

QUEST OF THE STARSTONE

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Jirel of Joiry is riding down with a score of men at her back,
For none is safe in the outer lands from Jirel's outlaw pack;
The vaults of the wizard are over-full, and locked with golden key,
And Jirel says, "If he bath so much, then he shall share with me!"
And fires flame high on the altar fare in the lair of the wizard folk,
And magic crackles and Jirel's name goes whispering through the smoke.
But magic fails in the stronger spell that the Joiry outlaws own:
The splintering crash of a broadsword blade that shivers against the bone,
And blood that bursts through a warlock's teeth can strangle a half-voiced
spell

Though it rises hot from the blistering coals on the red-hot floor of Hell!

The rivet-studded oaken door crashed open, splintering from the assault of pikebutts whose thunderous echoes still rolled around the walls of the tiny stone room revealed beyond the wreck of the shattered door. Jirel, the warrior-maid of Joiry, leaped in through the splintered ruins, dashing the red hair from her eyes, grinning with exertion, gripping her two-edged sword. But in the ruin of the door she paused. The mail-clad men at her heels surged around her in the doorway like a wave of blue-bright steel, and then paused too, staring.

For Franga the warlock was kneeling in his chapel, and to see Franga on his knees was like watching the devil recite a paternoster. But it was no holy altar before which the wizard bent. The black stone of it bulked huge in this tiny, bare room echoing still with the thunder of battle, and in the split second between the door's fall and Jirel's crashing entry through its ruins Franga had crouched in a last desperate effort at—at what?

His bony shoulders beneath their rich black robe heaved with frantic motion as he fingered the small jet bosses that girdled the altar's block. A slab in the side of it fell open abruptly as the wizard, realizing that his enemy was almost within sword's reach, whirled and crouched like a feral thing. Blazing light, cold and unearthly, streamed out from the gap in the altar.

"So that's where you've hidden it!" said Jirel with a savage softness.

Over his shoulder Franga snarled at her, pale lips writhed back from discolored teeth. Physically he was terrified of her, and his terror paralyzed him. She saw him hesitate, evidently between his desire to snatch into safety what was hidden in the altar and his panic fear of her sword that dripped blood upon the stones.

Jirel settled his indecision.

"You black devil!" she blazed, and lunged like lightning, the dripping blade whistling as it sheared the air.

Franga screamed hoarsely, flinging himself sidewise beneath the sword. It struck the altar with a shivering shock that numbed Jirel's arm, and as she gasped a sound that was half a sob of pain and fury, half a blistering curse, he scurried crabwise into a corner, his long robe giving him a curiously amorphous look. Recovering herself, Jirel stalked after him, rubbing her numbed arm but gripping that great wet sword fast, the highlights of murder still blazing in her yellow eyes.

The warlock flattened himself against the wall, skinny arms outstretched.

"Werhi-yu-io!" he screamed desperately. "Werhi! Werhi-yu!"

"What devil's gibberish is that, you dog?" demanded Jirel angrily. "I'll—"

Her voice silenced abruptly, the red lips parted. She stared at the wall behind the wizard, and something like awe was filming the blood-lust of her eyes. For over that corner in which Franga crouched a shadow had been drawn as one draws a curtain.

"Werhi!" screamed the warlock again, in a cracked and strained voice, and—how could she not have seen before that door against whose panels he pressed, one hand behind him pushing it open upon darkness beyond? Here was black magic, devil's work.

Doubtfully Jirel stared, her sword lowering. She did not know it, but her free hand rose to sign her breast with the church's guard against evil. The door creaked a little, then swung wide. The blackness within was blinding as too much light is blinding—a dark from which she blinked and turned her eyes away. One last glimpse she had of the gaunt, pale face of Franga, grinning, contorted with hate. The door creaked shut.

The trance that had gripped Jirel broke with the sound Fury flooded back in the wake of awe. Choking on soldier-curses she sprang for the door, swinging up her sword in both hands, spitting hatred and bracing herself for the crash of the heavy blade through those oaken panels so mysteriously veiled in the shadow that clung about the corner.

The blade clanged shiveringly against stone. For the second time, the agonizing shock of steel swung hard again, solid rock shuddered up the blade and racked Jirel's shoulders. The door had vanished utterly. She dropped the sword from nerveless hands and reeled back from the empty corner, sobbing with fury and pain.

"C-coward!" she flung at the unanswering stone. "H-hide in your hole, then, you fiend-begotten runaway, and watch me take the Starstone!"

And she whirled to the altar.

Her men had shrunk back in a huddle beyond the broken door, their magic-dazzled eyes following her in fascinated dread.

"You womanish knaves!" she flared at them over her shoulder as she knelt where the wizard had knelt. "Womanish, did I say? Ha! You don't deserve

the flattery! Must I go the whole way alone? Look then—here it is!"

She plunged her bare hand into the opening in the altar from which streamed that pale, unearthly light, gasped a little, involuntarily, and then drew out what looked like a block of living flame.

In her bare hand as she knelt she held it, and for minutes no one moved. It was pale, this Starstone, cold with unearthly fire, many-faceted yet not glittering. Jirel thought of twilight above the ocean, when the land is darkening and the smooth water gathers into its surface all the glimmering light of sea and sky. So this great stone gleamed, gathering the chapel's light into its pale surface so that the room seemed dark by contrast, reflecting it again transmuted into that cold, unwavering brilliance.

She peered into the translucent depths of it so near her face. She could see her own fingers cradling the gem distorted as if seen through water—and yet somehow there was a motion between her hand and the upper surface of the jewel. It was like looking down into water in whose depths a shadow stirred—a living shadow—a restlessly moving shape that beat against the prisoning walls and sent a flicker through the light's cold blue-white gleaming. It was —

No, it was the Starstone, nothing more. But to have the Starstone! To hold it here in her hands at last, after weeks of siege, weeks of desperate battle! It was triumph itself she cradled in her palm. Her throat choked with sudden ecstatic laughter as she sprang to her feet, brandishing the great gem toward that empty corner through whose wall the wizard had vanished.

"Ha, behold it!" she screamed to the unanswering stone. "Son of a fiend, behold it! The luck of the Starstone is mine, now a better man has wrested it from you! Confess Joiry your master, you devil-deluder! Dare you show your face? Dare you?"

Over that empty corner the shadow swept again, awesomely from nowhere. Out of the sudden darkness creaked a door's hinges, and the wizard's voice called in a choke of fury,

"Bel's curse on you, Joiry! Never think you've triumphed over me! I'll have it back if I—if I—"

"If you—what? D'ye think I fear you, you hell-spawned warlock? If you—what?"

"Me you may not fear, Joiry," the wizard's voice quavered with fury, "but by Set and Bubastis, I'll find one who'll tame you if I must go to the ends of space to find him—to the ends of time itself! And then—beware!"

