yet it was a powerful portrait, and somehow Stark felt that just so had Ban Cruach looked in his ancient armor, standing with the hilt of his great sword between his hands and his helmeted head uplifted, his eyes fixed upon the Gates of Death. His face was made for battles and for ruling, the bony ridges harsh and strong, the mouth proud and stern but not cruel. A fearless man, one would have said. But Stark thought that he saw in that stone face the shadow of something akin to fear—awe, perhaps, or doubt, or something more nameless, as though he stared at the portal of some dark and secret world where only he had ventured.

"Ban Cruach," Stark said softly, as though he had not heard the name before. "And a shrine. You spoke of a talisman?"

Lugh motioned to the soldiers to march nearer to the statue. The pedestal on which it stood was not a solid block of masonry, but a squat

building having a small barred window in each side and no door that Stark could see. Entrance to the chamber must be through some hidden passageway below.

"The talisman," Lugh said, "was the gift of Ban Cruach to the city. As long as it is here, Kushat will never fall to an enemy."

"Why?" asked Stark.

"Because of the power of the talisman."

"And what is that?" asked Stark, the rude barbarian, simple and wondering.

Lugh answered with unquestioning certainty, "It will unlock the power that lies beyond the Gates of Death."

"Oh," said Stark. He leaned close to the little barred window. "That must be a great power indeed."

"Great enough," said Lugh, "that no enemy has ever dared to attack us, and no enemy ever will as long as the talisman is there." His voice was defiant, a little too emphatic. Stark wondered. Did Lugh really believe that this was the talisman, or was he only trying to believe it, trying very hard?

"I thought that yesterday in the market place I heard someone say..."

"A wild rumor started by the rabble in the Thieves' Quarter. You can see for yourself. It is there."

Certainly something was there, set on a block of polished stone. An oval piece of crystal, very like the talisman in shape and size, so much like that they could not be told apart except that this was a bit of crystal and nothing more, inert, hollow, reflecting the light with shallow brightness. Remembering the eerie glow, the living flickering shifting radiance of the talisman, Stark smiled inwardly. And paused to wonder how under heaven Camar had managed to steal the thing.

"I see," said Stark aloud. "It is. And those are coming who will test its strength—and yours." He glanced at Lugh. "How is it used to unlock this power you speak of?"



"When the time comes to use it," Lugh said curtly, "it will be used. Come, the Lord Rogain is waiting."

In other words, Stark thought, you don't know how it is used any more than I do.

As he moved to fall in again with the soldiers, Lugh added with positive viciousness, "And I do not believe your barbarian army any more than the captain does."

He strode off, the soldiers matching step behind him. They marched across the square and into the courtyard of a massive building on its eastern side, where the stone figures of men in ancient mail stood sentry, some without their heads, or arms, some shattered into fragments by the cracking frosts of a thousand winters. Here the soldiers were left behind, and Lugh escorted him through high drafty corridors hung with dim tapestries and through a series of guard rooms where men-at-arms halted them and made Lugh give his name, rank, company, and errand. At length a guard swung open a massive bronze-plated door and Stark found himself in a surprisingly small room, heavily curtained against the cold, smelling of smoke from a couple of braziers, and filled with an assortment of irritated men.

Stark recognized the captain of the guard. The others, old, young, and intermediate, wore various harness indicating rank, and all of them looked as though they hated Eric John Stark, whether for presenting them with unpleasant problems or for routing them out of their warm beds at such an early hour he did not know. Probably both.

Behind a broad table that served as a desk sat a man who wore the jeweled cuirass of a noble. He had a nice, kind face. Gray hair, mild scholarly eyes, soft cheeks. A fine man, Stark thought, but ludicrous in the trappings of a soldier.

Lugh saluted. "Here is the man, sir," he said. Rogain nodded and thanked him, and dismissed him with a flick of the hand. Stark stood still, waiting, and Rogain studied him, taking his time, his gaze probing and thoughtful.

"How are you called?" he asked.

Stark told him.

"You are not of the Norlands."

"No. Nor of Mars. My parents came from the third planet. I was born on the world nearest the sun." He paused, meeting Rogain's eye without either arrogance or deference. "I say this because I wish you to understand that I am a wanderer by birth and by nature."

Rogain nodded, with just the hint of a smile. "In other words, I need not inquire what business you had on the northern moors in winter. Or any other time, for that matter."

The captain of the guard muttered something audible about the business of rogues and outlaws. Stark said to Rogain,

"Ask what you will. I was in the south, where I had come to fight with the Drylanders in a war against the Border States. But things went wrong, and that war was never fought. There was nothing for me to do there, and I had never seen this part of Mars. So I came north."

"You are a mercenary, then?" asked Rogain, and one of the others, a heavy-jawed man with insolent, stupid eyes, made a gesture of relief.

"There is your answer, Rogain. He brings a great tale of war in the hope of selling his services."

"What do you say to that, Stark?" asked Rogain mildly.

Stark shrugged. "I say that the proof of my story is easily gained. Only wait a day or two." He looked from one to the other of the assembled faces, finding them hopelessly wanting. They were civilized men, all of them, good, bad, and indifferent—so civilized that the origins of their culture had been forgotten half an age before the first clay brick was laid in Sumer. Too civilized, Stark thought, and far too long accustomed to the peace Ban Cruach had bequeathed them, a peace that had drawn their fangs and cut their claws, leaving even the best of them unfit for what was coming.

"You will defend Kushat or not, as you choose," he said. "But in either case, my services are not for sale."

"Oh?" said Rogain. "Why?"

Very softly Stark said, "I have a personal quarrel with Ciaran of Mekh."

The man who had spoken before gave a derisive laugh. Rogain turned to look at him with pointed interest. "Can you no longer recognize a man when he stands before you?" he asked, and shook his head. The man's wattles turned a dull red, and the others looked startled. Rogain turned again to Stark.

"Sit down," he said, pointing to a chair beside the desk. "Now. I would like to hear the story from your own lips."

Stark told it, exactly as he had told the captain. When he was finished Rogain asked him questions. Where was the camp? How many men? What were the exact words of the Lord Ciaran, and who was he? Why had he ordered Stark to be scourged? Stark found answers for them all that were truthful and yet made no mention of Otar and the talisman. Rogain sat then for some time, lost in thought, while the others waited impatiently, not quite daring to offer their opinions. Stark watched Rogain's hand moving abstractedly among the seals and scrolls upon his desk—a scholar's hands, without a callus on them. Finally he sighed and said, "I will arm the city. And if the attack comes, Kushat will owe you a debt for the warning, Stark." An astonishingly unpleasant look came into his eyes. "If it does not come—we will talk further about the matter then."

Stark smiled, rather cruelly. "You still hope that I am lying."

"This part of the world has laws of its own, which you neither know nor understand, and therefore it is possible for you to be mistaken. Firstly..."

"No one makes war in the winter," Stark said. "That is exactly why Ciaran is doing it."

"Quite possibly," said Rogain. "But there is another thing. We have a power here that guards our city. It has sufficed in all the time past." His voice was very quiet, deceptively unemotional. "Why now should the barbarians suddenly lose their fear of the talisman?"

There was now a stillness in the room, a sense of held breath and stretching ears, of eyes that glanced swiftly at Stark's face and then away again, afraid to be caught looking lest they betray the intensity behind them. A duller man than Stark would have been able to smell the trap that had opened so innocently under his feet. Stark gave no notice that he was

aware of anything, but any thought he might have had of telling Rogain the truth and surrendering the talisman to its rightful owners died then and there. He was on the edge of a trap, but these men were in one. They had lied to their own people to save their skins, and they did not dare admit it. If he told them that Ciaran knew the talisman was gone they would kill him to keep the word from spreading. If he gave them the true talisman, they would weep with relief and joy, and kill him even quicker. The last thing they could afford was to have word get about the city that the true talisman had returned.

So Stark said, "The Lord Ciaran is no common barbarian, and he is a hungry man, far too hungry for fear. If your talisman is as powerful as you say, I would guess he means to take it for himself." The stillness hurt his ears. He sat with his heart pounding and the sweat flushing cold on his skin, and he added casually, "Sooner or later there is always someone to challenge a tradition."

It was as though the room relaxed and drew breath. Rogain nodded curtly and said, "We shall see. For the moment, that is all."

Stark rose and went out. Lugh was waiting to march him out of the building and across the square under the looming statue of Ban Cruach, past the shrine, and back to the grimy Quarter under the wall.

## VI

AT THE FOOT of the stair Lugh stopped and gave Stark one last bitter look.

"Sleep well," he said, "while better men than you walk freezing on the Wall."

He marched his men away and Stark looked after them, hearing the petulance in the clang of Lugh's iron-shod boots on the stones. He could find it in his heart to pity this young man, who was going to be forced so soon to dirty his beautiful armor with blood. Then he turned and climbed the stair, and was appalled at the effort it took. Twice he had to stop and

hold on to keep from falling.

Part of his faintness was from hunger. He knew that as he entered the room and saw Thanis bent over a brazier stirring something savory in a blackened pot. Balin sprawled gracefully on the bench bed that ran along one crooked wall. He sprang up to catch Stark's arm and steady him to a seat, and Stark muttered something about food, unable to remember how long it was since he had eaten. Thanis waited on him gladly, and they did not speak until he was finished, drinking the last of his wine and feeling human again, feeling strong enough to think, and thinking, scowling into his cup.

And Balin asked, "What happened?"

"They will arm the city," Stark said.

"Will they hold it?"

Thanis said, "Of course they'll hold it. We still have the Wall."

"Walls," said Balin, "are no stronger than the men who defend them." He asked again. "Will they hold it?"

Stark shook his head. "They'll try. Some of them will even die gloriously. But they're sheep, and the wolves will tear them. This is my belief."

He rose abruptly and went to stand by the window, looking out at the ancient uneven roofs, above them to the distant towers of the King City, and then beyond to the black line of the cliffs. The cold air stirred his hair, and he shivered and said, "Balin, could they hold it if they had the talisman?"

There was a quiet, in which he could hear the wind chafing and whining at the walls outside. He pulled the curtain tight and turned, and Balin was looking at him with smoky cat eyes, his body poised like a bent bow.

"This is your city, Balin. You know. I can only guess. Could they hold it?"

Slowly and softly Balin answered, while Thanis sat stiff and still as ivory, and as pale, watching the two men.

"They *are* sheep, Stark. And they're worse than that. They're liars. And they have forgotten the knowledge that was entrusted to them. They do not remember any more how the talisman was used, nor what it called forth from beyond the Gates of Death. If they had ten talismans, they could not hold the city."

And he added, "Why do you ask that question?"

"Because," said Stark grimly, "I have decided to trust you with my life." He slipped the belt from around his waist. "I've done what I promised. I have finished a journey for a friend—a man named Camar, who had a burden on his soul." He saw Thanis start at the sound of that name, but Balin did not stir and his eyes never wavered from Stark's. The silence thrummed between them. Stark's nerves twitched and tightened, and his fingers curved around the hollow boss of the buckle.

"The talisman belongs to Kushat. But on that journey I bought a small share in it, Balin, with my blood. Both Otar and Ciaran were sure I could give it to them, and they did their best to make me. Now I say that if the city falls to Ciaran he must not get the talisman. And someone—you or I, *someone*, must live to use it against him." He paused. "If there truly is a power beyond the Gates of Death ..."

"For an outlander," Balin said, "you have a strong love for Kushat."

Stark shook his head. "Kushat may stand or fall as it will without breaking my heart. But I have a score to settle with Ciaran, and I will hale the devil out of hell to do it, if I have to."

"Well," said Balin, and smiled, and was suddenly relaxed and easy. "In that case our ways lie close enough together that we can walk them side by side." Casually he laid back the cover on the couch beside him, and the thin sharp blade of a throwing knife glittered in the chill light. He picked it up and placed it in his girdle. "Oh," he said, "and Stark, don't be too concerned about trusting me with your life." His fingers plucked something from the folds of his tunic and held it up—a bit of crystal, gleaming with subtle witch-fire, seeming to draw to itself all the light in the room.

Thanis cried out, "Balin... !" and then was still, her eyes as wide as moons.

"I knew Camar too," said Balin. "He once showed me the secret of that buckle. So I have had your life in my hands since last night."

Thanis whispered, "And you did not tell me..."

"Of course not," said Balin. "I might have had to kill him, and I recognize the light in your eye, little sister. These things are unpleasant enough without additional fussing." He leaned forward, placing the talisman on a low table, and then looked up at Stark.

"As you say, Kushat is my city."

Stark said slowly, "I will be damned." He stared at Balin, as though he were looking at a new and different man. Then he laughed and flung himself down on the couch, being careful to avoid the talisman. "Very well, comrade. How do we plan?"

"If the Wall holds and the city stands, then the plan is simple enough and Narrabhar's high seat will be quickly emptied. But if the city falls..." Balin sipped his wine reflectively. "We here in the Quarter are more like rats than sheep, and so perhaps poverty is useful, since it has kept our teeth sharp. I think that we are the ones who must survive, Stark." He looked at the talisman and added in a strangely awed and almost frightened voice, "We are the ones who will have to carry that beyond the Gates of Death."

"So long as I go with you," Stark said.

"We need you," Balin said simply. "We are thieves by trade, killers only by accident. I myself have never drawn blood in anger. You will have to make us into fighting men."

"If you have the will," Stark said, "the method is not hard to teach." He yawned.

"The will we have."

"Good." Stark lay back on the soft furs. "There will be very little time. What we do must be done quickly. Talk to your people, Balin, the best men. Assume that the Wall will be breached. Arrange a rallying place, and if it is possible, plan a way out of the city. We'll need supplies, food and warm clothing, all we can carry without being burdened. And no more

women and children than you can help. They're more likely to die in the mountains than they are here, and we must be able to move fast."

Balin had risen. He looked down at Stark and said, "Friend, I've been at this since I found the talisman."

"So much the better," Stark said, and swore. "I hate this planning in the dark. I can see clearly enough between Kushat and the Gates of Death, and after that I am in darkness. Is it possible, Balin—truly possible, that no one ever goes into that pass, even a little way, to tell us what it's like? Even Otar didn't say he had."

Balm shrugged. "From time to time men have tried it, in spite of the taboo. Sometimes their bodies return to us in the spring floods. Mostly they never come back at all. The law and the legend of Ban Cruach both say that Kushat was built to guard the pass, and that only with the talisman can a man go through it and live."

"Does the legend say," asked Stark, "*why* Kushat guards the pass?"

"Didn't Camar tell you that?"

"He said no one remembered why, except that it was a great trust."

"And that is true. But one may guess that the power hidden beyond the pass is too great to be loosed by chance or whim, and so must be protected. In the beginning, of course, Ban Cruach gained that power for himself, somehow, and used it to build his own fame in the Norlands..."

"Which Ciaran hopes to do again." Stark nodded. "Otar has turned his brain with desire."

"Otar," said Balin, and shook his head. "He was always daft. He used to make speeches in the market places, the wine shops, anywhere that people would listen to him, saying that Kushat was dying and it was time we took the power beyond the Gates and made ourselves great again. He became so troublesome that Rogain chained him up a time or two, and after that he vanished."

"He found someone to listen," said Stark. "Is there more to the legend?"

"It is believed that the building of Kushat was part of the bargain that



Ban Cruach made to get the—whatever it was he got..."

"Bargain? Bargain with whom?"

"Or with *what*. No one knows. It does not seem that anyone but Ban Cruach knew even then, though it is all so long ago that nothing is sure. Perhaps there never was a bargain. But this you can depend on. Regardless of what gods or devils may be waiting there, there is enough danger in the Gates of Death without them. Crevasses, ice and mist and grinding rockfalls, starvation and cold."

"Well," said Stark, "those things won't stop the Lord Ciaran, so they can't stop us. As for what else may or may not be there, I suppose we'll find out when the time comes. Until then we may as well forget it."

"At any rate," said Balin, "we have the talisman. So if there is truth in the legend... Stark?"

