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The Secret of Sinharat by Leigh Brackett

I

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

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

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

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

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

He moved then, running toward the tor with a lightness and speed incredible in anything but an animal or a savage. He was of Earth stock,

built tall, and more massive than he looked by reason of his leanness. The desert wind was bitter cold, but he did not seem to notice it, though he wore only a ragged shirt of Venusian spider silk, open to the waist. His skin was almost as dark as his black hair, burned indelibly by years of exposure to some terrible sun. His eyes were startlingly light in color, reflecting back the pale glow of the moons.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He recognized the inevitable. He was used to inevitables—hunger, pain, loneliness, the emptiness of dreams. He had accepted a lot of them in his time. Yet he made no move to surrender. He looked out at the desert and

the night sky, and his eyes blazed, the desperate, strangely beautiful eyes of a creature very close to the roots of life, something less and more than man. His hands found a shard of rock and broke it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who calls me N'Chaka?"

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

Stark shrugged. "Of course."

He walked on to meet the rider, who had dismounted, leaving his beast behind. He was a slight, wiry man, this EPC officer, but there was about him the rawhide look of the planetary frontiers. Those planets, Earth's sister worlds, were not quite as forbidding as they had once seemed when peered at from millions of miles away, and they had their peoples, descendants of some parent human stock that long ago had seeded the whole System. But they were still cruel worlds and even as they had left their mark on Stark, they had left it on this man, on his grizzled hair and sun-blackened skin, in his hard good-humored face and keen dark eyes.

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

Stark nodded. "Sixteen years." The two men studied each other for a

moment, and then Stark said, "I thought you were still on Mercury, Ashton."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Remember who I am—Simon Ashton. Remember who came along when the miners in that valley on Mercury had a wild boy in a cage, and were going to finish him off like they had the tribe that raised him. Remember all the years after that, when I brought that boy up to be a civilized human being."

Stark laughed, not without a certain humor. "You should have left me in the cage. I was caught a little old for civilizing."

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

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

Ashton said deliberately, "I won't take you in, Eric, unless you make me." He went on then, rapidly, before Stark could answer. "You've got a twenty-year sentence hanging over you, for running guns to the Middle-Swamp tribes when they revolted against Terro-Venusian Metals, and a couple of similar jobs. All right. So I know why you did it, and I won't say I don't agree with you. But you put yourself outside the law, and

that's that. Now you're on your way to Valkis. You're headed into a mess that'll put you on Luna for life, the next time you're caught."

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

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

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

Ashton shook his head.

"This isn't a private war, Eric. It's something a lot bigger and nastier than that. The Martian Council of City-States and the Earth Commission are both in a cold sweat, and nobody can find out exactly what's going on. You know what the Low-Canal towns are—Valkis, Jekkara, Barrakesh. No law-abiding Martian, let alone an Earthman, can last five minutes in them. And the back-blocks are absolutely *verboden*. So all we get is rumors.

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

Stark gave a slight start, and Ashton smiled briefly.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I heard about that." Then he sobered. "You can figure that set-up for yourself, Eric. The barbarians are going to go out and fight some kind of a holy war, to suit the entirely unholy purposes of men like Delgaun and the others. Half a world is going to be raped, blood is going to run deep in the Drylands—and it will all be barbarian blood spilled for a lying promise, and the carrion crows of Valkis will get fat on it. Unless, somehow, we can stop it."

He paused, then said flatly, "I want you to go to Valkis, Eric—but as my agent. I won't put it on the grounds that you'd be doing civilization a service. You don't owe anything to civilization, Lord knows. But you might save a lot of your own kind of people from getting slaughtered, to say nothing of the border-state Martians who'll be the first to get Kynon's axe.

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

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

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

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

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

There was a silence, and then Stark held out his hand. "All right, Simon—but only for this one deal. After that, no promises."

"Fair enough." They shook hands.

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

Stark nodded. "On the Dryland Border."

"Good luck to you, Eric."

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

Stark watched them go. He filled his lungs with the cold air, and stretched. Then he roused the beast out of the sand. It had rested, and was

willing to carry him again as long as he did not press it. He set off again, across the desert.

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

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

II

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

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

For the streets where the torches flared were only a tiny part of Valkis. The life of the city had flowed downward from the cliff-tops, following the dropping level of the sea. Five cities, the oldest scarcely recognizable as a place of human habitation. Five harbors, the docks and quays still standing, half buried in the dust.

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

Stark picked his way slowly down the steep descent. There was something fascinating to him in the stone houses, roofless and silent in the night. The paving blocks still showed the rutting of wheels where carters

had driven to the marketplace, and princes had gone by in gilded chariots. The quays were scarred where ships had lain against them, rising and falling with the tides.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

jangling of bronze bangles and a great hissing and stamping in the dust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

room that served as his headquarters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that was only a quick passing thought in Stark's mind. It was on Luhar that his attention centered. Bitter memory and hatred had come to savage life within him as soon as he saw the Venusian.

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

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

Stark said nothing. He began to walk toward Luhar. Luhar said sharply, "There's no use in getting nasty, Stark. Past scores are past. We're on the same side now." The Earthman spoke, then, with a peculiar gentleness.

"We were on the same side once before. Against Terro-Venus Metals. Remember?"

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

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

He continued to walk toward Luhar.

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

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

Luhar nodded and sat down, smiling out of the corner of his mouth at Stark, who stood looking with narrowed eyes at Delgaun. He was still half blind with his anger against Luhar. His hands ached for the kill. But even so, he recognized the power in Delgaun.

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

He shrugged and joined the others at the table.

Walsh of Terra rose abruptly and began to prowl back and forth.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" he demanded.

Delgaun poured wine into a bronze goblet. "Don't expect me to know," he snapped. He shoved the flagon along the table toward Stark.

Stark helped himself. The wine was warm and sweet on his tongue. He drank slowly, sitting relaxed and patient, while the others smoked nervously or rose to pace up and down.

Stark wondered what, or who, they were waiting for. But he did not ask.

Time went by.

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

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

The Martian dawn, brilliant and clear, flooded the dead sea bottom with harsh light. Beyond the black line of the canal a caravan was coming toward Valkis through the blowing dust.

It was no ordinary caravan. Warriors rode before and behind, their spearheads blazing in the sunrise. Jewelled trappings on the beasts, a litter with curtains of crimson silk, barbaric splendor. Clear and thin on the air came the wild music of pipes and the deep-throated throbbing of drums.

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

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

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

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

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

III

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

The advance guard reached the slave block. Then, with deafening abruptness, the drummers crossed their sticks and the pipers ceased, and there was utter silence in the square.

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

A man leaped from the back of his mount to the block standing at its outer edge where all could see, his hands flung up.

"I greet you, my brothers!"

And the cheering went on.

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

Kynon's eyes were a bright, compelling blue, and his face was the face of a young eagle. His voice had deep music in it—the kind of voice that can sway crowds to madness. Stark looked from him to the rapt faces of the people—even the Valkisians had caught the mood—and thought that Kynon was the most dangerous man he had ever seen. This tawny-haired barbarian in his kilt of bronze-bossed leather was already half a god.

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

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

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

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

Stark settled down to watch. The litter with the crimson curtains was now beside the block. A girl, a Valkisian, stood beside it, looking up. It seemed to Stark that her green eyes rested on Kynon with a smouldering anger. He glanced away from the serving girl, and saw that the curtains were partly open. A woman lay on the cushions within. He could not see much of her, except that her hair was like dark flame and she was smiling, looking at the old man and the naked boy. Then her glance, very dark in the shadows of the litter, shifted away and Stark followed it and saw Delgaun. Every muscle of Delgaun's body was drawn taut, and he seemed unable to look away from the woman in the litter.

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

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

Kynon was speaking again.

"There are still those who doubt me, I say! Those who scoffed when I said that I possessed the ancient secret of the Ramas of long ago—the secret by which one man's mind may be transferred into another's body. But none of you after today will doubt that I hold that secret!

"I, myself, am not a Rama." He glanced down along his powerful frame, half-consciously flexing his muscles, and laughed. "Why should I be a Rama? I have no need, as yet, for the Sending-on of Minds!" Answering laughter, half ribald, from the crowd. "No," said Kynon. "I am not a Rama. I am a man like you. Like you, I have no wish to grow old, and in the end, to die."

He swung abruptly to the old man.

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

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

"And you shall be!" The strength of a god rang in Kynon's voice. He turned again to the crowd and cried out, "For years I suffered in the desert alone, searching for the lost secret of the Ramas. And I found it, my brothers! I alone—in these two hands I hold it, and with it I shall begin a new era for our Dryland races!

"There will be fighting, yes. There will be bloodshed. But when that is over and the men of Kesh and Shun are free from their ancient bondage of thirst and the men of the Low-Canals have regained their own—then I shall give new life, unending life, to all who have followed me. The aged and lamed and wounded can choose new bodies from among the captives. There will be no more age, no more sickness, no more death!"

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

"Lest anyone still doubt my promise," said Kynon, "watch. Watch—and I will show you!"

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

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

The silken wrappings fluttered loose, fell away. And in Kynon's hands gleamed two crystal crowns and a shining rod. He held them high, the sunlight glancing in cold fire from the crystal.

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

The crowd drew breath then, one long rasping *Ah!*

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

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

"Kneel," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

Kynon lowered the rod. In a ringing voice he cried, "Arise, grandfather!"

The boy stirred. Slowly, very slowly, he rose to his feet. Holding out his hands, he stared at them, and then touched his thighs, and his flat belly, and the deep curve of his chest. Up the firm young throat the wondering fingers went, to the smooth cheeks, to the thick fair hair above the crown. A cry broke from him.

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

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

Eric John Stark found that he himself was trembling slightly. He glanced at Delgaun and the outlanders. The Valkisian wore a look of intense satisfaction under his mask of awe. The others were almost as rapt

and open-mouthed as the crowd.

