

The Sorcerer of Rhiannon

He had been without water for three days. The last of his concentrated food, spared by the sandstorm that had caught him away from his ship and driven him beyond all hope of finding it, rattled uselessly in his belt pouch, because his throat refused to swallow.

Now Max Brandon stood on a dune of restless ochre dust, watching the coming of another storm.

It rolled crouching across the uneasy distances of the desert, touched blood-red above by the little far sun of Mars. Brandon heard the first faint keening of it above the thin whine of the eternal winds that wander across the dead sea bottoms.

Brandon's sharp-cut face, handsome with its sea-blue eyes and bronzed skin, and the thin scars of battle that enhanced rather than marred, creased into a grin.

"So the grave-robber is going to be buried instead this time," he whispered. The skirling wind blew ochre dust in his eyes and mouth, the gold-brown stubble of beard.

"All right," he said to the storm. "See if you can make me stay down." He waved a mocking hand at it and staggered down into the hollow.

To himself, he said ironically, "There's no one here to see your act, Brandy. No pretty ladies, no interplanetary televisions. The storm doesn't care. And you're going to die, dead, just like ordinary mortals."

His knees buckled under him, flung him headlong in the stifling dust. The simplest thing to do would be just to lie there. Drowning in these Martian sea bottoms was just like drowning in the sea. All you had to do was breathe.

He thought of all the ships that had foundered when there was water here, and how his bones would join theirs in the end. Red dust, blowing forever in the wandering wind.

His white grin flashed briefly. "I always said, Brandy, that you knew too much to take advice."

Everybody had advised him not to come. Jarthur, head of the Society for the Preservation of Martian Relics. Sylvia Eustace. And Dhu Kar of Venus.

Jarthur wanted to put him in the Phobos mines for looting, which was bad. Sylvia wanted to marry him, which was worse. And Dhu Kar, his best competitor and deadliest enemy, wanted to get to the Lost Islands first, which was worst of all.

"So I came," Brandon reflected. "Right in the middle of the stormy season. And here, apparently, I stay."

But he couldn't stay down. Something drove him up onto his feet again, something that wouldn't listen to what his reason was saying about its being no use.

He went on, part of the time on hands and knees, to nowhere, with the Martian desert-thirst burning him like living fire, and the first red-dun veils of the storm blowing past him.

He began to see things in the clouds. Ships in full sail, the ancient high-prowed Martian galleys. He could hear the thrumming of their rigging, knowing with the last sane scrap of his mind that it was his own blood drumming in his ears.

The wind screamed over him and the red dust rolled like water. It was dark, and the galleys rushed by faster and faster. They got clearer, so that he knew that he was going, and still he wouldn't lie down.

And then, through those fleeing phantom ships, he saw a wreck tossing.

Her masts were gone, her hull canted, her high-flared bow thrust up in a last challenge to the wind. Max Brandon knew, because he could see so clearly the wide-winged bird that made her figurehead, that he was almost dead.

His dust-filled eyes lost even the phantom ships. He wondered distantly why he should imagine a wreck among them. The wind hurled him on. He fell. And, driven by some blind, dogged stubbornness, struggled up again.

The wind flung him with spiteful viciousness against something. Something solid. Something hard and unmoving, in the heart of the restless Martian desert.

It hurt. He went down and would have stayed there, but for the stubborn thing that lashed him on.

There was metal under his hands, singing with the impact of the storm. He looked up, forcing himself to see. A deck slanted down to him, bare of everything but the stumps of broken masts.

He stared at the ship, not believing his sight. But his aching body told him it was there. He thumped it with his hand, and it rang thinly.

It wasn't any use, really, because he had no water. But the thing that had driven him kicked him now up over the broken rail and along the canting deck to the broad cabin in the stern.

Feeble and distant, his heart was pounding with excitement. A ship, sunk ages ago in the Sea of Kesh, sailing through the red clouds of the storm—

It was impossible. He was delirious. But the closed door of the cabin was before him, and he tried to open it.

There was no catch.

He grew angry. He'd come this far. He wouldn't be balked. He drew himself erect, his tawny hair whipping in the storm, and roared at the door, commanding it to open.

It did. Max Brandon walked through, and it closed silently.

There was soft light in the cabin, and a faint choking pungency. A table of Martian teak inlaid with gold stood in the center of a room shaped to the curve of the galley's stern, furnished in somber richness.

A man sat in a carven chair beside the table. He was fair and slight in a plain black robe, with no ornament but a curious band of gray metal about his head, bearing the figure of a wide-winged bird.

His face was gentle, grave, rather young. Only in the strong lines about his

mouth and the fathomless darkness of his eyes was there any hint—

Of what? Max Brandon, dying on his feet, knew that the man wasn't there. Simply wasn't, because he couldn't be.

He looked alive, but he was too rigid, and his eyes didn't wink. Didn't wink or move, staring at the girl who sat facing him.

She was hardly more than a child, with the supple strength of a sleeping deer in the long lines of her, and the stamp of a burning, vital pride still on her clear-cut face.

She wore a short white tunic with a jeweled girdle, and the cloth was no whiter than her skin. Her eyes looked at the man, unconquered even in death.

They were golden, those eyes, clear and rich as pure metal. Her hair grew low in a peak between them, swept back and down and hung rippling over her shoulders.

Max Brandon stared at it, swaying on his feet, feeling the blood swell and throb in his throat.

Her hair was blue.

Blue. The deep, living blue of an Earthly sea, with tints of cobalt in its ripples and the pale color of distance where it caught the light.

He followed it down across her white arms, and then he saw the shackles on her wrists. Her hands lay on the table, slim and strong, and on the thumb of the left one was a ring with a dull-blue stone.

Brandon's brain burned with more than thirst.

"The Prira Cen!" he whispered, "The Blue Hairs, the oldest race of Mars. Half mythical. They were almost extinct when the Sorcerers of the Lost Islands were the governing brain of the planet, and that was forty thousand years ago!"

A wave of blackness closed over him, as much from that staggering thought as from his desperate weakness. He fought it off, clinging to life for just that one instant longer—

Something sparkled dully on the table, close by the arm of the man in black. A small, transparent bottle, filled with amber liquid.