Silence.

Thanis said, "He's asleep."

Balin swore a long and involved Norland oath, and then smiled wryly. "I'm not at all sure it's entirely human, but I'm glad to have it on my side, anyway."

"Would you really have killed him?"

"Let's put it this way. I'd have tried." He measured the thickness of Stark's shoulders and shook his head. "I'm extremely relieved that I didn't have to."

Thanis turned again to the talisman, not going close to it but standing with her hands clasped tightly behind her back and her head bent, her eyes somber and shadowed. Suddenly she said, "I'm afraid, Balin."

He touched her shoulder gently. "So am I. But the thing has come home and the gods have put it into our hands, and we must do what we can."

He took the crystal reverently in his fingers and returned it to the hollow boss, closing it carefully.

Thanis had not moved, except to let her hands drop to her sides. Now

she lifted them and brushed the black heavy strands of hair from her forehead, and it was an old woman's gesture, infinitely weary.

"It's all to be broken, isn't it?" she said.

The one small word encompassed everything, the city, the Quarter, the street, this building, this room, these few belongings, this way of life. Balin experienced something of Stark's personal hatred of the Mekhish bastard who would do this breaking, and he wanted very much to comfort Thanis, but it was no use lying and so he did not. He said, "For a time, I'm afraid. For a time, anyway." He hung the belt over the wall peg under Stark's cloak, threw his own cloak around him and went out. The cold air struck him with the familiar winter smells of frost and smoke. The dark roofs glinted in the sunlight, lying against one another like the discarded counters of a game of hazard, and above him the great Wall rose as it had risen since his eyes first opened on the world, massive and comforting and secure. Balin went down the hollow steps, his hand touching the worn stone at his side. He moved slowly. He moved like a man with a knife in his heart.

## VII

IT WAS EVENING again when Stark awoke and lay stretching, still sore in all his muscles and ravenously hungry, but feeling pretty much himself. He became aware of sounds that had not been there before, the pacing of men on the Wall above the house, the calling of the watch. Thanis heard him stir and came from where she had been standing at the doorway, looking out into the dusk.

"There is still no sign of attack," she said.

"It will come." Stark sat up. There was something different about the room. In a moment he realized that all the small things were gone, the little useless things that made a room something more than merely a box in which to shelter like a captive animal. Presumably they had been hidden somewhere. The utilitarian things, clothing and such, were arranged in two small piles in a corner, where they might be quickly

chosen from, and a supply of food was beside them, wrapped in a cloth. The room was already vacant. No one lived in it any more. People were only camping here, waiting to move on. He glanced up at Thanis. Her eyes hurt him, so big and full of unshed tears.

He said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she answered with unexpected fierceness and suddenly her eyes blazed. "Just tell me what I can do to fight."

"You've made a good beginning." He smiled at her, pleased. "Is there anything to eat without breaking into the iron rations?"

"Oh, yes. I've had a good day in the markets." She brought him cold meat and bread and wine. She watched him eat for a minute or two and then began herself to eat, very hungrily. And again Stark smiled.

"I see the knot has come untied."

She seemed surprised. "How did you guess?"

"I've known a time or two myself when the food choked me. Here, have some wine. It's warming to the gut and cheering to the nerves." He poured her cup full and she smiled and drank it, and they were companionable in that bereaved room, with the thick shadows gliding in to cover the empty places and a pleasant warmth from the brazier.

"Where is Balin?"

"Talking. Planning. He'll be home soon."

"I should thank you. Both of you, for taking me in, but especially you, for helping me there in the marketplace."

She looked at him briefly, steadily, and smiled a little, and said, "Thank me if you will. There'll be little enough of kindness soon." She glanced away from him around the room, and outside on the Wall the boots rang on cold stone and the voices challenged harshly.

Stark reached over and pulled her to him and kissed her, feeling the warm sweet-smelling firmness of her body, feeling the immensely thrilling fact of life in her, beating in her throat under his fingers, stirring in the lift

and fall of her breathing, her own individual and separate being. And she clung to him, almost desperately, and did not speak, and all at once it was as though he held a child, small and frightened and seeking comfort.

Something in his manner must have changed, because she pushed away from him, laughing a little and shaking her head. "I need more wine, I think." She lifted the cup and then paused, listening, and gave Stark an urchin's grin.

"Anyway, here is my brother."

Balin was in a taut, keyed-up mood. He sat down at first with them to eat, but then rose and moved restlessly about the room, his eyes too bright, his voice edged and brittle, talking about all he had been doing.

"I've had to be very careful, Stark. Only four other men know about the talisman, and them I trust as I do my own right hand. One word—just one word in the wrong ear, and the three of us here would never live to see what happens to Kushat."

"You have a rallying place?"

"Yes. The Festival Stones. They lie outside the city..." He sat down beside Stark and dipped his finger in the wine, drawing with it a map on the table-top. "Here, to the northeast, some two miles. There is a ceremony there every year at the spring solstice, mostly for the children now, though in older times it was a more serious thing."

Stark nodded. The sun rose and set for all the planets, and on each one of them the worship of the Shining God was old as the first men, as old as life.

"Everyone knows where it is," Balin was saying, "and from there the way is clear to the pass. That is all arranged. Each man will find his own way out of the city.

There are a hundred ways and every thief knows them. In its underlevels, Kushat is a honeycomb."

Again Stark nodded. This was so with every Martian city he knew.

The challenge of the watch sounded on the Wall. Suddenly the room

was stifling. "I would like to go out," Stark said, and rose. "Is it possible?"

"Oh, yes. As long as we stay in the Quarter." He jumped up, caught by a new idea and eager to go again. "We will go around and let the men see you, so they'll know you when the time comes."

"And," said Stark mildly, putting on his cloak, "you might show me one or two of these ways out of the city that every thief knows. Just in case we become separated in the heat of battle..."

Balin said cheerfully, "I told you, I'm not a soldier. Come on." He touched Thanis on the shoulder. "Try to get some sleep, little one. You'll need it."

She gave them an uncertain smile, and they left her and went out into the cold night. Both moons were up, painting the rumbled roofs of the city in a wild pattern of black and greenish silver, double-shadowed and constantly ashift. The towers of the King City rose up as though they would catch the nearer moon out of the sky, and it shone maliciously through them where their walls were broken away, revealing them for the sad ruins they were. Below in the streets there was mostly darkness, except for the watchfires in the squares, with here and there a torch lighting a tavern sign, or a dim gleam behind a shuttered window.

Stark noticed that Balin went ahead of him rapidly down the stairs and did not pause to look. He shook his head sympathetically and followed him. High above on the Wall the iron-shod boots tramped rhythmically.

"The city seems very quiet," Stark said, walking beside Balin along the crooked street.

"They still do not quite believe," said Balin. "Even here in the Quarter. No one has ever seen an attack, and no one has ever thought of such a thing in the winter. Winter is a safe time, when the tribesmen are too busy scratching a living to be bothered with making war. In the summer they try to plunder the caravans we send to trade with cities farther south, and they attack our hunting parties, but that is all. Most people in Kushat are of Thanis' opinion, anyway—regardless of the talisman, the great Wall still protects us." He looked up at it. "And when I see it I cannot help but feel in my heart, no matter what my mind tells me, that the Wall is proof against any enemy."

"Nevertheless," said Stark, "show me these hidden ways."

Balin showed him. There was a place in the Wall itself where a slab of stone swung open into a dark tunnel. There was another place where a paving block, hidden in a narrow mews, tilted open to show a rusted ladder of iron pegs going down into what Balin said was the system of ancient drains that carried the spring floods under Kushat.

"Very good," said Stark. "But we may be driven back out of the Quarter. Supposing that I am running for my life somewhere between here and the King City. Where would I go?"

"In that case," said Balin, "your best way would be by the Quarter of the Tomb-Robbers. That is only our name for it, of course—the artisans call it the Quarter of the Blessed. It is a burying ground." He led Stark up onto a roof-top and pointed out the way as well as he could, and then described in detail how to find the entrance to the hidden rat-runs that pierced the many levels below the surface, through the layers of detritus built up over the centuries to the deep rock that underlay it all. "Stay with the main tunnel. It will bring you out under the Wall and well away." He paused and added, "It leads under the King City. That was the road that Camar took when he left Kushat. He might have come back that way unseen... Of course the men who use these ways go chiefly to meet with outland traders and dispose of items that cannot well be sold in Kushat. Trade moves briskly in the summer, at the time of the caravans." Again he paused. "Poor Camar. The sin of pride. But perhaps after all he has done the city a great service."

"We'll know soon," said Stark, feeling the weight of the belt around his waist. "Doubtless sooner than we wish." And he stored all the information Balin had given him very carefully in his mind, knowing that by it he might live or die.

They went after that to a succession of poor tavern rooms, thick with smoke and the smell of people and old used leather garments. They sat for a little while in each one, drinking a cup of the sour wine that came by caravan from places with a kinder climate, and in each one lean dark-faced men took note of Stark but did not speak. When they walked home the nearer moon was close upon the Wall and the black figures of the sentries moved hugely against it.

Thanis lay at one end of the bench bed, sleeping. They lay down quietly

and did not disturb her.

The night wore on.

Very late, when the farther moon was sloping to the west, Thanis woke and knew that she was not going to sleep again. The room was very quiet except for the deep breathing of the men. The sentries on the Wall had ceased their pacing. Thanis lay in the dark quiet until she could not stand it any longer and then she rose and went to the window and opened the heavy curtains. Wind and moonlight swept together into the room. She stood with a fur robe wrapped around her, leaning on the sill and looking out at the slumbering city.

Stark stirred uneasily, turning one way and then another. His motions grew violent. Thanis turned, and then crossed the room and touched him.

Instantly he was awake.

"You were dreaming," she said softly.

Stark shook his head. His eyes were still clouded, though not with sleep. "Blood," he said, "heavy in the wind."

Thanis whispered, "I smell nothing but the dawn."

Stark got up. "Wake Balin. I'm going up on the Wall."

He caught his cloak from the peg and flung open the door, standing on the narrow steps outside. The moonlight caught in his eyes, pale as frostfire. Thanis turned from him, suddenly trembling.

"Balin," she said. "Balin..."

He was already awake. Together they followed Stark up the rough-cut stair that led to the top of the Wall.

Stark looked southward, where the plain ran down from the mountains and spread away below Kushat Nothing moved out there. Nothing marred the empty whiteness.

Stark said, "They will attack at dawn."

## VIII

THEY WAITED.

Some distance away in either direction a guard was huddled down over a small brazier, each one making a sort of tent out of his cloak to hoard the heat. They glanced incuriously at the three civilians, apparently content merely to survive these last hours of the night, when a man's will and courage ran out of him like water from a cracked vessel. The wind came whistling down through the Gates of Death, and below in the empty streets the watchfires shuddered and flared.

They waited, and still there was nothing.

Balin said at last, "How can you know they're coming?"

Stark shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh that had nothing to do with cold, and every muscle of his body came alive. The farther moon plunged downward. The moonlight dimmed and changed, and the plain was very empty, very still.

"They will wait for darkness," Stark said. "They will have an hour or so, between moonset and the rising of the sun."

He turned his head, drawn inevitably to look toward the cliffs above Kushat. Here, close under them, they seemed to tower outward in a curving mass, like the last wave of eternity rolling down, crested white with the ash of shattered worlds.

He looked into the black and narrow mouth of the Gates of Death, and the primitive ape-thing within him cringed and moaned, oppressed by a sense of fate. By this means and that he had been led across half a world to stand here with the talisman of a long-dead king in his hands. If things went as he supposed they would, he would soon be following the footsteps of that long-dead king into whatever strangeness might be beyond that doorway—a strangeness, perhaps, that spoke with little spidery voices...

He shook with the memory of those voices and fought down a strong desire to take off the belt and drop it outside the Wall. He reminded



himself of how he had ridden toward Kushat, looking up at the pass and lusting after the power that he might find there, power to destroy Ciaran of Mekh, and he laughed, not with any very great humor, at his own inconsistency.

He said to Balin, "Camar told me that Ban Cruach was supposed to have gone back through the Gates of Death at the end. Is that true?"

Balin shrugged. "That is the legend. At least, he is not buried in Kushat." It occurred to him to be surprised. "Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know," Stark said, and turned back to his contemplation of the plain. Deimos touched the horizon. A last gleam of reddish light tinged the snow and then was gone.

Thanis pressed closer to Balin for warmth, looking uneasily at Stark. There was a sort of timeless patience about him. Balin was aware of it, too, and envied him. He would have liked to go back down where there were warmth and comfort to help the waiting, but he was ashamed to. He was cold and doubtful, but he stayed.

Time passed, endless minutes of it. The sentries drowsed over their braziers. The plain was in utter darkness under the faint, far northern stars.

Stark said, "Can you hear them?"

"No."

"They come."

His hearing, far keener than Balin's, picked up the little sounds, the vast inchoate rustling of an army on the move in stealth and darkness. Light-armed men, hunters, used to stalking wild beasts in the snow. They could move softly. But still they made a breathing and a stirring, a whispering that was not of the wind.

"I hear nothing," Balin said. And Thanis shook her head, her face showing pale from the folds of Balin's cloak.

Again they waited. The westering stars moved toward the horizon, and at length in the east a dim pallor crept across the sky. The plain was still

shrouded in night, but now Stark could make out the high towers of the King City, ghostly and indistinct. And he wondered who would be king in Kushat by the time this unrisen sun had set.

"You were wrong," said Balin, peering. "There is nothing on the plain."

"Go kick that sentry awake," Stark told him, and strode off to rouse the other one. The man snarled at him and Stark straightened him up with a rough hand, pushing the brazier over into the street below. "There is something out there that you should see," he said.

Swiftly now, in the thin air of Mars, the dawn came with a rush and a leap, flooding the world with harsh light. It flashed in cruel brilliance from sword-blades, from spearheads, from helmets and burnished mail, from the war harness of beasts. It glistened on bare russet heads and on coats of leather, and it set the banners of the clans to burning, crimson and gold and green, bright against the snow.

For as long as a man might hold a breath there was no sound, not a whisper, in all the land. Then the sentry turned and ran, his iron-shod boots pounding on the stone. A great gong was set up on the parapet. He seized the hammer and began to beat the alarm, and the sound was picked up all around the circumference of the Wall where other gongs added their brazen booming.

Out among the tribesmen a hunting horn sent forth one deep cry to split the morning. The wild skirling of the mountain pipes came after it, and the broken thunder of drums, and a wordless scream of exultation that rang back from the Wall of Kushat like the very voice of battle.

The men of Mekh began to move.

They came slowly and raggedly at first, the front ranks going at a walking pace that quickened and quickened as the press of warriors behind them pushed forward, until all at once they were running and the whole army began to break and flow, and the barbarians swept toward the city as water sweeps over a broken dam.

They came in knots and clumps of tall men, running like deer, leaping, shouting, swinging their great brands. Riders spurred their mounts until they raced with bleeding flanks and their bellies to the ground. There was no order, no array of neat and studied ranks advancing according to a

plan. Behind the runners and the riders came more and more men and beasts until they became indistinguishable as such and were simply a motion, a tossing and rushing and trampling that shook the ground.

Ahead of them all came a solitary figure in black mail, bearing a sable axe and riding a tall beast trapped all in black.

Stark became aware that he was leaning far over the parapet and that Balm was trying to pull him back. "Did you have some idea of single combat?" Balin asked, and Stark stared at him, and Balin drew back, away from him. "One favor, friend. Don't become my enemy, please—my nerves would never stand it. But your turn against Ciaran must come later."

He pointed along the parapet where soldiers were running toward them, shouting at them to get off the Wall. Stark shrugged and followed Balin back down the steps and then up another set to the roof of the building. Thanis followed them, and they clambered out over the cold slates to watch. And again Stark was withdrawn into his stony patience, but only when Ciaran was hidden from him did he take his eyes off the black helm.