Stark turned his head slightly and looked down at the litter. One white hand was already drawing the curtains, so that the scarlet silk appeared to shake with silent laughter. The serving girl beside it had not moved. She looked up at Kynon, and there was nothing in her eyes but hate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have no secret," said Stark deliberately.

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

Stark's voice sounded loud in the stillness.

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

IV

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

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

Delgaun told him.

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

"Certainly. First of all, the Earth boy was a prisoner. He was told what he had to do to save his neck, and then was carefully coached in his part. Second, the crystal rod and the crowns are a fake. You used a simple Purcell unit in the rod to produce an electronic brush discharge. That made the blue light. Third, you gave the old man poison, probably by means of a sharp point on the crown. I saw him wince when you put it on him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Curious, aren't you? Well, I'll let you in on a secret." Kynon lapsed abruptly into perfectly good colloquial English. "I was on Terra, learning about things like the Purcell electronic discharge." Reaching over, he poured wine for Stark and held it out to him. "Now you know. Now we all know. So let's wash the dust out of our throats and get down to business."

Stark said, "No."

Kynon looked at him. "What now?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My people have a just cause for war. They go hungry and thirsty, while the City-States along the Dryland border hog all the water sources and

grow fat. Do you know what it means to watch your children die crying for water on a long march, to come at last to the oasis and find the well sanded in by a storm, to go on again, trying to save your people and your herd? Well, I do! I was born and bred in the Drylands, and many a time I've cursed the border states with a tongue like a dry stick.

"Stark, you should know the workings of the barbarian mind as well as I do. The men of Kesh and Shun are traditional enemies. Raiding and thieving, open warfare over water and grass. I had to give them a rallying point—faith strong enough to unite them. Resurrecting the old Rama legend was the only hope I had. And it has worked. The tribes are one people now. They can go on and take what belongs to them—the right to live. I'm not really so far out in my promise, at that. Now do you understand?"

Stark studied him, with his cold cat-eyes. "Where do the men of Valkis come in—the men of Jekkara and Barrakesh? Where do *we* come in, the hired bravos?"

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

"We're going to create an empire," he said softly. "The City-States are disorganized, too starved or too fat to fight. And Earth is taking us over. Before long, Mars would be hardly more than another Luna. We're going to build a power out of dust and blood—and there will be loot in plenty to go round."

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

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

The Earthman answered slowly, "I'll go along with you—as long as no

harm comes to the tribes."

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

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

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

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

They sat. The wine went round, and the vultures of Valkis drank to each other's luck and loot, and Stark learned that the woman's name was Berild. Kynon was happy. He had made his point with the people, and he was celebrating. But Stark noticed that though his tongue grew thick, it did not loosen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was searching for Tilca. When he was old enough, he would mate with her. He wanted to hunt with her now, for she was fleet and as keen as he at scenting out the great lizards. He heard her voice calling his name. There was terror in it, and N'Chaka began to run. He saw her, crouched between two huge boulders, her light fur stained with blood.

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

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

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

The man cringed away from him. "Delgaun sent me —he wants you, in the council room." Then he turned and fled.

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

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

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

"I do."

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

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

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

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

He crossed a square, heading away from the palace. A twisting lane swallowed him up. And quite suddenly, someone took his arm and said rapidly, "Smile at me, and then turn aside into the alley."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So?

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

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

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

Her slightly tilted green eyes looked scornfully into his.

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

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

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

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

Stark said, "No."

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

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stark realized now what secret vice Kala sold here.

Shanga—the going-back—the radiation that caused temporary artificial atavism and let men wallow for a time in beasthood. It was supposed to have been stamped out, years ago. But it still persisted, in places like this outside the law.

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

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

He turned. Kala might have been beautiful once, a thousand years ago as you reckon. She wore still the sweet chiming bells in her hair, and Stark thought of Fianna. The woman's ravaged face turned him sick. It was like the reedy, piping music, woven out of the very heart of evil. Yet her eyes were shrewd, and he knew that she had not missed his searching look around the room, nor his interest in Freka. There was a note of warning in her voice.

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

He said, "Bring me wine."

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

"Perhaps later. Now, I wish wine."

She went away, clapping her hands for a slatternly wench who came between the sprawled figures with an earthen mug. Stark sat down beside a table, where his back was to the wall and he could see both the door and the whole room. Kala had returned to her own heap of furs by the door, but her basilisk eyes were alert.

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

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

But he would have needed no warning about that—and Delgaun himself had said there would be trouble.

No. There was something more.

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

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

Stark began to brood on the emptiness of that room.

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

Kala said, "That room is taken."

"But I see no one!"

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

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

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

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

In a moment it opened and the Venusian came out, drawing his gun as

he did so.

Stark jumped him.

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

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

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

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

The Venusian's breath left him with a whistling grunt. His fingers relaxed. Stark struck his hands away. He rose and bent over Luhar and picked him up, gripping him cruelly so that he turned white with the pain, and raised him high and flung him bodily into the growling, beast-faced men who were shambling toward him.

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

He faced the ring of bestial, Shanga-sodden men who walled him off from what he had been sent to do. There was a reddish tinge to his vision,

partly blood, partly sheer rage. He could see Freka standing erect in the corner, his head weaving from side to side brutishly.

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

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

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

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

Out of the corner of his eyes, Stark saw Luhar. He had risen and crept around the edge of the fight. He was behind Stark now, and there was a knife in his hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Delgaun was in the council room, and Berild was still with him. It seemed that they had been waiting, over their wine and their private talk. Delgaun rose to his feet as Stark came in, so sharply that his goblet fell and spilled a red pool of wine at his feet.

Stark let the Shunni drop to the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And she smiled.

A dark flush crept over Delgaun's face. In a voice tight with fury, he said, "Perhaps you've forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you

in this barbarian, this creature of an hour!"

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

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

VI

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

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

Luhar rode ahead with Kynon. He had come dragging into the square at the mounting, his face battered and swollen, an ugly look in his eyes. Kynon gave one quick look from him to Stark, who had his own scars, and said harshly,

"Delgaun tells me there's a blood feud between you two, I want no more of it, understand? After you're paid off you can kill each other and welcome, but not until then. Is that clear?"

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

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

The big barbarian captain sat rigidly erect in his saddle, but Stark had

seen his face in the torchlight, sick and sweating, with the brute look still clouding his eyes. There was a purple mark on his temple, but Stark was quite sure that Berild had spoken the truth—Freka would not forgive him either the indignity or the hangover of his unfinished wallow under the lamps of Shanga.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I thought Berild was Kynon's woman."

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

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

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

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

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

The Lady Berild lay among her furs and cushions, and even then there was no indolence about her. She was relaxed as a cat is, perfectly at ease and yet vibrant with life. In the shadows of the litter her skin showed silver-white and her loosened hair was a sweet darkness.

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

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

"Afraid?"

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

She laughed, half scornfully. "Kynon's ambitions leave no room for me."

We have an agreement, because a king must have a queen—and he finds my counsel useful. You see, I am ambitious too! Apart from that, there is nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He spurred away and left her without a backward look, and the skin of his back tingled with the expectancy of a flying knife. But the only thing that followed him was an echo of disturbing laughter down the wind.

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

"This is the country you will lead your men over. Learn it." He was

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

Lunar said, "Sinharat?"

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

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

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

He laughed, very softly, and said no more. Stark could believe that what Berild said of him was true. There was a flame of ambition in Kynon that would let nothing stand in its way. He measured the size and the strength of the tall barbarian, the eagle look of his face and the iron that lay beneath his joviality. Then Stark, too, stared off toward the Border and wondered if he would ever see Tarak or hear Simon Ashton's voice again.

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

Stark did not speak again to Berild, nor did she send for him. Fianna would pass him in the camp, and smile sidelong, and go on. For her sake, he did not stop her.

Neither Luhar nor Freka came near him. They avoided him pointedly, except when Kynon called them all together to discuss some point of strategy. But the two seemed to have become friends, and drank together from the same bottle of wine.

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

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

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

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

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

Kynon looked at him curiously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

One hour.

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

Two hours.

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

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

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

Stark spurred toward the women, who were only a few feet away but already hidden by the veil of mingled dust and sand.

Someone blundered into him in the murk. Long hair whipped across his face and he reached out, crying "Fianna! Fianna!" A woman's hand caught his, and a voice answered, but he could not hear the words.

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

Luhar and Freka.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no direction, no sight of anything, in that howling inferno. The caravan seemed to have been scattered like a drift of autumn leaves.

Already, in the few brief moments he had stood still, Stark's legs were buried to the knees in a substratum of sand that rolled like water. He pulled himself free and started on, going nowhere, remembering Kynon's words.

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

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

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

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

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

They staggered on, and Berild did not whimper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How far?"

"Seven, eight days, afoot."

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

He rose and took up the skin, and Berild came beside him without a word. Her red hair hung loose over her shoulders. The rags of her silken robe had been torn away by the wind, leaving her only the loose skirt of the desert women, and her belt and collar of jewels.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It seemed as though some primal glacier must have met its death here in the dim dawn of Mars, hollowing out its own grave. The body of the glacier had melted away, but its bones were left. Bones of basalt, of granite and marble and porphyry, of every conceivable shape and color and size, picked up by the ice as it marched southward from the pole and dropped here as a cairn to mark its passing.

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

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

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

Stark asked, "Has it ever been crossed?"

"Once, that I know of. But they were a war party, mounted and well supplied."

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

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

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

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

VIII

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

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

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

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

But nothing lived in the Belly of Stones. Nothing, but the two who crept

and staggered across it under the low moons.

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

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

And she clawed the sand and the bitter rocks, dragging herself onward. It was uncanny, the madness that she had for life.

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

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

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

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

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

But she refused to go. "Too far... die... without water..."

He knew that she was right, but still he was not ready to give up.

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

curved out into the desert.

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

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

She croaked, "Water!" and pointed.

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

She said again, "Too far. Two—three days, without water." She pointed. "Very old well—a chance—"

Stark hesitated, standing with his head swaying drunkenly. He could not think very well. But he thought that the chances were a hundred to one that this was all only a hallucination born of Berild's thirst-madness.