"Bring on your champion!" Jirel's laughter was hot with scorn. "Search hell itself and bring out the chiefest devil! I'll lift the head from his shoulders as I'd have lifted yours, with one sweep, had you not fled."

But she got for answer only the creak of a closing door in the depths of that shadow. And now the shadow faded again, and once more empty stone walls stared at her enigmatically.

Clutching the Starstone that—so legend had it—carried luck and wealth beyond imagination for its possessor, she shrugged and swung round to her soldiers.

"Well, what are you gaping at?" she flared. "Before heaven, I'm the best man here! Out—out—pillage the castle—there's rich loot of that devil's servant, Franga! What are you waiting for?" and with the flat of her sword she drove them from the chapel.

"By Pharol, Smith, have you lost your taste for segir? I'd as soon have expected old Marnak here to sprout legs!" Yarol's cherubic face was puzzled as he nodded toward the waiter who was moving quickly about the little private drinking booth of polished steel in the back of the Martian tavern, placing fresh drinks before the two men, regardless of his artificial limbs—lost, some said, during an illicit amorous visit to the forbidden dens of the spider women.

Northwest Smith frowned moodily, pushing the glass away. His scarred dark face, lighted with the pallor of steel-colored eyes, was morose. He drew deeply on the brown Martian cigarette that smoked between his fingers.

"I'm getting rusty, Yarol," he said. "I'm sick of this whole business. Why can't something really worth the effort turn up? Smuggling—gun-running—I'm sick of it, I tell you! Even segir doesn't taste the same."

"That's old age creeping up," Yarol advised him owlishly above the rim of his glass. "Tell you what you need, N.W., a snort of the green Mingo liquer old Marnak keeps on his top shelf. It's distilled from pani-berries, and one shot of it will have you prancing like a pup. Wait a minute, I'll see what I can do."

Smith hunched over his folded arms and stared at the shining steel wall behind Yarol's vacant chair as the little Venusian slid out of the booth. Hours like these were the penalty of the exiled and the outlaw. Even the toughest of them knew times when the home planet called almost intolerably across the long voids of the spaceways, and all other places seemed flat and dull. Homesickness he would not have admitted to anyone alive, but as he sat there alone, morosely facing his dim reflection in the steel wall, he found himself humming that old sweet song of all Earth's exiled people, The Green Hills of Earth:

Across the seas of darkness

The good green Earth is bright—Oh, star that was my homeland Shine down on me tonight . . .

Words and tune were banal, but somehow about them had gathered such a halo of association that the voices which sang them went sweeter and softer as they lingered over the well-remembered phrases, the well-remembered scenes of home. Smith's surprisingly good baritone took on undernotes of a homesick sweetness which he would have died rather than admit:

My heart turns home in longing Across the voids between,

To know beyond the spaceways The hills of Earth are green . . .

What wouldn't he give just now, to be free to go home again? Home without a price on his head, freedom to rove the blue seas of Earth, the warm garden continents of the Sun's loveliest planet? He hummed very softly to himself,

—and count the losses worth To see across the darkness The green hills of Earth . . . and then let the words die on his lips unnoticed as he narrowed steel-colored eyes at the polished wall in which a moment before his dim reflection had faced him. It was darkening now, a shadow quivering across the bright surfaces, thickening, clouding his mirrored face. And the wall—was it metal, or—or stone? The shadow was too thick to tell, and unconsciously he rose to his feet, bending across the table, one hand hovering back toward the heat-gun on his thigh. A door creaked open in the dimness—a heavy door, half seen, opening upon darkness beyond too black to gaze on—darkness, and a face.

"Are your services for hire, stranger?" quavered a cracked voice speaking in a tongue that despite himself sent Smith's pulses quickening in recognition. French, Earth's French, archaic and scarcely intelligible, but unquestionably a voice from home.

"For a price," he admitted, his fingers closing definitely on his gun. "Who are you and why do you ask? And how in the name of—"

"It will reward you to ask no questions," said the cracked quaver. "I seek a fighting-man of a temper strong enough for my purpose, and I think you are he. Look, does this tempt you?"

A claw-like hand extended itself out of the shadow, dangling a double rope of such blue-white pearls as Smith had never dreamed of. "Worth a king's ransom," croaked the voice. "And all for the taking. Will you come with me?"

"Come where?"

"To the planet Earth—to the land of France—to the year of 1500."

Smith gripped the table-edge with one frantic hand, wondering if the segir he had drunk could somehow have sent him into paroxysms of dream. By no stretch of imagination could he really be standing here, in this drinking-booth in a Martian tavern, while out of a door that opened upon darkness a cracked voice beckoned him into the past. He was dreaming, of course, and in a dream it could do no harm to push back his chair, skirt the table, step closer to that incredible door thick-hung with shadows, take the outstretched hand over whose wrist the luminous pearls hung gleaming . . .

The room staggered and whirled into darkness. From somewhere far away he heard Yarol's voice shouting frantically, "N.W.! Wait! N.W., where're you going—" And then night too black to gaze on blinded his dark-dazzled eyes and cold unthinkable flamed through his brain, and—and-

He stood on a green hilltop whose gentle slope rolled downward to a meadow where a brook wound with a sound of rippling water. Beyond, on a

high upthrust of craggy rock, a great gray castle loomed. The sky was blessedly blue, the air fresh in his nostrils with the sweetness of green growing things. And all about him rolled grassy uplands. He took a deep, deep breath. "The Green Hills of Earth!"

"N.W., what in—by Pharol, I—hell's blazes, man, what's happened?" Yarol's spluttering amazement jolted him out of his delight.

Smith turned. The little Venusian stood on the soft grass beside him, two small glasses full of pale green liquid in his hands and a look of almost idiotic bewilderment on his good-looking, cherubic face. "I come back into the booth with the pani-juice," he was muttering dazedly, "and there you are stepping through a door that—damn it! —that wasn't there when I left! And when I try to pull you back I—I—well, what did happen?"

"You stumbled through the Gateway—uninvited," said a cracked voice ominously behind them.

Both men whirled, hands dropping to their guns. For a dazed moment Smith had forgotten the voice that had lured him into the past. Now for the first time he saw his host—a small man, wizened, dark, stooping under his robe of rich black velvet as if the evil reflected on his seamed face were too heavy to bear upright. Dark wisdom glinted in the eyes that stared malevolently at Yarol.

"What's he saying, N.W.?" demanded the little Venusian.

"French—he's speaking French," muttered Smith distractedly, his gaze on the lined and evil face of their host. And then to the warlock, "Qui êtes-vous, m'sieur? Pourquoi—"

"I am Franga," interrupted the old man impatiently. "Franga, the warlock. And I am displeased with this blundering stranger who followed us through the door. His speech is as uncouth as his manners. Were it not for my magic I could not guess his meaning. Has he never learned a civilized tongue? Well, no matter—no matter.