Kushat had come violently to life. The gongs still bellowed intermittently. Soldiers had begun to pour up onto the Wall. There seemed to be very many soldiers until their numbers were balanced off against the numbers of the barbarians and the length of the Wall. Mobs of citizens swarmed in the streets, hung out of windows, filled the roofs. A troop of nobles went by, brave in their bright mail, to take up their posts in the square by the great gate.

"What do you think now?" asked Balin softly, and Stark shook his head.

"This first attack won't carry. Then it depends on whether Ciaran is leader enough to hold his men at the Wall." He paused. "I think he is."

They did not speak again for a long while.

Up in their high emplacements the big ballistas creaked and thrummed, hurling boulders to tear great gouges in the flesh and bone of the attackers. From both sides the muted song of the horn bows became a wailing hum, and the short bone arrows flew in whickering showers. Slingers rattled their stones as thick as hail. War was a primitive thing here in the Norlands, as it was now over all of Mars except where the

Earthman's weapons had been brought in, not for lack of ingenuity but for lack of metal and chemicals and power. Even a drained and dying world could still find hide and stone and bone and enough iron to forge a blade, and these simple, ancient ways were efficient enough. Men fell and were carried or kicked off the ledges by their fellows, and below them the barbarian dead began to lie in windrows. The blood-howl of the clans rang unceasingly on the frosty air, and Stark heard the rap of scaling ladders against stone. And he began to think that he was wrong and this first charge was going to carry after all. The soldiers of Kushat fought bravely, but it was their first and only battle and they were indeed like folded sheep against the tall killers of the mountains.

Still the Wall held. And by mid-morning the barbarian wave had beaten its strength out on the black stones. The men of Mekh grew silent and moved sullenly back across the plain, carrying their wounded with them, leaving their dead behind.

Thanis said, "You see, Stark? The Wall—the Wall protects us." Her face was drawn and over-bright with hope. "You see? They're going away."

Stark said, "They have left their dead. Among the tribes I know, the men of Kesh and Shun, this is a pledge that they will return. I would guess that these have the same custom. And look there." He pointed out across the plain. "That black banner with the lightning stroke. That is Ciaran's standard, and see how the chiefs are gathering to it."

Looking at the thinned ranks of the soldiers on the Wall, Balin said, "If this is victory, one is all we can afford."

But the city screamed with joy. People rushed into the streets to embrace the soldiers. The nobles rode the circuit of the Wall, looking well pleased. And on the highest tower of the king's hall a crimson banner shook out on the wind.

Stark said to Thanis, "Bring us food, if you will. There'll be little time later on."

She said fiercely, "I don't believe you, Stark. They're beaten." But she went and brought them food. The sun rose higher, and they waited.

A little after noon the barbarian army began to move again. It split itself into three spearheads, with a fourth body of men in reserve. Two

spearheads launched themselves at two widely separated segments of the Wall, while the third simply waited. And Stark nodded.

"This is what Ciaran should have done at first. But barbarians are independent and have to be crushed once before they'll listen. Now we'll see. And the nobles had better get their reserves on the Wall."

The reserves came, running wildly. The forces of the defenders divided themselves raggedly and rushed to the two threatened points to repel the tribesmen already swarming up their ladders onto the parapet. Now the rest of the Wall was only thinly guarded.

The third barbarian spearhead hurled itself at the great gate.

Now the city was silent again except for the noises of battle. And Thanis said abruptly, "What is that—that sound like thunder?"

"Rams," Stark answered. "They are battering the gate."

He became very restless, watching as the officers tried to meet this new danger with their increasingly inadequate forces. The party attacking the gate was well organized. The sweating red-haired giants who swung the rams were protected by shield-men who locked their long hide shields together overhead to form a roof, warding off missiles from above. Other shield-men knelt to provide cover from behind which bowmen and slingers could sweep the Wall. Out on the plain, by the black standard, Ciaran waited with some of the chiefs and the impatient body of reserves, who were beginning to howl and cry like hounds chained up in sight of the hunt.

Stark said to Balin, "It would be better if you went now. Take the talisman, gather your men..."

Balin struck his fists down hard against the slates. "Not one man will leave Kushat without fighting for it." He glared angrily at Stark, who shrugged.

"Their chance is coming." He nodded to where press gangs were starting to beat the Quarter for men. "Let's go and meet them, then." He stood up and turned to Thanis. "You asked me last night to tell you how you could fight." He took off the belt and fastened it around her body underneath her cloak. "Take this, and what food and blankets you can

carry, but above all this. Go and wait for us at the Festival Stones."

She seemed about to defy him, and he told her gently, "You have the talisman. It's up to you to see that it's not taken."

She stared at him, wide-eyed, and Balin said impatiently, "Will you stand all day?" He kissed her on the cheek and then pushed her bodily ahead of him off the roof and down the stairs. As they passed the door of the room he added, as though to make sure she understood, "And *wait*. Someone will come."

He ran on past her, down the steps. Stark smiled and said, "Be careful." He followed Balin. At the foot of the steps he glanced back and she was gone inside the room, taking with her Camar's belt and the talisman. He felt light and free, as though he had been relieved of a heavy stone.

They joined a thickening flow of men who needed no urging from the press gangs to go and fight for their city. Balin ran beside Stark, and his face was so set and white around the lips that Stark said, "When you run the first one through and he screams, and you reflect upon your mutual humanness, remember that he came here of his own free and greedy will to kill you."

Balin snarled at him. "Thanks, but I don't expect to have that trouble."

"Nevertheless," said Stark, "you will."

The weapons of the dead and wounded soldiers were heaped together in piles to supply the citizenry. Stark and Balin armed themselves and went up onto the Wall.

## ***IX***

IT WAS a waste of time, and Stark knew it. He thought that probably a fair number of the men swarming up with them knew it too, and certainly for the thieves at least it would have been much easier simply to slip away out of Kushat and avoid the inevitable. But he was beginning to have

considerable respect for the people of Kushat. To his simple way of thinking, a man who would not fight to defend what was his did not deserve to have it and would not have it for long. Some people, he knew, professed to find nobility in the doctrine of surrender. Maybe they did. To him it was only a matter of making a virtue out of cowardice.

At any rate, they fought, these men. Thief and weaver, butcher and blacksmith, stonemason and tavern-keeper, they fought. They were not very good at it, and the officers who ordered them this way and that along the Wall were not much better. The intermittent thunder of the rams still boomed from the gateway. The barbarian spearheads attacking the Wall began to play a game of shift, striking and then withdrawing to strike again in another place. Playing with us, Stark thought, and noticed that the supply of arrows seemed to be exhausted, as more and more of the defenders threw away their bows. He looked out at the black standard, where it waited on the plain.

And then the wait was over.

The mounted standard-bearer lifted the banner and rode with it to the forefront of the reserve force. The black-mailed form of Ciaran rode in its shadow. The pipers set up a thin wild crying, and the mass of men was suddenly in motion, coming down on Kushat like a thunderbolt.

Stark said to Balin, "Don't wait too long, friend. Remember there is a second battle to be fought."

"I know," said Balin. "I know." His face was agonized, watching the death of his city. He had not yet found occasion to flesh his blade.

The occasion came swiftly.

A ladder banged against the stones only a few feet away. Men came leaping up the rungs, fierce-eyed clansmen out to avenge their fallen brothers and wipe out the defeat they had suffered that morning. Stark was at the ladderhead to greet them, with a spear. He spitted two men through with it and lost it as the second one fell with the point jammed in his breastbone. A third man came over the parapet. Stark received him into his arms.

Balin stood frozen, his borrowed sword half raised. He saw Stark hurl the warrior bodily off the Wall and heard the cry as he fell, and he saw

Stark's face as he grasped the ladder and shoved it outward. There were more screams. Then there were more ladders and more red-haired men, and Stark had found a sword and was using it. Balin smelled the blood, and suddenly he was shaken with the immediacy of it, the physical closeness of an enemy come to slaughter him and destroy everything he loved. A fever burned through him. He moved forward and began to chop at the heads that appeared over the Wall. But it was as Stark had said, and at first he found that it was easier if he did not look too closely into their faces. Because of this one of them got under his uncertain guard and almost gutted him. After that he had no more difficulty.

Things had become so hot and confused now that the officers had lost control and men fought wherever they wished and could. And there was fighting in plenty for all, but it did not last long. The barbarians gained the Wall in three places, lost it in two and then regained it in one, and from these two footholds they spread inward along the ledges, rolling up the defenders, driving them back, driving them down. The fighting spread to the streets, and now all at once the ways leading back into the city were clogged with screaming women and children. Stark lost sight of Balin. He hoped that he was still alive and sensible enough to get away, but however it might be he was on his own and there was nothing Stark could do about it. So he forgot it and began to think of other things.

The great gate still held against the booming rams. Stark forced his way through to the square. The booths of the hucksters were overthrown, the wine-jars broken and the red wine spilled. Tethered beasts squealed and stamped, tired of their chafing harness and driven wild by the shouting and the smell of blood. The dead were heaped high where they had fallen from above. The last of the defense was here, soldiers and citizens forming a hollow square more or less by instinct, trying to guard their threatened flanks and their front, which was the gate, all at the same time. The deep thunder of the rams shook the very stones under them. The iron-sheathed timbers of the gate gave back an answering scream, and toward the end all other sounds grew hushed. The nobles had come down off the Wall. They mounted and sat waiting.

There were fewer of them now. Their bright armor was dented and stained, and their faces had a pallor on them. Still they held themselves erect and arranged their garments and saw that the blazons on their shields were clean of blood. Stark saw Rogain. His scholar's hands were soft, but they did not tremble.



There was one last hammer-stroke of the rams. With a bitter shriek the weakened bolts tore out and the great gate was broken through.

The nobles of Kushat made their first, and final, charge.

As soldiers they went up against the riders of Mekh, and as soldiers they held them until they were cut down. The few who survived were borne of an avalanche. And first through the gates came the winged battle-mask of the Lord Ciaran.

There were many beasts tied among the ruined stalls with no riders to claim them. Stark mounted the nearest one and cut it free. Where the press was thickest, there was the man in black armor, riding like a god, and the sable axe drank life wherever it hewed. Stark's eyes shone with a strange cold light. The talisman was gone, the fate of Kushat was nothing to him. He was a free man. He struck his heels hard into the scaly flanks and the beast plunged forward.

It was strong, and frightened beyond fear. It bit and trampled, and Stark cut a path through the barbarians with the long sword, and presently above the din he shouted, "Ciaran!"

The black mask turned toward him. "Stark."

He spurred the beast again. "I claim my sword-right, bastard!"

The remembered voice spoke from behind the barred slot. "Claim it, then!" The black axe swept a circle, warning friend and foe alike that this was a single combat. And all at once they two were alone in a little space at the heart of the battle.

Their mounts shocked together. The axe came down in a whistling curve, and the red swordblade flashed to meet it. There was a ringing clash of metal and the blade was shattered and the axe fallen to the ground.

There was a strange sound from the tribesmen. Stark ignored it. He spurred his mount ruthlessly, pressing in.

Ciaran reached for his sword, but his hand was numbed by the force of the blow and lacked its usual split-second cunning. The hilt of Stark's weapon, still clutched in his own numb grip and swung viciously by the

full weight of his arm, fetched Ciaran a stunning blow on the helm so that the metal rang like a flawed bell. He reeled back in the saddle, only for a moment, but long enough. Stark grasped the war-mask and ripped it off, and got his hands around the naked throat.

He did not break that neck, as he had planned to do. And the clansmen all around the circle stopped and stared and did not move.

Stark knew now why the Lord Ciaran had never shown his face.

The throat he held was white and strong, and his hands around it were buried in a mane of black hair that fell down over the shirt of mail. A red mouth passionate with fury, wonderful curving bone under sculptured flesh, eyes fierce and proud and tameless as the eyes of a young eagle. A splendid face, but never on any of the nine worlds of the sun could it have been the face of a man.

In that moment of amazement, she was quicker than he.

There was nothing to warn him, no least flicker of expression. Her two fists came up together between his outstretched arms and caught him under the jaw with a force that nearly snapped his neck. He fell backward out of the saddle and lay sprawled on the bloody stones, and for a moment the sun went out.

The woman wheeled her mount. Bending low, she caught up the axe from where it had fallen and faced her chieftains and her warriors, who were as dazed as Stark.

"I have led you well," she said. "I have taken you Kushat. Will any man dispute me?"

They knew the axe, if they did not know her. They looked from side to side uneasily, completely at a loss. Stark, lying on the ground, saw her through a wavering haze. She seemed to tower against the sky in her black mail, with her dark hair blowing. And he felt a strange pang deep within him, a kind of chill foreknowledge, and the smell of blood rose thick and strong from the stones.

The nobles of Kushat chose that moment to charge. This strange unmasking of the Mekhish lord had given them time to rally their remnants together, and now they thought that the gods had wrought a

miracle at last to help them. They found hope, where they had lost everything but courage.

"A woman!" they cried. "A strumpet. A drab of the camps. *A woman!*"

They howled it like an epithet, and tore into the barbarians.

She who had been the Lord Ciaran drove the spurs in deep, so that the beast leaped forward screaming. She went, and did not look once to see if any had followed, in among the men of Kushat. The great axe rose and fell.

She killed three and left two others bleeding on the stones. And still she did not look back.

The clansmen found their tongues.

"Ciaran! Ciaran! Ciaran!"

The crashing shout drowned out the sound of battle. As one man they turned and followed her. These tall wild children that she led could see only two choices, to slay her out of hand or to worship her, and they had chosen to worship. From here on they would follow her anywhere she led, with a kind of devotion different from and more powerful than any they could have given to a man—so long as she did nothing to tarnish the image they had of her, as a goddess.

Stark almost laughed. Instead of killing Ciaran, he had succeeded in giving her power and freedom she had never had before. Now nothing short of death could stop her.

Very well, he thought, in some dark corner of his mind. Very well, if that is the way the thread is woven.

Feet trampled him, kicked him, stumbled over him. Men were fighting above him, and the padded hooves of beasts came stamping toward him. His head cleared with a panic rush. He got his knees under him and started to rise, and the movement attracted the attention of a warrior who must have thought he was dead, judging from the expression of surprise. He yelled and started the lunge that was meant to run Stark through, and then suddenly he dropped down flat as an old sack, with the back of his neck shorn through, and somebody was telling Stark bitterly, "Pick up his sword, damn it, pick up his sword, I can't hold them all off alone."

It was Lugh, filthy, battered, bleeding, and a hundred years older than he had been the last time Stark saw him. Stark bent quickly and caught up the sword. He stood beside Lugh and they fought together, moving with the flow of the fight, which was becoming a rout so swiftly that before they knew it they had been carried out of the square. Here in the narrow, crooked streets, the press of refugees was simply too great. Clots of men formed like corks, bottling up the ways, and the barbarians cut them down happily at leisure. Stark grunted. "There's no profit in this. Can we get clear?"

"What matter?" said Lugh. "We might as well die here as anywhere."

Stark said, "There is a second line of battle, if you'd rather fight than die."

Lugh looked at him out of haggard eyes, a man's eyes where only a few hours ago they had been the eyes of a petulant boy. "Where, Stark? Where? The city is lost."

"But another thing has been found." The barbarians held all the streets under the Wall now. There was no way back to the places Balin had shown him. He took Lugh sharply by the shoulder. "If you can point me the way to the Quarter of the Blessed, I'll show you."

Lugh looked at him for a moment more. They were hemmed in by the press of people, jammed against the cold stone of the buildings. Lugh shook his head. "I can point the way, but we must still go over or through this mob."

Stark nodded. The walls were solid, and in any case one street would be no better than another. The roofs were a blind alley, and the houses traps. "We'll go through, then. Stick close."