Yet they had very little to lose by taking the gamble. He knew now that they were not going to reach Sinharat. He nodded slowly, and went with her toward the curve of rock.

The three miles might have been three hundred. Each time either of them fell, they lay now for a longer time before struggling up again. Each time, Stark thought that it was the end for the woman. But every time, Berild finally got up and staggered forward again, and he went with her, forcing his body painfully forward on this last throw of the dice.

The sun was setting by the time they came up under the ragged cliffs, onto a little crest. The long, streaming light showed everything, pitilessly.

There was no well. There was a carved pillar, half buried on one side, and the mounded shape of an incalculably ancient ruin of which only the foundations and a few broken columns were left. That was all.

Berild pitched forward and lay still. Stark stood and stared, knowing that this was the end of everything, but unable to think, unable even to remember. He sagged down on his knees beside the woman, and the darkness slid over his mind.

He awoke later, and it was night, and cold. He was vaguely surprised to awaken at all, and he lay for some moments before he tried to raise his head. The two little moons cast a shifting brilliance. He looked for Berild beside him.

She was gone.

Stark stared at the place in the sand where she had lain, and then after a moment he struggled up to his feet. He looked around, and saw Berild.

She was down there below the little crest on which he was. He saw her quite clearly in the moonlight, standing beside the half-buried pillar at the edge of the shapeless ruins. She leaned on the pillar, and her head hung downward as though she could not raise it. He wondered what last well-spring of strength had enabled her to awake and make her way down there.

As Stark watched, he saw Berild's head come up. She looked this way and that through the flattened ruins, turning her head very slowly. After a little while, Stark got an uncanny feeling that she was trying to visualize the place as it had been, even though the walls must have been dust a thousand years ago.

Berild moved. She went inward into the ruin, slowly, carefully, and then she put out her hand as though she was touching the long-vanished wall, as though she was feeling along it for a doorway that had not been there for ages. She turned right after so many steps, and again moved carefully in a straight line, and then turned again to her left.

It almost seemed to Stark as though she could see the vanished walls, and was following them. He watched her, a white shape moving in the moonlight, stopping now and then to gather a little strength, but carefully, surely, threading through the desolation of the ancient flattened ruin.

Finally she halted, in a broad flat place that might once have been a central courtyard. There she fell on her knees and began to dig weakly.

The vagueness suddenly left Stark's brain, and his body screamed with its need. There was only one thing Berild would dig for with dying strength. He lurched his way down the little slope, and got down beside her.

"Well," she gasped. "Dig..."

They scabbled like a pair of dogs in the yielding sand. Stark's nails slipped across something hard, and the moonlight struck a metallic glint from something beneath the dust. Within a few minutes they had bared a golden cover six feet across, very massive and wonderfully carved with the symbols of some lost god of the sea.

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

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

Next night, when the low moons roved again over the desert, they sat by the well, drowsy with an animal sense of rest and repletion. Stark looked at the woman, and said, "Who are you, Berild?"

"But you know that. I am a Shunni woman, and I am to be Kynon's queen."

"Are you, Berild? I think you are a witch. Only a witch could find a well hidden for ages, here in a place where you have never been."

She became very still. But when she answered, it was with a laugh.

"No witchcraft, wild man. I told you that a war-party once crossed the Belly of Stones. They followed old tradition, and finally found the well. My father was of that party."

It could be, Stark thought. The secret of a well was a treasure beyond price in these Drylands, to be handed down from father to child.

"I did not know we were near the place," she added, "until I saw the landmark, the fin of rock that juts from the great ridge. But I feared we would die before we reached it."

Yes, thought Stark, it could very well be as she said.

But why did she walk through this place as though she knew and saw

the walls as they were a thousand years ago? She does not know that I watched her, moving familiarly through this ancient ruin as one who lived here when it was whole would move.

"What are you dreaming of, wild man? The moon is in your eyes."

"I don't know," said Stark.

Dreams, delusions, the unearthly suspicions that had crossed his mind? It could be that he had heard too much talk of old Martian legends, in this deathly wilderness where the dark memory of the Ramas haunted the minds of men.

"Forget your dreams, wild man. That which is real is better."

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

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

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

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

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

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

IX

STARK SAW IT rising against the morning sky—a city of marble, high

on an island of coral laid bare by the vanishing of the sea. The coral island stood up tall in the hard clear sunlight, its naked cliffs beautifully striated with deep rose and white and delicate pink. And from this lovely pedestal there rose walls and towers so perfectly built from many-shaded marble and so softly sculptured by time that it was difficult to tell where the work of men began and ended. Sinharat, the Ever-living...

Yet it had died. As he came closer to it, plodding slowly through the sand with Berild, he saw that the place was now no more than a beautiful corpse, many of the lovely towers broken, many of the palaces roofless and open to the sky. The only signs of life were outside and below the city, on the dry lagoon that surrounded it. Here were beasts and tents and men, a huddle of them that looked small and unimportant under the loom of the dead city.

"The caravan," said Berild. "Kynon... and the others... are here."

"Why are they camped below the city instead of in it?" asked Stark.

She gave him a mocking sidelong glance. "This was the old city of the Ramas, and its name still has power. The people of the Drylands don't like to enter it. When the hordes gather here, you will see. They will camp outside."

"For fear of the Ramas? But the Ramas are gone, long ago."

"Of course—but old fears die slowly." Berild laughed. "Kynon has no such superstitions. He will be up there in the city."

As they plodded nearer, they were seen. Riders started to race out toward them from the encampment, and figures hurried between the skin tents. Soon they were near enough to hear a distant crying of excited voices.

Stark walked stolidly on, his face set straight ahead. It seemed to him that the shimmering haze around them had darkened, a little. A vein in his temple had begun to throb.

The racing Shunni riders reached them, voices shouted to them. Berild answered, but Stark said nothing. He walked on, and his eyes were on the city.

Berild plucked his arm, and spoke his name urgently, repeating it so that he would listen.

"Stark! I know what is in your mind, but it is not the way. You must wait..."

He plodded on and did not answer, or look at her. Now they were near enough the camp that tribesmen were all around them, calling Berild's name in a rising uproar of excitement, while others of them ran toward the great stairway, carved in the coral, that led up into Sinharat.

The camp of the caravan was below that stairway, and not far from the encampment was a big arched opening in the coral cliff, a natural cavern. Men came from it with heavy water-skins, so that it was evident that there was a well in the cavern. But Stark saw only the great stairway that led upward, and as he walked on toward it, the tribesmen around them stopped the excited shouting. They fell silent, watching Stark's face, and drew away from him as he set foot upon the lowest step of the stair.

"You must *listen!*" Berild, somewhere in the darkening haze beside him, was clinging to his arm, speaking almost in his ear. "Kynon will kill you if you do this thing. I know him, Stark."

But he was not Stark any more, he was N'Chaka. The enemies of N'Chaka had dealt him a cruel death, but it had passed him by, he had not died and now it was his turn. They were up there, on the cliffs where even the great lizards did not go, and they thought they were safe from him but he would climb, and climb, and slay...

He climbed, and the darkness of his vision deepened, and then of a sudden it cleared away and he stood in the hard clear sunlight in a great square of the city Sinharat.

All around the square rose the sculptured fronts of buildings, dazzling in the morning light. On them marched files of carven figures in the dress of ancient Mars, and the sun struck glints from jewelled eyes, and harshened the outlines of the faces so that it seemed that all the pride and glory and cruelty of the Ramas of old still held sway here.

But Stark had eyes only for the living, for the men who were coming across the square. Kynon, a gun in his hand, was walking out from the biggest palace, and ahead of him came Luhar.

Luhar.

"Stark, stop!" Kynon's voice rang.

Stark did not even look at him. He had eyes only for Luhar, who stood there fresh from sleep, his pale hair tumbled, his eyes still drowsy but now, sharply, awakening.

"I will shoot you unless you stop, Stark!" warned Kynon.

From beside him, Stark vaguely heard Berild's cry. "But for him, I'd be dead in the desert, Kynon!"

Kynon made a decisive gesture. "If he saved you, I will thank him. But he must not touch Luhar! Come here, Berild!"

Voices. And what were voices to N'Chaka when the time for slaying, for vengeance, had come?

Berild had left him, had hurried forward to run past Luhar in the direction of Kynon, who stood, grim with the levelled gun. And still Stark moved on.

He saw the first sharp alarm in Luhar's face now replaced by a triumphant, taunting smile. The man whom Luhar had killed had come back to life, but he was going to be killed a second time, here and now, and all was well. Luhar's smile deepened.

Berild, running past Luhar, seemed to stumble and pitch against him, and then recovered herself.

Luhar's smile of triumph suddenly blanked out. In his face was only an incredulous astonishment. He stood, and looked down at the slash in his tunic from which his heart's blood was spurting, and then he crashed down to the flagging.

Stark stopped, then. He did not understand. But Kynon did and his voice came in a wrathful shout.

"Berild!"

Berild calmly threw away the little knife in her hand. Its thin blade glittered redly in the sun, and it rattled and tinkled on the stone paving.

Her back was to Stark and he could not see her face, but he could hear the bitter passion that throbbed in her voice as she said to Kynon, "He was nearly my death. Do you understand that? He would have *ended* me!" She spoke the word as though she was uttering the most blackly blasphemous thing in the world. "What now, Kynon? Will you shoot *me*?"

There was a silence. N'Chaka was gone, and Eric John Stark stood looking down at the dead Venusian. He was not thinking of Luhar now. He was thinking that Berild must have had that little knife hidden in the waistband of her skirt all this time, and he was wondering how close he had come to getting it in his back.

And why, in the moment of her passion, had she spoken that odd word, accusing Luhar of nearly "ending" her?

Stark went on, toward Kynon. He saw the rage in Kynon's face and he thought that he was going to shoot, after all. There was nothing of the jovial barbarian and hail-fellow about Kynon now. He looked as friendly as a frustrated tiger.

"Damn you, Berild, I needed that man!" he said.