"Listen, now. I have brought you here to avenge my defeat at the hands of the lady of Joiry whose castle you see on yonder hilltop. She stole my magical jewel, the Starstone, and I have vowed to find a man who could tame her if I had to search outside my own world and time to do it. I am too old myself, too feeble now. Once when I was as young and lusty as you I won the jewel from a rival as it must be won, bloodily in battle, or its magic is void to the possessor. Too, it may be given freely and maintain its power. But by neither method can I take it from Joiry, and so you must go up to the castle and in your own way win the stone.

"I can help you—a little. This much I can do—I can

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put you beyond the reach of the pikes and swords of Joiry's men."

Smith lifted an eyebrow and laid his hand lightly on his heat-gun, a blast of whose deadly violence could have mowed down a charging army like wheat ripe for the scythe.

"I'm armed," he said shortly.

Franga frowned. "Your arms would not avail you against a dagger in the back. No, you must do as I say. I have my reasons. You must go—beyond the Gateway."

Cold, pale eyes met the wizard's veiled stare for a moment. Then Smith nodded.

"It doesn't matter—my gun burns as straight in any land. What's your plan?"

"You must get the lady of Joiry through the Gateway—that same Gateway by which you came hither. But it will take you into another land, where—where"—he hesitated—"where there are—powers—favorable to me, and therefore to you. Make no mistake; it will not be easy to wrest the Starstone from Joiry. She has learned much of the dark lore."

"How shall we open the Gateway?"

Franga's left hand rose in a swift, strangely archaic gesture. "By this sign—learn it well—thus, and thus."

Smith's gun-callused brown hand imitated the queer motion. "Thus?"

"Yes—and the spell must be learned as well." Franga mouthed something queer and garbled, Smith echoing him with twisted tongue, for the words were as strange as he had ever spoken.

"Good." The warlock nodded, and again the strange syllables came incoherently from his thin lips, again his hand moved, giving the gestures an oddly cadenced rhythm. "When you voice the spell again the Gateway will open for you—as it opens now for me!"

Silently a shadow swept down upon them, dimming the sunlit hill. In its midst a blacker oblong darkened, the creak of a door sounded faintly as if from enormous distances.

"Bring Joiry through the Gateway," the wizard whispered, vicious lights crawling in his cold eyes, "and follow. Then you may seize the Starstone, for the powers in this this other land will fight with you. But not here, not in Joiry. You must follow me . . . As for this little man who blundered through my door of darkness—"

"He is my friend," said Smith hastily. "He will help me."

"Eh—well, let his life be hostage then to your success. Win me the stone, and I stay my wrath at his stupid interference. But remember—the sword of my magic hovers at your throat . . ."

A shadow quivered over the wizard's black-robed form. His image quivered with it as a reflection in troubled water shakes, and abruptly shadow and man were gone.

"By great Pharol," articulated Yarol in measured syllables, "will you tell me what this is all about? Drink this—you look as though you need it. As for

me"—he thrust a small glass into Smith's hand, and drained his own drink at a gulp—"if all this is a dream, I hope there's liquor in it. Will you kindly explain—"

Smith threw back his head and tossed the pani-spirits down his grateful throat. In crisp sentences he outlined the situation, but though his words were brisk his eyes lingered like a caress over the warm, sweet-scented hills of home.

"Urn-m," said Yarol, when he had finished. "Well, why are we waiting? Who knows, there may be a wine-cellar in that cozy-looking castle over there." He licked his lips reflectively, tasting the last of the green liqueur. "Let's get going. The sooner we meet the woman the sooner she'll offer us a drink."

So they went down the long hill, Earth's green grass springing under their spaceman's boots, Earth's warm June breezes caressing their Mars-burned faces.

The gray heights of Joiry loomed above the two before life stirred anywhere in the sunny midday silences of this lost century. Then high in the buttresses a man shouted, and presently, with a rattling of hooves and a jangle of accouterments, two horsemen came thundering across the lowered drawbridge. Yarol's hand went to his heat-gun, and a smile of ineffable innocence hovered on his face. The Venusian never looked so much like a Raphael cherub as when death was trembling on his trigger finger. But Smith laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Not yet."

The horsemen bore down on them, vizors lowered. For a moment Smith thought they would trample them down, and his hand hovered ever so lightly over his gun, but the men reined to a halt beside the two and one of them, glaring down through his helmet bars, roared a threatening question.

"We're strangers," Smith told him haltingly at first, and then more easily as long-forgotten French flowed back into his memory. "From another land. We come in peace."

"Few come in peace to Joiry," snapped the man, fingering his sword-hilt, "and we do not love strangers here. Have you, perhaps"—a covetous gleam brightened the eyes half hidden by the vizor—"gold? Or gems?"

"Your lady can judge of that, fellow." Smith's voice was as cold as the steel-gray eyes that caught the man's gaze in a stare of sudden savagery. "Take us to her."

The man hesitated for an instant, uncertainty eloquent in the eyes behind the vizor. Here was a dusty stranger, afoot, swordless, unarmed, such a fellow as Joiry's men might ride down on the highway and never notice twice. But his eyes were the eyes of—of—he had never seen such eyes. And command spoke in his cold, clipped voice. The soldier shrugged inside his mail and spat through the bars of the helmet.

"There's always room in Joiry's dungeons for one more varlet, if our lady

doesn't fancy you," he said philosophically. "Follow me, then."

Yarol, plodding across the drawbridge, murmured, "Was he speaking a language, N. W.—or merely howling like a wolf?"

"Shut up," muttered Smith. "I'm trying to think. We've got to have a good story ready for this—this Amazon."

"Some brawny wench with a face like a side of beef," speculated Yarol.

So they entered Joiry, over the drawbridge, under the spiked portcullis, into the high-vaulted, smoke-blackened banquet hall where Jirel sat at midday table. Blinking in the dimness Smith looked up to the dais at the head of the great T-shaped board where the lady of Joky sat. Her red mouth glistened with the grease of a mutton-bone she had been gnawing, and the bright hair fell flaming on her shoulders.

She looked into Smith's eyes.

Clear and pale and cold as steel they were, and Joiry's yellow gaze met them with a flash like the spark of meeting blades. For a long moment there was silence between them, and a curious violence flamed in the silent stare. A great mastiff loped to Smith's knee, fangs bared, a growl rumbling in its furry throat. Without looking down, Smith's hand found the beast's head and the dog sniffed for a moment and let the man rough its shaggy fur. Then Jirel broke the silence.

"Tigre—ici!" Her voice was strong and suddenly deeper in timbre, as if emotions she would not acknowledge were stirring in her. The mastiff went to her chair and lay down, finding a well-gnawed bone to crack. But Jirel's eyes were still fast on Smith's, and a slow flush was mounting her face.

"Pierre—Voisin," she said. "Who is he?"

"I bring you news of treasure," said Smith before they could speak. "My name is Smith, and I come from a—a far land."

"Smeet," she murmured. "Smeet. . . . Well, what of this treasure?"