He began to forge his way by main strength through the press, being perfectly ruthless about it, as he thought that very quickly now Ciaran of Mekh would be looking for him. She—it still came very strangely to think of Ciaran as "she"—would have killed him when he challenged her because no leader could violate the customs of single combat, but he knew that she would vastly prefer to have him alive. There was still that matter of the talisman. Only the shock of the unmasking and the subsequent necessities of battle had saved him in the square. He moved faster and harder the more he thought about it. Men cursed and struck at him, but he was

bigger and stronger than most of them, and a little more coherently desperate, and with Lugh to back him up he found himself before too long at the other side of the jam, where the press began to thin out into streams of people blindly running.

Stark ran too, but not blindly, with Lugh coming at a sort of loose-jointed weary gallop beside him. They passed through the gate of the Thieves' Quarter, where they had passed before on their way to the King City. The streets of the artisans had in them only the first stirrings of chaos. Mostly the shops were shuttered, the houses quiet. The folk had left them to watch the fighting, and now the buildings stood in the winter sunlight as peacefully as on a holiday afternoon.

Lugh sobbed, an abrupt, harsh sound. "They betrayed us," he said. "They lied."

"About the talisman? Yes."

"They *lied!*" A pause. Their feet rang on the paving stones. "But that wasn't the worst. They were fools, Stark. Idiots!"

"Fools are plentiful everywhere. A man has to learn to think for himself."

"They're dead," said Lugh vindictively. "They were paid for their folly."

"Fools generally are. Did they die well?"

"Most of them. Even Old Sowbelly. But what good is courage at the last minute, when you've already thrown everything away?"

"Every man has to answer that question for himself," Stark said, looking back. People were pouring through the gate now, and over the low wall. Over their heads he saw mounted men, forging their way in a tight group through the refugees. There were eight or nine of them and they looked as though they were hunting for something. "You were satisfied well enough with your leaders yesterday, so it might be said that you deserved them. Now let's drop the subject and think about staying alive." He shoved Lugh bodily aside into a transverse street. "Which way to the Quarter of the Blessed?"

Lugh opened his mouth, shut it again hard, and then made a wry

gesture. "I can't argue with that," he said. "This way." He started to walk.

"Faster," said Stark. "Ciaran's riders are on the hunt."

They ran, looking frequently over their shoulders.

"She won't forgive you," Lugh said, and swore. "What a shame to us, to be defeated by a woman!"

Stark said, "Kushat has been taken by a warrior, and never forget it."

The street had curved and twisted, shutting off the view of the main avenue, but Stark's quick ears caught the sound of riders coming, the feet of the beasts making a soft heavy thudding as they ran. He caught Lugh and pulled him into an alley that led between the buildings, no more than three feet wide. They fled along it and into a mews behind the crumbling rear premises of the street, and Stark realized that most of these buildings had been abandoned long ago. The windows gaped and walls had spilled their carefully-cut blocks into the mews, where they were drifted over with dust and the wind-blown sloughings of a city. The sounds of war and death seemed suddenly very far away.

"How much farther?" Stark asked.

"I don't know... not much farther, I think."

They floundered, slipping and scrambling over the debris, their flanks heaving. And then the mews ended in a blank wall some eight feet high, and Lugh said,

"There. On the other side."

## X

STARK HAULED himself up onto the wall and sat there, breathing hard and looking at the Quarter of the Blessed. It was not a happy prospect. Kushat was a very old city, and a great deal of dying had been done in it. The area of this quarter was greater than any of those housing

the living, and it had grown vertically as well as horizontally. Above ground the squat stone tombs had fallen and been levelled and rebuilt on their own debris until most of them now stood on humped mounds higher than the wall. Beside each one stood a tall stela, carved with innumerable names, most of them long obliterated, and these stelae sagged and leaned in every direction, bowed down with their weight of time, a dark sad forest with the cold wind blowing through it and the winter sun making long erratic patterns of shadow. Below ground, Balin had said, the rock was riddled with the even older shaft graves. Except for the wind, the silence was absolute.

High overhead, the somber cliffs brooded, notched with the gateway of the pass.

Stark sniffed the cold and quiet air, and the aborigine in him recoiled, shivering. He hunched around on the wall, looking back toward the increasing sounds of war and rapine. Columns of smoke were rising now, here and there, and the screaming of women had become incessant. The barbarian tide was rolling rapidly inward toward the King City. On the high tower of the king's hall, the crimson banner had come down.

Lugh had clambered up on the wall beside him. He watched Stark curiously. "What is it?"

"I'm thinking that I'd rather go back where the fighting is hot, then in there where it's far too peaceful."

"Then why go?"

"Because Balin told me of a way used by the tomb-robbers."

Lugh nodded, looking at Stark and smiling a crooked smile. "But you're afraid."

Stark shrugged, a nervous twitch of his shoulders.

Lugh said, "I was hating you, Stark, because you're too damned much of a man and you make me feel like a child. But you're only a child yourself under all that muscle." He jumped down off the wall. "Come on, I'll keep you safe against the dust and the dry bones."

Stark stared at him. Then he laughed and followed him, but still

reluctantly. They went between the tombs and the leaning stelae, mindful of Ciaran's riders and darting like animals between the covering mounds. Then Lugh stopped and stood facing Stark and said, "When you told me, 'Another thing has been found,' what did you mean?"

"The talisman."

The wind rocked Lugh back and forth where he stood, and his eyes were wild and bright, looking into Stark's.

"How do you know that, outlander?"

"Because I brought it here myself, having taken it from the hands of Camar, who was my friend and who did not live to return it."

"I see." Lugh nodded. "I see. Then that morning at Ban Cruach's shrine..."

"I knew you were lying. Yes."

"No matter. Where is it, Stark? I want to see..."

"It's in safe hands, and long out of the city." He hoped that he was right. "Men are rallying to it, at the Festival Stones."

"That's where we're going?"

"Yes."

"Good enough," Lugh said. "Good enough. Where is the door to this rat-run?"

Stark pointed toward the arched ceremonial gate that pierced the wall at the end of the street they had left. "I must count from that. Keep an eye out for Ciaran's men."

There was no sign of them. It was possible they had turned back. It was also possible that they had come ahead of Stark and Lugh into the Quarter of the Blessed and were now hidden from sight among the tumuli. He picked up his guide mark as quickly as he could and counted the stelae as Balin had told him, going past one that was cracked in half, and one that was fallen, and one that had carved on its top a woman's face. "Here," he said, and stopped below a tomb with a great slab of rock in its side, no



different from any other in appearance. He began to climb up the tall mound, flinching from the icy touch of the stone and rubble that seemed somehow colder than other stones, and Lugh came scrambling up like a dog on all fours behind him.

"Stark," he said abruptly, "what happens if you have counted wrong?"

"We go back and start over again."

"I think not."

Stark turned his head, startled. Lugh was looking off to his left. There was movement there among the tumuli. Stark saw the gleam of a bare red head in the sunlight, and then at a distance another as two riders came into view in the twisting lanes between the mounds. From those two he could extrapolate the whole company of riders. They had come ahead to the burying ground, while Stark and Lugh were struggling on foot along the mews. Now they were fanned out in a long line and working their way back toward the gate, hoping to flush out their quarry.

One of the men saw them and yelled, and Stark flung himself upward toward the stone slab.

If he *had* counted wrong...

He set his hands on the stone in the way Balin had told him, and he pushed in the way Balin had told him, and for a moment nothing at all happened and the red-haired riders were racing toward them. Then the slab tilted with a sudden harsh groan. There was a puff of dead-cold, dead-stale air in his face, and the side of the tomb was open. He shoved Lugh into the dark aperture, glancing back as he did so at the riders. They were not quite going to make it, and both of them had their arms lifted for the throw. Behind them other riders were coming into sight, gathering to their shouts. Stark dived for the opening as the spears flew. One grazed his leg, cutting a gash across the back of the calf. The other came through the opening beside him, passed between him and Lugh and clattered harmlessly against the far wall of the tomb. "Close it up," Lugh was saying. "Close it up, we'll have the bastards in with us." They flung themselves against the stone and it went back with a clang on its pivots, shutting out light and sounds.

They sat for a moment, getting their breath and their bearings. Very

quickly there came a pounding on the stone and the faint shouting of angry voices.

"Can they open it?" Lugh asked.

"Not likely. The stone is cleverly made."

The pounding increased, and now there were new sounds, of men clambering over the vaulted roof and probing with their spear-points for a likely crack. "They won't get far with that," Stark said, "but it won't take them long to commandeer some men with picks and sledgehammers. We'd best be going."

"What about light?"

Stark groped and fumbled in the darkness, remembering Balin's instructions. "Even tomb-robbers need light to ply their trade. Here—if I can find it..."

He found it, neatly set out in a corner—a lantern, a supply of slow-burning candles, and a flint-and-steel lighter with an impregnated wick that gave out a tiny flame the second time Stark snapped it. He stuck one candle into the lantern and thrust the rest into his tunic along with the lighter. Let Ciaran's men find their own. The banging and hammering on the outside was reaching a peak of angry frustration. Stark examined the gash on his leg. It was not deep but it was bleeding enough to be annoying. He stood while Lugh bound it up with a strip of dirty rag torn from some part of his garments, studying the tomb chamber in the dim glow of the lantern. It was quite large, and quite empty. The stone ledges had been used for nothing besides the storage of loot.

"All right," he said, when Lugh had finished. "That stone over there, with the ring in it. It lifts aside."

Underneath it was a pitch-black and narrow shaft, with niches cut for the hands and feet. Lugh peered down it. Stark glanced at his face and grunted.

"What happened to your courage, fearless one?"

"It's not the dust and the dry bones that bother me," Lugh said. "It's thinking what will happen if I miss my footing."

"I'll go first with the lantern." Stark lowered himself over the edge, feeling for the niches, and started down, the lantern slung by a thong from his wrist. He looked up at Lugh. "*Don't* miss your footing," he said.

Lugh followed him, slowly and painfully, saying nothing.

It was a long way down. The upper part of the shaft had been constructed over many centuries, extending up through the layers of rubble as they formed. At the moment Stark had no interest in archaeology, but it was impossible not to observe the strata as he crept down through them. Then the shaft widened and the walls were of solid rock, and he knew that he was in the original, the gods knew how ancient, shaft. They had cut it deep, those long-gone builders, and Stark cursed them for every foot of it, the sweat starting on his forehead and his muscles aching, his attention shifting anxiously between his own next foothold and the soles of Lugh's boots scrabbling uncertainly so close above his head.

He stood at last in the fine vaulted chamber at the bottom and waited for Lugh to stop shaking. The lantern glow showed the outlines of bas-reliefs as sharp and clear as the day they were finished. Otherwise the chamber was empty except for a few ambiguous fragments and a pinch of dust swept into a corner as though by some untidy housewife. The air was musty and stifling, though the candle burned well enough. Stark fought down a choking claustrophobia, holding himself firmly in hand. There was a doorway leading out of the chamber, crudely cut and brutally ruining one of the reliefs. Stark went through it, into a narrow rough-walled tunnel.

He had no idea how old this tunnel might be. Even more he had no idea why men would have gone to the immense and back-breaking labor of constructing it, unless every tomb it connected with was as rich as Tutankh-Amen's, and even then it seemed as though it would have been easier just to work for a living. It did pass through a succession of chambers, all stripped bare except for an occasional heap of bones or potsherds. Side tunnels led off presumably to other tombs. Stark supposed that this tunneling had gone on since the first shaft grave was sunk in Kushat, and that had been time enough for a lot of expansion.

"Did you know about this?" he asked Lugh. "There are tales about all sorts of holes and byways underneath the city. We never took much stock in them." He added, "That's only one of the mistakes we made, and not the

worst, either."

Their voices sounded dim and muffled in that place, and made little furtive echoings in the side passages. They did not speak again.

After a while Stark realized that it had been some time since they passed the last tomb-chamber. He guessed that they had now left the Quarter of the Blessed and were under the King City.

The tunnel became a doorway into a vastly wider space. Stark held the lantern high, peering into the dim-lit obscurity. And now he understood the reason why the tunnel had been built.

"The catacombs," said Lugh, whispering. "The tombs of the kings of Kushat."

The words scattered softly away in the hollow darkness. Lugh held out his hand to Stark. "Light a candle." Stark lighted him one at the stub in the lantern, and then replaced that with a fresh one. Lugh ranged ahead, looking here, looking there, his face shocked in the candle-glow.

"But they were so carefully sealed," he said. "There are three levels, and each gallery was sealed so that no one could ever break into it..."

"From above," said Stark. "Where it would be noticed. That's what they did with the talisman. Camar must have come at it from below."

"Oh," said Lugh, shaken with indignation. "Oh, but see what they've done!"

The kings of Kushat had been buried royally, each one carefully embalmed and sitting upright on a funerary throne, presumably wearing all the trappings of kingship and surrounded by the weapons and the wine cups, the offertory bowls and the precious ornaments suitable to his estate. The beautifully polished stone of the ceilings and walls had been carved in reliefs showing events in the lives of the rulers, who had sat stiffly all down the length of that very long, wide hall, each in his own space. The remains of hooks set into the roof showed where rich hangings had once served to separate these throne-rooms, and Stark could imagine carpets on the cold floor, and a great deal of color. There were many holes for sconces, and he thought that it must have been a fine sight here with the torches blazing and the long procession of priests and nobles and

mourning women following slowly as a king was borne on his long shield to the place where he would hold court forever. At the back of each room was a rock-cut chamber, equally splendid in its own way, for the queen and other members of the royal family.

Of all that immeasurable splendor, the tunnelling thieves of Kushat had taken every crumb. Even the metal sconces had been dug out of the walls. Nothing was left, except the thrones, which were stone and immovable, and the kings themselves, who were not worth the carrying. Stripped of their robes and their armor and their jeweled insignia of office, the naked corpses shivered on their icy thrones, and the irreverent thieves had placed some of those that were still sturdy enough in antic poses. Others were broken in bits and scattered on the floor or heaped like kindling in the throne seats.

"All this time it's been like this," Lugh was muttering. "All this time. And we never knew."

"I expect that by now Narrabhar is in much the same case," said Stark, and added, "Let's get the hell out of here."

He blew out Lugh's candle and hurried on, treading once or twice on the brittle fragments of royalty.

From the catacombs the way led straight enough, with only two side tunnels leading off to some other sources of plunder, perhaps the other catacombs Lugh had mentioned. Stark moved as fast as he dared, in a tearing rush to get out into the world again. At the same time he was calculating how long it would take Ciaran's men to break into the tomb and follow them, and how long it would take Ciaran to think of sending patrols out around the city. In any case, the sooner he and Lugh got clear of this rathole the better.

He came to the end of it almost before he realized it. He had been watching for daylight and there was none, or so very little of it that he did not notice it at once. It was a change in the air, a fresh clean smell that warned him. He blew out the candle, and then he was able to see ahead of him a ragged patch of darkness much less absolute than that surrounding him. He touched Lugh's arm, enjoining caution, and moved much more slowly and carefully to the end of the tunnel.

It opened into the bottom of a deep cleft in the rock, where the shadows

were already black. Overhead he saw the sky with pale sunlight still left in it. There was no sight or sound of anything human nearby. Stark emerged from the tunnel, breathing deeply and covered suddenly with a cold sweat, as though he had just escaped some deadly peril.

"There is a path," said Lugh, pointing to a narrow thread that slanted up the side of the cleft.

They climbed it, coming out at length in a sheltered place among the rocks where the plain sloped upward from Kushat. Here for thousands of years thief and merchant had met to bargain over the furniture of kings and rich men and the golden hair-pins of their wives. Now Stark and Lugh looked out between the rocks and saw the black smoke rising from the city, and heard the voices, thin and distant down the wind. Lugh's chin quivered like a child's.

"The Festival Stones lie there," he said, and led off at an abrupt trot.

Stark turned to follow him. And high above him on his right hand, so close now that he could hear the huge whistling of the wind in its stony throat, was the Gates of Death.