Berild's eyes blazed. "Why don't you get down beside him and cry and cover your head? In his desire to murder Stark, he did not scruple to leave me to die also. Am I to forgive that?"

Kynon looked as though he was tempted to strike her. But Stark spoke, and asked, "Where is Freka?"

Kynon turned on him, and his face now was dark and dangerous. "Listen, Stark, you'd be dead on the stones right now instead of Luhar, if Berild hadn't such a passion for revenge. You're alive, you're lucky. Don't push it."

Stark merely waited. Kynon went on, in a voice that cut as coldly as a wind from the pole.

"Freka is out with others, raising the Dryland fighting-men who will gather here. Freka will return. When he returns, I'll kill the first of you two who makes a move at the other. Do you hear?"

Stark said, "I hear."

Kynon's piercing gaze hung on him, but apparently he decided not to push it either. He growled, "Hell take such allies! Old hatred, old feuds, always at each other's throats."

"I thought you wanted tough fighters," said Stark. "If you wanted dear hearts and loving friendships, you sent for the wrong men."

"I'm beginning to think I did," said Kynon, scowling. "Well, it's done for now. But it isn't done for good. Delgaun was close with Luhar and he'll want blood for this when he finds out about it. He and his cursed Low-Canallers have been difficult enough to handle, as it is."

He turned angrily and started back toward the building from which he had come. Berild gave Stark an unfathomable look as they followed.

There came a sound that made the hair bristle a little on Stark's neck. It was a murmuring seeming to come from all the silent, dead white city around them, a sound not human in tone but rising and falling like distant voices. The morning breeze had begun to blow and the vague whispering seemed brought by it. Stark did not like it at all.

They went with Kynon into a room of polished marble, with faded frescoes of the same figures in ancient dress that marched in the carvings outside. The frescoes were much more faded in some places than in others, so that only here and there did a shadowy face leap suddenly into being, prideful and mocking with smiling lips, or a procession pass solemnly toward some obliterated worship.

Kynon had here a folding wooden desk, with papers scattered on it, which looked utterly incongruous in this place.

"I sent riders back," Kynon said abruptly, "to search for you. They didn't find you. You were nowhere near Sinharat. And now you pop up out of nowhere."

Berild said, "Your riders wouldn't have found us. We came across the Belly of Stones."

"With one skin of water? It's impossible!"

Berild nodded. "But we had three skins, that were on the packbeast that Stark caught. They were our life."

So Berild had her secrets from Kynon, and one of them was the hidden well? Stark was not surprised. She was the kind of woman who would have many secrets.

But I have my secrets too, Berild. And I will not tell even you how I saw you walking in the moonlight with too great a knowledge of dead ages.

"It was not," Berild was saying to Kynon, "exactly a pleasure journey. I want to rest. Was Fianna saved?"

Kynon came out of some inner abstraction to answer, with a nod, "Yes, she and most of your things."

Berild left. Kynon's eyes followed her, and when she had gone he looked at Stark.

"Even with water, only a wild man could have done it," he said. "But again I warn you—curb your wildness, Stark. Especially when Delgaun comes."

Stark said, "Drylanders and Low-Canallers and outland mercenaries—can you keep them from each other's throats?"

"By all the gods, I'll do it if I have to tear throats out myself!" Kynon swore viciously. "We can grab a world and only one thing could prevent it—the old feuds that have brought so many brave plans to wreck, in the past. They'll not wreck *my* plans!"

They would if he could encompass it, Stark thought. He had known from the time that Ashton had given him his mission of stopping this thing, that the only possible leverage he would have was the ancient quarrels of Mars, that his only chance would be to turn these old enemies against each other. How he would do this, he did not know.

He found that he was swaying, and Kynon saw it and exclaimed, "Go get some rest before you drop here. I'll say this, that you may be a wild man but you are indeed a man, to have come the way you did."

He stepped closer and added flatly, "And I'll tell you also, that I don't quite like men who are as tough or almost as tough as I am. Get out."

Stark went the way he pointed, into a broad and shadowy hallway. The first room he looked into had a sleeping-pad in the corner. He stumbled to it and fell, rather than lay down.

But even as he plunged into sleep, he heard the faint echoing whisper from outside, the uncanny murmurs, rising now into a strange, pulsating singing of sound that seemed to moan through the whole dead city like a dirge.

X

STARK AWOKE to find the room in semi-dusk, a narrow shaft of red sunset light striking in from a high loophole window. He sensed that a presence had awakened him and then he saw Fianna, sitting on a carved stone bench across the room. She was looking at him, her eyes serious and dark.

"You growled, before you awoke," she said. "Like a great beast."

"Perhaps that is what I am," he said.

"Perhaps it is," Fianna said, and nodded. "But if so, I will tell you this, beast: You have come into a trap."

He got to his feet, every nerve waking to alertness. He went and stood looking down at her.

"What do you mean, little one?"

"Don't call me 'Little one,' " she flashed. "It is not I who am foolish and young—it is you. If you were not, you would not be in Sinharat."

"But you are here also, Fianna."

She sighed. "I know. It is not a place where I would wish to be. But I serve the Lady Berild, and must go where she takes me."

He looked keenly down at her for a moment. "You serve her. Yet you

hate her."

She hesitated. "I don't hate her. Sometimes, for all her wickednesses, I envy her—she lives so passionately and fully. But I fear her—I fear what she and Kynon may do to my people."

Eric John Stark feared that too but he did not say so. Instead, he said, "Being a beast, I'm concerned for my hide. You spoke of a trap."

"It is this," said Fianna. "You are valuable to Kynon, to train his hordes, when they gather, in outland fighting-skills. But Delgaun and his support are even more valuable to Kynon. If Delgaun asks your death for Luhar's..."

She did not finish, and Stark finished for her. "Why, then Kynon will very likely regretfully sacrifice one guerrilla fighter, to keep the Low-Canallers happy. Thanks for the warning. But this was already in my mind."

Fianna said hopefully, "You could slip away before Delgaun comes. If you stole a mount and took water, you could escape."

No, thought Stark. It is the sensible thing to do, if I want to save my skin, but Simon Ashton will be waiting in Tarak and I can't go to him and say that I've quit the whole thing, it's just too dangerous.

Besides, he thought, there's something here that I can't understand and that I must find out. Something...

Fianna, watching his face, said suddenly, "You're going to stay. But don't give me the lying reasons you're now thinking up. You stay because of Berild."

Stark smiled. "All women think that men do nothing except for a woman."

"And all men deny it when it is true," she said. "Tell me, were you and Berild lovers in the desert?"

"Jealous, Fianna?"

He expected her to sputter resentment at that, but she did not. Instead an enigmatic, almost pitying look came into her eyes, and she said softly,

"No, not jealous, Eric John Stark. But saddened."

She rose suddenly to her feet and said, formally, "I am sent to bring you to the Lady Berild."

Stark's eyes narrowed slightly. "With Kynon right here? Will he like that?"

Fianna smiled mirthlessly. "That's a clever, cautious beast, to think of that. But Kynon is down in the camp below the city. And the Lady Berild does not like this place, and lives elsewhere. I will take you."

He went out with her into the great square. There was no one in it at all, and its sculptured walls and towers rose into the flaring red sunset, wrapped in a silence that was oppressive. As they walked, their footfalls sounded loud upon the ancient flagstones, and it seemed to Stark that all the stones of dead Sinharat that loomed around them were listening and watching.

The evening wind sprang up and touched his face. Suddenly, he stopped. He had heard a sound that began as an inaudible vibration and rose stealthily into his hearing. A whispering, a vast, vague murmuring that came from everywhere and nowhere, so that it seemed that Sinharat was not only listening and watching, but was now speaking also.

Of a sudden, the whispering swelled up into musical voices. Organ-voices, that seemed to come from the very coral on which the city stood. Flute-voices, from the tall towers that caught the last red light. Shrill, distant voices as of the desert pipes, raging from the carven cornices of buildings far across the city.

Stark caught Fianna's arm. "What is it?"

"The voices of the Ramas."

He said roughly, "Make sense."

She shrugged. "So all Drylanders believe. That is why they hate to come here. But others have said that it is only the wind that sings in the hollow coral."

Stark understood. The massive coral pedestal on which the city stood

was indeed a vast honeycomb of tiny air-passages, and the wind forcing up through them could create this eerie effect.

"No wonder your barbarians don't like it," he muttered. "I'm a barbarian. I don't like it."

They went through streets that ran like topless tunnels between the walls and the towers that reached impossibly thin and tall into the evening sky. Some of them had lost their upper stories, and some had fallen entirely, but in the main they were still beautiful, the colors of the marble still lovely. And as the wind changed, the singing voices of Sinharat changed with it. Sometimes those voices were soft and gentle, murmuring about everlasting youth and its pleasures. And then they became strong and fierce with pride, crying *You die, but I do not!* Sometimes they swelled up, mad, laughing and hateful. But always their song was subtly evil.

In the outside world, even in Valkis, the Ramas had been only a legend, a shadowy tradition that a clever barbarian was using to give glamor to his leadership. But here in Sinharat, the Ramas seemed very real, and he began to understand why all this world in the long ago had feared them, and hated them, and envied them.

Fianna led him toward the western battlement of the high city, a point a little distance away from the great stair. She took him into a building that loomed in the gathering darkness like a white dream-castle, and along a hallway where flaring torches in sockets threw a shaking light over the caravan dancing-girls that seemed in that illumination to be moving along the walls. She opened a door and stepped aside for Stark to enter.

The room was low and long, and the soft glow that lighted it came from lamps with shades of alabaster as thin as paper. Berild came toward him, but not the Berild of the desert. She wore a jewelled girdle, and a wide collar of green jewels above her breasts, and a white cloak hanging from her shoulders. "I hate that gloomy ruin where Kynon holds his councils," she said. "This is better. Do you think it was the apartment of a queen?"

"It is now," said Stark.

Her eyes softened. He took her by the shoulders, and her mocking smile flashed and she said, "But if I am a queen, I am not for you, wild man."