"I would speak to you alone of that," he said guardedly. "There are jewels and gold, guarded by thieves but ripe for the harvesting. And I think Joiry—harvests well."

"C'est vrai. With the luck of the Starstone—" She hesitated, wiping her mouth on the back of a narrow hand. "Are you lying to me? You who come so curiously clad, who speak our language so strangely—always before I have seen the lie in the eyes of the man who tells it. But you—"

Suddenly, and so quickly that despite himself Smith blinked, she had flung herself across the table, leaning there on one knee while the slender blade of her dagger flickered in the air. She laid the point of it against Smith's bare brown throat, just where a strong pulse stirred beneath sunburnt flesh. He watched her without a quiver of expression, without twitch of muscle.

"I cannot read your eyes—Smeet ... Smeet. . . . But if you are lying to

me"—the point dented the full swell of his muscular throat—"if you are, I'll strip the skin from your carcass in Joiry's dungeons. Know that!"

The blade fell to her side. Something wet trickled stickily down Smith's neck inside the leather collar. So keen was that blade he had not known himself scratched. He said coldly,

"Why should I lie? I can't get the treasure alone—you can help me win it. I came to you for aid."

Unsmilingly she bent toward him across the table, sheathing her dagger. Her body was one sweep of flowing grace, of flowing strength, slim as a sword-blade, as she half knelt among the broken meats upon the board. Her yellow eyes were cloudy with doubt.

"I think there is something more," she said softly, "something you have left untold. And I have a memory now of a yelling warlock who fled from my blade, with certain—threats. . . ."

The yellow eyes were cold as polar seas. She shrugged at last and stood up, her gaze sweeping down over the long table where men and women divided their time between feasting and fascinated staring at the tableau by the tablehead.

"Bring him up to my apartment," she said to Smith's captors. "I'd learn more of this—treasure."

"Shall we stay to guard him?"

Jirel's lips curled scornfully.

"Is there a man here who can best me with steel—or anything else?" she demanded. "Guard yourselves, you cravens! If you brought him in without getting a poniard in the belly, I can safely talk with him in the heart of Joiry's stronghold. Well, don't stand there gaping—go!"

Smith shrugged off the heavy hand laid on his shoulder.

"Wait!" he said crisply. "This man goes with me."

Jirel's eyes dwelt on Yarol with a velvety, menacing appraisal. Yarol's sidelong black stare met hers eloquently.

"Brawny wench, did I say?" he murmured in the liquid cadences of High Venusian. "Aie—the Minga maidens were not more luscious. I'll kiss that pretty mouth of yours before I go back to my own time, lady! I'll—"

"What is he saying—he gurgles like a brook!" Jirel broke in impatiently. "He is your friend? Take them both, then, Voisin."

Jirel's apartment lay in the top of the highest tower of joiry, at the head of a winding stone stairway. Lofty-roofed, hung with rich tapestries, carpeted with furs, the place seemed to Smith at once alien and yet dearly familiar with a strange, heart-warming familiarity. Separated from his own time by dusty centuries, yet it was earth-sprung, earth-born, reared on the green hills of his home planet.

"What I need," said Yarol carefully, "is some more Minga-liqueur. Did you see how that hell-cat looked me over? Black Pharol, I don't know if I'd sooner kiss her or kill her! Why, the damned witch would run her sword through my gullet on a whim—for the sheer deviltry of it!"

Smith chuckled deep in his throat. "She's dangerous. She—"

Jirel's voice behind him said confidently,

"Wait beyond the door, Voisin. These two strangers may visit our dungeons, after all. This little one—how are you named?"

"He's called Yarol," Smith said curtly.

"Yes—Yarol. Well, we may find means to make you a taller man, Yarol. You would like that, eh? We have a little device—a ladder which I got from the Count of Gorz when he visited me last summer—and the Count is clever in these things."

"He does not speak your tongue," Smith interrupted.

"No? It is not strange—he looks as though he came from a far land indeed. I have never seen a man like him." Her eyes were puzzled. She half turned her shoulder to them, toying with a sword that lay on a table at her side, and said without looking up, "Well, your story. Let's have it. And—yes, I'll give you one more chance at living—if you're lying, go now. None will stop you. You are strangers. You do not know Joiry—or Joiry's vengeance."

Over her shoulder she slanted into Smith's eyes a level glance that burnt like the stab of lightnings. Hell-fires flickered in it, and despite himself Smith knew a sudden crawl of unease. Yarol, though he did not understand the words, whistled between his teeth. For a heartbeat no one spoke. Then very softly in Smith's ear a voice murmured,

"She has the Starstone. Say the spell of the Gateway!"

Startled, he glanced around. Jirel did not stir. Her lion-yellow eyes were still brooding on him with a gaze that smoldered. Yarol was watching her in fascination. And Smith realized abruptly that he alone had heard the cracked quaver of command in—yes, in Franga's voice! Franga, the warlock, whispering through some half-opened door into infinity. Without glancing aside at Yarol he said in the ripples of High Venusian, "Get ready—watch the door and don't let her out."

Jirel's face changed. She swung round from the table, her brows a straight line of menace. "What are you muttering? What devil's work are you at?"

Smith ignored her. Almost involuntarily his left hand was moving in the queer, quick gesture of the spell. Phrases in the unearthly tongue that Franga had taught him burned on his lips with all the ease of his mother-tongue. Magic was all about him, guiding his lips and hands.

Alarm blazed up in Jirel's yellow eyes. An oath smoked on her lips as she lunged forward, the sword she had been toying with a gleam in her fist. Yarol grinned. The heat-gun danced in his hand, and a white-hot blast traced a trail of fire on the rug at Jirel's feet. She shut her red lips on a

word half uttered, and twisted in midair, flinging herself back in swift terror from this sudden gush of hell-flame. Behind her the door burst open and men in armor clanged into the room, shouting, dragging at their swords.

And then—down swept the shadow over the noisy room. Cloudy as the sweep of the death-angel's wings it darkened the sunny air so that the ray from Yarol's gun blazed out in dazzling splendor through the gloom. As if in the misted depths of a mirror Smith saw the men in the door shrink back, mouths agape, swords clattering from their hands. He scarcely heeded them, for in the far wall where a moment before a tall, narrow window had opened upon r sunlight and the green hills of Earth—was a door. Very slowly, very quietly it was swinging open, and the black of utter infinity lay beyond its threshold.

"Hai—s'lelei—Smith!" Yarol's warning voice yelled in the darkness, and Smith threw himself back in a great leap as he felt a sword-blade prick his shoulder. Jirel sobbed a furious curse and plunged forward, her sword and sword-arm a single straight bar. In the dimness Yarol's gun hand moved, and a thin beam of incandescence burned bright. Jirel's sword hissed in midair, glowed blindingly and then dripped in a shower of white-hot drops to the stone floor. Her momentum carried her forward with a hilt and a foot of twisted steel still gripped in her stabbing hand, so that she lunged against Smith's broad chest thrusting with the stump of the ruined sword.