Somehow he crossed the deck. The bottle was sealed with some curious substance. He struck the neck off against the table.

A drop of the fluid splashed on his hand. It tingled as though charged with a strong current, but Brandon was beyond caring. He drank.

It was strong, burning and cooling all at once. Some of the madness died out of Brandon's eyes. He stood for a moment looking at that beautiful, incredible, impossible girl with the sea-blue hair.

A racing bolt of flame went through him suddenly, a queer shivering agony that had a perverse pleasure in it. He felt his mind rocking in its bed like an engine with a broken shaft, and then there was darkness and a great silence.

He came to sprawled in a heap of dust. For a moment he thought he was back in the desert again. Then the madness that had happened swept back, and he got up, blinking into utter darkness. The light mechanism must have failed at last.

Dust rose and choked him. He blundered into a corner of the table, and something fell behind him with a dry, soft whoosh. He couldn't see the door at all. When he finally found it with his hands, there was no catch.

Blind panic shook him for a moment, until he remembered how he had got in. A little incredulously, he shouted at the door.

"Open!"

It didn't budge. And Brandon stood in the darkness like a trapped rat.

From somewhere, quite unbidden, a thought came.

"Set your hands on it and push. It will come open."

He did. His palms barely touched the metal, his muscles had hardly gathered for the effort. The door broke from its hinges and fell with a thin clash on the deck.

Pale Martian daylight flooded the cabin. Brandon saw now that the cushions and hangings had crumbled to dust. The teakwood table still stood, but its grain was splitting and softening. The man in black had vanished completely, save for the gray metal circlet that lay in a scatter of dust on the floor.

Brandon knew now what had fallen behind him. His gaze darted to the woman, and his heart contracted with a faint stab of pain.

There was only a naked skeleton, beautiful even now in its curved white perfection. The shackles, the blue stone of the thumb ring glinted dully on fleshless bones, the jeweled girdle burned across a splintered pelvis.

That little puff of air he had let in must have done it. Whatever mechanism had controlled the door—he made a wild guess at some seleno-cell sensitive to thought currents instead of light—had gone with the rest.

Remembering the faint pungent odor, he wondered if that had had anything to do with preserving the bodies.

The cabin appeared to be hermetically sealed. The metal of the ship was some unfamiliar alloy, incredibly strong to resist the ages of immersion on the sea floor, and the further ages of dryness and wind and rubbing sand.

It was worn thin as paper under his fingers, but uncorroded.

They had had knowledge, those ancient scientists of the Lost Islands, that no one had ever found again. That was why men lost their lives in the desert, hunting for them.

Brandon looked forward along the deck. The storm had nearly buried the ship again, but the wings of the bird on the high prow still gleamed defiantly

He grinned half derisively at the thick pulse of excitement beating in him. He was lionized as a dashing explorer, publicly cursed and secretly patronized by

scientific men, the darling of wealthy collectors—all because of the archaeological treasures he stole from under the noses of planetary governments.

All this gave him money and fame and adoring fans, mostly feminine. It gave him the continual heady excitement of dancing on the edge of disaster. It gave him glamour and a gay flamboyant theatricalism, in all of which he reveled.

But underneath all that was the something that drew him to the old forgotten places and the lost and buried things. The poignant something that was real and sincere and that he didn't understand at all.

Only that he loved catching glimpses through the veil of time, finding the scraps of truth that lay solid under legends.

He went back into the cabin. The gray metal circlet he scooped out of the dust and set jauntily on his gold-brown hair. He paused over the skeleton of the woman, reluctant to touch it, but he wanted the girdle.

He reached for it. And then, oddly, he took the dull-blue ring instead.

He put it on his ring finger and was suddenly giddy. He gulped a food tablet and felt better. The woman's skeleton had fallen into grayish powder, broken by his slight touch.

He picked the girdle out of it and clasped it around his lean waist and turned to search the cabin.

There were chests of scrolls acid-etched on thin metal that blackened and flaked as he looked at them. The letters he did glimpse were older than any he had ever seen.

There were instruments and gadgets of utterly inexplicable design, far too many to carry. The frailer ones were ruined, anyway. He stuffed a few of the more enduring into his pockets and went out.

At the broken door he paused with a small, unpleasant shiver. To break down a door simply by touching it—

Then he grinned. "Duck up, Brandy. This metal is so thin that a baby could knock holes in it."

As though in mocking answer, the port rail crumpled, sending a flood of red sand across the deck. The bird on the prow trembled, and for an instant Brandon thought it was going to fly.

It fell into the dust, and was buried.

He got away from there, and watched the ship die her final death in the dry red sea, And then he said to himself:

"Now what? No water, precious little food, no idea of where I am. Speaking of water—"

That stuff in the bottle had certainly been potent. It had revived him like a shot of adrenalin. But now—

He was thirsty again.

He tried to ignore it, making his plans. He had thought he was near the Lost Islands when he landed. In fact, he'd landed because he thought he saw the outline of dry harbors and stone quays.

"But I didn't. And the position of the Lost Islands is only conjecture, anyway. No two authorities agree."

He stood there, his scarred, handsome face twisted into a defiant grin that he knew was as hollow as his stomach, the wide-winged bird on the gray circlet glittering above his forehead. Then he forced himself to shrug jauntily and start off across the other sand.

Thirst grew in him with the arid touch of dust. The wind whined at him, and presently he heard a voice in it. He knew it was delirium, and refused to listen.

The spurt of strength the strange amber fluid had given him drained away. He fell in the blowing dust and cursed it in a choking whisper. And the voice said:

"Strike it with your hand."

He did, because he thought it was his own desire speaking. He struck the side of the dune before him, weakly, with his doubled fist.

There was a flash and a small thunderclap, and water ran.

He caught it in his cupped hands and drank like an animal, splashing himself, sobbing. Then he got up and stood staring at the wet place in the dust and his wet hands.

He backed off, slowly, his blue eyes widening and paling in a stricken face. He shuddered and passed a hand across his damp beard.

"Merciful heavens!" he whispered. And gripped hard at the rising terror in him.

"The power isn't yours," said a gentle thought voice in his brain. "It's merely transmitted through your body."