Then, with a startling abruptness, the smile left her face and she put his

hands away. "There is no time for this," she said. "I sent for you to speak of danger. You may not live out this night."

"If you wanted to take my mind off you," said Stark, "that statement is just the thing to do it."

His grim humor awakened no answer in her sober face. She took his hand and led him to an open window.

This westward face of the building rose sheer from the edge of the coral cliff. Out beyond the window stretched the vastness of the deepening Martian night, with no moons yet up but a great vault of stars tenting the desert. A little to the left, down at the base of the cliff, were the torches of the camp, winking and shaking in the wind.

Up from beneath them came the murmurous whistling, piping voices of the wind in the hollow coral. But also there came the sounds of the camp, of squealing beasts, of a voice bawling an order, of picket-pins being driven deeper.

"Kynon is there," said Berild. "He waits to welcome Delgaun and the others from Valkis, who arrive tonight."

The skin between Stark's shoulders tightened slightly. The crisis had come sooner than he expected.

He shrugged. "Well, then, Delgaun is coming. I wasn't afraid of him in Valkis, and I don't fear him here."

Berild looked at him steadily. "Fear him," she said. "I know Delgaun."

Their faces were only inches apart and there was something in hers that he had glimpsed there once before.

"How can you know him so well?" he asked. "You're a Shunni woman, and he is a Valkis."

"Do you think Kynon hasn't been plotting with Delgaun for months?" she demanded impatiently. "Do you think I can watch a man all those times and not know whether he is dangerous?"

"Your concern for me is moving, Berild," said Stark. "That is—if it's

sincere."

He half-expected her to flare out at him for that, but she did not. She looked at him levelly, and said, "You're strong. And it may be that I shall need a strong man at my side."

"To protect you? But you have Kynon!"

Berild said impatiently, "I need no one to *protect* me. As for Kynon, I come always second with him, and his ambitions first. He would put me aside without a thought, if it helped to realize his plans of conquest."

"And you don't intend to be put aside," said Stark.

Her eyes flashed. "I do not."

"So, the wild man may be useful," said Stark. "I'll say this for you, Berild—you have a certain honesty that I admire."

She smiled wickedly. "It's only the least of my attractions."

Stark thought for a moment. "When Delgaun arrives, will the tribesmen down there come up into Sinharat with him and Kynon?"

Berild nodded. "Yes, for this night Kynon is to raise his standard. For that, they'll come—even though they have a superstitious fear of this place."

He looked at her curiously, and said, "You talk of tribesmen's superstitions—yet you yourself are a woman of the Shunni."

"Yes. But I do not believe what they believe. Kynon taught me better—he had education, in outland places, and I learned from him."

"You didn't learn ambition from him," said Stark.

"No," she said. "I'm tired of being just another woman. I too would like to hold a world between my hands."

Looking at her, it came to Stark that Ashton might have more to fear than he knew, that this woman might be as great a threat to the peace of Mars as Kynon and Delgaun.

Of a sudden, the cold night wind brought through the open window a sound of excited voices from the encampment underneath the cliff.

Stark and Berild went to the window. Far out in the darkness of the desert there were little points of ruddy light that moved in a long line toward Sinharat.

Drums suddenly boomed hoarsely down in the camp below, drowning with their clamor the piping of the wind in the coral. Torches sprang to light between the tents, and the drums grew louder.

"Delgaun has come," said Berild.

"And I must go," said Stark.

He turned and went out of the room. In the corridor of the carven dancing-girls, he came face to face with Fianna.

"You were listening," he said.

She did not deny it. "I hate to see foolish beasts run their throats toward the knife," she said. "So I have a word for you, Eric John Stark."

"Yes?"

"Don't trust Berild too far. She is not all she seems."

Fianna paused, and then in a whisper, she added, "Did you ever think that all of the Ramas of old might *not* be dead?"

All the half-formed, vague suspicions that had haunted Stark since the desert surged up in a cold tide within him. He grasped for her, demanding, "What do you mean?"

But Fianna eluded him, and was gone like a shadow. After a moment, he turned and went out into the dark, silent street.

The drums were echoing across dead Sinharat, but as Stark went through the streets it seemed to him that above them he could hear, louder than ever before, the mocking sounds, the pipings and fluting and whisperings, that seemed to echo from the past.

XI

SHATTERING THE NIGHT, light and sound crashed up the grand stairway of Sinharat. First came massed torch-bearers, holding their flaring brands high. Then the thundering skin drums and shrilling pipes, and then Kynon and his newcome allies, and after them the tribesmen.

As the procession climbed, the dark western face of the clifftop city leaped into the quivering light. The ancient carven faces that had for centuries looked out on nothing but darkness and silence and desert, now glared triumphantly in the shaking red rays. And despite the proud, loud clamor of drums and pipes, the eyes of climbing tribesmen glinted with doubt as they looked up and beheld the old stone faces of the Ramas.

Stark heard the uproar approaching through the streets, as he waited patiently in the darkness of a deep doorway of the building that was Kynon's headquarters. He saw the torches, drummers, pipers, warriors, march into the great square and across it toward him. He thought that Kynon was putting on a brave show indeed, to impress everyone that the men of Kesh and Shun and the men of the Low Canals were now friends and allies.

Kynon came up onto the steps in front of the old building, only a score of yards from where Stark stood in shadows. He turned and faced the torches and the glinting spears and the fierce faces.

"Bring the banner!" he cried in his bull voice.

A tall barbarian came promptly, with a black silken banner rolled on a long staff. With a gesture totally theatrical, and yet none the less impressive, Kynon shook the silk loose so that it flowed out on the cold wind.

"Here I raise the Banner of Death and Life!" he cried. "Death for our enemies, and life—unending life— for us who shall rule this world!"

The silken standard, unfolding on the wind, showed two white crowns, and below them a red sword, on a field of dead black.

The cry of the crowd was like the baying of a great hound.

Stark's eyes had been searching the faces in the torchlight and now he saw the little knot of men in outland dress—Walsh, Themis, Arrodd—and in front of them, Delgaun.

"I bring you not only a banner, but strong allies!" roared Kynon. "In the new era that begins, old enmities are forgotten. Delgaun of Valkis stands shoulder to shoulder with us in this conquest, and with him will march the men of the Low-Canals!"

Delgaun came up beside Kynon and faced the crowd and raised his hand. There was a response, but not a wildly enthusiastic one.

Shrewdly, Kynon did not give them time to start muttering. He said loudly, "And when Kesh and Shun, and Valkis and Jekkara, march together against the Border States, with us will fight brave men from far away!"

Walsh and the other two heard their cue and started up the steps. But Stark stepped out of the shadows and came up beside Delgaun and Kynon, and looked at them and smiled. He said loudly, so that all could hear, "I will follow your banner—and I greet my brother and comrade-in-arms, Delgaun of Valkis!"

He put his hand on Delgaun's shoulder in the traditional gesture. Delgaun's gold-colored eyes flared hot as an eagle's, and his hand went under his cloak. He said thickly,

"You bastard..."

"Do you want to ruin everything?" said Kynon in a low voice charged with agony and anger. "Return the greeting!"

Slowly, as though he would rather have torn his arm from its socket, Delgaun raised his hand and placed it on Stark's shoulder. There was sweat on his face.

Stark grinned at him sardonically. He thought his timing had been rather good. Delgaun would try to kill him, but would not now dare to do it openly. Comradeship in arms was a sacred thing to the barbarians.

"The riders are out in the Drylands this night!" Kynon shouted at the crowd. "The fighting-men of all the tribes will soon gather here! Go back down and prepare for them. And remember..." He paused dramatically, then continued, "Remember that it is not only the loot of a world we march for, but unending life to enjoy it in, through the Sending On of Minds!"

The crowd raised a storm of cheers. But it seemed to Stark that the carven stone faces of the Ramas high above them looked down at them with secret mirth.

Kynon turned abruptly and led the way into his council hall. They followed. In the torchlit room, he turned on them, looking dangerous as an angry lion.

"We'll have this out once and for all," he said between his teeth. "Stark, you've brought nothing but dissension to us, since you came."

Stark answered flatly. "An old enemy tried to kill me—and when I survived, I tried to kill him. Would you yourself have done differently?"

He looked then at Delgaun. "Luhar was my enemy, but I do not know why Delgaun should hate me. Let's have this thing out, as you say. Delgaun, if you have cause for anger against me, say now what it is. Speak out!"

The golden eyes glared at him out of a face that had become livid. Delgaun's lips twisted, but he did not speak.

Damn you, you can't speak, thought Stark. You hate me because you're jealous over Berild, but you daren't say that out.

Delgaun finally muttered, "I may have been wrong. It could be that Luhar poisoned my mind against Stark."

"Then that is that," said Kynon.

He went over to the table and sat down behind it and let his bleak gaze rove over their faces before he spoke.

"The fighting-men will start arriving tomorrow," he said. "I want them trained in detachments as they come in. Arrod, you'll help Stark do that."

Knight's cruiser should be here in two days, with the weapons we need. I want our force on the march from Sinharat two weeks from now, no later."

A glow came into Kynon's eagle eyes, although his voice remained hard and harsh.

"The Border States we'll hit first will be Varl and Kathuun. They're bound to get warning enough to close their gates. My Drylanders will make a pretense of siege. Then we'll retreat, a little, as help comes from the two cities."

A slow smile curved Delgaun's lips. "Yes, help from Valkis and Jekkara. My Low-Canallers will nobly come to the assistance of the Border States. When they joyfully open their gates to us—then we all go in together."

"Clever," said Walsh admiringly, a smile on his coarse face.

Kynon's big hand squeezed shut. "The fall of Varl and Kathuun will breach the whole line of the Border States. We'll roll up that line, and in six months we'll be in Kahora."

Themis, a man with a dark, saturnine face who spoke little, asked, "What about the government of Earth?"

Kynon grinned. "Principle of non-intervention in Martian affairs has been their policy for a long time. They'll deplore, they'll protest—but nothing more, and we'll have our hands on the throat and the loot of a world."