## *XI*

THE FESTIVAL STONES, a broken ring of cyclopean blocks, stood alone on a great space below the pass, a space so flat and smooth that Stark knew it must have been levelled artificially. And he knew that whatever the original purpose of the stones might have been, it had nothing to do with sun-worship. He recognized them, with a lifting of the hair at the back of his neck, as soon as he could see them clearly. They were the foundation courses of a tower like the one in which Camar had died. The rest of the structure, apparently shaken down in some ancient cataclysm, lay tumbled over the rock, the cut stones so worn now by time and frost and the gnawing wind that they had lost their precise shapes and might have been only a casual scattering of boulders.

The circle was full of people, and more were coming, straggling in little

bands across the plain from Kushat. They were, on the whole, quiet, but it was a bitter, angry quiet. From time to time an eddy of the wind brought a taint of smoke from the city.

Lugh looked around, estimating the numbers and the ration of women and children to men. "Not much of an army," he muttered.

"It will have to do," Stark said. He moved through the huddled groups, searching for Thanis, and he was beginning to get panicky when he saw her. She was helping some other women patch up the wounded, her face pulled into a deep frown of weariness and concentration. He called her name. She started and then ran to him and threw her arms around him. She did not say anything, but he felt the tightness of her grip and the way she trembled, and he held her until she drew a long unsteady breath and stood away from him, half smiling. She began to unbuckle the belt from around her waist, as though she could not get rid of it fast enough.

"Here, you can have this back," she said. "It's too big for me."

Stark took it and put it on, feeling a great number of eyes watching him. "Where's Balin?"

"Out with some others, rounding up refugees. Some got away that were not from our Quarter, and he thought they might be useful."

"Every man helps." He smiled briefly. "Yes, even he." Thanis was looking at Lugh in a way that should have felled him on the spot. Lugh bore it patiently, without resentment, and presently Thanis shrugged and dropped her gaze.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "We're all here together, now."

Stark said, "Yes." He put his hands on the boss of Camar's belt and turned and looked at the people who were gathered there inside the great circle of stone. He looked up at the pass high above them, with the long rays of the sun touching the icy rocks to flame so that it burned as it had when he first saw it, with the sullen fires of hell, and it seemed to him that the wind that blew down from it carried a hint of strangeness that plucked at his nerves. He remembered with a sudden and shocking vividness how the talisman had glowed between his hands, and how from somewhere far away the tiny unhuman voices had spoken.

He clenched his hands firmly around the boss and walked to the center of the ring, where a kind of altar had been made by piling together some of the fallen stones. He stood on this and called to the people, and while they came closer to hear him he watched the smoke rise up from Kushat and thought of Ciaran and the lash and the dark axe, and hardly at all of night-black hair and white skin and a beautiful woman's face.

He said aloud to the people, "Most of you know that the talisman of Ban Cruach was stolen by a thief named Camar."

They did, and said so, and many of them cursed his name. And some others said, in an ugly mood, "Who are you, outlander, to be talking about the talisman?"

Two of the men that Stark had seen in the taverns on the night before the attack climbed up on the altar beside him. "Balin vouches for him," they said. "And he has something to say that you would do well to listen to." They sat down on the top of the altar, their knives bare in their hands.

Stark went on. "I was a friend of Camar. He died on his way here, to return that which he had taken. Because I owed him a debt, I finished the journey for him."

He opened the boss, and took from it the bit of crystal wrapped in silk.

"Most of you knew, or guessed, that the so-called talisman in the shrine was only a piece of glass put there by the nobles to hide the loss." He waited until the angry growl had quieted, and then he held up his hands, with the crystal cupped between them. And he said, "Look now at this."

He laid back the covering of silk. The level sunlight struck against the crystal, and it seemed to draw the light, to feed on it, to suck it down and down into its many facets until each one glowed with a separate radiance. Stark caught his breath sharply and held himself rigid, watching the crystal brighten into a small sun between his hands. It was warm now. It dazzled his eyes.

And the voices spoke. In his ear. Over his shoulder. Close, immediate, just beyond... just beyond...

"Stark!"



It was Balin's voice. The sound of it broke through the other voices and shocked him back into the sane world. He caught a brief reeling glimpse of the people staring, their eyes stretched and their mouths gone slack with awe, and he realized that they were looking at him as much as they were at the talisman. He closed his hands over it, shutting off the radiance but not the warmth, and huddled the silk wrapping over it and hid it again in the boss, and all the time Balin was pushing through the crowd toward him. In the background where Balin had left them was a party of refugees, and Stark recognized Rogain among them.

Balin stood at the foot of the altar, looking up. "Stark, there are riders coming from Kushat."

"Well," said Stark. "Then we had best be moving." He bent down, still dazed and acting more by instinct than by conscious thought, and gave Balin a hand up beside him. "You know Balin," he said to the people. "Hear him speak."

Balin said, "Stark and I will take the talisman through the Gates of Death, and see what power we can find there to drive the tribesmen out of Kushat. Let everyone who wishes follow us."

He sprang down from the altar, with Stark behind him. They started for the opening in the ring of stones. A tremendous cry went up, a confusion of cries, and the whole untidy crowd began to coalesce and form itself into a solid band. Someone shouted, "Ban Cruach!" like a war cry, and others took it up. Lugh appeared at Stark's elbow, yelling, "The talisman! Follow the talisman!" The people began to pour out, of the circle. Stark gave Lugh the lantern and candles he had brought from the tunnel.

"Lead on ahead," he said. "The first place you come to that can be fortified and held by the number of men we have—get about it. Even the children can haul stones."

"I would like to go with him," said someone at his shoulder. It was Rogain. The day had worn hard on him. He was wounded and beaten, and his scholar's hands were stained with blood. But he stood proudly and gave Stark look for look without apology or comment. Stark nodded, and he went to join Lugh, walking stiffly, with his head up.

"There's a good man," Stark said. "A pity he wasn't a better general."

He began to shout to the people. "Let the women and the young ones go first. The men stay behind—we may have to fight. Balin, keep them moving there. Hurry on now. Hurry on!"

In the reddening light of late afternoon the men and women and children streamed upward toward the pass, where the fires burned brighter as the sun sank. Stark and Balin were the last to leave the circle. They looked back toward Kushat and Stark could see the riders, a company of fifty or more picking its way over the frost-wracked and gullied surface of the plain. In the forefront was a figure in dark mail.

"Can that be Ciaran leading them?" asked Balin, astonished.

"Why not?" asked Stark.

"But she has barely taken the city. Any other chieftain..."

"... would be baying after loot and women. She has no use for either. All that concerns her is her ambition."

They followed on up the naked slope, and Stark thought that it was a measure of Ciaran's power that she could find fifty men willing to leave the plundering of Kushat. Probably they were clan chiefs whose men were bound to give them their share in any case. Or perhaps the lure of the talisman was great enough to draw them.

Balin said hesitantly, "Stark... when you stood there with the talisman in your hands, just before I called your name..."

"Yes?"

"Your face was strange. It was like the face of a madman—or a god."

"Something spoke to me," Stark said.

Balin looked at him, startled, and Stark shook his head. "Something. Voices. But I seemed to know that they were there, beyond the pass."

"Ah," said Balin, and his eyes were bright. "Then we may hope to find help there as Ban Cruach did."

"The gods know," Stark said. "For an instant, just before you spoke, I thought I understood . . ."

He broke off, shivering involuntarily. "Time enough for that when we're through the pass." He glanced back at the riders. "They're gaining."

"And look there," said Balin. "Beyond the Festival Stones."

Tribesmen had appeared on the plain as though out of nowhere. Stark nodded. "I was expecting them. They came after us through the tunnel." They had seen the people going up into the pass, and they began to run. They were closer, but the mounted men were faster. Stark judged that both groups would reach the pass at about the same time, and that that time would be much sooner than he wanted it.

"What shall we do?" Balin asked.

"Be ready for a rear-guard action, but keep ahead of them if we can." They ran up the slope, urging the men to go faster, driving them on. The lower parts of the plain were lost now where the dusk flowed over them. In the high places there was still light, and it shone into the pass so that the people seemed to move in a bath of blood. Stark thought how small they looked under those vast sheer cliffs, and how quickly they vanished into the narrow jaws of the Gates of Death. He left Balin and pushed on, past the line of march, in a fever to see the place before the daylight left it altogether.

It was an evil place, a crack in the mountain wall with towering sides that leaned together overhead, a thousand feet or more, and the wind came viciously through it. Stark hated it. He hated it as an aborigine, sensing the unknown and unnatural and cringing from it. And he hated it as a rational man, because it was a death-trap.

Balin had said that this was a place of grinding rockfalls, and that at least was no myth. The floor of the pass was heaped with detritus, and Stark, who knew his mountains well, having grown up where all the world was mountain, could look up at the looming sides and see where the rock was rotten and treacherous, ready to crash down at the slightest disturbance. He caught up to Lugh and Rogain and cautioned them to be careful. They sent his word back along the line and went on.

Stark stayed where he was, standing aside on a pile of boulders and looking up at the cliffs.

The people hurried by him, burdened women, older children carrying

younger ones who were too tired now to walk, the men with some of the wild zeal sweated out of them by the climb. Finally Balin came and saw him and stopped.

"They're close behind us, Stark. Hadn't we better prepare to fight?"

"I think," said Stark, looking upward, "there's a better way. Get me a spear." Balin took one from one of the men. Stark laid it by. He stripped off Camar's belt and gave it to Balin, along with every other thing that he could spare, and then rigged a thong to hold the spear across his back. While he did this he told Balin what he had in mind.

Balin squinted up at the cliffs and shuddered. "I won't even offer to help you."

"Don't," said Stark feelingly. "Just keep them moving on. I want everyone clear, around the bend there." He pointed ahead to where the pass turned around a jutting shoulder. "Do we have any slingers?"

"A few, I think. They came with Rogain and some others."

"Station them there, behind the shoulder. Keep them well out of sight."

Balin nodded, muttering something about the gods lending Stark strength. He ran on.

Stark went across the floor of the pass and began to climb up the cliff.

The aborigines had taught him how to climb, and he had spent the years of his boyhood clinging to rocks with his fingers and toes and the pores of his naked skin, slithering up and down on his belly like the lizards he hunted. It was a skill he had never lost, any more than he had ever forgotten how to breathe, because for so long the two functions had been interdependent. He found now that the going was easier than he had thought. The rock was rougher than it had looked from below, and its inward slope was greater. He had picked his place carefully, where the rock was sound and the holds did not crumble under his hands and feet. He swarmed up fairly quickly, toward a narrow ledge that angled across the cliff face. The daylight was fading much faster than he could climb, receding upward ahead of him as the sun went lower, but he thought that he would have all he needed. The thing that he was shortest on was time.

He climbed almost recklessly, leaning into the rock, merging with it, moving his four limbs as he had learned to do in imitation of the great rock-lizard, so that he looked like one himself, going claw-over-paw up the cliff and lacking only the balancing tail. He reached the ledge and hauled himself onto it, lying still to get his breath. In the pass below him he heard the clink of arms and harness, and he looked down. The shadows were thickening there, but enough light still reflected from the sky and the high cliffs to show him the riders. The narrowness of the pass had strung them out in a long line, and the treacherous footing had slowed them down. The unmounted tribesmen presumably were somewhere behind them. At the head of the line was Ciaran in her black mail. Her voice rose up to him, a thin thread of sound much broken by the wind. He could not understand the words, but it was obvious that she was impatient and urging the others to move faster. Stark smiled. She must feel that the talisman was already in her hands.

He rose and went along the ledge. Ciaran drew level with him, passed him by. Behind her came the Mekhish chiefs, grumbling and cursing at the evil nature of the place and at the growing dark. Some of them had torches and paused to light them, fighting the wind. Stark was not in any hurry now. He came to where the ledge was blocked by stones fallen from above, and he stopped and undid the thong that held the spear across his back. The wind tore at him, beating him back against the cliff. He set his head against it. He thrust the long stout blade of the spear in among the rocks, and set his feet, and pried.

Beyond the point where he stood the cliff face had rotted inward, where frost and the summer melt had eaten away the softer veins. The detritus had fallen, and piled, and slipped, and piled again, and now there were countless tons of rock poised and ready to slide. All that was needed was a touch.

Stark heaved up on the butt of the spear. The dislodged boulders went bounding down with a heavy ominous clashing, like a series of hammer-strokes.

Stark turned and ran.

THERE WAS an outcry of startled voices, and after that a complete cessation of sound from below. Stark could picture them sitting stiffly in their saddles, stretching eye and ear in the darkness, listening. The hammer-strokes died away in a booming rattle as the boulders hit the floor of the pass and wore out their momentum. For a brief space it seemed that there was silence, except for the wind. Then there began to be other sounds, of stones rolling and clacking together, and knocking, and shifting. The sounds overlapped each other, growing louder, and underneath them was a deep groaning grinding bass. Stark thought that he heard voices shouting again, very loud this time. The ledge began to quake under him. He threw himself flat, hugging the inner surface. The grinding noise exploded into a great roar. Behind him a section of the cliff face disappeared downward into darkness and a mighty cloud of dust.

Stark clung to the ledge, his arms over his head, his face pressed grinning against the rock. He howled triumphant obscenities that neither he nor anyone else could hear. And it was better than he had hoped. His deafened ears picked up, as though they were echoes, the crashings of three lesser rockfalls touched off by the first one. Very quickly after the last one there came a sort of stunned quiet, stitched through with a trickling of pebbles and a faint screaming.

Stark got to his hands and knees and looked down. The dust hung in the air like smoke, but it was heavy and the wind was tearing it. Below it was a mass of rock completely blocking the pass. And it had fallen like a portcullis between Ciaran and her men, except for a handful that Balin's slingers should take care of.

Stark laughed and began leisurely to climb down the cliff.

He did part of that climb in complete darkness, a task that left him no margin of attention for what was going on below. He could hear cries of pain and anger, and what he thought was Balin's voice raised in some rather violent demands, or orders. There were other sounds, all confused, and all of them at the moment of no interest to him. The nearer moon swung overhead and after that it was easier, though not nearly as easy as it had been going up. By the time the light of a high-held torch reached to him, and hands caught him to ease him down, he was glad of the help.

Balin's face appeared in the torchlight, wild with excitement. "We have

her. We have her! And the pass is closed."

"For a while," Stark said. "For a while."

He flexed his legs, bending to rub the aching stiffness out of them. It dawned on him that he was tired enough to drop right where he stood. "Has anybody got wine? I could do with a drink." Somebody handed him a leather bottle and he drank thirstily. Balin was still talking, telling how Ciaran and the seven or eight men who had kept up with her had tried to break back at the first sound of falling rock, and how three of the chieftains had been caught under the slide. Before the rest could gather their stunned wits together Balin's slingers had dropped them out of their saddles. Ciaran had tried to charge them with her axe and they had dropped her, too, and Balin had thought that she was dead. Then a great many of the people of Kushat had rushed back from around the bend. They had killed the chieftains on the ground, those who had not been slain outright by the stones, and they had wanted to kill Ciaran too when they found that she was still breathing.

"I had to mount guard over her myself," Balin said. "Then I thought they were going to kill *me*. I had the devil of a time convincing them."

"We may need her," said Stark. "Her men will start pulling away those rocks with the first light. I think there are three more falls, though not such big ones, between here and the mouth of the pass, and it will all take them time, but sooner or later they'll clear the way. When they do we must have the means to destroy them—or else we must buy our way free."

A considerable crowd had gathered. They had been cheering Stark, but now there was some growling and muttering, and Stark said, "Don't be so impatient. You can always kill her later on, if we find we don't need her."

Thanis pushed her way to him. "Stark, why don't we trade her to them in exchange for Kushat? They'd give up the city to get her back."

Apparently there were many who agreed with her. Stark shook his head. "Of course they would. And you'd have Kushat for just as long as Ciaran would need to rally her men and retake it. And then you would wish that you had killed her."

Thanis considered that, walking beside him and Balin as they started through the crowd. "We could say that we would give her back, and then

as soon as they left the city we could kill her..."