Brandon closed his eyes and held his clenched fists against his temples.

"No," he said. "I'll die decently of thirst if I have to. But I won't go mad."

"You're not mad," said the voice. "Don't be frightened."

The last was faintly condescending, which made Brandon angry. He threw his head back, so that he looked rather like the bird of prey on his circlet.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And where?"

"I am Tobul, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. My body is dust. But the essential frequencies that activated that body are in you."

"That's witchcraft," said Brandon curtly, "and that's madness."

"Witchcraft to the ignorant," murmured the voice coolly. "Simple science to the learned. Life is essentially a matter of electrical frequencies, a consumption and emission of energy. There is nothing strange about charging

metal with electrical life. Why should there be anything strange in charging any other substance with any other phase of the basic stuff of the universe?"

Brandon looked at the restless desert, tasted the dust on his tongue, listened to the wailing wind.

He pulled a hair from his tawny beard, and felt the hurt of it. He took a deep breath.

"All right," he said. "How did you get into me?"

But the voice whispered now, and not to him.

"Desolation," it said. "Death and desolation. The sea, the clouds, the strength and power of life, all gone. Is this truly Mars?"

Max Brandon felt a wrenching sadness, go through him, and then a swift stab of fear, very faint, like things in a half-forgotten dream.

"I must get to Rhiannon," said the voice of Tobul. "At once."

There was no emotion in it now. Brandon sensed an iron control, an almost barbarian strength.

"Rhiannon," he repeated. "I never heard--You said Tobul, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms?"

Brandon sat down, because his knees wouldn't hold him.

"Rhiannon," he whispered. "That's the ancient name for the Lost Islands. And 'Lord of the Seven Kingdoms' was the title of the sorcerer-scientist who ruled half Mars, from his seat in Rhiannon."

Ancient things. Things deeply buried, nearly forgotten, clouded by superstition and legend. Forty thousand years--

Brandon sat still, just clinging to his sanity. At length he repeated quietly:

"How did you get into me?"

"When the ship sank, so suddenly that nothing could be done, I transferred my essential to a bottle of liquid prepared for the purpose--a faintly radioactive suspension medium. Those were troubled times--one went prepared.

"The collective frequencies that form my consciousness remained there unharmed, until you drank the liquid. Fortunately it was not poisonous, and you gave me easy entry into a satisfactory host."

A picture of the man at whose side the bottle had been came back to Brandon--the fair, grave face and the impenetrable eyes. That man, dead forty thousand years.

Brandon ran his tongue over dry lips. "When are you going to get out of me?"

"Probably never. I should have to build another body, and the secret of that is known only. . . Brandon!"

It was as though a hand gripped his brain. The impact of that will was

terrifying. Brandon felt his mind stripped naked, probed and searched and shaken, and then dropped,

"Her jeweled girdle he took," murmured Tobul, "and my circlet, and some instruments. The girdle is only metal and jewel—look at your hands!"

Brandon looked, raging, but unable to help himself.

"The blue ring, Brandon, that you took from her thumb, is it there?"

It glinted dully in the sun. Brandon looked at it and said simply: "I don't understand. What ring?"

Tobul whispered: "His eyes don't see, he has no memory. Yet I can't be sure. I was faint with the effort of breaking the door, after so many centuries of quiescence. She may have blanked his mind. But it's a chance I must take.

"Brandon, we go to Rhiannon."

Brandon got up, and there was something ominous in the set of his broad shoulders.

"Just a minute," he said evenly. "I want to find the Lost Islands, too. This possession business has its fascinating angles, I'll admit, so I'm trying to be tolerant of you. But I won't be ordered about."

"Take the instrument out of your left-hand pocket and look at it." Tobul's voice was utterly without emotion.

"Do you hear me, Tobul? I won't have the privacy of my mind invaded. I won't be ordered—"

He stopped. Again the hand of that iron will closed on his brain. The sheer calm strength of it numbed him, as though he had been an ant trying to stem an avalanche.

He fought, until sweat ran down the channels of his face and his lean body ached, fought to keep his hand from reaching into his pocket for the instrument.

But the dark iron power of Tobul's mind rolled in on him, wrapped and crushed and smothered him with a slow, patient ease.

Trudging over the ocher waste, following the mysterious, quivering needle in Tobul's instrument, Max Brandon still could grin.

"Brandy, Brandy," he murmured. "I always said drinking would get you into trouble!"

Two chill Martian nights passed, and two days. Brandon got used to drawing water from the dust with a blow of his fist. It pleased him, like a small boy with a firecracker.

Tobul, in a rare fit of communicativeness, said it was simply a matter of releasing mental energy which caused oxygen and hydrogen to unite from the air. The blow was only a means of directing the mental concentration.

The Lord of the Seven Kingdoms had withdrawn himself utterly. Brandon felt no

discomfort, nothing different from his usual tough health. Only when he tried to disobey the pointing of the compass, he was forced back to obedience.

It galled him, but there was nothing he could do. It was terrible to think of living out his life as host for a parasitic intelligence. It outraged his pride, his individuality.

And yet, to have contact with a mind forty thousand years old; to be taken to the Lost Islands of Rhiannon, the greatest archaeological mystery of Mars—

He asked about the compass. Tobul answered absently.

"It obeys a directional impulse from the vault." And then, even more distantly: "The vault is still there, safe, in all this."

For a fleeting instant, through his own excitement at the mention of a vault, Brandon caught the unguarded sorrow of Tobul, looking through an alien's eyes at the withered mummy of his world.

More and more, as he accustomed himself to his strange condition, Brandon's mind went back to the girl with blue hair, sitting proud in her shackles across from Tobul.

"Who was she?" he asked.

The leashed fury of Tobul's answer startled him.

"The most dangerous creature on Mars. In a short time I should have destroyed her. But, somewhere, her mind lives as mine does, and defies me—Brandon! Go on!"

But Brandon stood still, with a curious chilly crinkle to his spine.

"Sorry," he said. "But the compass is shot."

Tobul's armor dropped, then, for an instant. Brandon felt what a lost planet must feel, torn from its sun. He never forgot it.

"Kymra! Somehow, she has gone before me—Go on, Brandon!"