His arms prisoned her, a writhing fury that sobbed wild oaths and twisted like a tiger against him. He grinned and tightened his arms until the breath rushed out of her crushed lungs and he felt her ribs give a little against his chest.

Then vertigo was upon him. Dimly he realized that the girl's arms had gone round his neck in a frantic grip as the room swayed—tilted dizzily, amazingly, revolving as though on a giant axis—or as if the black depths of the Gateway were opening under him . . . he could not tell, nor was he ever to understand, just what happened in that fantastic instant when nature's laws were warped by strange magic. The floor was no longer solid beneath his feet. He saw Yarol twisting like a small sleek cat as he stumbled and fell—fell into oblivion with his gun hand upflung. He was falling himself, plunging downward through abysses of dark, clasping frightened girl whose red hair streamed wildly in the wind of their falling.

Stars were swirling about them. They were dropping slowly through stars while the air danced and dazzled all around them. Smith had time to catch his breath and flex the muscles of his gun thigh to be sure the comforting weight pressed there before a spongy ground received them softly. They fell like people in a nightmare, slowly and easily, with no jar, upon the strange dim surface of the land beyond the Gateway.

Yarol landed on his feet like the cat he was, gun still gripped and ready, black eyes blinking in the starry dark. Smith, hampered by the terrified Jirel, sank with nightmare ease to the ground and rebounded a little from its sponginess. The impact knocked the stump of sword from the girl's hand, and he pitched it away into the blinding shimmer of the star-bright dark before he helped her to her feet.

For once Joiry was completely subdued. The shock of having her sword melted by hell-fire in her very grasp, the dizzying succession of manhandling and vertigo and falling into infinity had temporarily knocked all violence out of her, and she could only gasp and stare about this incredible starlit darkness, her red lips parted in amazement.

As far as they could see the mist of stars quivered and thickened the dim air, tiny points of light that danced all around them as if thousands of fireflies were winking all at once. Half blinded by that queer, shimmering dazzle, they could make out no familiar topography of hills or valleys, only that spongy dark ground beneath them, that quiver of stars blinding the dim air.

Motion swirled the shimmer a little distance away, and Jirel snarled as Franga's dark-robed form came shouldering through the stars, spinning them behind him in the folds of his cloak as he moved forward. His withered features grimaced into a grin when he saw the dazed three.

"Ah—you have her!" he rasped. "Well, what are you waiting for? Take the stone! She carries it on her."

Smith's pale eyes met the warlock's through the star-shimmer, and his firm lips tightened. Something was wrong. He sensed it unmistakably—danger whispered in the air. For why should Franga have brought them here if the problem was no more complex than the mere wresting of a jewel from a woman? No—there must be some other reason for plunging them into this starry dimness. What had Franga hinted—powers here that were favorable to him? Some dark, nameless god dwelling among the stars?

The warlock's eyes flared at Jirel in a flash of pure murder, and suddenly Smith understood a part of the puzzle. She was to die, then, when the jewel could no longer protect her. Here Franga could wreak vengeance unhampered, once the Starstone was in his hands. Here Joiry was alone and helpless—and the flame of hatred in the wizard's eyes could be quenched by no less than the red flood of her bloody death.

Smith glanced back at Jirel, white and shaken with recent terror, but snarling feebly at the warlock in invincible savagery that somehow went to his heart as no helplessness could have done. And suddenly he knew he could not surrender her up to Franga's hatred. The shift of scene had shifted their relations, too, so that the three mortals—he could not think of Franga as wholly human—stood together against Franga and his malice and his magic. No, he could not betray Jirel.

His gaze flicked Yarol's with a lightning message more eloquent than a warning shout. It sent a joyous quiver of tautening along the little Venusian's body, and both men's gun hands dropped to their sides with simultaneous casualness.

Smith said: "Return us to Joiry and I'll get the stone for you: Here--no."

That black glare of murder shifted from Jirel to Smith, bathing him in hatred.

"Take it from her now—or die!"

A smothered sound like the snarl of an angry beast halted Smith's reflexive snatch at his gun. Past him Jirel lunged, her red hair streaming with stars, her fingers flexed into claws as she leaped bare-handed at the warlock. Rage had drowned out her momentary terror, and soldier's curses tumbled blistering from her lips as she sprang.

Franga stepped back; his hand moved intricately and between him and the charging fury the starlight thickened—solidified into a sheet like heavy glass. Jirel dashed herself against it and was hurled back as if she had plunged into a stone wall. The silvery mist of the barrier dissolved as she reeled back, gasping with rage, and Franga laughed thinly.

"I am in my own place now, vixen," he told her. "I do not fear you or any man here. It is death to refuse me—bloody death. Give me the stone."

"I'll tear you to rags with my bare nails!" sobbed Joiry. "I'll have the eyes out of your head, you devil! Ha—even here you fear me! Come out from behind your rampart and let me slay you!"

"Give me the stone." The wizard's voice was calm.

"Return us all to Joiry and I think she'll promise to let you have it." Smith fixed a meaning stare upon Jirel's blazing yellow eyes. She shrugged off the implied advice furiously.

"Never! Yah—wait!" She leaped to Yarol's side and, as he shied nervously away, his eyes mistrustfully on her pointed nails, snatched from his belt the small knife he carried. She set the blade against the full, high swell of her bosom and laughed in Franga's face. "Now—kill me if you can!" she taunted, her face a blaze of defiance. "Make one move to slay me—and I slay myself! And the jewel is lost to you for ever!"

Franga bit his lip and stared at her through the mist of stars, fury glaring in his eyes. There was no hesitancy in her, and he knew it. She would do as she threatened, and —

"The stone had no virtue if not taken by violence or given freely," he admitted. "Lifted from a suicide's corpse, it would lose all value to anyone. I will bargain with you then, Joiry."

"You'll not! You'll set me free or lose the jewel for ever."

Franga turned goaded eyes on Smith. "Either way I lose it, for once in her own land Joiry would die before surrendering it, even as she would here. You! Fulfill your bargain—get me the Starstone!"

Smith shrugged. "Your meddling's spoiled everything now. There's little I can do."

The angry black eyes searched his for a long moment, evil crawling in their deeps. They flicked to Yarol. Both men stood on the spongy ground with feet braced, bodies balanced in the easy tautness which characterizes the gunman, hands light on their weapons, eyes very steady, very deadly. They were two very dangerous men, and Smith realized that even here Franga was taking no chances with their strange weapons. Behind them Jirel

snarled like an angry cat, her fingers flexing themselves involuntarily. And suddenly the wizard shrugged.

"Stay here then, and rot!" he snapped, swinging his cloak so that the stars swirled about him in a blinding shower. "Stay here and starve and thirst until you'll surrender. I'll not bargain with you longer."

