

The Jewel of Bas

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One

Mouse stirred the stew in the small iron pot. There wasn't much of it. She sniffed and said:

"You could have stolen a bigger joint. We'll go hungry before the next town."

"Uh huh," Ciaran grunted lazily.

Anger began to curl in Mouse's eyes.

"I suppose it's all right with you if we run out of food," she said sullenly.

Ciaran leaned back comfortably against a moss-grown boulder and watched her with lazy gray eyes. He liked watching Mouse. She was a head shorter than he, which made her very short indeed, and as thin as a young girl. Her hair was black and wild, as though only wind ever combed it. Her eyes were black, too, and very bright. There was a small red thief's brand between them. She wore a ragged crimson tunic, and her bare arms and legs were as brown as his own.

Ciaran grinned. His lip was scarred, and there was a tooth missing behind it. He said, "It's just as well. I don't want you getting fat and lazy."

Mouse, who was sensitive about her thinness, said something pungent and threw the wooden plate at him. Ciaran drew his shaggy head aside enough to let it by and then relaxed, stroking the harp on his bare brown knees. It began to purr softly.

Ciaran felt good. The heat of the sunballs that floated always, lazy in a

reddish sky, made him pleasantly sleepy. And after the clamor and crush of the market squares in the border towns, the huge high silence of the place was wonderful.

He and Mouse were camped on a tongue of land that licked out from the Phrygian hills down into the coastal plains of Atlantea. A short cut, but only gypsies like themselves ever took it. To Ciaran's left, far below, the sea spread sullen and burning, cloaked in a reddish fog. To his right, also far below, were the Forbidden Plains. Flat, desolate, and barren, reaching away and away to the up-curving rim of the world, where Ciaran's sharp eyes could just make out a glint of gold; a mammoth peak reaching for the sky.

Mouse said suddenly, "Is that it, Kiri? Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life?"

Ciaran struck a shivering chord from the harp. "That's it."

"Let's eat," said Mouse.

"Scared?"

"Maybe you want me to go back! Maybe you think a branded thief isn't good enough for you! Well I can't help where I was born or what my parents were—and you'd have a brand on your ugly face too, if you hadn't just been lucky!"

She threw the ladle.

This time her aim was better and Ciaran didn't duck quite in time. It clipped his ear. He sprang up, looking murderous, and started to heave it back at her. And then, suddenly, Mouse was crying, stamping up and down and blinking tears out of her eyes.

"All right, I'm scared! I've never been out of a city before, and besides..." She looked out over the silent plain, to the distant glint of Ben Beatha. "Besides," she whispered, "I keep thinking of the stories they used to tell—about Bas the Immortal, and his androids, and the gray beasts that served them. And about the Stone of Destiny."

Ciaran made a contemptuous mouth. "Legends. Old wives' tales. Songs to give babies a pleasant shiver." A small glint of avarice came into his gray eyes. "But the Stone of Destiny—it's a nice story, that one. A jewel of such power that owning it gives a man rule over the whole world..."

He squinted out across the barren plain. "Someday," he said softly,

“maybe I’ll see if that one’s true.”

“Oh, Kiri.” Mouse came and caught his wrists in her small strong hands. “You wouldn’t. It’s forbidden—and no one that’s gone into the Forbidden Plains has ever come back.”

“There’s always a first time.” He grinned. “But I’m not going now, Mousie. I’m too hungry.”

She picked up the plate silently and ladled stew into it and set it down. Ciaran laid his harp down and stretched—a tough, wiry little man with legs slightly bandy and a good-natured hard face. He wore a yellow tunic even more ragged than Mouse’s.

They sat down. Ciaran ate noisily with his fingers. Mouse fished out a hunk of meat and nibbled it moodily. A breeze came up, pushing the sunballs around a little and bringing tatters of red fog in off the sea. After a while Mouse said:

“Did you hear any of the talk in the market squares, Kiri?”

He shrugged. “They gabble. I don’t waste my time with it.”

“All along the border countries they were saying the same thing. People who live or work along the edge of the Forbidden Plains have disappeared. Whole towns of them, sometimes.”

“One man falls into a beast-pit,” said Ciaran impatiently, “and in two weeks of gossip the whole country has vanished. Forget it.”

“But it’s happened before, Kiri. A long time ago...”

“A long time ago some wild tribe living on the Plains came in and got tough, and that’s that!” Ciaran wiped his hands on the grass and said angrily, “If you’re going to nag all the time about being scared...”

He caught the plate out of her hands just in time. She was breathing hard, glaring at him. She looked like her name, and cute as hell. Ciaran laughed.

“Come here, you.”

She came, sulkily. He pulled her down beside him and kissed her and took the harp on his knees. Mouse put her head on his shoulder. Ciaran was suddenly very happy.

He began to draw music out of the harp. There was a lot of distance around him, and he tried to fill it up with music, a fine free spate of it out

of the thrumming strings. Then he sang. He had a beautiful voice, clear and true as a new blade, but soft. It was a simple tune, about two people in love. Ciaran liked it.

After a while Mouse reached up and drew his head around, stroking the scar on his lip so he had to stop singing. She wasn't glaring any longer. Ciaran bent his head.

His eyes were closed. But he felt her body stiffen against him, and her lips broke away from his with a little gasping cry. "Kiri—Kiri, look!"

He jerked his head back, angry and startled. Then the anger faded.

There was a different quality to the light. The warm, friendly, reddish sunlight that never dimmed or faded.

There was a shadow spreading out in the sky over Ben Beatha. It grew and widened, and the sunballs went out, one by one, and darkness came toward them over the Forbidden Plains.

They crouched, clinging together, not speaking, not breathing. An uneasy breeze sighed over them, moving out. Then, after a long time, the sunballs sparked and burned again, and the shadow was gone.

Ciaran dragged down an unsteady breath. He was sweating, but where his hands and Mouse's touched, locked together, they were cold as death.

"What was it, Kiri?"

"I don't know."

He got up, slinging the harp across his back without thinking about it. He felt naked suddenly, up there on the high ridge. Stripped and unsafe. He pulled Mouse to her feet. Neither of them spoke again. Their eyes had a queer stunned look. This time it was Ciaran that stopped, with the stewpot in his hands, looking at something behind Mouse. He dropped it and jumped in front of her, pulling the wicked knife he carried from his girdle. The last thing he heard was her wild scream.

But he had time enough to see. To see the creatures climbing up over the crest of the ridge beside them, fast and silent and grinning, to ring them in with wands tipped at the point with opals like tiny sunballs.

They were no taller than Mouse, but thick and muscular, built like men. Gray animal fur grew on them like the body-hair of a hairy man, lengthening into a coarse mane over the skull. Where the skin showed it

was gray and wrinkled and tough.

Their faces were flat, with black animal nose-buttons. They had sharp teeth, gray with a bright, healthy grayness. Their eyes were blood-pink, without whites or visible pupils.

The eyes were the worst.

Ciaran yelled and slashed out with his knife. One of the gray brutes danced in on lithe, quick feet and touched him on the neck with its jeweled wand.

Fire exploded in Ciaran's head, and then there was darkness, pierced by Mouse's scream. As he slid down into it he thought:

They're Kalds. The beasts of legend that served Bas the Immortal and his androids. Kalds, that guarded the Forbidden Plains from man!

Ciaran came to, on his feet and walking. From the way he felt, he'd been walking a long time, but his memory was vague and confused. He had been relieved of his knife, but his harp was still with him.

Mouse walked beside him. Her black hair hung over her face and her eyes looked out from behind it, sullen and defiant.

The gray beasts walked in a rough circle around them, holding their wands ready. From the way they grinned, Ciaran had an idea they hoped they'd have an excuse for using them.

With a definitely uneasy shock, Ciaran realized that they were far out in the barren waste of the Forbidden Plains. He got a little closer to Mouse. "Hello." She looked at him. "You and your shortcuts! So all that talk in the border towns was just gabble, huh?"

"So it's my fault! If that isn't just like a woman..." Ciaran made an impatient gesture. "All right, all right! That doesn't matter now. What does matter is where are we going and why?"

"How should I—Wait a minute. We're stopping."

The Kalds warned them with their wands to stand. One of the gray brutes seemed to be listening to something that Ciaran couldn't hear. Presently it gestured and the party started off again in a slightly different direction.

After a minute or two a gully appeared out of nowhere at their feet. From up on the ridge the Forbidden Plains had looked perfectly flat, but

the gully was fairly wide and cut in clean like a sword gash, hidden by a slight roll of the land. They scrambled down the steep bank and went along the bottom.

Again with an uneasy qualm, Ciaran realized they were headed in the general direction of Ben Beatha.

The old legends had been gradually lost in the stream of time, except to people who cared for such things, or made a living from singing about them, like Ciaran. But in spite of that Ben Beatha was taboo.

The chief reason was physical. The Plains, still called Forbidden, ringed the mountain like a protective wall, and it was an indisputable fact whether you liked it or not that people who went out onto them didn't come back. Hunger, thirst, wild beasts, or devils—they didn't come back. That discouraged a lot of traveling.

Besides, the only reason for attempting to reach Ben Beatha was the legend of the Stone of Destiny, and people had long ago lost faith in that. Nobody had seen it. Nobody had seen Bas the Immortal who was its god and guardian, nor the androids that were his servants, nor the Kalds that were slaves to both of them.

Long, long ago people were supposed to have seen them. In the beginning, according to the legends, Bas the Immortal had lived in a distant place—a green world where there was only one huge sunball that rose and set regularly, where the sky was sometimes blue and sometimes black and silver, and where the horizon curved down. The manifest idiocy of all that still tickled people so they liked to hear songs about it.

Somewhere on that green world, somehow, Bas had acquired the flaming stone that gave him the power of life and death and destiny. There were a lot of conflicting and confused stories about trouble between Bas and the inhabitants of the funny world with the sky that changed like a woman's fancy. Eventually he was supposed to have gathered up a lot of these inhabitants through the power of the Stone and transported them somehow across a great distance to the world where they now lived.