Stark felt cold. He could not fault this plan. It would work, and red destruction would run along the Border like a spreading flame. Men would die in those cities, and most of them would be the warriors of the Drylands, so that the clever thieves of the Low Canals could reap the plunder.

There came to Stark the determination to kill Kynon with his own hand before he let this thing happen.

Kynon rose. "That's it. You've got your jobs, and they won't be easy. Get to them by the first light of morning."

His voice stopped them as they were going. "One more thing. The soul

and spirit of this whole war is the hunger for eternal life, the secret of the Ramas. If any of you let on that I don't have that secret, if any of you even as much as smile when the Sending On of Minds is mentioned—"

He did not finish. He did not have to. What was in Kynon's face was a threat more deadly than any he could have spoken.

Stark thought that if what he suspected was true, the joke was on Kynon, and a grim and terrible joke it was. If Berild...

He would not let himself finish that thought. It was impossible. To dream that the old, dark secret of Mars had survived, that some of the Ramas had survived, just because he saw a woman walking in the moonlight and heard a serving-girl's sullen insinuation—it was too fantastic. He would forget it.

But Stark could not forget it in the days that followed. He spent each day down in the dust and glare of the desert, teaching the techniques of modern guerrilla warfare to the men of Kesh and Shun who rode constantly in from the wastes. He heard the talk of these warriors, and more even than loot they talked of unending life. He saw how their eyes followed the great black banner, with its white crowns above the crimson sword, when it went with Kynon through the camp.

Knighon's little cruiser came in, its weapons were unloaded, and it went away again for more. Men came from Valkis and Jekkara and Barrakesh, and with these Kynon and Delgaun talked long, setting the times and routes for the great stroke against the Border, and then these too went away again.

Freka came, with the last of the fighting men of Shun. Stark saw the tall barbarian chieftain riding with his men through the camp that had now grown great, and he heard the shouts that hailed him. He went a little later to report to Kynon, and Freka was standing with him by the banner.

Stark felt the Shunni's eyes glaring at him through half-drooping lids, yet Freka made no move.

"You've both had your warning," Kynon said curtly. "Remember it. I won't repeat it."

Stark made his report on the readiness of the warriors, and went away,

and felt Freka's gaze burning a hole in his back.

He had not seen Berild, in these days of hurry and toil. One evening when he left Kynon and Delgaun in the camp, and climbed the great stairway in the red sunset light, Stark turned aside and went toward the building where she had her quarters. He felt that he had to put the dark, impossible doubt in his mind at rest.

The wind was talking through the hollow coral, the streets of Sinharat vibrated to the murmuring voices that strengthened as the light faded and the wind rose. From the marble walls, the stone faces of the llamas watched him with fixed and secret smiles.

Stark came into the street he sought and then stopped suddenly. At the far end of the dusky street, he saw the flutter of a white cloak that disappeared as he watched.

He thought that it was Berild, and he followed. But without being conscious of it, he made his footfalls softer and softer, going through the silent, dusky streets after her like a hunting sand-cat. Where a street turned, he lost her. Stark stood, undecided which way to search, and the whispering voices in the coral mocked and jeered him. A narrow way beside him led to a wider street on which rose a great domed white pile. There was a track in the blown dust and sand that way. He followed it, and reached the gaping open doorway of the building, and peered cautiously.

It was not much more shadowy inside than in the dusking street. Light still struck through tall windows set above a gallery that ringed the great dome, high up above the floor. The-light was enough to show a round, perfectly empty hall, whose only feature was a crumbling inscription that covered all one wall. Berild stood, her back to him, looking up and reading this inscription.

She was silent, but he knew that she was reading from the way her head turned slightly, inclining forward with each few lines. And for a moment, Stark felt a coldness like that of outer space.

For the inscription was in that ancient language of the Ramas which no one for millennia had been able to read.

"*Witch-woman,*" his instincts clamored. "*Not human, not really human. Run!*"

He forced himself to stand silent, there in the shadows outside the door. He saw Berild, after a few more minutes of concentration, droop her head as though in pain.

Then she turned brusquely away from the inscription, and her sandals tapped the dusty flagstones. She went toward a stair that spiralled up the side of the vast room, to the encircling gallery. Stark saw her go to one of the tall windows there, and stand looking out with her back still toward him.

The wind chuckled and muttered through the gaping doors and windows, and it covered the sound of Stark's soft footfalls as he went across the room and up the stair. He came up and stopped, a dozen feet behind the silent woman.

"It's not as you remembered it, is it, Berild?" he said. "What was it like before, with the blue ocean around it, and the ships?"

XII

BERILD DID NOT turn around. It was as though she had not heard his voice. She stood absolutely still—too still.

Stark went to the window and stood beside her. The dying light from across the desert showed her face, with its mocking smile.

"What are you dreaming about now, wild man?"

To Stark's ears, it seemed as though there was a thin edge of brittleness in her mockery.

"You're a Rama," he said flatly.

"But the Ramas were long ago," she said. "If I were one, I would be very old. How old?"

He disregarded the derision in her tone. He said, "That's what I want to know, Berild. How old? A thousand years... ten thousand? How many

bodies have you inhabited?"

Instantly, the moment that he put the thought into spoken words, it seemed immeasurably more horrible to Stark than it had before. Something of that horror must have shown in his face, for he saw a dangerous flash in her eyes.

"What you say is madness," she said. "Who has put this thought into your head?"

"A woman walking in the moonlight," he muttered. "A woman who threaded her way through walls and doorways that hadn't been there for centuries, and that she could only know because she remembered them."

Berild's tension seemed to relax a little. She said impatiently, "So that's it! In the Belly of Stones—you were awake, when I hunted for and found the well."

Then she laughed. "Why didn't you say so, why did you keep it to yourself? I could have told you that it was the secret my father gave me—to walk this way, so many steps, then that way, and so on, until I was where the well was buried. And you thought..." Her laughter came again.

"I don't believe you," he said. "You were not measuring your steps—you were groping, remembering." The shadows were deepening. He took a step toward her, peering into her face. "You've been laughing at Kynon all along haven't you? The real Rama, laughing at the pretended one?"

Berild said, in a slow voice that had now no laughter in it at all, "Forget this thing, Eric John Stark. It is madness, and it could be your death."

"How many of you are there, Berild? How many have come down through the ages, secretly stealing the bodies of others, laughing at the world that thought they were all gone long ago?"

In a whisper that was full of infinite menace, Berild said, "I tell you again, forget this."

"There would have to be at least two of you, so one could use the Sending On of Minds on the other," Stark said, and nodded. "And who but the jealous one, the one who said, 'There is nothing for you in this creature of an hour.' It is he, isn't it? Delgaun?"

In a voice sibilant with passion, Berild said, "I will hear no more of your delusions. Don't come with me—I want no madman for an escort."

And she turned swiftly and left him, almost running down the stair that was in heavy darkness now, and so out of the building.

Stark stood, his mind awhirl. She had been warm and living, her arms around him that night, but inside the Shunni woman's vibrant body—a Rama woman of long ago?

He turned and looked back out the open window. The moons were rising, and their shifting light slanted across the vague desert. Down beneath the cliffs of Sinharat, the far-flung torches of the Drylanders' camp pricked the gloom, and voices came up on the piping wind, and the squeal of beasts, and the sounds of a sane and normal world. He told himself that he was deluded, obsessed. But he knew that it was not so.

Looking down there, another thought came slowly to Stark. If it was true, if Berild and Delgaun were Ramas of old, then this barbarian campaign to loot and conquer half of Mars was steered by intelligence as old and evil as Sinharat. Yet Kynon would be the conqueror, the ruler, and he was no Rama. Was that why Berild had become Kynon's woman, to influence his every move, plotting all the while with Delgaun?

He turned abruptly around, away from the window. The great, ancient hall was now a well of utter darkness, and the wind that moaned and whispered through it seemed cold with the cold of dead ages. A detestation of the place seized Stark, and he went down the stairs and out of the building, feeling all the way as though eyes watched him in the blackness.

As he walked through the silent, moon-splashed streets of Sinharat, Stark tried to think. He had to stop Kynon's plan of conquest—was more bound to do so, if age-old evil was behind it. Should he tell Kynon and the others, about Delgaun and Berild?

They would laugh at him. He had no proof to show them, none in the world.

But there must be some way. He...

Stark suddenly stopped walking, all his nerves alert. He listened,

turning his head this way and that.

There was no sound at all, but the wind and its whisperings. Nothing moved in the shadow-blotched, moonlit streets of the dead city.

But Stark was not reassured. His senses had spoken and had told him that someone, something, was stalking him.

He moved on, after a moment, heading toward the distant glow of light that came from Kynon's palace in the great square. But after a dozen steps he suddenly froze again.

This time, he heard it. A scutter and scuffle of feet, back down the narrow street in the shadows.

Stark put his hand on his gun and his voice rang down the street. "Come out!"

A stooping figure came out of the shadow, toward him. For a moment he did not realize that this was the tall barbarian chieftain, Freka, for the man was hunched, bent forward.

Then as Freka came across a bar of moonlight, Stark saw his face, slack-jawed, grinning, inexpressibly repulsive. He knew then. Freka, the addict of an ancient vice, was a long way into Shanga, and in his animalism he cared not the least about the gun facing him. He cared only about his brute hatred. "Go back," Stark said softly. "I'll kill you." But he knew that he could not, that the threat was an empty one. If he killed Freka, he would incur the death penalty himself.

With a flash of insight, Stark realized the neatness of the trap. Delgaun had set it, without a doubt—no one else would have brought Freka the Shanga lamp. Whoever of the two killed the other, must himself die by Kynon's decree. Delgaun could not lose.

Stark suddenly took to his heels and ran. He ran in the direction of the distant torch-glow. If he could get that far, so that Kynon and the others saw Freka pursuing and attacking him...

He did not get that far. Freka, half an animal, could run as fast as he, and faster. With an animal-like sound, he caught up to Stark, and his long arms went around Stark's head, and his teeth sank into the back of Stark's

neck.