They blinked in the sudden eddy of that starry mist, and when their vision cleared the bent black figure had vanished. Blankly they looked at one another through the drifting stars.

"Now what?" said Yarol. "Shan, but I could drink! Why did he have to mention thirst?"

Smith blinked about him in the swirling brightness. For once he was utterly at a loss. The wizard had every advantage over them in this dim, blinding outland where his god reigned supreme.

"Well, what have we to lose?" he shrugged at last. "He's not through with us, but there's nothing we can do. I'm for exploring a bit, anyhow."

Yarol raked the starry dark with a dubious gaze. "We couldn't be worse off," he admitted.

"Comment?" demanded Jirel, suspicious eyes shifting from one to the other. Smith said briefly.

"We're going to explore. Franga's got some trick in mind, we think. We'd be fools to wait here for him to come back. We—oh, wait!" He snapped his fingers involuntarily and turned a startled face on the surprised two. The Gateway! He knew the spell that opened it—Franga had taught him that. Why not voice the invocation now and see what happened? He drew a quick breath and opened his mouth to speak—and then faltered with the remembered words fading from his very tongue-tip. His fingers rose halfheartedly in the intricate gestures of the spell, groping after the vanished memory as if it could be plucked out of the starmisted air. No use. His mind was as blank of the magical remembrance as if it had never been. Franga's magic worked well indeed.

"Are you crazy?" demanded Yarol, regarding his hesitating ally with an amazed gaze. Smith grinned ruefully.

"I thought I had an idea," he admitted. "But it's no good. Come on."

The spongy ground was wicked to walk on. They stumbled against one another, swearing in a variety of tongues at the blinding air they groped through, the hard going under foot, the wretched uncertainty that kept their eyes scanning the dazzle as they walked.

It was Jirel who first caught sight of the shrunken brown thing. Indeed, she almost stumbled over it, a mummified body, curled up on its side so that its bony knees nearly touched the brown fleshless forehead. Smith turned at her little gasp, saw the thing, and paused to bend over it wonderingly.

It was not pleasant to see. The skin, stretched tightly over the bony frame, was parchment-brown, hideously rough in texture, almost as if the hide of

some great lizard had been stretched over the skeleton of a man. The face was hidden, but the hands were slender claws, whitish in places where the granulated skin had been stripped from the bone. Wisps of straw-like hair still clung to the wrinkled scalp.

"Well, come along," said Yarol impatiently. "Certainly he can't help us, or harm us either."

Silently assenting, Smith swung on his heel. But some instinct—the little tingling danger-note that whispers in the back of a spaceman's head—made him turn. The position of the recumbent figure had changed. Its head was lifted, and it was staring at him with swollen, glazed eyes.

Now the thing should have been dead. Smith knew that, somehow, with a dreadful certainty. The face was a brown skull-mask, with a vaguely canine cast, and the nose, although ragged and eaten away in places, protruded with a shocking resemblance to a beast's muzzle.

The limbs of the horror twitched and moved slowly, and the skeletal, tattered body arose. It dragged itself forward among the whirling star-motes, and instinctively Smith recoiled. There was something so unutterably dreary about it, despite the dreadful attitude of hunger that thrust its beast's head forward, that he sickened a little as he stared. From Jirel came a little cry of repugnance, quickly muffled.

"We'd better get out of here," said Smith harshly. Yarol did not speak for a moment. Then he murmured, "There are more of the things, N. W. See?"

Hidden by the starry mists close to the ground, the ghastly things must have been closing in upon them with that hideous dreary slowness for the past several minutes. They came on, scores of them veiled in stars, moving with a dreadful deliberation, and none of them stood upright. From all sides they were converging, and the dancing motes lent them a curious air of nightmare unreality, like carven gargoyles seen through a fog.

For the most part they came on hands and knees, withered brown skull-faces and glaring bulbous eyes staring blindly at the three. For it seemed to Smith that the beings were blind; the swollen eyes were quite whitish and pupilless. There was nothing about them that savored of the breathing flesh which they so hideously caricatured save the terrible hunger of their approach, made doubly hideous by the fact that those rotting jaws and parchment-dry bellies could never satisfy it by any normal means.

The deformed muzzles of some of them were twitching, and Smith realized abruptly what instinct had led them here. They hunted, apparently, by scent. And their circle was closing in, so that the three humans, recoiling before that creeping, dryly rustling approach, stood very close together now, shoulder to shoulder. Smith felt the girl shudder against him, and then give him a swift sidelong glance, hot with anger that she should have betrayed weakness even for a moment.

A little hesitantly he drew his heat-gun. There was something a bit incongruous about the very thought of shooting at these already dead things. But they were coming closer, and the prospect of contact with those brown, scaling bodies was so repulsive that his finger pressed the trigger

almost of its own volition.

One of the approaching horrors toppled over, the left arm completely burned from its body. Then it regained its balance and crawled onward with a crab-like sidewise motion, the severed arm forgotten behind it, although the skeleton fingers writhed and clawed convulsively. The creature made no outcry, and no blood flowed from the wound.

"Shan!" breathed Yarol. "Can't they—die?" His gun jarred and bucked in his hand. The head of the nearest horror became a blackened, cindery stub, but the thing betrayed no pain. It crawled on slowly, the nimbus of swirling stars like a malefic halo about the burned remnant of a head.

"Yarol!" said Smith sharply. "Double strength—we'll cut a path through them. Follow us, Jirel." Without waiting for an acknowledgment he flicked over a lever on his heat-gun's muzzle, and sent the searing ray flaming through the dark.

The stars danced more swiftly, troubled. Smith sensed a quick, intangible menace in their aroused motion. It was as though something, drowsy and dreaming, had awakened suddenly from slumber to confront the intruders in this strange land. Yet nothing happened; the stars raced back from the heat-ray's beam, but the crawling monsters paid it no attention, even though they blackened into cinders as they crept. The dry, rustling hordes of them advanced straight into the heat-gun's path, and crisped into ruin—and crunched under the feet of their destroyers into fragments that twitched and squirmed with unquenchable animation too hideous to be called life.

Yarol and Smith and Jirel moved forward over brittle black things that still moved and crunched and crept beneath their feet. The two heat-guns hissed softly, mowing a path. Jirel's yellow eyes dwelt speculatively on Smith's brawny back, and once she touched Yarol's dagger sheathed at her side. But she made no hostile move.

So they won free at last from the withered brown horrors, although until the thickening star-mist hid them Smith could see the nightmare horde crawling behind them, slowly, inexorably. And ever the stars danced and swung in their oddly patterned orbits, seeming to watch with detached and sardonic amusement as the three moved on.

The misty brilliance thickened about them sometimes until they could not see each other's faces; sometimes it thinned so that distances were visible, long corridors of emptiness stretched through the stars. Along one of these aisles at last they caught a glimpse of rising ground, and turned toward it in some hopeless hope of escape.