Ciaran had found that children loved these yarns particularly. Their imaginations were still elastic enough not to see the ridiculous side. He always gave the Distance Cycle a lot of schmaltz.

So after Bas the Immortal and his Stone of Destiny had got all these people settled in a new world, Bas created his androids, Khafre and Steud,

and brought the Kalds from somewhere out in that vague Distance; another world, perhaps. And there were wars and revolts and raiding parties, and bitter struggles between Bas and the androids and the humans for power, with Bas always winning because of the Stone. There was a bottomless well of material there for ballads. Ciaran used it frequently. But the one legend that had always maintained its original shape under the battering of generations was the one about Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life, being the dwelling place of Bas the Immortal and his androids and the Kalds. And somewhere under Ben Beatha was the Stone, whose possession could give a man life eternal and the powers of whatever god you chose to believe in.

Ciaran had toyed with that one in spite of his skepticism. Now it looked as though he was going to see for himself.

He looked at the Kalds, the creatures who didn't exist, and found his skepticism shaken. Shaken so hard he felt sick, with it, like a man waking up to find a nightmare beside him in the flesh, booting his guts in.

If the Kalds were real, the androids were real. From the androids you went to Bas, and from Bas to the Stone of Destiny.

Ciaran began to sweat with sheer excitement.

Mouse jerked her head up suddenly. "Kiri—listen!"

From somewhere up ahead and to the right there began to come a rhythmic, swinging clank of metal. Underneath it Ciaran made out the shuffle of bare or sandaled feet.

The Kalds urged them on faster with the jewel-tipped wands. The hot opalescence of the tips struck Ciaran all at once. A jewel-fire that could shock a man to unconsciousness like the blow of a fist, just by touching.

The power of the Stone, perhaps. The Stone of Destiny, sleeping under Ben Beatha.

The shuffle and clank got louder. Quite suddenly they came to a place where the gully met another one almost at right angles, and stopped. The ears of the Kalds twitched nervously.

Mouse shrank in closer against Ciaran. She was looking off down the new cut. Ciaran looked, too.

There were Kalds coming toward them. About forty of them, with wands. Walking between their watchful lines were some ninety or a

hundred humans, men and women, shackled together by chains run through loops in iron collars. They were so close together they had to lock-step, and any attempt at attacking their guards would have meant the whole column falling flat.

Mouse said, with vicious clarity, “One man falls into a beast-pit, and in three weeks of gossip a whole town is gone. Hah!” Ciaran’s scarred mouth got ugly. “Keep going, Mousie. Just keep it up.” He scowled at the slave gang and added, “But what the hell is it all about? What do they want us for?”

“You’ll find out,” said Mouse. “You and your shortcuts.”

Ciaran raised his hand. Mouse ducked and started to swing on him. A couple of Kalds moved in and touched them apart, very delicately, with the wands. They didn’t want knockouts this time. Just local numbness.

Ciaran was feeling murderous enough to start something anyway, but a second flick of the wand on the back of his neck took the starch out of him. By that time the slave party had come up and stopped.

Ciaran stumbled over into line and let the Kalds lock the collar around his neck. The man in front of him was huge, with a mane of red hair and cords of muscle on his back the size of Ciaran’s arm. He hadn’t a stitch on but a leather G-string. His freckled, red-haired skin was slippery with sweat. Ciaran, pressed up against him, shut his mouth tight and began to breathe very hard with his face turned as far away as he could get it.

They shackled Mouse right in back of him. She put her arms around his waist, tighter than she really had to. Ciaran squeezed her hands.

Two

The kalds started the line moving again, using the wands like ox-goats. They shuffled off down the gully, going deeper and deeper into the Forbidden Plains.

Very softly, so that nobody but Ciaran could hear her, Mouse whispered,

“These locks are nothing. I can pick them anytime.”

Ciaran squeezed her hand again. It occurred to him that Mouse was a handy girl to have around.

After a while she said, “Kiri—that shadow. We did see it?”

“We did.” He shivered in spite of himself.

“What was it?”

“How should I know? And you better save your breath. Looks like a long walk ahead of us.”

It was. They threaded their way through a growing maze of cracks in the plain, cracks that got deeper and deeper, so you had to look straight up to see the red sky and the little floating suns. Ciaran found himself watching furtively to make sure they were still shining. He wished Mousie hadn’t reminded him of the shadow. He’d never been closer to cold, clawing panic than in those moments on the ridge.

The rest of the slave gang had obviously come a long way already. They were tired. But the Kalds goaded them on, and it wasn’t until about a third of the line was being held up bodily by those in front or behind that a halt was called.

They came to a fairly wide place where three of the gullies came together. The Kalds formed the line into a circle, squeezed in on itself so they were practically sitting in each other’s laps, and then stood by watchfully, lolling pink tongues over their bright gray teeth and letting the wands flash in the dimmed light.

Ciaran let his head and shoulders roll over onto Mousie. For some time he had felt her hands working around her own collar, covered by her hair and the harp slung across his back. She wore a rather remarkable metal pin that had other functions than holding her tunic on, and she knew how to use it.

Her collar was still in place, but he knew she could slide out of it now anytime she wanted. She bent forward over him as though she was exhausted. Her black hair fell over his face and neck. Under it her small quick hands got busy.

The lock snapped quietly, and the huge red-haired man collapsed slowly on top of Ciaran. His voice whispered, but there was nothing weak about it.

He said, “Now me.”

Ciaran squirmed and cursed. The vast weight crushed him to silence.

“I’m a hunter. I can hear a rabbit breathing in its warren. I heard the woman speak. Free me or I’ll make trouble.”

Ciaran sighed resignedly, and Mouse went to work.

Ciaran looked around the circle of exhausted humans. Charcoal burners, trappers, hoop-shavers—the lean, tough, hard-bitten riffraff of the border wilderness. Even the women were tough. Ciaran began to get ideas.

There was a man crushed up against them on the other side—the man who had hitherto been at the head of the column. He was tall and stringy like a hungry cat, and just as mean-looking, hunched over his knees with his face buried in his forearms and a shag of iron-gray hair falling over his shoulders.

Ciaran nudged him. “You—don’t make any sign. Game to take a chance?”

The shaggy head turned slightly, just enough to unveil an eye. Ciaran wished suddenly he’d kept his mouth shut. The eye was pale, almost white, with a queer unhuman look as though it saw only gods or devils, and nothing in between.

Ciaran had met hermits before in his wanderings. He knew the signs. Normally he rather liked hermits, but this one gave him unpleasant qualms in the stomach.

The man dragged a rusty voice up from somewhere. “We are enslaved by devils. Only the pure can overcome devils. Are you pure?”

Ciaran managed not to choke. “As a bird in its nest,” he said. “A newly fledged bird. In fact, a bird still in the shell.”

The cold, pale eye looked at him without blinking.

Ciaran resisted an impulse to punch it and said, “We have a means of freeing ourselves. If enough could be free, when the time came we might rush the Kalds.”

“Only the pure can prevail against devils.”

Ciaran gave him a smile of beatific innocence. The scar and the missing tooth rather spoiled the effect, but his eyes made up for it in bland

sweetness.

“You shall lead us, Father,” he cooed. “With such purity as yours, we can’t fail.”

The hermit thought about that for a moment and then said, “I will pass the word. Give me the feke.”

Ciaran’s jaw dropped. His eyes got glassy.

“The feke,” said the hermit patiently. “The juggler.”

Ciaran closed his eyes. “Mouse,” he said weakly, “give the gentleman the picklock.”

Mouse slid it to him, a distance of about two inches. The red-haired giant took some of his weight off Ciaran. Mouse was looking slightly dazed herself.

“Hadn’t I better do it for you?” she asked, rather pompously.

The hermit gave her a cold glance. He bent his head and brought his hands up between his knees. His collar-mate on the other side never noticed a thing, and the hermit beat Mouse’s time by a good third.

Ciaran laughed. He lay in Mouse’s lap and had mild hysterics. Mouse cuffed him furiously across the back of his neck, and even that didn’t stop him.

He pulled himself up, looked through streaming eyes at Mouse’s murderous small face, and bit his knuckles to keep from screaming.

The hermit was already quietly at work on the man next to him.

Ciaran unslung his harp. The gray Kalds hadn’t noticed anything yet. Both Mouse and the hermit were very smooth workers. Ciaran plucked out a few sonorous minor chords, and the Kalds flicked their blood-pink eyes at him, but didn’t seem to think the harp called for any action.

Ciaran relaxed and played louder.

Under cover of the music he explained his plan to the big red hunter, who nodded and began whispering to his other collar-mate. Ciaran began to sing.

He gave them a lament, one of the wild dark things the Cimmerians sing-at the bier of a chief and very appropriate to the occasion. The Kalds lounged, enjoying the rest. They weren’t watching for it, so they didn’t see,

as Ciaran did, the breathing of the word of hope around the circle.

Civilized people would have given the show away. But these were bordermen, as wary and self-contained as animals. It was only in their eyes that you could see anything. They got busy, under cover of their huddled bodies and long-haired, bowed-over heads, with every buckle and pin they could muster.

Mouse and the hermit passed instructions along the line, and since they were people who were used to using their hands with skill, it seemed as though a fair number of locks might get picked. The collars were left carefully in place.

Ciaran finished his lament and was halfway through another when the Kalds decided it was time to go.

They moved in to goad the line back into position. Ciaran's harp crashed out suddenly in angry challenge, and the close-packed circle split into a furious confusion. Ciaran slung his harp over his shoulder and sprang up, shaking off the collar. All around him was the clash of chain metal on rock, the scuffle of feet, the yells and heavy breathing of angry men. The Kalds came leaping in, their wands flashing. Somebody screamed. Ciaran got a fistful of Mouse's tunic in his left hand and started to butt through the melee. He had lost track of the hermit and the hunter.