Brandon shrugged and went. "May as well die walking as sitting," he said. "It may not be Kymra of the Prira Cen, though. It may be just plain Dhu Kar of Venus, which is worse!"

And then, just before the swift sunset, a flier came droning low over the ocher sand, swinging in wide circles, searching.

Brandon danced like a madman on the top of a dune, obeying Tobul's command as well as his own urge. The flier came down.

A tall, slender figure in grease-stained flying togs leaped from the port and ran toward him in a cloud of dust.

"Brandy!" yelled a clear voice. "Brandy, you idiot!"

"Good Lord!" said Brandon. "Sylvia."

She swept into his arms, kissed him, cursed him, and shook him all at once.

"Are you all right? What happened? I've been hunting for three days."

He helped her off and grinned into her eager gamin face, framed in a perpetually tousled mop of curly black hair, set with eyes as sea-blue and adventurous as his own, and smudged slightly with grease.

"Syl," he said, "for once I'm glad to see you."

"Some day," she grinned back, "you'll realize my sterling worth and marry me. Then I shan't have to fight mom about being a glamour girl, and pop about you being a bandit hunting the Eustace cash—"

"And I won't be able to rob graves in peace—"

She was suddenly pressed against him, gripping his arms with painful fingers, making choking, sounds at his shoulder.

"Oh, Brandy," she whispered. "I thought you were dead."

Tobul spoke harshly in Brandon's mind. "Hurry. Get into the flier. We'll try to find Rhiannon from the air. Hurry!"

Brandon was apprehensive about that, because of the compass suddenly going dead. If Kymra of the Blue Hair was really there ahead of them, it meant trouble for Tobul, which meant trouble for Max Brandon, and, consequently, for Sylvia.

He hesitated, and Sylvia said, "Brandy, you'd better give up hunting for the Lost Islands. Jarthur is hopping mad, because you know what relics from there would mean to Mars, and Dhu Kar—"

"Dhu Kar?" snapped Brandon.

"He left the day after you did, as soon as he found out. And Jarthur went storming off with a bunch of policemen, to look for both of you. Of course," she added hopefully, "they may have got lost in a sandstorm."

Brandon shook his head. "It's a big desert, and they may not have been fools like me. I got too far away from my ship."

If it was Dhu Kar who had broken into the vault at Rhiannon, that meant trouble, too. The Venusian played for keeps. Brandon had skirmished with him before, and he knew.

And yet, if he could help it, he wasn't going to let that semi-human pirate from the Venusian coal swamps steal Rhiannon from him.

He stood there, thinking these things, his profile hawk-clear with the wide-winged bird glittering above it, the red sunlight caught in his fair beard and shaggy hair, looking rather like a Viking.

And Sylvia Eustace, with a curiously puzzled look in her blue eyes, took the ring from Brandon's finger and put it on her own. Then she said calmly:

"Come on, Brandy. We're going to Rhiannon."

He followed her, not noticing the ring. Tobul, grim and silent inside him, seeing only through his eyes, knew nothing of it, either.

The flier was small, fast, lovingly worked over and expertly handled. Sylvia went directly to the controls. Brandon scowled, trying to plot the most likely course, combining his own conjectures of the position of the Lost Islands with the way shown by Tobul's compass.

Sylvia sent the ship hurtling upward. When he started to speak, she cut him short.

"I think I know the way."

He stared at her. "Nobody does. It's all guesswork."

"Well," she snapped, "can't I guess, too?"

He shrugged and sat back in the padded seat. Sylvia's tall, boyish form, the despair of her society-loving mother, hunched over the controls. The flier shivered with the thrust of power from the rockets, and the thin, cold air screamed along the hull.

Sylvia always flew fast, but there was a tenseness about her now that was unlike her.

"We can't do much looking at this pace," he said mildly.

"I tell you, I've studied up on it and I know the way!" There was an imperious bugle note in her voice that startled him.

Then she glanced at him. Just for an instant her eyes were puzzled and frightened and altogether Sylvia's. But that was gone in a flash, and the ship rushed on, racing the rising moons.

In the third hour before dawn, with little Phobos rushing ahead of them and Diemos a ball of cold fire overhead, Brandon saw a shadow more solid than the shifting dunes.

Sylvia put the ship down. "We're there," she said. Then she laughed and shook him by the shoulders, and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Think of it, Brandy! The Lost Islands. And we'll see them together!"

"Yes," said Brandon, and the lines of his scarred brown face were deeper. He was thinking: "Funny she knew the way." There came before him suddenly the picture of a reckless, vital face set with unconquerable golden eyes, and hair like a living waterfall.

Tobul said softly: "I see what is in your mind. Kymra may have taken her, as I took you. I dare take no chances. Kill her."

"No!"

Sylvia looked at him, startled. He gripped his seat with corded hands, and argued desperately.

"It wouldn't do any good! If Kymra is in Sylvia, she'd only go back into—wherever she was before."

"Into some inanimate thing, Brandon. Perhaps in that state she could be forced— She would be helpless to move, as we both were in the ship. The

cohesive frequencies of a disembodied intelligence undergo a violent change under solar bombardment, unless protected by some denser matter."

"I won't!" whispered Brandon.

He clung to the seat, fighting the inexorable command of Tobul's mind. He looked at Sylvia's eager, vital face, and his heartstrings knotted in him like the straining muscles of his body.

It was futile. Slowly he drew the small needle gun he always carried and slid the clip of poisoned needles into place. He raised it and aimed, at the girl who neither moved nor spoke.

He fired.

The needles vanished in midair with little bright spurts of flame. And Sylvia laughed,

"Tobul," she said, and the ringing bugle note that was not Sylvia's was in her voice again. "Not that easily, Tobul! I'll fight you, just as I fought in the old days, to the last ditch!"

As though of its own volition, Brandon's voice came, gentle and strange to his ears, with a feel of barbaric iron under the velvet.

"That vault is all that is left to me of Mars, Kymra. It is mine by right of conquest and the blood my people shed."

"Barbarian!" Sylvia tossed her head like a war horse scenting battle. "What is in that vault is mine by right of having built it, and the blood my people shed defending it! The secret of the things you stole from us lies locked in my brain. The things of your own borrowed civilization you shall not have, either.