Stark looked at her. "That's treachery. And it's also bad business. The tribesmen would stamp your city flat and use the stones for butcher's blocks." He found himself suddenly shouting at them all. "Can't you understand? You couldn't hold the city with every man and every weapon you had, and you can't hold it now, with nothing. You lost Kushat, and you'll never get it back unless the talisman gives you the power." They were silent, startled by his anger and impatience. "If it does not, we may buy our own lives with Ciaran, but don't hope for more."

He tramped on ahead and they let him go. Even Thanis stood away from him. He passed the bodies of the chieftains and went around the shoulder where the pass turned. On the other side was a bay or pocket in the cliff, cut out by the waters that had poured through here over the millennia. It offered a partial shelter from the wind, and here the women and children were huddled in a makeshift camp, sharing out cold rations and trying to cover themselves against the night. There was nothing with which to make fires, and only two or three torches burned. Stark saw the dim glow of the candle lamp and made for it. Lugh and Rogain were there, and between them, sitting erect with her back against the cliff wall, was Ciaran.

She had been stripped of her armor, down to the dark close-fitting leather she wore beneath it, and someone had wrapped a tattered cloak around her. Her hands and feet were bound. Her forehead was cut, marred with a purpling bruise. There were streaks of dried blood all down her cheek and her white neck. And still she sat like a king. Stark looked down at her. Her eyes met his without wavering, without pleading or softness or a hint of tears. She did not speak.

He passed on by her. Lugh gave him a robe. He wrapped it around him and lay down on the cold stone and was instantly asleep. When he woke again, stiff and chilled in the predawn dark, Ciaran seemed not to have moved at all, and he wondered whether she had slept, and what her dreams were like. He did not ask her.

"Keep her close behind us," he said to Lugh and Rogain. "I want her guarded well."

They ate their meager breakfast and started on through the Gates of Death. Stark thought that he had never seen a more shivering, miserable



army on its way to a blind destiny. He walked at the head of it, with Balin beside himself. Lugh and Rogain came with Ciaran just behind. After that the people were strung out as they pleased, since for the present there was no more danger from the rear.

For Stark there began an ordeal.

The sun came up, but now they were going deeper into the pass, and the walls stretched higher, and the light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. The wind boomed and howled. It spoke with many tongues in the crevices of the rock, and Stark thought he heard in it the unhuman voices that had spoken to him as he held the talisman. Balin had given Camar's belt to him, saying he deserved the honor. Stark thought it was more that Balin had an uneasy passion to be rid of the thing. Now again it was a burden to him, and he hated it. In this place he was more conscious than ever of the strange powers that lived in that bit of crystal, and the fact that the answer to them lay somewhere up ahead, he could not tell how close, and that he was being forced inevitably into seeing what they were, whether he wanted to or not.

He did not want to.

He tried to reason with himself. He tried to force his attention to stay fixed on realities, the ever-present and highly important realities of the pass, which was no less dangerous here than it had been where he had brought down the slide. In spite of himself, his nostrils twitched to the smell of evil, ancient and dusty and old but still living, a subtle unclean taint on the wind that only a beast, or one as close to it as he, can sense and know. Every nerve was a point of pain, raw with apprehension. The thin veneer of civilization began to slough away from him no matter how hard he grasped at it, so that the farther he went the more his very body changed, drawing in upon itself and flattening forward, bristling and starting and pausing to test the wind, more like a four-footed thing than a man walking upright.

The worst of it was that he knew Ciaran watched him, and understood. All that morning she walked with bound hands between her guards, and never once spoke. But he felt that her eyes never left him.

When they stopped to rest and eat a little more of their scanty food he went to where she sat, on a heap of boulders off to one side, away from the others. She had not been given anything to eat or drink, and she had not

asked for anything. Stark broke off half of his dry cold hunk of bread and handed it to her. She took it and began to eat, rigidly controlling what must have been her very great hunger. Stark sat down on the rocks facing her and nodded to Lugh and Rogain, who were glad enough to leave their charge. He held out a bottle with some dregs of wine left in it, and they shared that too.

He said, "You're thinking how you may kill me."

"Yes." The wind tumbled her hair across her face and she shook it aside impatiently. "You've been a curse to me, Stark."

"I'm not a forgiving man." He nodded at the people of Kushat. "Neither are they."

"They had no choice," she said. "You did. I made you an offer once." She looked at him with honest curiosity. "You have no more loyalty to these people than I have. Why did you refuse?"

"Two reasons. I had made a promise..."

"To a dead man."

"To a friend."

"That is only one reason. Go on."

"You and I," said Stark, "are much alike. I think you said that yourself. Much too much alike, for one to lead and the other to follow. Besides, I had no desire to take Kushat." He handed her the wine again. "I suppose you might say I lack ambition, but you have too much. You were Lord of Mekh. You should have been content."

"Content!" she said. "Are you content? Have you ever been content?"

He considered that. "Not often. And not for long. But the spurs are not so deep in me."

"The wind and the fire," Ciaran said. "One wastes its strength in wandering, the other devours. Well, we shall see who was wiser when the battle is over. But don't talk to me of contentment."

Her face had a white blaze to it, a strength and an iron pride. He

studied her, sitting tall and straight on the cold rock, with her long legs and her splendid shoulders, and the fine hands that seemed forlorn without the axe to fondle.

"I would like to know," he said, "what made you as you are?"

She said impatiently, "A man is free to be what he will without questions, but a woman is supposed to be a woman and nothing more. One gets tired of explaining." She leaned back against the boulders, and there was a certain triumph in her eyes. "I did not ask for my sex. I will not be bound by it. I did not ask to be a bastard, and I will not be bound by that, either. So much I have accomplished, if I die today."

She was silent for a time, and he thought that she was through talking. Then she said softly, "If I live, there will be more to do. Kushat was only a stepping-stone."

Her eyes looked somewhere else, far off, and what they saw was bitter.

"A stepping stone?" asked Stark. "To where?"

"To Narrissan." Her voice was very low. "That is a walled city, Stark, much like Kushat, but farther south, and far more rich and powerful. My grandfather was king in Narrissan. By the time I could walk, I was a servant in his house. I don't think he ever knew it. Why should he? I had no name. My father knew. He came upon me and my mother once in the passageway, and he looked at me as one might look into a mirror. 'So that's the brat,' he said. My mother spoke, complaining, I believe, though I hardly heard her, and he cut her off sharply, saying, 'Be thankful it's a girl-child. Otherwise I would be afraid to let it grow. It's too much in my image.' "

She smiled. "After that he forgot about me. But when I was old enough I left my scrubbing of floors to practice arms with the young boys. I was beaten for it every day, but every day I went. My father was a good man of his hands, and as he said, I was made in his image. I learned. When I had learned enough I started out to make my own fortune. With these two hands, Stark," she said, holding them up. "With what I am myself, and what I can do, not what I can trick and wheedle and whore out of others by the ancient usages of the bedchamber."

Stark nodded. "And that is why you wanted the talisman so

badly—because it might help you to take your father's city."

"To take Narrissan. My father is dead these three years, and I was his only issue. I hope the gods allow him to be amused..." She shook her head, looking at Stark. "If you had fought with me instead of against me... Well, that is past. But who knows what lies ahead?"

She gave him a keen glance. "You have a hint, I think. And it frightens you."

"We'll soon know," Stark said, and rose, going back to the head of the straggling column. He did not bother to tell Ciaran that if ever they did face each other again it would still be as man to man and equal to equal, with no regard for her sex. He knew that she knew that. And he knew that it would be more than a little foolish to say so, since in any case the choice was not his.

The line of march formed up and moved on again.

The pass dropped lower and the uncanny twilight deepened to a kind of sickly night. There was nothing but rock and ice. Yet the sense of danger increased, so that Stark moved against it as a man might move against water. And not he alone was oppressed. Balin, Lugh, Rogain, Thanis, all of the people now moved grudgingly and in silence. Even Ciaran's face began to show apprehension under the stoic mask.

Then suddenly the rock walls dropped away. The pallid darkness lifted to a clear daylight. They were through the Gates of Death.

Beyond them was a stony slope widening out and down into a great valley locked between the mountains. They filed out of the pass and stood there on the slope. The cessation of the wind that had hammered and howled at them in the narrow cleft made it seem that the valley was terribly quiet.

They stood a long time. Thanis came up between Stark and Balin, her cloak wrapped tight around her, her dark eyes wide and stricken.

"What does it mean?" she asked finally.

Stark answered, "I don't know."

## *XIII*

THERE WERE three towers. Two were roofless, long abandoned. All around these two were ruins, sheathed in ice, and they were the strangest ruins that Stark had ever seen, on a world that was rich in ruins and in strangeness.

The eye could follow even yet the spiderweb pattern of streets, pick out what might have been the market places and the temple squares. All along these streets the hollow skeletons of buildings stood like the shells of fantastic sea-things with their soft flesh all eaten away. The ice made the color blurred and luminous, added a luster to soaring curves and empty arches where they caught the sun.

"Did they build the place all of swords and spear-points?" said Balin, staring.

"Something like it," Stark said. In that land where stone was the obvious material for building, nothing was made of stone but the great towers. The light and graceful bones of the city were all of metal, colored in some fashion so that the black valley shone with an icy mockery of spring greens and yellows and soft blues, with here and there a spurt of crimson or coral pink. The taller structures had crumpled down. The smaller ones leaned. Nothing had lived there for a very long time.

The third tower was still whole and sound.

Stark looked at it, feeling the cringing, snarling, hateful fear rise in him, and knew that this was how Camar's tower and all the others beyond the pass had looked in the days of their strength. It was alien. It was arrogant. It was massive and very high, the stonework tapering in close at the top, and on its highest point was a glimmer of something unfamiliar, like a captive star. Only the star did not shed light. It sent out instead a cloudy shimmering, visible more as a distortion in the air than as a definite emanation. The mountain peaks behind it seemed to float.

Underneath that cloudy shimmer, filling almost a third of the valley,

was a portion of the city that was not in ruins, although the ruined areas joined it. Obviously all had once been part of the same complex, and obviously the dead parts of the city had once been covered by the same kind of forcefield, from the abandoned towers. The line of demarcation was quite clear. The ice and the broken buildings ended at the edge of the field. Beyond there were streets as bare as summer. Arches soared up straight and free. The many-colored walls stood squarely. Nowhere was there any sign of frost, or decay.

Or of life. In all those long avenues, nothing moved. And in all that valley there was no living sound except what the people of Kushat had brought with them.

Stark heard Ciaran laugh, and turned to face her. She was looking past him at the bright-colored desolation.

"It seems," she said, "that myths die as well as men."

Stark moved his head as an animal does when it listens to something far off. "There is life there yet."

He put his hands on the belt and felt the talisman as a point of fire under them.

"There must be life," said Balin. "Look at the tower.

I don't know what its purpose is, but it still functions.

There must be someone—something there to tend it."

The others caught that up. They were eager, desperate to believe. Balin went on, gesturing at the tower.

"That is power, certainly. Perhaps the very kind of power Ban Cruach brought away with him, though not in that form. What do you think it is, Stark? A defense?"

Stark said slowly, "I think it's a defense against the ice and cold. See how warm the city looks."

"And how quiet," Lugh muttered. "Why should we lie to ourselves? The place is dead. As dead as Ban Cruach."

Only Stark heard him. The people had begun to crowd and clamor. They shouted for the talisman, and some of them moved on down the slope, too impatient to wait for their leaders. This was their last hope. On it rested everything they had left behind, city, home, the remnants of their families. With the power they might find here they could regain them all. Without it, even though they might buy their lives with Ciaran and go free, they would be only stateless wanderers on the face of Mars, utterly destitute.

"It would be wiser for them to wait here," Stark said. Balin only shook his head, and Stark did not press the point. Perhaps they knew best what they wanted.

He opened the box and took out the talisman, wrapped in silk. He handed it to Balin.

"It belongs to Kushat," he said. "Not to me."

Balin looked at him with wry and bitter mirth. "True. And I thank you for the honor. But I am not Ban Cruach. If I drop the thing, you may have to pick it up." He held it stiffly and did not remove the wrappings.

They walked on together, and the people followed them closely. Stark was very conscious of external things, the soft breathing and trampling of the group and the way their voices fell silent, the slippery frost-buckled pavement that replaced the rock under his feet, the lengthening shadow of the western wall of mountains. He was extremely conscious of Ciaran walking behind him, and of Thanis at his side. But there was something else, something he could not put a name to, that he sensed more powerfully than any of these things. He still walked against fear as a man walks against water, just as he had in the pass, in spite of the fact that now he was in open sunlight and clear air.

The colors and fantastic shapes of the ice-sheathed ruins rose around him, marked off by transverse streets that glittered like ribbons of glass.

"These folk were never part of our past," said Balm. His voice was small and low, so as not to wake any echoes. He held the talisman tight in his closed hands. "We never built like this, even when the world was young and rich."

No, thought Stark, No race on Mars ever built like this. I have seen the

old, old cities. Jekkara and Valkis of the Sea-Kings, Barrakesh, and sand-drowned ruins by the Wells of Tamboina. I have even seen Sinharat the Ever-Living. But the people who built them were human. Even the Ramas were human, and so the wickedness that clung around Sinharat was human too, and understandable. But no human ever conceived and shaped these curving walls and enormously elongated arches. No human hands ever opened these strange narrow doors. No human mind could endure for long surrounded by this geometry.

I suppose perhaps they might, he added to himself— but I know that they did not. I have heard the voices.

He said aloud, "They once held all the country beyond the Gates of Death. Even the place where Kushat stands. The Festival Stones were once a tower like that one. You can see the ruins of others all through the Norlands."

"But there are no traces left of any cities like this one."

"No. The metal would have been carried off and beaten into useful things, every scrap of it, ages gone."

Balin grunted. The pace of the whole column had imperceptibly slowed and the people were bunched together closely now, very quiet, mothers hanging tight to their children, husbands close to their wives. The avenue they had been following led straight in under the edge of the shimmering cloud. The line of demarcation was close ahead now. No more than a hundred feet.

Balin gave Stark a queer desperate look. He lifted the talisman as though he might be going to hand it to him, or throw it away. Then he set his jaw tight and said something that Stark could not hear, and he took the silk wrappings away so that the crystal lay bare in his hands.

The people sighed. Thanis gave Balin a look of fierce pride. "Lead us," she said. He held out the talisman in his cupped palms and walked ahead. Stark ceased to watch Balin. Instead he looked up and on either side, going close behind him, his body tensed like a spring, trying to see through walls and hear through silence and feel through the intangible.

Balin paused under the edge of the cloud and nothing happened, except that after a step or two he halted and said with almost childish surprise,



"It's warm."

Stark nodded. He was still looking warily around, seeing nothing. The city lay in a kind of summer dream, full of sweet color and soft shadow and the drowsy stillness of sleep. Overhead the sky had vanished in a quivering mirage.

And it was warm. Too warm, after the bitter cold. It gave a feeling of ease and pleasant languor. The people began to loosen their cloaks. Then, as they went on, they laid aside their burdens, piling them neatly together with the unwanted garments, mindful that they would have to be picked up again when they returned.

The avenue was wide. On either side the buildings marched, or on occasion fell back to form an odd-shaped square. Here where they were undamaged and free of ice the strangeness of their shaping was more vividly apparent. They gave an illusion of tallness though actually they were not, being limited by the height of the tower. Some of the structures seemed to have no useful purpose at all. They shot up in twisted spires, or branched in weird spiky arms like giant cacti done in pink and gold, or looped in helical formations, sometimes erect, sometimes lying on their sides. Ornaments, Stark thought, or monuments, perhaps with some religious significance. And then it struck him that they were more like the markers in some monstrous game. It was an unpleasant thought. He did not know why he had it. Then he realized that the odd forms were repeated, distributed throughout the checkerboard streets of the city according to an unknown but definite plan.

Passing close by one of the cactus-shapes, he saw that the metal spikes were long and very sharp, and that there were traces on them of some dark stain.

Thanis' urgent voice said, "Balin! Balin..."