Then, quite suddenly, it was dark.

Silence closed down on the gully. A black, frozen silence, with not even a sound of breathing in it. Ciaran stood still, looking up at the dark sky. He didn't even tremble. He was beyond that.

Black darkness, in a land of eternal light.

Somewhere then, a woman screamed with a terrible mad strength, and hell broke loose.

Ciaran ran. He didn't think about where he was going, only that he had to get away. He was still gripping Mouse. Bodies thrashed and blundered and shrieked in the darkness. Twice he and Mouse were knocked kicking. It didn't stop them.

They broke through finally into a clear space. There began to be light again, pale and feeble at first but flickering back toward normal. They were in a broad gully kicked smooth on the bottom by the passing of many feet. They ran down it.

After a while Mouse fell and Ciaran dropped beside her. He lay there, fighting for breath, twitching and jerking like an animal with sheer panic. He was crying a little because it was light again.

Mouse clung to him, pressing tight as though she wanted to merge her body with his and hide it. She had begun to shake.

“Kiri,” she whispered, over and over again. “Kiri, what was it?”

Ciaran held her head against his shoulder and stroked it. “I don’t know, honey. But it’s all right now. It’s gone.”

Gone. But it could come back. It had once. Maybe next time it would stay. Darkness, and the sudden cold. The legends began crawling through Ciaran’s mind. If Bas the Immortal was true, and the Stone of Destiny was true, and the Stone gave Bas power over the life and death of a world... then... ?

Maybe Bas was getting tired of the world and wanted to throw it away.

The rational stubbornness in man that says a thing is not because it’s never been before helped Ciaran steady down. But he couldn’t kid himself that there hadn’t been darkness where no darkness had even been dreamed of before.

He shook his head and started to pull Mouse to her feet, and then his quick ears caught the sound of someone coming toward them, running. Several someones.

There was no place to hide. Ciaran got Mouse behind him and waited, half crouching.

It was the hunter, with the hermit loping like a stringy cat at his heels and a third man behind them both. They all looked a little crazy, and they didn’t seem to be going to stop.

Ciaran said, “Hey!”

They slowed down, looking at him with queer, blank eyes. Ciaran blew up, because he had to relax somehow.

“It’s all over now. What are you scared of? It’s gone.” He cursed them, with more feeling than fairness. “What about the Kalds? What happened back there?”

The hunter wiped a huge hand across his red-bearded face. “Everybody went crazy,” he said thickly. “Some got killed or hurt. Some got away, like

us. The rest were caught again.” He jerked his head back. “They’re coming this way. They’re hunting us. They hunt by scent, the gray beasts do.”

“Then we’ve got to get going.” Ciaran turned around. “Mouse. You, Mousie! Snap out of it, honey. It’s all right now.”

She shivered and choked over her breath, and the hermit fixed them both with pale, mad eyes.

“It was a warning,” he said. “A portent of judgment, when only the pure shall be saved.” He pointed a bony finger at Ciaran. “I told you that evil could not prevail against devils!”

That got through to Mouse. Sense came back into her black eyes. She took a step toward the hermit and let go.

“Don’t you call him evil—or me either! We’ve never hurt anybody yet, beyond lifting a little food or a trinket. And besides, who the hell are you to talk! Anybody as handy with a picklock as you are has had plenty of practice...”

Mouse paused for breath, and Ciaran got a look at the hermit’s face. His stomach quivered. He tried to shut Mouse up, but she was feeling better and beginning to enjoy herself. She plunged into a detailed analysis of the hermit’s physique and heredity. She had a vivid and inventive mind. Ciaran finally got his hand over her mouth, taking care not to get bitten. “Nice going,” he said, “but we’ve got to get out of here. You can finish later.”

She started to heel his shins, and then quite suddenly she stopped and stiffened up under his hands. She was looking at the hermit. Ciaran looked, too. His insides knotted, froze, and began to do tricks.

The hermit said quietly, “You are finished now.” His pale eyes held them, and there was nothing human about his gaze, or the cold calm of his voice.

“You are evil. You are thieves—and I know, for I was a thief myself. You have the filth of the world on you, and no wish to clean it off.”

He moved toward them. It was hardly a step, hardly more than an inclination of the body, but Ciaran gave back before it.

“I killed a man. I took a life in sin and anger, and now I have made my peace. You have not. You will not. And if need comes, I can kill again—without remorse.”

He could, too. There was nothing ludicrous about him now. He was stating simple fact, and the dignity of him was awesome. Ciaran scowled down at the dust.

“Hell,” he said, “we’re sorry, Father. Mouse has a quick tongue, and we’ve both had a bad scare. She didn’t mean it. We respect any man’s conscience.”

There was a cold, hard silence, and then the third man cried out with a sort of subdued fury:

“Let’s go! Do you want to get caught again?”

He was a gnarled, knotty, powerful little man, beginning to grizzle but not to slow down. He wore a kilt of skins. His hide was dark and tough as leather, his hazel eyes set in nests of wrinkles.

The hunter, who had been hearing nothing but noises going back and forth over his head, turned and led off down the gully. The others followed, still not speaking.

Ciaran was thinking, He’s crazy. He’s clear off his head—and of all the things we didn’t need, a crazy hermit heads the list!

There was a cold spot between his shoulders that wouldn’t go away even when he started sweating with exertion.

The gully was evidently a main trail to Somewhere. There were many signs of recent passage by a lot of people, including an occasional body kicked off to the side and left to dry.

The little knotty man, who was a trapper named Ram, examined the bodies with a terrible stony look in his eyes.

“My wife and my first son,” he said briefly. “The gray beasts took them while I was gone.”

He turned grimly away.

Ciaran was glad when the bodies proved to be the wrong ones.

Ram and the big red hunter took turns scaling the cleft walls for a look. Mouse said something about taking to the face of the Plains where they wouldn’t be hemmed in. They looked at her grimly.

“The gray beasts are up there,” they said. “Flanking us. If we go up, they’ll only take us and chain us again.”

Ciaran's heart took a big, staggering jump. "In other words, they're herding us. We're going the way they want us to, so they don't bother to round us up."

The hunter nodded professionally. "Is a good plan."

"Oh, fine!" snarled Ciaran. "What I want to know is, is there any way out?"

The hunter shrugged.

"I'm going on anyway," said Ram. "My wife and son..."

Ciaran thought about the Stone of Destiny, and was rather glad there was no decision to make.

They went on, at an easy jog trot. By bits and pieces Ciaran built up the picture— raiding gangs of Kalds coming quietly onto isolated border villages, combing the brush and the forest for stragglers. Where they took the humans, or why, nobody could guess.

The red hunter froze to a dead stop. The others crouched behind him, instinctively holding their breath.

The hunter whispered, "People. Many of them." His flat palm made an emphatic move for quiet.

Small, cold prickles flared across Ciaran's skin. He found Mouse's hand in his and squeezed it. Suddenly, with no more voice than the sigh of a breeze through bracken, the hermit laughed.

"Judgment," he whispered. "Great things moving." His pale eyes were fey. "Doom and destruction, a shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying."

He looked at them one by one, and threw his head back, laughing without sound, the stringy cords working in his throat. "And of all of you, I *alone* have no fear!"

They went on, slowly, moving without sound in small shapeless puddles of shadow thrown by the floating sunballs. Ciaran found himself almost in the lead, beside the hunter.

They edged around a jog in the cleft wall. About ten feet ahead of them the cleft floor plunged underground, through a low opening shored with heavy timbers.

There were two Kalds lounging in front of it, watching their wands flash

in the light.

The five humans stopped. The Kalds came toward them, almost lazily, running rough gray tongues over their shiny teeth. Their blood-pink eyes were bright with pleasure.

Ciaran groaned. “This is it. Shall we be brave, or just smart?”

The hunter cocked his huge fists. And then Ram let go a queer animal moan. He shoved past Ciaran and went to his knees beside something Ciaran hadn’t noticed before.

A woman lay awkwardly against the base of the cliff. She was brown and stringy and not very young, with a plain, good face. A squat, thick-shouldered boy sprawled almost on top of her. There was a livid burn on the back of his neck. They were both dead.

Ciaran thought probably the woman had dropped from exhaustion, and the kid had died fighting to save her. He felt sick.

Ram put a hand on each of their faces, His own was stony and quite blank. After the first cry he didn’t make a sound.

He got up and went for the Kald nearest to him.

Three

He did it like an animal, quick and without thinking. The Kald was quick, too. It jabbed the wand at Ram, but the little brown man was coming so fast that it didn’t stop him. He must have died in mid-leap, but his body knocked the Kald over and bore him down.

Ciaran followed him in a swift cat leap.

He heard the hunter grunting and snarling somewhere behind him, and the thudding of bare feet being very busy. He lost sight of the other Kald. He lost sight of everything but a muscular gray arm that was trying to pull a jewel-tipped wand from under Ram’s corpse. There was a terrible stink of burned flesh.

Ciaran grabbed the gray wrist. He didn't bother with it, or the arm. He slid his grip up to the fingers, got his other hand beside it, and started wrenching.

Bone cracked and split. Ciaran worked desperately, from the thumb and the little finger. Flesh tore. Splinters of gray bone came through. Ciaran's hands slipped in the blood. The gray beast opened its mouth, but no sound came. Ciaran decided then the things were dumb. It was human enough to sweat.

Ciaran grabbed the wand.

A gray paw, the other one, came clawing for his throat around the bulk of Ram's shoulders. He flicked it with the wand. It went away, and Ciaran speared the jewel tip down hard against the Kald's throat.

After a while Mouse's voice came to him from somewhere. "It's done, Kiri. No use overcooking it."

It smelled done, all right. Ciaran got up. He looked at the wand in his hand, holding it a way off. He whistled.

Mouse said, "Stop admiring yourself and get going. The hunter says he can hear chains."

Ciaran looked around. The other Kald lay on the ground. Its neck seemed to be broken. The body of the squat, dark boy lay on top of it. The hunter said:

"He didn't feel the wand. I think he'd be glad to be a club for killing one of them, if he knew it."