Stark, feeling himself going down, dived to the pavement to help the movement. The side of his head rang on the time-worn cobbles and he felt half-stunned but he kept on rolling in a somersault that shook off the thing on his back. It shook the gun out of his hand, also. He scrambled to his feet.

Freka, mewling, reached from the street where he had fallen and his long arms grabbed Stark's knees and pulled him down again.

A kind of horror possessed Stark. He had been called a half-beast, in his lifetime, but the thing he fought was all beast.

The teeth were trying for his throat. Stark's hand grabbed the long hair of the barbarian and snapped his head back. Still holding Freka's hair, he banged his head onto the cobbles.

Freka still clawed and mewed, and a shivering conviction that this creature was invulnerable came to Stark. He heard vague voices yelling somewhere. In a kind of hysterical fury he banged Freka's head again and again on the cobblestones.

The voice of Kynon roared close by, and Stark was hauled to his feet and blinked his eyes at the tossing torches.

"He's murdered Freka—give me a spear!" screamed a Shunni warrior.

Stark saw other tribesmen, all with fury on their faces, and saw also the horrified face of Walsh, and then Kynon's head blotted out the others as Kynon came close to him.

"I warned you, Stark!"

"The man was in Shanga, he was an animal set upon me!" gasped Stark. "And I know who set him! Delgaun..."

The flat of Kynon's great hand cracked across his mouth and he reeled backward. Hard hands held him when he would have struck back.

"Blood for Freka's blood!" the Shunni warrior was speaking to Kynon. "Unless all the men of Shun see this man die, we do not march with you!"

"You will see it," Kynon said. "All will see it. And yours, brother, will be the weapon that wipes out Freka's blood."

Stark, raging, roared to Kynon, "You idiot! Pretending to the Rama knowledge, while all the time you're a puppet dangled by..."

A spear-haft hit Stark on the back of his head and he fell into blackness.

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

A torch lit the room. There were no other prisoners. But there was a guard, a thick-shouldered barbarian who sat on what looked like an execution block in the center of the well, with a sword and a jug of wine. It was the Shunni warrior who had screamed for a spear, and he looked at Stark, and smiled.

"You should not have slept so long, outlander," he said. "For you have only three hours till morning. And when morning comes, you will die on the great stair, where all the men of Shun can see."

He drank from the jug, and set it down, and smiled again.

"Death comes easily if the thrust is sure," he said.

"But if the thrust wobbles, death is very slow, and very painful. I think yours will be slow."

Stark did not answer. He waited, with the same unhuman patience he had shown when he waited for his captors under the tor.

The man on the block laughed, and raised the jug again.

Stark's eyes narrowed slightly. He saw the movement of a shadow, in the darkness beyond the drinking man.

He thought he knew who it was that came to this place so stealthily. Delgaun would make very sure that he never stood upon the great stair, to

shout mad accusations to the Drylanders before he died.

He thought that he had not even three hours, now.

XIII

THEN, AS THOUGH she had suddenly taken shape there, Fianna stood in the shadows behind the Shunni. Her young face was very pale, but her hand did not tremble as she brought up the little gun she held.

The gun coughed, and the Shunni warrior pitched forward and lay without moving, while his sword rattled along the stone floor. The jug, upset, sent out bright crawling loopings of red.

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

Stark took her slender shoulders between his hands. "Listen, Fianna. It could be your death if it becomes known that you have done this."

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

"I think that the death of many things is close," she said. "Tonight is a black and evil time in Sinharat, which has known so much of darkness and evil. And I risked freeing you because I think you are my only hope—perhaps the only hope of Mars."

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

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

"And is yours old, Fianna?"

"Old," she whispered. "As old as Berild's." The words vibrated away and

were lost in silence. But to Stark, it seemed that suddenly a world-deep abyss had been opened between him and this girl who looked up at him from dark, unguessable eyes. "You too?" he whispered.

"I, too," she said, "am of the Twice-Born, the Ramas. Even as those whom you know as Berild and Delgaun."

He could not quite take it in. He stared at her in silence, and then asked, "But, then, how many of you are there?"

Fianna shook her head. "I am not sure, but I think only we three are left. And now you know why I follow Berild and serve her. She and Delgaun have the secret of the Sending On of Minds, the true secret. They know where the Crowns of the Ramas are hidden, somewhere here in Sinharat, and I do not know that. They give me life, from one lifetime to another, so that I have lived only at their caprice. And that has been a long, long time."

Without realizing it, Stark had let his hands fall from her and had stepped back. Fianna looked up at him and said, not resentfully but sadly, "I do not blame you. I know what we have been. The ever-young, the ever-living immortals, the stealers of others' lives. It was wrong, wrong, the thing that began here in Sinharat long ago. I have known it was wrong, through all these changing lives. But I will tell you this—most evilly powerful of all addictions is the addiction to life."

Stark stepped forward and again he took her head between his hands. "Whatever you are and have been, Fianna, I think you are my friend."

"Your friend, and the friend of all the Dryland tribesmen from whom I—the real I—sprang. They must not march, and drown Mars and themselves in blood. Will you help me?"

"It is why I am here," he said.

"Then come with me," said Fianna. She stirred the Shunni's body with her foot. "Bring that. It must not be found here."

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

dry, faint smell of eternity.

At length Fianna whispered, "Here. Be careful."

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

Ragged black mouths opened in the coral, entrances to some unguessed catacombs beneath. Stark consigned the body to the nearest pit, but he kept the sword with which the Shunni warrior had planned to kill him.

"You will need it," Fianna said.

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

He stopped her in a place where a bar of moonlight came splashing through a great crack in the tunnel roof. He said, "You want my help in preventing the march and the conquest. But only Kynon's death can prevent that."

"Kynon stands in danger of worse than death, tonight," she said. "We go to save him."

Stark roughly caught her wrist. "Save Kynon? But he planned this bloody thing... he is the man who will lead it!"

Fianna shook her head. "He will not lead it, though he will seem to do so. And he did not plan it, for that was the doing of Delgaun and Berild, who put the plan into Kynon's head."

"There are lies everywhere," said Stark. "I am tangled up in lies. Tell me the truth."

"The truth of Delgaun and Berild is this," said Fianna. "They are tired of wandering secretly through the ages of the world. Even Berild has wearied of living for pleasure only, and longs for power. They, the Twice-Born, should rule the short-lived peoples. So they conceived their plan for empire."

"Berild it was who subtly put into Kynon's mind the idea of using the legended secret of the Sending On of Minds, the lure of immortality, as a bait to lure the fighting-men, to rally Drylanders and Low-Canallers together. Kynon, always ambitious and eager for power, seized upon that. He prepared the hoax, and with the promise of the crowns, he has gathered the men. It was Delgaun who suggested bringing in the outlanders, and their weapons. More outland vultures will come, drawn by the smell of loot, if the first conquest succeeds. And Delgaun and Berild will use them to keep the Martian tribes in check, and to prop their evil rule." Stark thought about Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis and Arrod of Mercury and Callisto Colony. He thought of others like them, and what they would do with their talons hooked in the heart of Mars. He thought of Delgaun's yellow eyes. He said, "You speak of Delgaun and Berild ruling—but would they dare get rid of Kynon, whom all look on as leader?"

Fianna looked at him pityingly. "You don't understand. They will not get rid of Kynon physically. It will still be Kynon whom the tribesmen hail and follow as their leader."

Still Stark could not comprehend. "What do you mean? Kynon may have been influenced, but he's not one to dance to anyone's bidding."

"I said, they will not get rid of Kynon *physically*," Fianna repeated.

Stark began to understand, and a cold sickness rose in him. "You mean—the Sending On of Minds?"

The sickness in Stark became a shuddering repulsion, as from a nightmare. He suddenly felt a violent hatred for this ancient, evil world and of the black things that came up from its past.

"Do you understand now why I need your help?" Fianna was saying. "This final wickedness must not happen. If Delgaun takes the body of Kynon, he'll use it to lead the Drylanders to bloody ruin. You have to help me prevent that."

Stark looked at her, and asked thickly, "Where?"

"Berild's quarters. Kynon is there now, in the trap. Delgaun has gone to bring the Crowns of the Ramas from their hiding-place."

Stark gripped the Shunni sword and said, "Take me there the shortest way."

"Not quite the shortest, but the safest. Come!"

She led him through labyrinthine underground ways, a dark maze that twisted and turned and seemed to go on forever. And he saw things on the way that he had not dreamed existed under the dead pile of Sinharat.

One great cavern was lighted vaguely by a globe of cold green fire that stood upon a pedestal in a corner. It cast a livid glow over masses of piled and jumbled and incomprehensible objects. There were massive silvery wheels and targes, weird reticulations of dusty metal rods, brazen beaks that had once adorned the prows of ships, in the old days when Sinharat was an island rising arrogantly from the rolling ocean.

Relics, possessions, or perhaps only loot—they were of the Ramas and the past that should be dead but not, quite. They set Stark to bristling, and he gripped the sword more tightly, but Fianna did not glance at them. A flight of dark steps took them up into a passageway that smelled of the upper air. And now a whispering began about them, a muttering and chuckling and piping that he had heard before, and it seemed uncannily to Stark as though the sounds that were called the voices of the Ramas were really voices now. It was as though the old ones, the Ever-living, watched and gloated over the thing that was about to be done.

"The wind is rising and it will soon be dawn," said Fianna. "We must hurry."

Cold air struck Stark's face as he followed her upward again, this time into a room whose windows let in the light of the flying moons.

"We are there," whispered Fianna. "Now, very quietly. I must know first if Delgaun has returned."

She went softly down a hallway, motioning him to wait. After a moment, without any sound at all, a little crack of light spilled into the corridor and showed Fianna pressed close outside a door she had softly opened. Stark's pulses thudded as he caught the sound of a silvery voice that he recognized as Berild's. Then the dark silhouette of Fianna moved, making a beckoning gesture.

He came softly to her side and she stepped away so that he might see through the crack in the doorway. He looked, into the lamplit room.