The spongy earth became firmer as they advanced, until by the time they reached the upland they were walking on black, splintered rock from which a sort of star-veiled mountain rose into the misty upper air. Here the stars thickened about them again, so that they could see nothing, but they stumbled up the jagged slope blindly, clutching at the rock with slipping fingers as they helped one another from ledge to ledge.

In Smith, as he mounted the difficult slopes, a fever of exploration had

begun to burn so hotly that their danger retired to the back of his mind. What lay ahead, what unimaginable heights rearing among the stars, what lands beyond the mountain? He was not to know, then or ever.

The slope had grown steeper and more rugged at every step. There was no progress save by painful climbing. And now, as Smith braced his back against a rocky outcropping, straining upward to his full height as he supported Yarol's scrambling boots which a moment before had left his shoulders, his arms encountered a queer, thick obstruction in the starry mist overhead. Full of the desire to know what lay ahead, his mind intent on helping Yarol to a foothold above, he scarcely heeded it until the obstruction had thickened until he could hardly move his hands.

Then the shock of memory jarred him sickeningly awake as he recalled the wall of mist that had solidified between Franga and Jirel. He moved with whiplash swiftness to jerk his arms down, but not quite swiftly enough. That thickening mist had turned to strong steel about his wrists, and after a moment of surging struggle against it, while the veins stood out on his forehead and the blood thundered in his ears, he relaxed against the stone, stretched painfully to full height so that he almost swung from his prisoned wrists, and blinked about him in the dazzling dim air, searching for Franga.

He knew now, with a sick regretfulness, that danger had never been farther from them in the mist than they had been from one another. Franga must have moved invisibly at their sides, waiting patiently for the men's hands to stretch far enough from their guns so that his shackles could prison them before they could reach the weapons. Well, he had them now.

From above, Yarol's voice, muffled in the starry mist, spoke passionately of gods and devils. Smith heard boots thrashing upon the rock and realized that the little Venusian must be struggling with bonds like his own. As for himself, he stood spread-eagled with his back to the mountain and his face to the starry void, boots braced on a long slope of rising stone.

He saw Jirel's back as she loitered below them on the slope, waiting for their call that the next highest ledge had been reached. He said quietly, "Joiry!" and met her gaze with a small, rueful grin.

"Well—what?" She was at his side before the question was out of her mouth, a blaze smoldering in her yellow eyes as she saw what had happened. Then she said viciously, "Good! This comes of trafficking with warlocks! May you hang there till you rot!"

"Heh!" came a dry chuckle from behind her. "He'll do just that, Joiry, if he doesn't obey my commands!" Franga came shuffling up the slope, emerging from the stars as from a thick fog, his malice-bright eyes gloating on the prisoned men. From above, Yarol's voice poured smoking Venusian curses upon the wizard's unheeding head.

Jirel matched his fervor with a hot French oath and spun toward Franga purposefully. He smiled crookedly and stepped back, his hands weaving in the air between them. And once more the cloudy barrier thickened in the dimness. Through it, in a triumphant voice, Franga called to Smith,

"Now will you fulfill your bargain and wrest the jewel from Jirel?"

Smith pressed his head back against the stone and said wearily,

"Not until you return us to Joiry."

The warlock's eyes were on his, and in the baffled fury glaring there he thought he read suddenly the full reason why they had been brought here. Franga had no thought of paying the debt he had contracted, nor of letting any of the three escape alive. Once the stone was surrendered they would die here, in some unimaginable way, and their bones would whiten until Judgment Day in the darkness at the mountain's foot. Their only hope of salvation lay in their ability to bargain with Franga over the Starstone. So he shut his lips on the refusal and shifted his shoulders to ease his already aching arms. The weight of the gun on his leg was a tantalization almost unbearable, so near and yet so hopelessly far from his shackled hands.

Franga said: "I think I can change your mind."

His hands behind the barrier moved cryptically, and '1 there came a stirring in the stars that danced between him and Smith. They moved as if fireflies were swarming there, moved toward Smith and swirled about him dizzyingly, blindingly, so that the eye despaired of following their motion. They turned into streaks of flame spinning about him, and now the nearest brushed across his cheek.

At the touch he started involuntarily, jerking back his head from the flame. For it was hot with a heat that sent pain stabbing deeper than a ray-burn through his flesh. Above him he heard Yarol's sharply caught breath, and knew that the hot pain was upon him too. He set his teeth and stared through the swirl at the warlock, his eyes pale and deadly. The spinning flames closed in, brushing his body with scores of tiny tongues, and at every touch the white-hot pain of their torment leaped through him until it seemed to him that every inch of his body flamed with deep-running agony.

Through the blinding pain and the blinding shimmer Franga's voice rasped, "Will you do my bidding?"

Stubbornly Smith shook his head, clinging even in the hot torture of the flames to the desperate hope which was all that remained to him—that so long as Franga had not the Starstone he dared not kill them. Smith had endured pain before; he could endure it now long enough to hold Franga to his bargain. And Yarol must endure it with him for a while. The Venusian had a shameless sort of bravery against physical pain for the simple reason that he could not endure it, quietly fainted and was out of it if called upon to suffer long. Smith hoped he reached that point soon. He said, "No," shortly, between clenched teeth, and pressed his head back against the rock, feeling sweat gather on his forehead as the flashing streaks of flame seared by him, every touch sending deep agony flaming through his flesh.

Franga laughed in a brief, hard cackle and gestured with one hand. And the star-swirls began to flash like knives before Smith's eyes. If they had flamed before, now they dazzled too blindingly to follow. The deep, hot torture of their flickering roared over him in a storm of agony, so that the torment wiped out all thought of Franga or Jirel or Yarol or anything but his own racked flesh flaming with ray-hot pain. He did not know that his fists

were clenched above the shackles, or that the muscles stood out in ridges along his jaws as he fought to keep the agony voiceless behind his teeth. The world was a hell of unbearable torment that swept him on a white-hot tide of pain deep into blazing oblivion. He did not even feel the drag on his wrists as his knees gave way beneath him.

Jirel had been watching with mingling emotions as the stars began to swirl into flames about her tall enemy. Triumph was foremost among them, as resentment and fury were foremost among her thoughts just then. But somehow, she who had looked hardily on torture many times before now felt a queer, hot weakness rising in her as the stars became brushing flames and she saw the sweat beading Smith's forehead and his fists clench against the rock.

Then Franga's hateful voice demanded that he rob her by violence of her jewel and she had tensed herself involuntarily to the struggle before she heard Smith's tortured but resolute "No." She stared at him then half in amazement, her mind whirling with wonder at his motives. And a small, reluctant admiration was coloring her resentment of him as she watched. Jirel was a connoisseur of torture, and she could not remember a man who had endured it more resolutely than Smith. Nor was there a sound from Yarol, half hidden in the starry mist above them, though the small flames streaked the dimness even there.