Ciaran said, "Yeah." He looked at Mouse. She seemed perfectly healthy. "Aren't women supposed to faint at things like this?"

She snorted. "I was born in the Thieves' Quarter. We used to roll skulls instead of pennies. They weren't so scarce."

"I think," said Ciaran, "the next time I get married I'll ask more questions. Let's go."

They went down the ramp leading under the Forbidden Plains. The hunter led, like a wary beast. Ciaran brought up the rear. They both carried the stolen wands.

The hermit hadn't spoken a word, or moved a hand to help.

It was fairly dark there underground, but not cold. In fact, it was hotter

than outside, and got worse as they went down. Ciaran could hear a sound like a hundred armorers beating on shields. Only louder. There was a feeling of a lot of people moving around but not talking much, and an occasional crash or metallic screaming that Ciaran didn't have any explanation for. He found himself not liking it.

They went a fairish way on an easy down-slope, and then the light got brighter. The hunter whispered, "Careful!" and slowed down. They drifted like four ghosts through an archway into a glow of clear bluish light.

They stood on a narrow ledge. Just here it was hand-smoothed, but on both sides it ran in nature-eroded roughness into a jumble of stalactites and wind-galleries. Above the ledge, in near darkness, was the high roof arch, and straight ahead, there was just space. Eventually, a long way off, Ciaran made out a wall of rock.

Below there was a pit. It was roughly barrel-shaped. It was deep. It was so deep that Ciaran had to crane over the edge to see bottom. Brilliant blue-white flares made it brighter than daylight about two-thirds of the way up the barrel.

There were human beings laboring in the glare. They were tiny things no bigger than ants from this height. They wore no chains, and Ciaran couldn't see any guards. But after the first look he quit worrying about any of that. The Thing growing up in the pit took all his attention.

It was built of metal. It rose and spread in intricate swooping curves of shining whiteness, filling the whole lower part of the cavern. Ciaran stared at it with a curious numb feeling of awe.

The thing wasn't finished. He had not the faintest idea what it was for. But he was suddenly terrified of it.

It was more than just the sheer crushing size of it, or the unfamiliar metallic construction that was like nothing he had seen or even dreamed of before. It was the thing itself.

It was Power. It was Strength. It was a Titan growing there in the belly of the world, getting ready to reach out and grip it and play with it, like Mouse gambling with an empty skull.

He knew, looking at it, that no human brain in his own scale and time of existence had conceived that shining monster, nor shaped of itself one smallest part of it.

The red hunter said simply, “I’m scared. And this smells like a trap.”

Ciaran swallowed something that might have been his heart. “We’re in it, pal, like it or don’t. And we’d better get out of sight before that chain gang runs into us.”

Off to the side, along the rough part of the ledge where there were shadows and holes and pillars of rock, seemed the best bet. There was a way down to the cavern floor— a dizzy *zigzag* of ledges, ladders, and steps. But once on it you were stuck, and no cover.

They edged off, going as fast as they dared. Mouse was breathing rather heavily and her face was white enough to make the brand show like a blood-drop between her brows.

The hermit seemed to be moving in a private world of his own. The sight of the shining giant had brought a queer blaze to his eyes, something Ciaran couldn’t read and didn’t like. Otherwise, he might as well have been dead. He hadn’t spoken since he cursed them, back in the gully.

They crouched down out of sight among a forest of stalactites. Ciaran watched the ledge. He whispered, “They hunt by scent?”

The hunter nodded. “I think the other humans will cover us. Too many scents in this place. But how did they have those two waiting for us at the cave mouth?”

Ciaran shrugged. “Telepathy. Thought transference. Lots of the backwater people have it. Why not the Kalds?”

“You don’t,” said the hunter, “think of them as having human minds.”

“Don’t kid yourself. They think, all right. They’re not human, but they’re not true animals either.”

“Did they think *that?*” The hunter pointed at the pit.

“No,” said Ciaran slowly. “They didn’t.”

“Then who—” He broke off. “Quiet! Here they come.”

Ciaran held his breath, peering one-eyed around a stalactite. The slave gang, with the gray guards, began to file out of the tunnel and down the steep descent to the bottom. There was no trouble. There was no trouble left in any of those people. There were several empty collars. There were also fewer Kalds. Some had stayed outside to track down the four murderous fugitives, which meant no escape at that end.

Ciaran got an idea. When the last of the line and the guards were safely over the edge he whispered, “Come on. We’ll go down right on their tails.”

Mouse gave him a startled look. He said impatiently, “They won’t be looking back and up—I hope. And there won’t be anybody else coming up while they’re going down. You’ve got a better idea about getting down from this bloody perch, spill it!”

She didn’t have, and the hunter nodded. “Is good. Let’s go.”

They went, like the very devil. Since all were professionals in their own line they didn’t make any more fuss than so many leaves falling. The hermit followed silently. His pale eyes went to the shining monster in the pit at every opportunity.

He was fermenting some idea in his shaggy head. Ciaran had a hunch the safest thing would be to quietly trip him off into space. He resisted it, simply because knifing a man in a brawl was one thing and murdering an unsuspecting elderly man in cold blood was another.

Later, he swore a solemn oath to drop humanitarianism, but hard.

Nobody saw them. The Kalds and the people below were all too busy not breaking their necks to have eyes for anything else. Nobody came down behind them—a risk they had had to run. They were careful to keep a whole section of the descent between them and the slave gang.

It was a hell of a long way down. The metal monster grew and grew and slid up beside them, and then above them, towering against the vault. It was beautiful. Ciaran loved its beauty even while he hated and feared its strength.

Then he realized there were people working on it, clinging like flies to its white beams and arches. Some worked with wands not very different from the one he carried, fusing metal joints in a sparkle of hot light. Others guided the huge metal pieces into place, bringing them up from the floor of the cavern on long ropes and fitting them delicately.

With a peculiar dizzy sensation, Ciaran realized there was no more weight to the metal than if it were feathers.

He prayed they could get past those workers without being seen, or at least without having an alarm spread. The four of them crawled down past two or three groups of them safely, and then one man, working fairly close to the cliff, raised his head and stared straight at them.

Ciaran began to make frantic signs. The man paid no attention to them. Ciaran got a good look at his eyes. He let his hands drop.

“He doesn’t see us,” whispered Mouse slowly. “Is he blind?”

The man turned back to his work. It was an intricate fitting of small parts into a pierced frame. Work that in all his wanderings Ciaran had never seen done anywhere, in any fashion.

He shivered. “No. He just—doesn’t see us.”

The big hunter licked his lips nervously, like a beast in a deadfall. His eyes glittered. The hermit laughed without any sound. They went on.

It was the same all the way down. Men and women looked at them, but didn’t see.

In one place they paused to let the slave gang get farther ahead. There was a woman working not far out. She looked like a starved cat, gaunt ribs showing through torn rags. Her face was twisted with the sheer effort of breathing, but there was no expression in her eyes.

Quite suddenly, in the middle of an unfinished gesture, she collapsed like wet leather and fell. Ciaran knew she was dead before her feet cleared the beam she was sitting on.

That happened twice more on the way down. Nobody paid any attention.

Mouse wiped moisture off her forehead and glared at Ciaran. “A fine place to spend a honeymoon. You and your lousy shortcuts!”

For once Ciaran had no impulse to cuff her.

The last portion of the descent was covered by the backs of metal lean-tos full of heat and clamor. The four slipped away into dense shadow between two of them, crouched behind a mound of scrap. They had a good view of what happened to the slave gang.

The Kalds guided it out between massive pillars of white metal that held up the giant web overhead. Fires flared around the cliff foot. A hot blue-white glare beat down, partly from some unfamiliar light-sources fastened in the girders, partly from the mouths of furnaces hot beyond any heat Ciaran had ever dreamed of.

Men and women toiled sweating in the smoke and glare, and never looked at the newcomers in their chains. There were no guards.

The Kalds stopped the line in a clear space beyond the shacks and waited. They were all facing the same way, expectant, showing their bright gray teeth and rolling their blood-pink eyes.

Ciaran's gaze followed theirs. He got rigid suddenly, and the sweat on him turned cold as dew on a toad's back.

He thought at first it was a man, walking down between the pillars. It was man-shaped, tall and slender and strong, and sheathed from crown to heels in white mesh metal that shimmered like bright water.

But when it came closer he knew he was wrong. Some animal instinct in him knew even before his mind did. He wanted to snarl and put up his hackles, and tuck his tail and run.

The creature was sexless. The flesh of its hands and face had a strange unreal texture, and a dusky yellow tinge that never came in living flesh.

Its face was human enough in shape—thin, with light angular bones. Only it was regular and perfect like something done carefully in marble, with no human softness or irregularity. The lips were bloodless. There was no hair, not even any eyelashes.

The eyes in that face were what set Ciaran's guts to knotting like a nest of cold snakes. They were not even remotely human. They were like pools of oil under the lashless lids—black, deep, impenetrable, without heart or soul or warmth.

But wise. Wise with a knowledge beyond humanity, and strong with a cold, terrible strength. And old. There were none of the usual signs of age. It was more than that. It was a psychic, unhuman feel of antiquity; a time that ran back and back and still back to an origin as unnatural as the body it spawned.

Ciaran knew what it was. He had made songs about the creature and sung them in crowded marketplaces and smoky wineshops. He'd scared children with it, and made grown people shiver while they laughed.

He wasn't singing now. He wasn't laughing. He was looking at one of the androids of Bas the Immortal—a creature born of the mysterious power of the Stone, with no faintest link to humanity in its body or its brain.

Ciaran knew then whose mind had created the shining monster towering above them. And he knew more than ever that it was evil.

The android walked out onto a platform facing the slave gang, so that it

was above them, where they could all see. In its right hand it carried a staff of white metal with a round ball on top. The staff and the mesh-metal sheath it wore blazed bright silver in the glare.