"This dusty shell is still Mars, and though my race is dead, its people are still mine. I'll not have them misruled by a dog of a nomad, with only four centuries of borrowed culture behind him!"

Brandon felt a blind stab of rage through Tobul's guard, and some of the velvet sloughed away from the iron ring in his voice.

"Borrowed or not, I have the knowledge. The need to rule is as strong in me as it is in you, woman of the Prira Cen!"

"Your people were soft with age and culture. You conquered us, yes, because you knew more. But our blood was strong. We took what we wanted and used it against you, and we were not bound by scruples about blood-letting!"

"I'm beginning to find myself again. From what I have taken from this man's mind, I see that Mars needs new rule, new strength, the knowledge that I can give it. Mars can live again. But in my way, Kymra! The way of strength and manhood."

"The way of stupid, blundering beasts," said Sylvia, her voice deep with some powerful emotion. "You slaughtered the Prira Cen, the kindest, wisest, gentlest race on Mars, because you were jealous of our knowledge. You called it 'foreign domination,' though we never killed a man of your people, and did you more good in ten years than you yourselves could have done in a century.

"Because we kept our race pure, you were jealous of us. Because we kept the secret of our one deadly weapon, you feared us, though we did it for your own protection."

"We crushed you without it," said Tobul.

"Only because we waited, not wanting to destroy you, and were betrayed. You were taking me to Rhiannon in chains, Tobul, but I tell you that no torture you could devise could have forced me to tell the secret of that weapon. Nor," she added with deliberate malice, "another secret, which you would like now, but cannot have."

Tobul did not answer her. Silently in Brandon's mind he said, "Take the small tube from your right-hand pocket."

The vise-grip of Tobul's will on his made even a pretense of resistance impossible. Brandon dropped the useless needle gun and did as he was told.

"She has nothing but the power of her mind," murmured Tobul. "She can't fight the strength of the projector long. Fire, Brandon!"

With some foreign knowledge, he pressed a stud. A faint beam of light leaped out, splattering in blazing incandescence against the barrier of force Kymra had built around Sylvia's body.

It burned and blazed, and the force wall held stubbornly, and Sylvia's blue eyes stared at him through the fire.

"You, too, Brandy?" she said, and now the voice was her own. "She made me understand, all in a flash. She can't hold out long. It's all so mad! Brandy, she's weakening. Brandy, can't you do something!"

He couldn't, though the sweat of agony needled his face. Out of some dim distance he sensed a growing heat and glare and thought it was from the clashing energies before him, until he realized it was in the wrong direction.

The stern plates of the cabin were glowing cherry-red.

Somehow he found his voice. "The fuel tanks!" he yelled. "Got to get out. Somebody's got a heat beam on us."

Miraculously, those two warring intelligences understood. The blazing battle of force broke off. The hull plates paled—

They ran. With all their strength they leaped through the port and pelted over the desert, trailing crazy shadows from the double moons.

Light gravity and long legs took them barely out of danger. Brandon threw Sylvia flat just as the tanks let go. A thundering, howling wind swept over them with a solid wall of dust, and a vast flame pillared up into the sky.

For an incredibly long moment it painted every detail of the scene in wicked crimson—the gaunt, worn shell of a volcanic cone dead and buried for unnumbered centuries and bared capriciously now by the restless sand, a few Cyclopean blocks of Terellan marble cut to shapeless lumps by the passing years, tumbled about a gaping hole.

Directly in front of the hole was a big, fast, convertible spaceship. From it had come the heat beam.

"Dhu Kar," said Brandon, coughing dust.

"Why does this Dhu Kar wish to kill you?" asked Tobul.

"For the same reasons I'd like to kill him," returned Brandon grimly. "Except that he's a vandal and a swine, and I'm a very charming fellow. Wait a bit. You'll see."

He got up, and Sylvia, as usual, scrambled up before he could help her. Her face was pale and a little frightened, but her blue eyes danced.

"I've always wanted real adventure," she said, with a shaky little laugh. "I'm getting it!"

They went toward the spaceship. And up out of the black pit, looking like a misshapen demon in the light of the double moons, came a squat shape bearing a burden—a radio-controlled robot carrier.

Brandon felt the tendrils of Tobul's mind reaching out to search the mind of the man who blocked his way to the vault.

"He's looting my vault," whispered Tobul. "My vault, built and sealed against time forty thousand years ago. This outland dog!"

"And what he can't carry away he'll destroy, partly to cover his tracks, mostly to keep anyone else from profiting." Brandon's tawny head came up. "Let me handle Dhu Kar myself."

"I can't afford to risk your body, Brandon."

Brandon said angrily: "Look here, Tobul—"

The iron hand of Tobul's will closed on his mind. He shrugged, and went on in silence, Sylvia's firm shoulder close to his.

Dhu Kar of Venus came out of the air lock of his ship.

He loomed hugely in the shifting light. The fish-belly white of his face and hands gleamed sharply out of the dark furs he wore against the Martian chill. He was bareheaded, according to the custom of his people, his snowy hair intricately coiled.

He held a needle gun in his hand, and his eyes were cold little chips of moonlight in his broad white face.

"Didn't know you had a woman aboard, Brandon," he said. His voice was harsh and slurring. "Yes, I recognize you, Miss Eustace. I'm glad you weren't harmed."

"He'll be happy to take you home, darling, for a small consideration. Say a million credits or so."

Brandon was advancing slowly, poised on the balls of his feet. Dhu Kar grinned.

"How right you are, Brandon. For once you're bringing me business instead of getting it away. But you can relax, Brandon. You won't have to worry about

it."

He raised his gun slightly. Sylvia cried out and made a move toward Brandon. The gun hissed softly.

The needles splattered harmlessly against a wall of force, just as Brandon's had done back in the ship. And Sylvia Eustace turned and ran.

"I'm not doing this, Brandy," she yelled, her long legs flashing through the dust. "Are you all right?"

"All right!" he yelled back, and rushed after her, impelled by Tobul's furious command to get to the vault tunnel first.