Then she saw the tenseness melting from Smith's racked body as his long legs buckled at the knees, saw him collapse against the mountainside, swinging by his wrists from the shackles. And a sudden fury of sympathy and hot emotion rushed over her, a sudden gust of pain in his pain. Without realizing how it had happened she found herself beating with clenched fists against the barrier that parted her from Franga, heard her own voice crying,

"Stop it! Stop! Let him go free—I give you the Starstone!"

In the depths of his pain-flaming oblivion Smith heard that high, passionate cry. The significance of it jolted him back into the memory that a world existed outside the burning circle of his agony, and with infinite effort he lifted his sagging head, found a footing on the rocky slope once more, struggled back into consciousness and flaming anguish. He called in a voice as hoarse as if it had screamed itself raw,

"Jirel! Jirel, you fool, don't do it! He'll kill us all! Jirel!"

If she heard him she did not heed. She was wrenching with both hands at the doeskin tunic buckled at her throat, and Franga, the barrier dissolving, leaned eagerly forward with clawed hands outstretched.

"Don't—Jirel, don't!" yelled Smith despairingly through the dazzle of the flames as the leather parted and suddenly, blindingly, the Starstone flamed in her hands.

Even his own hot pain was blotted for a moment from Smith's mind as he stared. Franga bent forward, breath sucked in, eyes riveted upon the great pale glory of the jewel.

There was utter silence in that strange, dim place as the Starstone blazed through the dusk, its cold, still pallor burning in Jirel's fingers like a block of frozen flame. Looking down, she saw again her own fingers distorted through its translucency, saw again that queer, moving flicker as if a shadow stirred in the deeps of the stone.

For a moment it seemed to her as if these smooth, cool surfaces against her hands enclosed a space as vast as the heavens. In a moment of sudden vertigo she might have been staring deep into an infinity through whose silences moved a something that filled it from edge to edge. Was it a world she held here, as vast in its own dimensions as space itself, even though her narrow hands cradled it between them? And was there not a Dweller in that vast, glowing place—a moving shadow that—

"Jirel!" Smith's pain-hoarse voice startled her out of her dreaming daze. She lifted her head and moved toward him, half visible in the swirl of his torture, holding the jewel like a lamp in her hands. "Don't—don't do it!" begged Smith, gripping hard at his ebbing consciousness as the flames stabbed through him.

"Free him!" she commanded Franga, feeling her own throat constrict inexplicably as she saw the pain etched upon Smith's scarred face.

"You surrender the stone willingly?" The warlock's eyes were ravenous upon her hands.

"Yes—yes, only free him!"

Smith choked on his own desperation as he saw her holding out the jewel. At any cost he knew he must keep it from Franga's clutches, and to his pain-dazed brain there seemed only one way for that. How it would help he did not stop to think, but he put all his weight on his prisoned wrists, swinging his long body through the burning stars in an arc as he kicked the jewel from Jirel's outstretched hands.

She gasped; Franga screamed in a thin, high note that quivered with terror as the Starstone was dashed from her hands against the jagged rock of the mountainside. There was a cracking sound that tinkled like broken glass, and then

And then a pale, bright glory rolled up in their faces as if the light that dwelt in the jewel were pouring out of its shattered prison. The winking stars were swallowed up in its splendor, the dim air glowed and brightened, the whole mountainside was bathed in the calm, still glory that a moment before had blazed in the Starstone's deeps.

Franga was muttering frantically, twisting his hands in spells that accomplished nothing, gabbling in a cracked voice incantations that evoked no magic. It was as if all his power had melted with the melting stars, the vanished dimness, and he stood unprotected in the full glow of this alien light.

Smith was scarcely heeding it. For as the great pale glory billowed up about him the flashing torment of the stars vanished as their flames vanished, and the utter bliss of peace after pain left him so weak with relief that as

the shackles dissolved about his wrists he could only reel back against the rock while waves of near-oblivion washed over him.

A rattling and scuffling sounded above him, and Yarol's small form slid to the ground at his feet in the complete relaxation of unconsciousness. There was a silence while Smith breathed deeply and slowly, gathering strength again, while Yarol stirred in the beginnings of awakening and Franga and Jirel stared about them in the broadening light from the Starstone.

Then down about them swept a thing that can be called only a shadow of light—a deeper brilliance in the glory of the pale day about them. Smith found himself staring directly into its blazing heart, unblinded, although he could make out no more than the shadowy outlines of a being that hung above them inhuman, utterly alien—but not terrible, not menacing. A presence as tangible as flame—and as intangible.

And somehow he sensed a cool and impersonal regard, an aloof, probing gaze that seemed to search the depths of his mind and soul. He strained his eyes, staring into the heart of the white blaze, trying to make out the nature of the being that regarded him. It was like the graceful whorl of a nautilus—and yet he sensed that his eyes could not fully comprehend the unearthly curves and spirals that followed a fantastic, non-Euclidean system of some alien geometry. But the beauty of the thing he could recognize, and there was a deep awe within him, and a feeling of fathomless delight in the wonder and beauty of the being he gazed on.

Franga was screaming thinly and hoarsely, falling to his knees to hide his eyes from the deep splendor. The air quivered, the shadow of brilliance quivered, and a thought without words quivered too through the minds of the three at the mountain's foot.

"For this release We are grateful," said a voiceless voice as deep and still and somehow flaming as the light that made it manifest. "We Whom strong magic prisoned in the Starstone ages ago would grant one last favor before We return to Our own place again. Ask it of Us."

"Oh, return us home again!" gasped Jirel before Smith could speak. "Take us out of this terrible place and send us home!"

Abruptly, almost instantaneously, the shadow of light enveloped them, swept blindingly about them all. The mountain dropped away underfoot, the glory-bright air swept sidewise into nothingness. It was as if the walls of space and time opened up all around them.

Smith heard Franga's shriek of utter despair—saw Jirel's face whirled by him with a sudden, desperate message blazing in her yellow eyes, the red hair streaming like a banner in the wind—and then that dazzle all about him was the dulled gleam of steel walls, and a cold steel surface was smooth against his cheek.

He lifted his head heavily and stared into silence into Yarol's eyes across the table in the little Martian drinking-booth he had left an eon ago. In silence the Venusian returned that long stare.

Then Yarol leaned back in his chair and called, "Marnak! Liquor—quick!" and

swung round and began to laugh softly, crazily.

Smith groped for the glass of segir-whisky he had pushed away when he rose from this table, ages past. He threw back his head and tossed the liquid down his throat with a quick, stiff-wristed gesture, closing his eyes as the familiar warmth burned through him. Behind the closed lids flashed the remembrance of a keen, pale face whose eyes blazed with some sudden violence of emotion, some message he would never know—whose red streaming hair was a banner on the wind. The face of a girl dead two thousand years in time, light-years of space away, whose very dust was long lost upon the bright winds of earth.

Smith shrugged and drained his glass.