The chained humans raised their heads. Ciaran saw the white scared glint of their eyeballs, heard the hard suck of breath and the uneasy clashing of link metal.

The Kalds made warning gestures with their wands, but they were watching the android.

It raised the staff suddenly, high over its head. The gesture put the ball top out of Ciaran's sight behind a girder. And then the lights dimmed and went out.

For a moment there was total darkness, except for the dull marginal glow of the forges and furnaces. Then, from behind the girder that hid the top of the staff a glorious opaline light burst out, filling the space between the giant pillars, reaching out and up into the dim air with banners of shimmering flame.

The Kalds crouched down in attitudes of worship, their blood-pink eyes like sentient coals. A trembling ran through the line of slaves, as though a wind had passed across them and shaken them like wheat. A few cried out, but the sounds were muffled quickly to silence. They stood still, staring up at the light.

The android neither moved nor spoke, standing like a silver lance.

Ciaran got up. He didn't know that he did it. He was distantly aware of Mouse beside him, breathing hard through an open mouth and catching opaline sparks in her black eyes. There was other movement, but he paid no attention.

He wanted to get closer to the light. He wanted to see what made it. He wanted to bathe in it. He could feel it pulsing in him, sparkling in his blood. He also wanted to run away, but the desire was stronger than the fear. It even made the fear rather pleasurable.

He was starting to climb over the pile of scrap when the android spoke. Its voice was light, clear, and carrying. There was nothing menacing about it. But it stopped Ciaran like a blow in the face, penetrating even through his semi-drugged yearning for the light.

He knew sound. He knew mood. He was sensitive to them as his own

harp in the way he made his living. He felt what was in that voice; or rather, what wasn't in it. And he stopped, dead still. „

It was a voice speaking out of a place where no emotion, as humanity knew the word, had ever existed. It came from a brain as alien and incomprehensible as darkness in a world of eternal light; a brain no human could ever touch or understand, except to feel the cold weight of its strength and cower as a beast cowers before the terrible mystery of fire.

“Sleep,” said the android. “Sleep, and listen to my voice. Open your minds, and listen.”

Four

Through a swimming rainbow haze Ciaran saw the relaxed, dull faces of the slaves.

“You are nothing. You are no one. You exist only to serve; to work; to obey. Do you hear and understand?”

The line of humans swayed and made a small moaning sigh. It held nothing but amazement and desire. They repeated the litany through thick animal mouths.

“Your minds are open to mine. You will hear my thoughts. Once told, you will not forget. You will feel hunger and thirst, but not weariness. You will have no need to stop and rest, or sleep.”

Again the litany. Ciaran passed a hand over his face. He was sweating. In spite of himself the light and the soulless, mesmerizing voice were getting him. He hit his own jaw with his knuckles, thanking whatever gods there were that the source of light had been hidden from him. He knew he could never have bucked it.

More, perhaps, of the power of the Stone of Destiny?

A sudden sharp rattle of fragments brought his attention to the scrap heap. The hermit was already halfway over it. And Mouse was right at his heels. Ciaran went after her. The rubble slipped and slid, and she was

already out of reach. He called her name in desperation. She didn't hear him. She was hungry for the light.

Ciaran flung himself bodily over the rubbish. Out on the floor, the nearest Kalds were shaking off their daze of worship. The hermit was scrambling on all fours, like a huge gray cat.

Mouse's crimson tunic stayed just out of reach. Ciaran threw a handful of metal fragments at her back. She turned her head and snarled at him. She didn't see him. Almost as an automatic reflex she hurled some stuff at his face, but she didn't even slow down. The hermit cried out, a high, eerie scream.

A huge hand closed on Ciaran's ankle and hauled him back. He fought it, jabbing with the wand he still carried. A second remorseless hand prisoned his wrist.

The red hunter said dispassionately, "They come. We go."

"Mouse! Let me go, damn you! *Mouse!*"

"You can't help her. We go, quick."

Ciaran went on kicking and thrashing.

The hunter banged him over the ear with exquisite judgment, took the wand out of his limp hand, and tossed him over one vast shoulder. The light hadn't affected the hunter much. He'd been in deeper shadow than the others, and his half-animal nerves had warned him quicker even than Ciaran's. Being a wise wild thing, he had shut his eyes at once.

He doubled behind the metal sheds and began to run in dense shadow.

Ciaran heard and felt things from a great misty distance. He heard the hermit yell again, a crazy votive cry of worship. He felt the painful jarring of his body and smelled the animal rankness of the hunter.

He heard Mouse scream, just once.

He tried to move; to get up and do something. The hunter slammed him hard across the kidneys. Ciaran was aware briefly that the lights were coming on again. After that it got very dark and very quiet.

The hunter breathed in his ear, "Quiet! Don't move."

There wasn't much chance of Ciaran doing anything. The hunter lay on top of him with one freckled paw covering most of his face. Ciaran gasped and rolled his eyes.

They lay in a troughed niche of rough stone. There was black shadow on them from an overhang, but the blue glare burned beyond it. Even as he watched it dimmed and flickered and then steadied again.

High up over his head the shining metal monster reached for the roof of the cavern. It had grown. It had grown enormously, and a mechanism was taking shape inside it; a maze of delicate rods and crystal prisms, of wheels and balances and things Ciaran hadn't any name for.

Then he remembered about Mouse, and nothing else mattered.

The hunter lay on him, crushing him to silence. Ciaran's blue eyes blazed. He'd have killed the hunter then, if there had been any way to do it. There wasn't. Presently he stopped fighting.

Again the giant breathed in his ear: "Look over the edge."

He took his hand away. Very, very quietly, Ciaran raised his head a few inches and looked over.

Their niche was some fifteen feet above the floor of the pit. Below and to the right was the mouth of a square tunnel. The crowded, sweating confusion of the forges and workshops spread out before them, with people swarming like ants after a rain. Standing at the tunnel mouth were two creatures in shining metal sheathes—the androids of Bas the Immortal.

Their clear, light voices rose up to where Ciaran and the hunter lay.

"Did you find out?"

"Failing—as we judged. Otherwise, no change."

"No change." One of the slim unhumans turned and looked with its depthless black eyes at the soaring metal giant. "If we can only finish it in time!"

The other said, "We can, Khafre. We must."

Khafre made a quick, impatient gesture. "We need more slaves! These human cattle are frail. You drive them, and they die."

"The Kalds..."

"Are doing what they can. Two more chains have just come. But it's still not enough to be safe! I've told the beasts to raid farther in, even to the border cities if they have to."

“It won’t help if the humans attack us before we’re done.”

Khafre laughed. There was nothing pleasant or remotely humorous about it.

“*If* they could track the Kalds this far, we could handle them easily. After we’re finished, of course, they’ll be subjugated anyway.”

The other nodded. Faintly uneasy, it said, “If we finish in time. If we don’t..”

“If we don’t,” said Khafre, “none of it matters, to them or us or the Immortal Bas.” Something that might have been a shudder passed over its shining body. Then it threw back its head and laughed again, high and clear.

“But we will finish it, Steud! We’re unique in the universe, and nothing can stop us. This means the end of boredom, of servitude and imprisonment. With this world in our hands, nothing can stop us!”

Steud whispered, “Nothing!” Then they moved away, disappearing into the seething clamor of the floor.

The red hunter said, “What were they talking about?”

Ciaran shook his head. His eyes were hard and curiously remote. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t like the smell of it, little man. It’s bad.”

“Yeah.” Ciaran’s voice was very steady. “What happened to Mouse?”

“She was taken with the others. Believe me, little man—I had to do what I did or they’d have taken you, too. There was nothing you could do to help her.”

“She—followed the light.”

“I think so. But I had to run fast.” There was a mist over Ciaran’s sight. His heart was slugging him. Not because he particularly cared, he asked,

“How did we get away? I thought I saw the big lights come on...”

“They did. And then they went off again, all of a sudden. They weren’t expecting it. I had a head start. The gray beasts hunt by scent, but in that stewpot there are too many scents. They lost us, and when the lights came on again I saw this niche and managed to climb to it without being seen.”

He looked out over the floor, scratching his red beard. “I think they’re

too busy to bother about two people. No, three.” He chuckled. “The hermit got away, too. He ran past me in the dark, screaming like an ape about revelations and The Light. Maybe they’ve got him again by now.”

Ciaran wasn’t worrying about the hermit. “Subjugation,” he said slowly. “With this world in their hands, nothing can stop them.” He looked out across the floor of the pit. No guards. You didn’t need any guards when you had a weapon like that light. Frail human cattle driven till they died, and not knowing about it nor caring.

The world in their hands. An empty shell for them to play with, to use as they wanted. No more marketplaces, no more taverns, no more songs. No more little people living their little lives the way they wanted to. Just slaves with blank faces, herded by gray beasts with shining wands and held by the android’s light.

He didn’t know why the androids wanted the world or what they were going to do with it. He only knew that the whole thing made him sick—sick all through, in a way he’d never felt before.

The fact that what he was going to do was hopeless and crazy never occurred to him. Nothing occurred to him, except that somewhere in that seething slave-pen Mouse was laboring, with eyes that didn’t see and a brain that was only an open channel for orders. Pretty soon, like the woman up on the girder, she was going to hit her limit and die.

Ciaran said abruptly, “If you want to kill a snake, what do you do?”

“Cut off its head, of course.”

Ciaran got his feet under him. “The Stone of Destiny,” he whispered. “The power of life and death. Do you believe in legends?”

The hunter shrugged. “I believe in my hands. They’re all I know.”

“I’m going to need your hands, to help me break one legend and build another!”

“They’re yours, little man. Where do we go?”

“Down that tunnel. Because, if I’m not clear off, that leads to Ben Beatha, and Bas the Immortal—and the Stone.”

Almost as though it were a signal, the blue glare dimmed and flickered. In the semi-darkness Ciaran and the hunter dropped down from the niche and went into the tunnel.