Dhu Kar was staring from his gun to the running man in open-mouthed amazement. Then his jaw shut hard. The girl didn't matter—he could catch her. But Brandon—

If something was wrong with his gun, he'd try something else. He fumbled in a capacious pocket, and his powerful arm flexed.

The gas capsule burst just at Brandon's feet, Tobul, concentrating every effort on catching Kymra, was caught off guard. Before he could stop himself, Brandon had breathed enough of it to drop him dazed in the sand.

He floundered away to windward, and realized that Tobul, associated as he was with Brandon's physical medium, was momentarily affected, too.

Sylvia's flying form vanished into the pit mouth. Dhu Kar laughed and ran toward Brandon, very light and swift for such a big man.

Brandon got to his feet and stood swaying, lost in a roaring mist, his hands raised blindly, waiting.

A pair of vast white hands came out of the darkness toward his throat. He caught them. He fought to hold them off, but his sinews were water.

The hands got closer. There was a face behind them now, broad and pale and contentedly smiling. Brandon's white teeth showed through his tawny beard. He gulped the clean desert air and scoured his lagging strength into his arms, to hold those hands away.

But the stuff he'd breathed sent a black tide swirling through his brain. The hands and the smiling face were drowned in it.

The wide-winged bird on his circlet gleamed in the cold light of Diemos; the lines of his scarred, handsome face were deep and strong. He dropped Dhu Kar's wrists.

The last desperate backlash of his strength went into his forward surge, the thrust of his hands, to Dhu Kar's throat.

The Venusian laughed and flung him off. Brandon crumpled on the sand, and looked up at death. He was grinning, the reckless grin that women sighed at on the television screens.

Some little mocking imp in his blacked-out brain whispered: "No audience, Brandy! You can quit."

But he didn't. And death came down in two white hands.

And vanished, in a sudden, coruscating puff of light.

Tobul's voice spoke, through the stifling darkness in his mind. The velvet was all gone from it now. It was clean, barbaric steel.

"I was affected only for an instant. I could have saved you this. But Kymra was gone then, and I wanted to see how men fight today.

"That circlet you wear was the crown of my fathers, when they were nomads living on raided herds and stolen grain. Keep it, Brandon. And believe me when I say I regret having to use your body. I shall try not to do it violence."

Brandon felt a tingling fire sweep through him, and quite suddenly the effects of the gas were gone. Some vibration Tobul freed, stimulating the natural processes of his body to instantaneous reaction. He got up.

"Tobul," he said, "did you say that Kymra knew the secret of building a body for you?"

"Yes. But there is no way now of forcing her to do it. The girl fights well, for all she's a Blue Hair."

"I'll find a way," said Brandon.

Tobul's voice came deep and strong in his brain.

"I admire you, Brandon. I wish to help you all I can. But this fight is between Kymra and me. We are of opposing races, opposing creeds. The will, the actual need to rule is inherent in both of us, as the need to breathe is in you. Not the will merely for power, but for the guidance of millions of people to what we believe is a better way of life.

"We have different ways, Kymra and I. There is not room on Mars for both of them.

"We will go, Brandon. Down into the vault. Kymra is there ahead of me, but I still have some powers. One of us will not come out."

Brandon went, down into the Stygian shadow of the tunnel. Somewhere ahead was Sylvia, and Kymra of the Prira Cen, and the powerful things in the vault he could only guess at.

Behind him, outside, was sleeping Mars, resigned to the slow advance of death, living out its little days in peace.

Behind him, too, long after the tunnel roof had killed all sound from beyond, four ships came flashing down through the moonlight, drawn by the great pyre of Sylvia's flier.

Jarthur, president of the Society for the Preservation of Martian Relics, looked out at the worn stump of the volcano—a tall, weedy man with sad Martian eyes and semi-military authority.

"These things are all we have left," he said to an assistant. "These bones and shards of our history. And even these the outlanders strip from us."

He flipped open the intership radio connection.

"Cover this area thoroughly. Issue orders that everyone found here is to be arrested. If they resist, fire. Anesthetic needles. No one is to be allowed to escape."

It was cold in the tunnel, and musty with the dead smell of time. It was dark, too, but Brandon had no trouble finding his way. The square passageway, sheathed in metal of the same forgotten alloy as Tobul's ship, ran straight ahead and down.

Tobul explained it, answering Brandon's question.

"Those were troubled times. I knew that Rhiannon might be destroyed at any time. So I built this vault, sheathed in metal that will not corrode and is harder than the finest steel. It's air-tight, and filled with a preservative gas—or was, before the Venusian broke in.

"In it I had placed the sum of our knowledge, science and arts and pleasures, and with them the two secrets we took from the Prira Cen but could not use—the machine of regeneration and the weapon.

"They're still here, waiting. They mean the rule of Mars."

Presently Brandon came to massive metal doors that barred his way. The controls were locked from the inside. Tobul said:

"The projector, Brandon. The same one."

He pressed the stud. The faint beam of light focused on the door. The metal glowed, wavered, and crumbled away into fine powder.

"It upsets molecular cohesion, reducing the metal to fine particles of its original elements," Tobul explained.

Brandon shuddered, thinking what would have happened to Sylvia. The beam ate and ate into the door, crumbling a hole around the massive controls.

It went through nearly a solid foot of metal, and went dead.

"Age," snarled Tobul. "And all this time, Kymra—" He broke off. "Put your hands in the hole, Brandon."

He obeyed, remembering the cabin door on the ship and wondering if he'd be destroyed by Kymra's secret weapon as soon as he entered, or whether he'd live long enough to say goodbye to Sylvia.

The weakened metal went through, under the power impulse from Tobul's brain. The massive valves swung back—

Brandon stood frozen on the threshold.

The vault stretched away into gleaming distances filled with machines, with racks of metal scrolls and objects of a million shapes and sizes. All the life and learning of ancient Mars, the scientific powers of the Sorcerers of

Rhiannon, preserved by the foresight of one man.

But it wasn't that sight, tremendous as it was, that set the blood hammering into Brandon's throat and wrists.

Directly across from the door, as though brought in just before it was closed, was a huge glass cabinet set in an intricate web of coils. These shimmered in a halo of light, at once subdued and fierce.