The talisman had been warming and glowing between his hands. Now it shone softly in the growing dusk, under that unnatural sky. And Balin had stopped. His face was ashen. He was like a man in shock. He made a moaning sound and then by sheer convulsive reflex he flung the talisman away from him, exactly as Stark had long ago in the tower. The crystal rolled a little way and lay gleaming.

The people stood still, appalled. Thanis put her hand on Balin's

shoulder and looked frightenedly at Stark. Ciaran watched from between her guards, attentive as a hawk.

Stark said to Balin, "You heard the voices?"

"Yes." Balm caught his breath and straightened up, but his face was still bloodless. "Clearly, in here." He touched his head. "I heard them louder and louder and all of a sudden I understood. I *understood* them, Stark." He looked around at the enclosing buildings, afraid with no ordinary fear. "This is an evil place." He shouted at the people. "Go back! Get out. Get out!"

He started to run. Stark caught him. The people hung on the edge of panic. He said to them, "Wait. Stay together." They milled uncertainly. Those in the back were too far away to see or know what was happening. They only knew that something was wrong. A woman's voice cried out, shrill with fear. In desperation Stark spoke to Lugh and Rogain. "Keep them together! If we start running we're lost." They left Ciaran and went rapidly down the line, shouting in brisk, authoritative voices although both of them were white around the lips. Stark looked at Ciaran. "Here is your chance. Take it if you will."

She shook her head and smiled, holding up her bound hands. Her eyes looked past him at the city.

Stark shook Balin and said fiercely, "Will you stand now?"

"I'll stand," he whispered. "But we must go, Stark. We must get out."

"All right. But wait."

Stark went to where the talisman lay. He knew now what it was, and that took some of the terror out of it. Even so his hands shook as he picked it up. If it had not been for all the lives that might depend on it, he would have let it stay where it was till doomsday.

The thing glowed and glimmered in his hands. He looked at it, and the voices burst inside his skull.

Not true voices. Probably these creatures had physical voices, but the crystal was not designed to carry them. It transmitted the thought-words that had to come before the spoken ones. At first they were a weird

jumble, amplification of the tiny chitterings he had heard from so far away. Their unhumanness then had shocked him into breaking contact. Now it was overwhelming. Because he knew that his own selfish survival depended on it as well as everybody else's, he fought it out this time. He hung on until the voices slipped suddenly over the edge of comprehension.

He understood them. Partly. No human would ever understand all of what these minds were thinking and talking about. But he understood enough. The crystal was unselective. It brought him all the flying fragments of speech within its range. Stark's mind became a sort of camera obscura looking on nightmare, where narrow doorways opened into bright-lit chambers, briefly flashing, each one a shard of lost sanity, each one shining with the phosphorescence of decay. And each one gleeful. That was the worst of it. The laughter. They were happy, these creatures. Terribly happy.

Most of them. Not all. Some of them were disturbed. Some of them had become aware.

Alarm broke the contact for him this time, at least enough that he could push the voices back. He clawed desperately for a grasp at the real world again, not easy since the real world that surrounded him was their world and so not immediately recognizable. There was a pale blur close to him that seemed familiar. It resolved itself gradually into Thanis' face.

"It's too late to go," he said. "They know we're here."

He turned to speak to Balin and the others. At the back of the line a woman screamed abruptly. Men's voices followed, crying out harshly. Lugh appeared, not quite running. "Stark," he said, and pointed. "Stark...".

Stark moved aside, where he could see down the long wide avenue past the line of march.

Back beyond the pink-and-gold structure with the blood-stained spikes, five figures had appeared in the street. Three of them held longish tubes with globed ends that might be weapons. They were very tall, these figures, towering over the people of Kushat, towering even over Stark, but they were excessively slender, and they moved with swaying motion like reeds before the wind. They were dressed in an assortment of bright-colored garments and queer tall caps that exaggerated their

elongated narrow skulls. Their skin was a pale golden color, stretched tight over a structure of facial bones that seemed to be all brow and jaw with little in between but two great round eyes like dark moons.

They did not speak. They only stood and held the weapons and stared at the people of Kushat.

Thanis caught her breath in a little cry. Stark looked around.

Six thin tall creatures fluttering in rainbow silks moved out to stand across the way. Four of them held tubes.

One of them spoke. His voice was a kind of high-pitched fluting, quite musical, like the call of some strange bird. The talisman brought the meaning of the sounds clearly to Stark.

"Our weapons are invincible. We can destroy you all. Ban Cruach protects us! His promise and his talisman!"

There was a moment's pause, a moment that seemed a hundred years long to Stark as he stared in astonishment.

Then he shouted, "Ban Cruach!"

He walked toward them, holding out the talisman.

## *XIV*

THE NAME crashed in metallic echoes from the surrounding walls. The creatures started back, swaying this way and that, and their huge eyes fixed on the talisman. Now that he was closer, Stark could see the vestigial noses and the small mouths, reptilian in their neatness of tight lips and little even teeth.

"Ban Cruach," he said again.

They swayed and fluted among themselves. The talisman glowed between Stark's hands. Their thought-voices clamored in his head.

"He has the Word of Power!"

"The talisman! He holds the talisman..."

"What are these creatures? What do they want here?"

"They have his form. Perhaps they're his people." The same thought was suddenly arrived at and projected by several of them together, and it was full of fear.

"They've come to take him away from us!"

"No!" said Stark. He made gestures of negation, having no idea whether they would understand. They stopped fluting and stared at him. He came closer, close enough to be aware of their bodies as living things, breathing, stirring, smelling oddly of a dry dusty perfume like the odor of fallen leaves. They horrified him, not because of their physical difference but because he had eavesdropped on their unguarded conversations and knew at least a fraction of the things these bodies were capable of doing. The creature who had first mentioned Ban Cruach was ornamented with streamers of blue and green, attached to his arms and legs and around his body with no possible function other than ornamentation. His conical cap was pink. Stark set his teeth on his rising gorge and approached him. He indicated that he should touch the talisman.

He did, with four long golden fingers and a thumb like a gamecock's spur, tipped with an artificial talon of razor-sharp steel.

"Do you understand me now?" Stark asked aloud. The dark moon eyes regarded him, alert and frighteningly clever but without comprehension.

"What is it trying to do?" said one of the aliens. This one wore a green cap, a long strip of coral down the front, and a set of amethyst-blue streamers that went down the back and then on down both legs, where they were fastened to the ankles by jeweled bands. Stark realized all of a sudden that this was a female. There was remarkably little difference. She swayed her thin gold body with a strange angular grace, her arms moving like a dancer's, expressing fear.

"Kill him," said a third one, dressed in russet and brown. "Drive your spur in, Hrillin. Take away their power..."

Stark stepped back abruptly, with the talisman, and half drew his sword. The one called Hrollin looked at him with a sudden blaze of understanding.

"Now I see! When we speak, you hear us, through the talisman." His long arms were motioning his fellows to silence, warning them. "If this is so, raise your hand three times."

Stark obeyed.

"Ah," said Hrollin. He stared at Stark, and stared, and then he laughed. "And is *this* the true nature of the talisman?"

Complete amazement, echoed by the others. More than amazement. Consternation. And the female in coral and amethyst-blue fluted on a shrill note of panic.

"But if that is true..."

"We shall see," said Hrollin, smoothly shutting her off. "It is certain he understands what we say."

"His talisman speaks for us," said another, this one enveloped in a great swirl of flame-colored silk that hid him completely from neck to heels. "Perhaps our talisman will speak for him."

Well, and of course, thought Stark. One tuned to their wave-output, one to ours, because the two systems are not compatible. I should have realized that. Otherwise I would have picked up all the human chatter around me as well.

Hrollin was watching him. He raised his hand again, three times.

Hrollin beckoned. "Come then."

Stark beckoned in his turn, to Balin and the others.

"No," said Hrollin. "Only you. Let the others rest."

Stark shook his head. He smiled mockingly, and made certain motions, remembering one or two of the things he had learned from the talisman during the time that he listened to the voices of the city.

Hrillin and some of the others laughed. It was a sound as musical as falling water, but Stark did not find it at all pleasant. They turned and moved up the broad street with their swaying, capering steps. Hrillin called to his fellows down the street to let the others come.

"Remember," he said to Stark. "We can destroy you all, in one second, if we wish."

Stark raised his hand, saying yes. But to Balin he said, "Maybe." He explained what Hrillin had said. "It's possible. Pass the word down to stay together. No panic, and no provocations. But there's something wrong here. They're frightened."

The thin gold Woman tossed her arms like the branches of a wind-torn tree, pantomiming destruction.

They moved in a long line down the avenue. Stark repeated what had been said, so that Balin and the others would know.

"Ban Cruach protects *them*?" said Balin. "*They* have a talisman?" He seemed unable to believe this. So did Thanis, and those others like Lugh who were close enough to hear. Only Ciaran said, "Ban Cruach appears to have been a generous man. Let us hope that he keeps his promises—all of them."

Stark warned them to silence when the aliens should hold their talisman.

It was growing dark. In the shadowy cross-streets and the squares along the way, more and more of the thin tall figures gathered, circling, following, watching. All at once, all over the city, lights sprang on.

Thanis gasped, and then whispered, "How can anything so hateful be so beautiful?"

The streets were filled now with a soft radiance of color. The tall thin shapes in their fluttering silks moved through pools of gold and green, blue and violet, orange and blood-red. All the windows of the buildings showed a clear silver-white against the colors. Rank after rank they passed by, giving a million narrow glimpses into public halls with many slender pillars, and the odd-shaped rooms of houses, all deserted.

Stark listened to the fluting calls of the creatures who followed.

"There are not many of them," he said quietly. "I think not as many as we. They seem to have no real leader. Hrollin happened to be the first to see us, so that apparently entitles him to lead for this..." He hesitated. "'Game' is the only word." The wild disorder of their talk was appalling. "Their whole existence here seems to be one great anarchic game. They murder for fun. Not simple murders. They do all kinds of things for fun, and physical torture is one of the least of them. They've had thousands of years to invent perversions."

"I heard them," Balin said. "Only briefly, but enough."

Lugh said, "But if they have no leader, and they are so few, how do they force the victims..."

"They don't have to," Stark said. "The victims get more fun out of it than anybody. It seems to be their moment of supreme fulfillment."

Thanis said furiously, "Ban Cruach would never have promised his help to these monsters."

"That was a long time ago," Stark said. "I doubt that they were monsters then." He looked around at the city, with the massive bulk of the tower rising over it. "They live in prison. They die in prison. They've been dying for a long time. It's small wonder they've gone mad with it."

"I do not pity them," Balin said with a shiver of repulsion.

"Nor I," said Stark. "Any more than they would pity me while they were watching me die."

They came into an enormous circle. In the center of the circle was a pavilion, the roof curved and peaked, upheld on many columns, the whole thing done in shades of purple. Hrollin beckoned Stark and the others on, and from all sides now the aliens began to gather closer. Broad stripes of gold like sunrays laid into the pavement led to the heart of the pavilion, where there was a low dais holding a glitter of crystal.

Embedded in the crystal was the body of a man, a human man, and quite old, dressed in antique armor. Stark recognized him. He had seen that face before, carved in stone and turned forever toward the Gates of



Death. He was looking at Ban Cruach.

A wave of awe swept over the people of Kushat. They pushed and crowded, delicately, as though they were in a temple, but determinedly, surrounding the crystal coffin, and all through what followed there was a constant motion as those in front gave way to others moving up from behind to see.

From some secret niche beside the coffin Hrollin took the mate to Ban Cruach's talisman and held it up, and stared while it warmed and glowed between his hands.

"Now," said Stark, "do you understand me, Hrollin?"

The alien flinched, as though he found the impact of human speech as distasteful as Stark had found theirs.

"I understand."

"This is as Ban Cruach and your forefathers wished. Your people made these things we call talismans so that our two races might talk together."

Hrollin glanced aside at Ban Cruach, lying still in his crystal bed.

"He promised to protect us," Hrollin said. "He promised to guard the Gates of Death so that his world could never trespass onto ours."

The aliens echoed that, swaying and tossing their arms. The fluting voices rang from the pavilion roof. "He *promised!* By the power of the talisman..."

"And he kept that promise," Stark said, "as long as his people held Kushat."

Hrollin started. He stared at Stark.

"Kushat? Kushat has fallen?"

A wild crying broke out among the aliens. They pressed closer around Hrollin, around the humans. Some of them, apparently in an ecstasy of excitement, pricked themselves and each other with their steel nails, drawing blood.

"Yesterday," Stark said.

"Yesterday," repeated Hrollin. "Yesterday Kushat fell." Suddenly he swayed forward and screamed. "You had no right! You had no right to let it fall!"

The fluting voices shrieked in rage, in hysteria and fear. The tall thin bodies swayed wildly, whirled and tossed. Stark thought the creatures were going to attack, and perhaps they might have, but the men of Kushat drew their weapons and the aliens moved back, circling round and round. More began to gash themselves. The game was not going quite as they had thought, Stark felt. And yet they were becoming more and more excited by it, perhaps simply because it was unpredictable and new.

He said to Hrollin, "The men of Kushat died defending their city. They could hardly do more." He could not keep all of what he was thinking out of what he was saying; the words formed themselves in his mind and Hrollin read them before he could suppress them. Some inscrutable emotion flickered in Hrollin's eyes.

"We do not like each other," he said. "Let it rest at that."

"Very well. But now we come to you because Ban Cruach made us a promise, too."

"A promise? A promise?" Hrollin was scornful. "His promise was to us. We gave him a strong weapon to fight his wars, and in exchange he gave us peace." He placed his hand with the cruel thumb-spur affectionately on the coffin. "When he was an old man he left his people and came to us. We were a great city, then. All this valley was warm and populous. He walked our streets and talked to our philosophers and wise men. It is said that he wrote our history, in the human tongue, though no one knows if that is true." He paused, looking at the humans. "We are the oldest race on Mars. We knew you before you walked erect. We built our cities when you lived in holes in the rock and barely understood fire."

The aliens swayed, lifting their long arms.

"But," said Hrollin, "you bred faster. And we grew old. We built our towers in the cold lands, and for a long time we were not troubled. But even the planet grew old, and men were everywhere, and one by one we abandoned our cities because there was no one left to live in them. This

valley was our last stronghold."

"It is a stronghold no longer," Stark said. "Men are on their way. And this was Ban Cruach's promise to us, the other side of your bargain. If ever need arose, we were to bring the talisman through the Gates of Death, and the great power Ban Cruach once had would be given to us again."

He held up the talisman in a gesture of finality.

"Give us that power. We will drive away these men who are enemies to us both, and Kushat will continue to guard the Gates as she always has. Otherwise..."

He let his hands fall.

"Otherwise you must fight this battle by yourselves."

"Fight," said the fluting voices. There was a whirl of laughter, strange and cruel.

"Give them the power, Hrollin, why not?"

"Yes, give them the power!"

"Let them be strong like Ban Cruach and fight the world away from us."

"Shall I?" said Hrollin, swaying, dancing where he stood, gesturing with malicious arms. "Shall I?" He bent to Stark. "Will you go?"

"Give us the weapons, Hrollin, and we'll go."

"Very well," said Hrollin, and turned to his people. "Give them the weapons! Bring all we have. Give them!"

These are the sons of Ban Cruach our protector. Give them the weapons!"

They began to chant. "Give them the weapons!" Those who carried the bulky tubes pressed them into human hands. Others ran away and returned quickly with more. In a few minutes the men of Kushat had forty of the globed weapons.

"Are you joyous now?" asked Hrollin, and thrust the last of the tubes

into Stark's hand. "See, thus and thus do you do with it, but be careful. It will kill much more than you think."

He drew back. All the aliens drew back. Balin held a tube in his own hands. He looked at it, his face alight with triumph, and then he turned to the crystal coffin where Ban Cruach lay. "He did it, Stark. He kept his promise." There was a glitter of tears in his eyes. "I thank you," he said to the aliens. "We of Kushat all thank you." He turned suddenly and faced Ciaran. "Now you can watch your red wolves die."