It was dark, with only a tiny spot of blue radiance at wide intervals along the walls. They had gone quite a distance before these strengthened to their normal brightness, and even then it was fairly dark. It seemed to be deserted.

The hunter kept stopping to listen. When Ciaran asked irritably what was wrong, he said:

“I think there’s someone behind us. I’m not sure.”

“Well, give him a jab with the wand if he gets too close. Hurry up!”

The tunnel led straight toward Ben Beatha, judging from its position in the pit. Ciaran was almost running when the hunter caught his shoulder urgently.

“Wait! There’s movement up ahead...”

He motioned Ciaran down. On their hands and knees they crawled forward, holding their wands ready.

A slight bend in the tunnel revealed a fork. One arm ran straight ahead. The other bent sharply upward, toward the surface.

There were four Kalds crouched on the rock between them, playing some obscure game with human finger bones.

Ciaran got his weight over his toes and moved fast. The hunter went beside him. Neither of them made a sound. The Kalds were intent on their game and not expecting trouble.

The two men might have got away with it, only that suddenly from behind them, someone screamed like an angry cat.

Ciaran’s head jerked around, just long enough to let him see the hermit standing in the tunnel, with his stringy arms lifted and his gray hair flying, and a light of pure insanity blazing in his pale eyes.

“Evil!” he shrieked. “You are evil to defy The Light, and the servants of The Light!”

He seemed to have forgotten all about calling the Kalds demons a little while before.

The gray beasts leaped up, moving quickly in with their wands ready. Ciaran yelled with sheer fury. He went for them, the rags of his yellow tunic streaming.

He wasn't quite clear about what happened after that. There was a lot of motion, gray bodies leaping and twisting and jewel-tips flashing. Something flicked him stunningly across the temple. He fought in a sort of detached fog where everything was blurred and distant. The hermit went on screaming about Evil and The Light. The hunter bellowed a couple of times, things thudded and crashed, and once Ciaran poked his wand straight into a blood-pink eye.

Sometime right after that there was a confused rush of running feet back in the tunnel. The hunter was down. And Ciaran found himself running up the incline, because the other way was suddenly choked with Kalds.

He got away. He was never sure how. Probably instinct warned him to go in time so that, in the confusion he was out of sight before the reinforcements saw him. Three of the original four Kalds were down and the fourth was busy with the hermit. Anyway, for the moment, he made it.

When he staggered finally from the mouth of the ramp, drenched with sweat and gasping, he was back on the Forbidden Plains and Ben Beatha towered above him—a great golden Titan reaching for the red sky.

The tumbled yellow rock of its steep slopes was barren of any growing thing. There were no signs of buildings, or anything built by hands, human or otherwise. High up, almost in the apex of the triangular peak, was a square, balconied opening that might have been only a wind-eroded niche in the cliff-face.

Ciaran stood on widespread legs, studying the mountain with sullen stubborn eyes. He believed in legend, now. It was all he believed in. Somewhere under the golden peak was the Stone of Destiny and the demigod who was its master.

Behind him were the creatures of that demigod, and the monster they were building—and a little black-haired Mouse who was going to die unless something was done about it.

A lot of other people, too. A whole sane comfortable world. But Mouse was about all he could handle, just then.

He wasn't Ciaran the bard any longer, He wasn't a human, attached to a normal human world. He moved in a strange land of gods and demons, where everything was as mad as a drunkard's nightmare, and Mouse was the only thing that held him at all to the memory of a life wherein men

and women fought and laughed and loved.

His scarred mouth twitched and tightened. He started off across the rolling, barren rise to Ben Beatha—a tough, bandy-legged little man in yellow rags, with a brown expressionless face and a forgotten harp slung between his shoulders, moving at a steady gypsy lope.

A wind sighed over the Forbidden Plains, rolling the sunballs in the red sky. And then, from the crest of Ben Beatha, the darkness came.

This time Ciaran didn't stop to be afraid. There was nothing left inside him to be afraid with. He remembered the hermit's words: *judgment. Great things moving. Doom and destruction, a shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying.* Something of the same feeling came to him, but he wasn't human any longer. He was beyond fear. Fate moved, and he was part of it.

Stones and shale tricked his feet in the darkness. All across the Forbidden Plains there was night and a wailing wind and a sharp chill of cold. Far, far away there was a faint red glow on the sky where the sea burned with its own fire.

Ciaran went on.

Overhead, then, the sunballs began to flicker. Little striving ripples of light went out across them, lighting the barrens with an eerie witch-glow. The flickering was worse than the darkness. It was like the last struggling pulse of a dying man's heart.

Ciaran was aware of a coldness in him beyond the chill of the wind. *A shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying...* He began to climb Ben Beatha.

Five

The stone was rough and fairly broken, and Ciaran had climbed mountains before. He crawled upward, through the sick light and the cold wind that screamed and fought him harder the higher he got. He retained

no very clear memory of the climb. Only after a long, long time he fell inward over the wall of a balcony and lay still.

He was bleeding from rock-tears and his heart kicked him like the heel of a vicious horse. But he didn't care. The balcony was man-made, the passage back of it led somewhere—and the light had come back in the sky.

It wasn't quite the same, though. It was weaker, and less warm.

When he could stand up he went in along the passage, square-hewn in the living rock of Ben Beatha, the Mountain of Life.

It led straight in, lighted by a soft opaline glow from hidden light-sources. Presently it turned at right angles and became a spiral ramp, leading down.

Corridors led back from it at various levels, but Ciaran didn't bother about them. They were dark, and the dust of ages lay unmarked on their floors.

Down and down, a long, long way. Silence. The deep uncaring silence of death and the eternal rock—dark titans who watched the small furious ant-scurryings of man and never, never, for one moment, gave a damn.

And then the ramp flattened into a broad high passage cut deep in the belly of the mountain. And the passage led to a door of gold, twelve feet high and intricately graven and pierced, set with symbols that Ciaran had heard of only in legend: the *Hun-Lahun-Mehen*, the Snake, the Circle, and the Cross, blazing in hot jewel-fires.

But above them, crushing and dominant on both valves of the great door, was the *crux ansata*, the symbol of eternal life, cut from some lusterless stone so black it was like a pattern of blindness on the eyeball.

Ciaran shivered and drew a deep, unsteady breath. One brief moment of human terror came to him. Then he set his two hands on the door and pushed it open. He came into a small room hung with tapestries and lighted dimly by the same opaline glow as the hallway. The half-seen pictures showed men and beasts and battles against a background at once tantalizingly familiar and frighteningly alien.

There was a rug on the floor. It was made from the head and hide of a creature Ciaran had never even dreamed of before— a thing like a huge tawny cat with a dark mane and great, shining fangs.

Ciaran padded softly across it and pushed aside the heavy curtains at

the other end.

At first there was only darkness. It seemed to fill a large space; Ciaran had an instinctive feeling of size. He went out into it, very cautiously, and then his eyes found a pale glow ahead in the blackness, as though someone had crushed a pearl with his thumb and smeared it across the dark.

He was a thief and a gypsy. He made no more sound than a wisp of cloud, drifting toward it. His feet touched a broad, shallow step, and then another. He climbed, and the pearly glow grew stronger and became a curving wall of radiance.

He stopped just short of touching it, on a level platform high above the floor. He squinted against its curdled, milky thickness, trying to see through.

Wrapped in the light, cradled and protected by it like a bird in the heart of a shining cloud, a boy slept on a couch made soft with furs and colored silks. He was quite naked, his limbs flung out carelessly with the slim angular grace of his youth. His skin was white as milk, catching a pale warmth from the light.

He slept deeply. He might almost have been dead, except for the slight rise and fall of his breathing. His head was rolled over so that he faced Ciaran, his cheek pillowed on his upflung arm.

His hair, thick, curly, and black almost to blueness, had grown out long across his forearm, across the white fur beneath it, and down onto his wide, slim shoulders. The nails of his lax hand, palm up above his head, stood up through the hair. They were inches long.

His face was just a boy's face. A good face, even rather handsome, with strong bone just beginning to show under the roundness. His cheek was still soft as a girl's, the lashes of his closed lids dark and heavy.

He looked peaceful, even happy. His mouth was curved in a vague smile, as though his dreams were pleasant. And yet there was something there...

A shadow. Something unseen and untouchable, something as fragile as the note of a shepherd's pipe brought from far off on a vagrant breeze. Something as indescribable as death—and as broodingly powerful. Ciaran sensed it, and his nerves throbbed suddenly like the strings of his own harp.

He saw then that the couch the boy slept on was a huge *crux ansata*,

cut from the dead-black stone, with the arms stretching from under his shoulders and the loop like a monstrous halo above his head.

The legends whispered through Ciaran's head. The songs, the tales, the folklore. The symbolism, and the image-patterns.

Bas the Immortal was always described as a giant, like the mountain he lived in, and old, because Immortal suggests age. Awe, fear, and unbelief spoke through those legends, and the child-desire to build tall. But there was an older legend...

Ciaran, because he was a gypsy and a thief and had music in him like a drunkard has wine, had heard it, deep in the black forests of Hyperborea where even gypsies seldom go. The oldest legend of all—the tale of the Shining Youth from Beyond, who walked in beauty and power, who never grew old, and who carried in his heart a bitter darkness that no man could understand.

The Shining Youth from Beyond. A boy sleeping with a smile on his face, walled in living light.

Ciaran stood still, staring. His face was loose and quite blank. His heartbeats shook him slightly, and his breath had a rusty sound in his open mouth.

After a long time he started forward, into the light.

It struck him, hurled him back numbed and dazed. Thinking of Mouse, he tried it twice more before he was convinced. Then he tried yelling. His voice crashed back at him from the unseen walls, but the sleeping boy never stirred, never altered even the rhythm of his breathing.

After that Ciaran crouched in the awful laxness of impotency, and thought about Mouse, and cried.

Then, quite suddenly, without any warning at all, the wall of light vanished.