Beneath the cabinet were several self-sealing metal containers. On the floor of it, inside, were trays and bowls of chemicals.

Above these, in the very center of the soft, deep glow, a shimmering thing stood, already vaguely formulated.

Witch fires danced over the chemicals, whirling upward in a spiral of incandescence. As though painted by a rapid brush, line and color took shape—

The fires died down, the glass door opened, and a girl stepped out.

A tall, long-limbed girl, naked as the moon and as white. She moved with a vital grace, and her eyes were like bits of living gold, proud, unconquerable, meeting Brandon's own.

And her hair was blue, rippling down over her shoulders like the curl of a living wave over foam white coral.

Brandon heard a long, quivering sigh through his mind, and Tobul said:

"Kymra."

The girl nodded and turned to a curious thing raised on a metal tripod. It seemed to be mainly a crystal prism forming the core of a helix, which was of some material midway between crystal and metal—partially transparent, and made up of countless intricate facets.

The helix broke at its lower end into a score of shining strands which fanned out into a circle.

Sylvia Eustace spoke suddenly from where she stood, at one side of Kymra and a little behind her.

"What are you going to do?"

Kymra's voice was very grave when she answered. Her golden eyes watched Brandon with somber regret.

"I am going to kill," she said quietly.

Her clear, muted voice rang softly from the metal vault, heavy with regret.

"For the first time one of the Prira Cen is going to take life willfully. I'm sorry, Max Brandon, that you must be the innocent victim—doubly sorry because of what I have read in this girl's mind.

"But you—and I—are less important than Mars."

Tobul, speaking aloud through Brandon's throat, said harshly: "So you have had

to come to my way at last."

She shook her head, that glorious shining hair like the forgotten sea that had lapped this island.

"No, Tobul. Because I take no pride in it, only sorrow. If my people had seen in time that they must deal with your barbarians as they would with a horde of wild beasts, humanely but firmly—" Her white shoulders shimmered through the shadowy blue.

"But they didn't," said Tobul, and his voice held a bitter satisfaction. "You'll be all alone, Kymra, in an alien world."

"No. You're not the only one who looked ahead, Tobul! My seven wisest councilors took refuge in sensitized stones, which you brought here to this vault. They knew that I would live, as they do. It was the thought-impulses of their minds that led me here, after Dhu Kar broke your sending mechanism moving it.

"Their atomic patterns are inherent in the frequencies of their consciousness. That's the secret of building bodies, Tobul. Given the consciousness and the necessary chemicals, that machine can create an identical replica, as you see in me.

"Sylvia, my dear," she added gently, "it will be quite painless. If I had any other sure weapon to use against Tobul's strength, I would, and then rebuild Brandon's body. But this force projects the consciousness into some unknown dimension, just as solar rays will. It cannot be recalled."

Her hands dropped out of sight below the prism. Brandon could see the ripple of firm muscles along her arms as she went through some complicated operation.

"Goodbye, Tobul," she said softly. "Strange that we must end like this, in a world so different from the one we knew."

The prism began to glow with some queer perversion of light that seemed rather luminous darkness. It ran along the facets of the helix, faster and faster, stranger, darker, more dazzling.

Brandon felt every drop of blood in him stop for a second, and then race on again, with the swirl of that mad, black luminosity. A cold terror caught him, a thing that hadn't come at all when Dhu Kar's hands were at his throat.

He felt Tobul's being surge within him, fierce and rebellious and bitter. Not afraid, much. Only ragingly sad at his defeat, and the thought of his people being ruled by Kymra of the Prira Cen.

"Negative energy," said Kymra's voice, ringing through the great vaulted rooms like a muted bugle. "It taps the power of the galactic wheel itself, turning against the cohesive force of space. Energy so close to the primal warp of creation that it needs only the slightest charge to push it over into the negative—the opposite balance that everything possesses."

The grave, sad voice beat against Brandon's ears.

"There is no defense against it, Tobul. All your force screens and projectors are worse than useless. They attract now, instead of repelling. Do you wonder we kept this weapon secret?"

The little threads of blackness spiraled out into a cone, and grew.

Brandon's heart thundered in his throat. The mocking devil in his brain laughed because the reckless grin was on his lips, playing to the audience—Sylvia's stricken eyes.

He was sorry for Sylvia. She'd be alone now, in an alien world of wealth and decorum, that only he could have taken her out of.

Alone, in an alien world—

Brandon swallowed his heart. A sudden, desperate hope flared in him. Useless, but he had to try. The thing that had driven him through the desert made him try.

He started to cry out, "Kymra!" And Tobul's will clamped his tongue to silence.

"I will not beg for life," he said.

Things happened then, all at once. Sylvia made a long-legged leap forward, into the path of that blackness that ribboned and twisted out from the helix. In a second it would have touched her. But Brandon, moving instinctively, so that Tobul had no time to catch his conscious thought and block it, flung himself against her.

She went sprawling over out of harm's way. Kymra caught her breath sharply and started to move the projector to a new focus. And Brandon, looking up, cried suddenly:

"Jarthur!"

He stood there, the tall, thin Martian with the sad eyes. He had a needle gun in his hand, and six or seven black-clad policemen just behind him.

He stared, momentarily stunned, at the vault and Kymra, with the blue hair cascading over her naked shoulders.

Kymra made a sharp movement. The dark light in the prism changed. The black cone unraveled itself, back into the helix. Brandon's heart gave a wild shudder of relief. Kymra was reluctant to take innocent lives.

He scrambled up, sensing Tobul's dangerous alertness. Jarthur, forcing himself to steadiness in spite of his amazement, said:

"Max Brandon, you're under arrest."

Tobul acted with the swiftness of his barbarian ancestors. With anesthetic needles splattering in flames from his force shield, he charged into the middle of Jarthur's group.

The shock of Brandon's immunity demoralized them. Tobul's mind put forth tendrils of iron force.

"Surround me," he said. "Walk forward,"

Brandon saw the look in Jarthur's eyes, midway between nightmare and reluctant acceptance of insanity. Then he obeyed. Tobul moved forward, surrounded by a living shield.

Kymra stood irresolute behind the projector, reluctant even then to destroy more of her people. And then Sylvia moved.