He shouted to the people, "You have the power now —the power of Ban Cruach! Let us go and take Kushat!" The people roared. They started to move out of the pavilion and into the street, with Balin running on to lead them. They shouted, "Kushat! Kushat!" until the echoes struck through the city like the ringing of flawed bells. They poured back along the avenue. And now Stark was at the rear of the march with Ciaran, and Lugh and Rogain, who were armed with the alien weapons. Thanis had raced ahead to be with Balin, seeing already the way her room would look with everything back as it had been before.

The people were in a hurry and they moved fast, through the pools of colored light. Stark watched from side to side, and he saw that Ciaran was doing so too. He could not see anything. There seemed to be no reason for alarm. Yet he was alarmed. And in his hand the talisman of Ban Cruach brought him not one single word.

He had a horrid picture of the aliens bending and swaying with their fingers pressed to their lips, their eyes bright with the excitement of playing a game where no one was allowed to speak.

Still they went on, and nothing happened.

The people began to pick up their burdens again from where they had left them. They put on their cloaks and shared their bundles and hurried along toward the terminus of the warm zone. They were in high spirits, their mouths full of the sweet taste of victory. Ciaran walked with her head high and her face a mask of stone. Lugh and Rogain fondled the strange weapons. Stark, impatient and nervous, kept looking back and seeing nothing, and straining toward the clean cold air ahead.

Perhaps half the people had left the city when the talisman brought Stark one unguarded cry, quickly silenced.

The cry was "Now, *now!*" and it held such a note of hungry eagerness that Stark did not wait for more. He shouted to the people to leave their belongings and run. He pushed Ciaran ahead of him, yelling at Lugh and Rogan to be ready with their weapons. They all began to run. And then all at once the lights went out.

Stark blundered into someone and stopped. It was as though he had been struck blind. He looked up at the sky. The stars were hidden by a shimmering cloud and the whole city was black as the pit. People were stumbling about, yelling, on the edge of panic.

Then the screaming began.

Stark felt something close by him, smelled a scent like the odor of dry leaves, and he knew suddenly that they were all around, keeping very quiet, their narrow feet soundless on the pavement, moving among the people. They must have come by secret ways of their own, through the empty houses and the unused halls. Now, above his head in the darkness, there was a little sound of suppressed laughter, horribly like a giggling child. A long thin finger brushed his face.

He yelled and lashed out violently with the globed weapon that he could not fire because of his own people. But the sharp thumb-spur had already pricked his neck, and whatever drug was on it acted very swiftly. He did not know whether the blow landed. Vaguely, very vaguely, as long arms wrapped around him and dragged him into unconsciousness, he heard the sounds of panic as the people of Kushat rushed blindly toward the outer night.

## XV

THE LIGHTS were on again.

He lay in a pool of light. The pool was deep orange, a suffocating color, very rasping to the nerves. Things moved in it, tall things that pranced and fluttered, trailing bright streamers.

"He's awake," they said.

The talisman lay on his breast, between his crossed hands.

"See?" they said. "His eyes are open..."

He sat up convulsively, his brain still unsteady from the drug. He was naked and unarmed. Only the talisman was left. He looked up at them and hated them, futilely, and feared them with a cold sick fear. His body had tiny cuts all over it that stung and pulled when he moved.

Hrillin came and bent above him, holding the other talisman. "You lost Kushat," he said, and Stark knew that Hrillin was referring not to him alone but to all the humans. "You lost Kushat and so the world rolls in on us." He raked himself with his free hand and blood ran down his narrow chest. His eyes burned. He twitched and swayed with a lunatic joy. "Do you feel the greatness of this time? Here we end. All the long, long ages, piled and gathered, and we bear them into the dark."

The figures behind him danced stiffly, fluting wild cries without words.

Stark said, "But you gave us the weapons..."

"The weapons!" Hrillin whirled and took from one of his fellows a tube, perhaps the same one Stark had been carrying. He pointed the globed end at Stark and pressed the firing stud. He pressed it and pressed it, laughing.

"I said these would kill more than you thought! Not enemies. Hopes, and dreams, and faith, but not enemies." He ceased to press the stud and held the weapon upright like a club. "Ban Cruach promised you power. We have no power. The city warms us and lights us and gives us food and drink because it was built to do so, but beyond that we have nothing. All else is dead, worn out, corroded, crumbled, useless. Now the city ends, and that is the end of everything. The end of the promise..."

He brought his two hands together, striking the useless weapon hard against the talisman, and the talisman shattered and fell.

"The end!" cried Hrillin. "This is our night of carnival. We dance toward oblivion, laughing, shouting the name of Ban Cruach!"

He struck the talisman out of Stark's hands and broke it, and the contact was gone. Forever.

They swooped on him in the orange light, in a swaying semi-circle, and began to prick him with their spurs. And as Hrollin had said, they were laughing.

Stark ran.

He fled along the colored streets. They had brought him to a part of the city that was strange to him, away from the avenue. The great stone tower rose high above the roofs in one direction, and in the other, toward the perimeter of the city, he thought the lights chopped off short, as though the aliens had left a barrier of darkness against the people of Kushat.

By now the people would have learned that the precious weapons were useless. How many of them would dare to come back into the city, through total darkness and armed only with their swords, he did not know. He did not think there would be enough to be useful to him, and there was also a question of time.

The lighted streets were alive with excitement, with joy and murder.

Stark was not the only human they had taken in their stealthy raid. He could hear cries from other streets. Once he saw a man go stumbling across an open space ahead, with his tall pursuers deliberately matching stride and driving him. And at a place where two streets met there was a pink-and-gold cactus with a woman impaled on its spikes.

He was a swift runner, but he knew that they could outdistance him. He proved it fairly quickly, trying to break back down a long wide avenue that he was sure must lead to the outside. There was not a sign of a pursuer when he entered it, but at the second cross-street there they all were, laughing and springing toward him with blue light glinting from their spurs. He turned, and they let him run, but one—he thought it was the female with the amethyst streamers down her back—caught up and gashed his buttocks lightly, just to prove she could, before dancing away out of his reach.

So he ran, but he knew that there would come an end to running. And he looked all around, searching, his empty fingers flexing hungrily.

They drove him. At first he did not realize that, because sometimes they would disappear and he would think perhaps they had gone off on some other insane pursuit. Then as he would turn a corner or start across some square they would be there, and he would have to go another way. His control began to slip. He wanted to rush them and tear at them with his teeth and bare hands, but he knew that they could kill him any time they wanted to, and that they would merely enjoy his savaging as long as it pleased them. So he went on.

He began to find bodies. Some of them were human. Some of them were not, and in one broad pillared hall done all in bronze and gray he saw two of the creatures with bright cords stretched between neck and ankles, strangling themselves in a state of ecstasy while others watched, swaying like trees in a hot wind.

In the middle of the deserted square he found Rogain. He recognized him by his hands, the fine scholar's hands stained with blood. A sword lay across the body.

Stark straightened and looked around. There was no one to see, but he knew they were watching. He knew he had been driven here deliberately. The sword was clean, both hilt and blade, and Rogain had never used it. It had been put there for him to find.

"All right," he said to them, and added an obscene name. "I'll do what you want."

He picked up the sword. It felt very good in his hand. He thought perhaps they had made a mistake.

He took his bearings from the tower and started again toward the outside. They did not stop him. But from this square there was only one way that he could go. He went, through the colored lights. A band of aliens came upon him suddenly from out of a tall pavilion. They were carrying between themselves two of their females who were either dead or close to it. All of them were bleeding from self-inflicted wounds. Stark wondered if they were drugged. Perhaps, or perhaps the euphoria of self-immolation was enough to make them as strange as they were. They laughed and pointed, and some of them came toward him. Stark had a weapon now, and his wisdom was all gone out of him. He bounded toward them like a big dark cat, and suddenly he was as lunatic as they, prancing and whirling with vicious grace as he drove the steel in. He could not avoid



their spurs entirely. His shoulders bled, but he hardly noticed. He rushed on and the others swayed aside from the blade, apparently content to wait a little longer. After a bit he looked back and they had ambled on, dragging their wounded with them.

Then for a space it was quiet. The street led on between high walls. The light changed, blue, gold, violet, soft pink. And then there was another little square all enclosed in a fencing of fine wrought work in a pattern of strange leaves that must have been a memory of another place and far gone time. At the far side of it, the street was covered by a series of elongated arches that receded in perspective, and the light was red. Coming toward them through the arches, in the bloody light, was a tall white-bodied long-striding woman, with black hair covering her shoulders and a sword in her hand.

Ciaran.

He stopped and waited. She saw him. She came into the square and stopped also, and said his name.

"I think I understand now," she said, "why they gave me this." She held up the sword.

Stark said, "Yes. And mine, too."

"But how did they know..."

"You were a captive. And they heard what Balin said to you about your red wolves. They would know you had something to do with the taking of Kushat."

He glanced from her in the red light, to the wrought work that fenced the square. Through the openings he could see them gathering to watch, their great eyes luminous. Then he looked beyond her through the arches.

"They are behind you now," he said.

She nodded. "And behind you. They're waiting for us to fight."

They faced each other, two naked humans in a strange far place, with swords in their hands.

Stark said, "Will you fight me, Ciaran?"

She shook her dark head. "No. Not to please them."

"Will you fight with me, then? Will you be the shield at my back?"

She smiled. "No. But I will fight beside you, and we can guard each other's backs." She looked at the tall peering creatures and added, "I have never wanted more to kill." Her white skin was marked like his with the pricking of their spurs.

"Good," he said. "Then there are two of us." He lifted his blade, feeling a new surge of hope and hot vengefulness. "Let us fence while we think how we can best use ourselves."

They made the ceremonial gesture. Their blades rang together. They moved lightly, their flexing bodies pale in the red glare.

Stark saw how her eyes lighted and glowed. "Remember this is play," he said, and she laughed.

"I'll remember, Stark."

They circled, and the heads in the bright conical caps bobbed to watch them. There was much fluting talk and the smell of dry leaves was strong.

Ciaran said, "I think the outside lies that way. We could try cutting our way through."

They circled, and Stark's eyes rested between strokes on the stone tower.

"It's a long way to the outside," he said, "and doubtful if we could make it. Remember, they expect to die. They could smother us by sheer numbers." He parried a stroke and the blades clashed. "But if we took them by surprise, the tower is much closer. We might have a chance of reaching it."

"The tower? And what would be gained by that?"

"That is the heart of the city. If it dies, all this dies too." She parried him expertly. He was almost sorry that they would not truly fight. It would have been interesting. "I doubt," he said, "that they could stand the cold

for long."

"Well," said Ciaran, "we are not likely to live the night through in any case, so let us throw for the highest stakes."

Stark nodded. "Quick, now."

They turned from their fencing and sprang at the creatures that filled the entrance to the street down which Stark had come.

And they almost perished there.

The creatures were close-packed, and they were tall, and their arms were long. Even in dying they could reach and claw. They fluted and screamed and fluttered and Stark had a nightmare feeling that he and Ciaran were being pecked to death by a flock of ungainly birds. He swung his blade in a frenzy of disgust, literally cutting his way through, and glad of Ciaran's strong shoulder beside his. He saw the street clear before them and they ran with all their might, and behind them the creatures began to stream from around the square and after them. Stark listened to the unmistakable tone of their voices and said between gasps, "They're delighted. The game is going better than they hoped."

Now that he was trying to reach it, the tower that had seemed so close looked as far away as the moons. He tried to approach it obliquely, as much as he could without losing distance, so that perhaps they would not understand his purpose until it was too late, and apparently at first they did not. They played as they had before, letting the quarry go and then heading them, only now there were more than had hunted Stark, quite a lot more. He and Ciaran obediently allowed themselves to be driven until they were level with the tower. Then Stark said, "We go now."

They turned sharply, and the tower was directly ahead of them, set in a great wide circle beyond the end of the avenue.

They ran. And the creatures came striding on their long thin legs out of a side street, to bar the way.

Behind them, Stark heard others coming to close off their retreat. Ciaran heard too. She said, "I think the game has ended."

Stark grunted. "Break through them now—we won't have a second

chance."

If only their damned arms weren't so long. The spurs jabbed and clawed for his eyes. He swung the sword-blade high, around his head. This worked cruelly well, and Ciaran was using the same trick, alternately stooping low for the hamstring. They trampled over thin gold writhing bodies and through the line, but others were already pecking and pawing at their backs, and still others ran ahead to close them in again. They set their backs together and moved out across the open, keeping a vicious blur of steel between them and the probing spurs. They had stopped trying to kill. Their only interest now was in staying alive long enough to reach the tower.

"Look for a door," Stark said.

"I see one. This way..."

They fought their way to the wall and around it, and it was easier now because the creatures could only come at them from three sides. And there were fewer of the creatures able to fight. But now they knew what the humans were up to, and for several minutes there had been loud calls as though for help.

They reached the door, a high and narrow door of metal set deep in the stone. "See if you can open it," Stark said, and faced outward to hold the creatures off. Then he realized a surprising thing. They were drawing back. More and more of them drifted into the great circle, all that were left, he imagined, and suddenly a strange quiet was coming over them. They stood swaying gently, their bright streamers dabbled all with blood, and those who had come dragging after them the trophies of the chase now laid them down. Behind him, Ciaran panted and cursed at the door, and then she said, "It's open..."

It was a moment before Stark turned. A tall creature in stained flutterings of blue and green was walking among the crowd, his arms held high, calling out in a sort of chant. Apart from that there was no more sound nor movement in the circle. Stark listened. The whole bright city had gone silent.

He turned abruptly and went through the door into the tower.

"I'll stand guard," Ciaran said.

He shook his head. "No need. This is the end of the game."

In the dark outer rim of the city, Balin and twenty-three men picked their way with drawn blades along the nighted avenue, starting at their own footsteps, their bellies cold with fear, cursing the pride that would not quite let them go without at least an attempt at rescue, or failing that, revenge. Far ahead of them the colored lights glowed.

There had been sounds. Now it seemed that there were no more.

Balin whispered, "Stop..."

They stopped. The world ached with silence. Even in his fear, Balin thought he could sense a waiting, a gathering, a rushing toward some tremendous and final moment. Ahead of him the lights flickered and went down. There was a deep hollow groan, more felt than heard. High overhead there was one vivid flash and then the stars sprang out clearly in the sky.

Very quickly, it began to grow cold.

It was morning. They stood on the slope at the mouth of the pass, Stark and Ciaran dressed in borrowed clothing and wrapped in borrowed cloaks. Of eleven men and women the aliens had taken, only they two survived. Behind them, the city lay quiet under the sun, rimed white with frost.

"We would have done better," Balin said, "all of us— to forget Ban Cruach and his talisman, and hew our own wood as it came to hand."

"Myths are unchancy things to lean on," Stark said, and turned to Ciaran. Her hands were not bound this morning, and that was at Stark's insistence. "Now you know that there is no power beyond the Gates of Death, and now that you have fed your red wolves with plunder, will you take your pack and leave Kushat in peace?" She looked at him, with the cold wind blowing her hair. "I might do that—on one condition. Now that I cannot count on the talisman, I must look elsewhere for help. Ride beside me, Stark, to Narrissan, and we will guard each other's backs as we did last night. Or have you made some other promise?"

"No promise," Stark said. He remembered her eyes, glowing as the swords swung. A deep excitement stirred in him. "This time I'll ride with

you."

Thanis came forward, and he caught her quickly up and kissed her to silence the angry words before she could speak them. "I owe you my life, little one, you and your brother. I do this for you, and for your Kushat. Build a new city, and build it in the world, so that your people will never end like they did." He nodded toward the other city, dead and shining in the sun.

He set her down and took Balin's hand. "Let us go ahead. By the time you come, the tribesmen will be clear of Kushat." He held Balin's strong grip a moment longer. Then he turned and walked with Ciaran, back through the Gates of Death.