He didn't believe it. But he put his hand out again, and nothing stopped it, so he rushed forward in the pitch blackness until he hit the stone arm of the cross. And behind him, and all around him, the light began to glow again.

Only now it was different. It flickered and dimmed and struggled, like something fighting not to die. Like something else.

Like the sunballs. Like the light in the sky that meant life to a world. Flickering and feeble like an old man's heart, the last frightened wing-beats of a dying bird...

A terror took Ciaran by the throat and stopped the breath in it, and turned his body colder than a corpse. He watched...

The light glowed and pulsed, and grew stronger. Presently he was walled in by it, but it seemed fainter than before.

A terrible feeling of urgency came over Ciaran, a need for haste. The words of the androids came back to him: *Failing, as we judged. If we finish in time. If we don't, none of it matters.*

A shadow across the world, a darkness and a dying. Mouse slaving with empty eyes to build a shining monster that would harness the world to the wills of nonhuman brains.

It didn't make sense, but it meant something. Something deadly important. And the key to the whole mad jumble was here—a dark-haired boy dreaming on a stone cross.

Ciaran moved closer. He saw then that the boy had stirred, very slightly, and that his face was troubled. It was as though the dimming of the light disturbed him. Then he sighed and smiled again, nestling his head deeper into the bend of his arm.

“Bas,” said Ciaran. “Lord Bas!”

His voice sounded hoarse and queer. The boy didn't hear him. He called again, louder. Then he put his hand on one slim white shoulder and shook it hesitantly at first, and then hard, and harder.

The boy Bas didn't even flicker his eyelids.

Ciaran beat his fists against the empty air and cursed without any voice. Then, almost instinctively, he crouched on the stone platform and took his harp in his hands.

It wasn't because he expected to do anything with it. It was simply that harping was as natural to him as breathing, and what was inside him had to come out some way. He wasn't thinking about music. He was thinking about Mouse, and it just added up to the same thing.

Random chords at first, rippling up against the wall of milky light. Then the agony in him began to run out through his fingertips onto the strings,

and he sent it thrumming strong across the still air. It sang wild and savage, but underneath it there was the sound of his own heart breaking, and the fall of tears.

There was no time. There wasn't even any Ciaran. There was only the harp crying a dirge for a black-haired Mouse and the world she lived in. Nothing mattered but that. Nothing would ever matter.

Then finally there wasn't anything left for the harp to cry about. The last quiver of the strings went throbbing off into a dull emptiness, and there was only an ugly little man in yellow rags crouched silent by a stone cross, hiding his face in his hands,

Then, faint and distant, like the echo of words spoken in another world, another time:

Don't draw the veil. Marsali—don't...!

Ciaran looked up, stiffening. The boy's lips moved. His face, the eyes still closed, was twisted in an agony of pleading. His hands were raised, reaching, trying to hold something that slipped through his fingers like mist.

Dark mist. The mist of dreams. It was still in his eyes when he opened them. Gray eyes, clouded and veiled, and then with the dream-mist thickening into tears...

He cried but, "*Marsali!*" as though his heart was ripped out of him with the breath that said it. Then he lay still on the couch, his eyes staring unfocused at the milky light, with the tears running out of them.

Ciaran said softly, "Lord Bas..."

"Awake," whispered the boy. "I'm awake again. Musk—a harp crying out... I didn't want to wake! Oh, God, I didn't want to!"

He sat up suddenly. The rage, the sheer blind fury in his young face rocked Ciaran like the blow of a fist.

"Who waked me? Who dared to wake me?"

There was no place to run. The light held him. And there was Mouse. Ciaran said:

"I did, Lord Bas. There was need to."

The boy's gray eyes came slowly to focus on his face. Ciaran's heart kicked once and stopped beating. A great cold stillness breathed from

somewhere beyond the world and walled him in, closer and tighter than the milky light. Close and tight, like the packed earth of a grave.

A boy's face, round and smooth and soft. No shadow even of down on the cheeks, the lips still pink and girlish. Long dark lashes, and under them...

Gray eyes. Old with suffering, old with pain, old with an age beyond human understanding. Eyes that had seen birth and life and death in an endless stream, flowing by just out of reach, just beyond hearing. Eyes looking out between the bars of a private hell that was never built for any man before.

One strong young hand reached down among the furs and silks and felt for something, and Ciaran knew the thing was death.

Ciaran, suddenly, was furious himself.

He struck a harsh, snarling chord on the harpstrings, thinking of Mouse. He poured his fury out in bitter pungent words, the gypsy argot of the Quarters, and all the time Bas fumbled to get the hidden weapon in his hands.

It was the long nails that saved Ciaran's life. They kept Bas from closing his fingers, and in the meantime some of Ciaran's vibrant rage had penetrated. Bas whispered:

"You love a woman."

"Yeah," said Ciaran. "Yeah."

"So do I. A woman I created, and made to live in my dreams. Do you know what you did when you waked me?"

"Maybe I saved the world. If the legends are right, you built it. You haven't any right to let it die so you can sleep."

"I built another world, little man. Marsali's world. I don't want to leave it." He bent forward, toward Ciaran. "I was happy in that world. I built it to suit me. I belong in it. Do you know why? Because it's made from my own dreams, as I want it. Even the people. Even Marsali. Even myself.

"They drove me away from one world. I built another, but it was no different. I'm not human. I don't belong with humans, nor in any world they live in. So I learned to sleep, and dream."

He lay back on the couch. He looked pitifully young, with the long lashes

hiding his eyes.

“Go away. Let your little world crumble. It’s doomed anyway. What difference do a few life-spans make in eternity? Let me sleep.”

Ciaran struck the harp again. “No! Listen...”

He told Bas about the slave gangs, the androids, the shining monster in the pit—and the darkness that swept over the world. It was the last that caught the boy’s attention.

He sat up slowly. “Darkness? You! How did you get to me, past the light?”

Ciaran told him.

“The Stone of Destiny,” whispered the Immortal. Suddenly he laughed. He laughed to fill the whole dark space beyond the light; terrible laughter, full of hate and a queer perverted triumph.

He stopped, as suddenly as he had begun, and spread his hands flat on the colored silks, the long nails gleaming like knives. His eyes widened, gray windows into a deep hell, and his voice was no more than a breath.

“Could that mean I will die, too?”

Ciaran’s scarred mouth twitched. “The Stone of Destiny...”

The boy leaped up from his couch. His hand swept over some hidden control in the arm of the stone cross, and the milky light died out. At the same time, an opaline glow suffused the darkness beyond.

Bas the Immortal ran down the steps—a dark-haired, graceful boy running naked in the heart of an opal.

Ciaran followed.

They came to the hollow core of Ben Beatha—a vast pyramidal space cut in the yellow rock. Bas stopped, and Ciaran stopped behind him.

The whole space was laced and twined and webbed with crystal. Rods of it, screens of it, meshes of it. A shining helix ran straight up overhead, into a shaft that seemed to go clear through to open air.

In the crystal, pulsing along it like the life-blood in a man’s veins, there was light.

It was like no light Giaran had ever seen before. It was no color, and every color. It seared the eye with heat, and yet it was cold and pure like

still water. It throbbed and beat. It was alive.

Ciaran followed the crystal maze down and down, to the base of it. There, in the very heart of it, lying at the hub of a shining web, lay *something*.

Like a black hand slammed across the eyeballs, darkness fell.

For a moment he was blind, and through the blindness came a soft whisper of movement. Then there was light again; a vague smeared spot of it on the pitch black.

It glowed and faded and glowed again.

The rusty gleam slid across the half-crouched body of Bas the Immortal, pressed close against the crystal web. It caught in his eyes, turning them hot and lambent like beast-eyes in the dark of a cave-mouth.

Little sparks of hell-fire in a boy's face, staring at the Stone of Destiny.

A stone no bigger than a man's heart, with power in it. Even dying, it had power. Power to build a world, or smash it. Power never born of Ciaran's planet, or any planet, but something naked and perfect—an egg from the womb of space itself.

It fought to live, lying in its crystal web. It was like watching somebody's heart stripped clean and struggling to beat. The fire in it flickered and flared, sending pale witch-lights dancing up along the crystal maze.

Outside, Ciaran knew, all across the world, the sunballs were pulsing and flickering to the dying beat of the Stone.

Bas whispered, "It's over. Over and done."

Without knowing it, Ciaran touched the harpstrings and made them shudder. "The legends were right, then. The Stone of Destiny kept the world alive."

"Alive. It gave light and warmth, and before that it powered the ship that brought me here across space, from the third planet of our sun to the tenth. It sealed the gaps in the planet's crust and drove the machinery that filled the hollow core inside with air. It was my strength. It built my world; *my* world, where I would be loved and respected—all right, and worshipped!" He laughed, a small bitter sob. "A child I was. After all those centuries, still a child playing with a toy."

His voice rang out louder across the flickering dimness. A boy's voice,

clear and sweet. He wasn't talking to Ciaran. He wasn't even talking to himself. He was talking to Fate, and cursing it.

"I took a walk one morning. That was all I did. I was just a fisherman's son walking on the green hills of Atlantis above the sea. That was all I wanted to be—a fisherman's son, someday to be a fisherman myself, with sons of my own. And then from nowhere, out of the sky, the meteorite fell. There was thunder, and a great light, and then darkness. And when I woke again I was a god.

"I took the Stone of Destiny out of its broken shell. The light from it burned in me, and I was a god. And I was happy. *I didn't know.*

"I was too young to be a god. A boy who never grew older. A boy who wanted to play with other boys, and couldn't. A boy who wanted to age, to grow a beard and a man's voice, and find a woman to love. It was hell, after the thrill wore off. It was worse, when my mind and heart grew up, and my body didn't.

"And they said I was no god, but a blasphemy, a freak.

"The priest of Dagon, of all the temples of Atlantis, spoke against me. I had to run away. I roamed the whole earth before the Flood, carrying the Stone. Sometimes I ruled for centuries, a god-king, but always the people tired of me and rose against me. They hated me, because I lived forever and never grew old.