She uncoiled from the floor with every ounce of her lithe strength, hurtling into Kymra. Kymra's mental force shield must have been momentarily dispersed by the shock of Jarthur's entrance and Tobul's sudden maneuver.

Sylvia crashed into her, knocking her away from the projector. She yelled, "Brandy! Do something!" But it was Tobul who flung away his unwilling protectors and gained the control board behind the projector.

Kymra rose, dignified and beautiful even then, standing beside the regenerator.

"It's no use, Tobul," she said. "You can't use it."

Brandon heard his voice say softly:

"You forgot the girl. She was where she could see your hands—and she didn't blank her mind to what she saw."

Tobul's hands moved over the intricate controls. Almost as an afterthought, he said to Jarthur, through Brandon's mouth:

"You are no longer needed. Go."

Jarthur's sad eyes became furious.

"See here, Brandon! I don't know what kind of madness this is—probably some secret you've stolen from this place. But you're through looting. I'm going to send you to Phobos if I die doing it!"

"You will," said Tobul calmly, and shrugged. "Please yourself."

Kymra said steadily: "You don't know how to control the force. Every living thing beyond its focus will be destroyed, and part of the inanimate substance, before you can stop it even by smashing the projector."

"You said yourself, Kymra, that Mars is more important than any of us."

The prism began to glow with its queer, black light.

And Brandon said desperately: "Tobul!"

"I'm sorry to cheat you of your body, Brandon. But this must be done."

Black rage suddenly took Brandon's mind, drowning out even the flashes of Jarthur's needles dying against the force screen.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Can't you see that the world has changed? The things you're fighting over don't exist anymore!"

"Silence, Brandon!"

The black threads were weaving themselves again around the focus of the projector, twisting out toward Kymra of the Prira Cen. In a few seconds they'd blast her out of existence, and the regenerator with her—and Brandon's only chance to get rid of Tobul and be a normal man again.

He could foresee Tobul's mind moving to silence his own. His hands were free from the projector now.

With a characteristic flourish, he ripped the circlet from his head and held it up.

"By this crown, Tobul, I've earned the right to speak!"

The mocking imp in Brandon's brain whispered: "Every inch the hero!" And behind it he could feel the struggle in Tobul's mind.

It seemed an eternity before the quiet, curt answer came. "Speak, then."

Brandon spoke, aloud, to Kymra as much as to Tobul.

"You say that Mars is your first consideration, and I believe you. But you still live in the past. Can't you see that the war between Tobul's people and the Prira Cen is as dead as the dust of your bodies?"

"What right has either of you to rob Mars of the other? The two of you, working together as balancing forces instead of enemies, could make Mars the greatest planet in the System. You could give her water again, and the air she's losing, the courage and will to live that she's lost.

"You could bring her the knowledge of the Lost Islands and the Prira Cen—complete, not in half-forgotten fragments. Kymra's councilors are invaluable to all humanity. What right have you, Tobul, to destroy them?"

"The world has changed. With each of you, the other is the only link to the world you knew. There can be no real companionship for you with anyone else.

"What human would mate with someone forty thousand years old? Yet you're both young. Think of that, for a minute. To live for well-nigh endless years with no one to speak to, no understanding, only awe and fear and perhaps hate?"

"For Heaven's sake, Tobul, if you're the brave man, the great man you believe yourself to be, face this out and see the truth in it!"

The little black threads wove out and out, and Kymra's eyes were burning gold, proud and steady.

Sylvia spoke up furiously. "He's right, you know. You're just fooling yourselves. You don't care who you hurt as long as you don't have to share your power!"

"That's not true," said Kymra gently. And Tobul echoed: "No—"

Brandon felt Tobul's mind gather into itself, thinking. For an instant his body was free from compulsion. He raised his foot and sent the projector crashing to the floor.

It shattered, became meaningless, shining fragments. But the fragments lay about a gaping hole, where the little black worms had gnawed.

Jarthur had stopped the useless firing. His eyes were dazed, bewildered, but his back was stubbornly straight.

"I don't understand," he said. "I may be only playing into your hands, Brandon. But if there are really beings from the past who can help Mars to live again—I beg them both to do it."

Tobul whispered in Brandon's mind: "What is all this to you, Brandon? You, an Earthman."

He shrugged. "I'm a human being, too. And I think I'm seeing what I've always wanted to see. The thing that, subconsciously, has drawn me to hunt up the old, forgotten places. I'm seeing the past—the past that is as real as the future or the present—come into its own."

"You're a looter, Brandon," said Jarthur harshly.

"But I've never destroyed anything. Oh, I'm not excusing myself. And I'm beginning to see the error of my ways."

"Perhaps," said Tobul shrewdly, "because this looks more exciting?"

Kymra said softly: "Your barbarian ancestors, Tobul, prided themselves on being honest with themselves. Let us be."

Brandon could feel the struggle that went on in Tobul's mind. It seemed to him that the whole universe had stopped breathing, waiting. And at last, reluctantly, Tobul said:

"Brandon speaks the truth. Much as I hate it, it is the truth. Blast you, Brandon, why did I give you my crown to wear?"

"You may have it back." Brandon was suddenly weak, almost hysterical with relief. "I don't want much—"

"Much?"

"Well, my body has served as your draft animal. I'm giving up a profitable career of grave robbing in order to act as your ambassador, your link between the past and the present—"

"Ambassador!" said Kymra, turning her imperious, golden gaze on him. "Who has asked you?"

"Hm-m-m," said Brandon. "You'll need a personal diplomat, too. Can't expect love and kisses all in one minute, after forty thousand years—know anybody who could do it better?"

Kymra looked at Brandon's handsome head cocked back, with the wide-winged bird glittering above it and his white teeth gleaming. She laughed.

"You're mad, as well as insolent. But—Tobul?"

"Why not? Kymra, you will restore my body, of course. But before I leave this Brandon, there is something I want to do—to tame him."

Brandon's heart gave a swift, little jerk of apprehension. He stammered: "What—" But the iron grip of Tobul's will was on his mind.

He found himself walking over to Sylvia. He found himself taking her in his arms, and whispering something, and then—

"So that," said Tobul, "is how it's done now. The world hasn't changed so much!"