He saw Kynon, in profile, bound by leather thongs to one of the massive stone pillars. There was a great bruise on Kynon's temple, and in his harsh, powerful face there was a look that Stark had never seen on any human face before.

Delgaun stood nearby, but Kynon ignored him and stared fixedly at Berild.

"You may well look, Kynon," she said. "It is the last you will see of Berild, your submissive and patient woman. You great ox of a barbarian! Not in a thousand years have I been so bored with anyone as I have been with you, and your roaring boasts and childish schemes."

"There's no time for this," Delgaun said sharply. "Let us get it done."

Berild nodded, and went to a small coffer of golden metal that rested on a table. She pressed a series of patterned bosses in an intricate sequence, and there was a sharp click of an opening lock. A shiver ran up along Stark's spine as he watched Berild raise the lid of the coffer and reach her hands inside it.

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

In her two hands Berild had the ancient crowns of the Ramas, the givers of life. Twin circlets of glorious fire, dimming the shallow light of the lamps, putting a nimbus of light around the white-clad woman so that as she walked across the room she was like a goddess walking in a cloud of stars.

She held them for Kynon to see, mocking him. "You blazoned them on your banner for all the world to see-do not shrink from them now!"

"I say again, we waste time," cut in the sharp voice of Delgaun.

Delgaun came and stood beside bound Kynon, with his back also against the pillar. And Berild raised the two flashing crowns in her hands

and bent toward them.

In the ear of Stark, Fianna said, "Now!"

XIV

STARK WENT INTO the room with his sword up and he went fast, heading toward Delgaun. He had always recognized the infinite dangerousness of this man. And now that he knew that it was backed by countless lifetimes of cunning and experience, he thought that his chances were not good.

Delgaun's yellow eyes flashed amazement, but he reacted with superb speed. He ran swiftly toward the corner of the room, and scrabbled a gun out of its hiding-place under a cloak.

And Stark thought, as he plunged, "Of course, he wouldn't have the gun on him when his body was going to be exchanged with Kynon's..."

He had never seen such speed as Delgaun's, turning with the gun. But the Shunni blade went home before the turn was ever completed, and Delgaun pitched and fell, the fall of his body wrenching the sword-hilt out of Stark's hand.

Stark, kneeling to retrieve the sword, heard a ringing sound and saw something bright rolling past him. It was one of the crystal crowns, but whatever material they were made of, it was not really crystal, for the crown was unharmed by its fall. Still stooping, grabbing the sword-hilt, he turned swiftly.

Berild had dropped the Crowns, and had drawn a slender knife. In her face was terror. For Kynon was loose, cut loose by Fianna, and the big barbarian was advancing toward her. His face was terrible as he grasped with hungry hands for the woman.

Berild's knife flashed, twice, and then Kynon's great arms closed around her. She screamed chokingly. Kynon's face was as red as the blood that

was pouring from his side, his mighty muscles straining, and in a moment, by the time Stark was on his feet again, Berild was broken and dead.

Kynon flung her limp body away, like an outworn, unclean doll. He turned slowly and his hand went to the gashes in his side. He said thickly, "The Rama witch has killed me. My life is pouring out..."

He stood, rocking and swaying, with a numbed expression on his face as though he could not actually believe it. Stark went to his side and supported him.

"Kynon, listen!"

Kynon did not even seem to hear him. His eyes had turned upon the motionless bodies of Berild and Delgaun.

"Witch and wizard," he muttered. "All this time—deceiving me, laughing at me, using me for their own ends. It is good that you killed the man, too."

Stark spoke urgently. "Kynon, their evil will still live and work if the men of the Drylands march! Not Berild and Delgaun, but someone else will spend the blood of the tribes for power."

Kynon seemed dazedly to consider that, and then his eyes blazed fiercely.

"Power that should have been mine... No, by God! Help me, Stark—I have a thing to tell the tribes!"

He was lurching, like an oak about to fall. Powerful as Stark was, he had difficulty supporting Kynon as they went out of the room. Fianna remained, still standing by the pillar and trembling and looking after them.

The dawn lightened the streets of Sinharat, and the morning wind was stronger. Louder came the pipings and fluting from the city. Kynon, his left hand pressed against his side, looked up at the stone faces of the Ramas and then raised his clenched right hand and shook it at them.

They came to the great stairway and started down it. Below them in the

sunrise light the vast huddle of tents was awakening. Then a voice yelled, a tribesman pointed wildly to where Stark and Kynon came painfully down the stair, and with a bursting roar of excited voices, the whole camp came to life. The men of Kesh and Shun came crowding in hundreds, then in thousands, their faces fierce and strange in the brightening light as they looked up to where Kynon stood swaying, with Stark steadying him.

Kynon looked down at them without speaking, for a moment. Then he seemed to gather his strength, and his bull voice roared out almost as loudly as it had on the slave block in Valkis.

"I have been deceived and betrayed, and so have you all! Delgaun and Berild conspired to use us of the Drylands, as a sword to hack conquests for them, not us!"

It took moments for them to take it in. Then a low growling sound came up from the thousands below.

A Keshi chieftain leaped up a few steps on the stairway and shook his weapon and shouted, "Death for them!"

And the crowd took up and echoed that fierce shout. Kynon held up his hand. "They are already dead... and Delgaun was slain by Stark, who tried to save me. But the snake Berild stung me, and I am dying."

He swayed so that Stark had to hold up his massive weight by both arms around him, but then he gathered his strength again.

"I lied when I said I had the secret of the Ramas," Kynon said. "And now I know that that secret would yield only evil. Forget it, and forget the war that you would fight only for the profit of others."

He tried to say more, but did not seem to be able to voice the words. Stark felt the weight of him sagging more heavily, and tried to hold him, but Kynon said thickly, "Let be."

He slid down, still holding his side, to sit upon the steps. He sat there, as the sun rose higher, with the great battlements and towers of Sinharat behind him and with the fighting-men of the Drylands looking silently up at him, and the desert stretching far away. And what thoughts were mirrored in his face, Stark, who stood behind him, could not see.

Kynon said no more. He sat, and his shoulders sagged, and then his whole body sagged down and was still.

For a time, nothing at all happened. Stark stood waiting, and farther back up the stair, Knighton and Walsh and Arrodd and Themis stood, peering and stricken, but no one moved.

Then four chieftains of the Shunni came silently up the stair. They did not even glance at Stark. They picked up Kynon's body and went back down the stair with it, and the crowd of warriors divided in front of them.

Stark climbed back up the stairway to where Knight and the others waited, a group of downcast, doubtful men.

"The thing's blown," said Stark. "There won't be any war, and there won't be any loot."

Walsh cursed. He asked, "What happened?"

Stark shrugged. "You heard Kynon."

They were not satisfied at all, but there was nothing they could do about it. They stood pondering, looking with gloomy eyes down at the striking of the skin tents and the loading of the beasts, as the great camp broke up. Knighton said, finally, "I'm getting out. And the rest of you had better go with me, and not back to Valkis or anywhere near it."

The others had already had that thought. Delgaun's lieutenants would be waiting in Valkis, ready for the great stroke against the Border, and they would not be happy with the thing that had happened.

Stark said, "I won't go with you. I'm going to Tarak."

He thought of Simon Ashton, waiting in Tarak, and he thought that Ashton would be glad of the word he brought, the word that meant peace and not war.

Walsh, looking at Stark without love, told him, "It's just as well. I think you Jonahed this whole deal, though I don't know how. There are riding-beasts in the pen behind Kynon's palace."

They turned and went away. Stark looked back down the stairway

toward the desert.

The vast encampment was disappearing as by magic. It was dissolving into streams of men and animals that moved out in long caravans, in many different directions, back into the recesses of the Drylands.

One file of men and beasts moved to the sound of booming drums and skirling pipes. Kynon of Shun was going home as a leader should.

Stark walked back through the silent streets of Sinharat, and came again into the room where Delgaun and Berild had died. Their bodies were not there now. But Fianna sat by the window looking out at the departure of the hosts.

Stark's gaze swiftly searched around the room. Fianna turned, and said, "They're not here, if it's the Crowns of the Ramas you are looking for. I hid them."

"The thought that was in my mind was to destroy them," said Stark.

She nodded. "I had the same thought. I almost did it. But—"

"But the addiction to life is a strong one, indeed," said Stark. "So you said, remember?"

Fianna got up and came to face him, and her face was shadowed by doubt.

"I know this," she said, "I do not want another life, who have had so many. I do not want it *now*. But when the body finally fails, and death stoops near, it may be different. There will always be time to destroy the Crowns."

"There will always be time," said Stark. "But there will never be the will."

Fianna came closer to him and her eyes were suddenly fierce. "Don't be so smug in your strength! You haven't felt your life guttering out... as I have, more than once! Perhaps when you come to feel that, you would be glad to join me in the Sending On of Minds."

Stark was silent for a moment, and then he shook his head. "I don't

think so. Life has not been so soft and sweet for me that I would want to live it over."

"Don't answer me now," Fianna said. "Answer me thirty years from now. And if your answer is 'Yes,' come seek me here in Sinharat. Soon or late, I will always return here."

"I will not return," Stark said flatly.

She looked up at him, and then she whispered, "Perhaps you won't. But don't be too sure."

The throbbing of Kynon's burial-drums was only a faint echo now, and far out on the desert the dust of the caravans receded.

Stark turned. "I am going, as soon as I can prepare. Do you go with me?"

Fianna shook her head. "I stay here, at least for a while. I am the last of my people, and this is my place."

Stark hesitated, then turned and left her.

When night came, he was riding far out on the desert, leading his pack-beasts. The wind was rising, murmuring and piping in the lonesomeness, but he knew it was only illusion that made him seem to hear at this distance the whispering, fluting voices of the city behind him.

Would he someday go back there, questing for another life, seeking out Fianna so that they two might go down through ages as Delgaun and Berild had done?

No. And yet...

Stark turned in the saddle and looked back, at the white towers of Sinharat rising against the larger moon.