"A man they might have accepted. But a boy! A brain with all the wisdom it could borrow from time, grown so far from theirs that it was hard to talk to them—and a body too young even for the games of manhood!"

Ciaran stood frozen, shrinking from the hell in the boy-god's agonized voice.

"So I grew to hate them, and when they drove me out I turned on them, and used the power of the Stone to destroy. I know what happened to the cities of the Gobi, to Angkor, and the temples of Mayapan! So the people hated me more because they feared me more, and I was alone. No one has ever been alone as I was.

"So I built my own world, here in the heart of a dead planet. And in the end it was the same, because the people were human and I was not. I created the androids, freaks like myself, to stand between me and my

people—my own creatures, that I could trust. And I built a third world, in my dreams.

“And now the Stone of Destiny has come to the end of its strength. Its atoms are eaten away by its own fire. The world it powered will die. And what will happen to me? Will I go on living, even after my body is frozen in the cold dark?”

Silence, then. The pulsing beat of light in the crystal rods. The heart of a world on its deathbed.

Ciaran’s harp crashed out, It made the crystal sing. His voice came with it:

“Bas! The monster in the pit, that the androids are building—I know now what it is! They knew the Stone was dying. They’re going to have power of their own, and take the world. You can’t let them, Bas! You brought us here. We’re your people. You can’t let the androids have us!”

The boy laughed, a low, bitter sound. “What do I care for your world or your people? I only want to sleep.” He caught his breath in and turned around, as though he was going back to the place of the stone cross.

Six

Ciaran stroked the harpstrings. “Wait...” It was all humanity crying out of the harp. Little people, lost and frightened and pleading for help. No voice could have said what it said. It was Ciaran himself, a channel for the unthinking pain inside him.

“Wait— You were human once. You were young. You laughed and quarreled and ate and slept, and you were free. That’s all we ask. Just those things. Remember Bas the fisherman’s son, and help us!”

Gray eyes looking at him. Gray eyes looking from a boy’s face. “How could I help you even if I wanted to?”

“There’s some power left in the Stone. And the androids are your creatures. You made them. You can destroy them. If you could do it before

they finish this thing—from the way they spoke, they mean to destroy you with it.”

Bas laughed.

Ciaran’s hand struck a terrible chord from the harp, and fell away.

Bas said heavily, “They’ll draw power from the gravitic force of the planet and broadcast it the same way. It will never stop as long as the planet spins. If they finish it in time, the world will live. If they don’t…” He shrugged. “What difference does it make?”

“So,” whispered Ciaran, “we have a choice of a quick death, or a lingering one. We can die free, on our own feet, or we can die slaves.” His voice rose to a full-throated shout. “*God! You’re no god!* You’re a selfish brat sulking in a corner. All right, go back to your Marsali! And I’ll play god for a minute.”

He raised the harp.

“I’ll play god, and give ‘em the clean way out!”

He drew his arm back to throw—to smash the crystal web. And then, with blinding suddenness, there was light again.

They stood frozen, the two of them, blinking in the hot opalescence. Then their eyes were drawn to the crystal web.

The Stone of Destiny still fluttered like a dying heart, and the crystal rods were dim.

Ciaran whispered, “It’s too late. They’re finished.”

Silence again. They stood almost as though they were waiting for something, hardly breathing, with Ciaran still holding the silent harp in his hand.

Very, very faintly, under his fingers, the strings began to thrum.

Vibration. In a minute Ciaran could hear it in the crystal. It was like the buzz and strum of insects just out of earshot. He said:

“What’s that?”

The boy’s ears were duller than his. But presently he smiled and said, “So that’s how they’re going to do it. Vibration, that will shake Ben Beatha into a cloud of dust, and me with it. They must believe I’m still asleep.” He shrugged. “What matter? It’s death.”

Ciaran slung the harp across his back. There was a curious finality in the action.

“There’s a way from here into the pit. Where is it?”

Bas pointed across the open space. Ciaran started walking. He didn’t say anything.

Bas said, “Where are you going?”

“Back to Mouse,” said Ciaran simply.

“To die with her.” The crystal maze hummed eerily. “I wish I could see Marsali again.”

Ciaran stopped. He spoke over his shoulder, without expression. “The death of the Stone doesn’t mean your death, does it?”

“No. The first exposure to its light when it landed, blazing with the heat of friction, made permanent changes in the cell structure of my body. I’m independent of it—as the androids are of the culture vats they grew in.”

“And the new power source will take up where the Stone left off?”

“Yes. Even the wall of rays that protected me and fed my body while I slept will go on. The power of the Stone was broadcast to it, and to the sunballs. There were no mechanical leads.”

Ciaran said softly, “And you love this Marsali? You’re happy in this dream world you created? You could go back there?”

“Yes,” whispered Bas. “Yes. Yes!”

Ciaran turned. “Then help us destroy the androids. Give us our world, and we’ll give you yours. If we fail—well, we have nothing to lose.”

Silence. The crystal web hummed and sang—death whispering across the world. The Stone of Destiny throbbed like the breast of a dying bird. The boy’s gray eyes were veiled and remote. It seemed almost that he was asleep.

Then he smiled—the drowsy smile of pleasure he had worn when Ciaran found him, dreaming on the stone cross.

“Marsali,” he whispered. “Marsali.”

He moved forward then, reaching out across the crystal web. The long nails on his fingers scooped up the Stone of Destiny, cradled it, caged it in.

Bas the Immortal said, “Let’s go, little man.”

Ciaran didn't say anything. He looked at Bas. His eyes were wet. Then he got the harp in his hands again and struck it, and the thundering chords shook the crystal maze to answering music.

It drowned the faint death-whisper. And then, caught between two vibrations, the shining rods split and fell, with a shiver of sound like the ringing of distant bells.

Ciaran turned and went down the passage to the pit. Behind him came the dark-haired boy with the Stone of Destiny in his hands.

They came along the lower arm of the fork where Ciaran and the hunter had fought the Kalds. There were four of the gray beasts still on guard.

Ciaran had pulled the wand from his girdle. The Kalds started up, and Ciaran got ready to fight them. But Bas said, "Wait."

He stepped forward. The Kalds watched him with their blood-pink eyes, yawning and whimpering with animal nervousness. The boy's dark gaze burned. The gray brutes cringed and shivered and then dropped flat, hiding their faces against the stone.

"Telepaths," said Bas to Ciaran, "and obedient to the strongest mind. The androids know that. The Kalds weren't put there to stop me physically, but to send the androids warning if I came."

Ciaran shivered. "So they'll be waiting."

"Yes, little man. They'll be waiting."

They went down the long tunnel and stepped out on the floor of the pit.

It was curiously silent. The fires had died in the forges. There was no sound of hammering, no motion. Only blazing lights and a great stillness, like someone holding his breath. There was no one in sight.

The metal monster climbed up the pit. It was finished now. The intricate maze of grids and balances in its belly murmured with the strength that spun up through it from the core of the planet. It was like a vast spider, making an invisible thread of power to wrap around the world and hold it, to be sucked dry.

An army of Kalds began to move on silent feet, out from the screening tangle of sheds and machinery.

The androids weren't serious about that. It was just a skirmish, a test to see whether Bas had been weakened by his age-long sleep. He hadn't been.

The Kalds looked at the Stone of Destiny and from there to Bas's gray eyes, cringed, whimpered, and lay flat.

Bas whispered, "Their minds are closed to me, but I can feel—the androids are working, preparing some trap..."

His eyes were closed now, his young face set with concentration. "They don't want me to see, but my mind is older than theirs, and better trained, and I have the power of the Stone. I can see a control panel. It directs the force of their machine..."

He began to move, then, rapidly, out across the floor. His eyes were still closed. It seemed he didn't need them for seeing.

People began to come out from behind the sheds and the cooling forges. Black-faced people with empty eyes. Many of them, making a wall of themselves against Bas.

Ciaran cried out, "*Mouse...!*"

She was there. Her body was there, thin and erect in the crimson tunic. Her black hair was still wild around her small brown face. But Mouse, the Mouse that Ciaran knew, was dead behind her dull black eyes. Ciaran whispered, "*Mouse...*"

The slaves flowed in and held the two of them, clogged in a mass of unresponsive bodies.

"Can't you free them, Bas?"

"Not yet. Not now. There isn't time."

"Can't you do with them what you did with the Kalds?"

"The androids control their minds through hypnosis. If I fought that control, the struggle would blast their minds to death or idiocy. And there isn't time..." There was sweat on his smooth young forehead. "I've got to get through. I don't want to kill them..."

Ciaran looked at Mouse. "No," he said hoarsely.

"But I may have to, unless... Wait! I can channel the power of the Stone through my own brain, because there's an affinity between us. Vibration, cell to cell. The androids won't have made a definite command against music. Perhaps I can jar their minds open, just enough, so that you can call them with your harp, as you called me."

A tremor almost of pain ran through the boy's body.

“Lead them away, Ciaran. Lead them as far as you can. Otherwise many of them will die. And hurry!”

Bas raised the Stone of Destiny in his clasped hands and pressed it to his forehead. And Ciaran took his harp.

He was looking at Mouse when he set the strings to singing. That was why it wasn't hard to play as he did. It was something from him to Mouse. A prayer. A promise. His heart held out on a song.

The music rippled out across the packed mass of humanity. At first they didn't hear it. Then there was a stirring and a sigh, a dumb, blind reaching. Somewhere the message was getting through the darkness clouding their minds. A message of hope. A memory of red sunlight on green hills, of laughter and home and love.

Ciaran let the music die to a whisper under his fingers, and the people moved forward, toward him, wanting to hear.

He began to walk away, slowly, trailing the harp-song over his shoulder—and they followed. Haltingly, in twos and threes, until the whole mass broke and flowed like water in his wake.

Bas was gone, his slim, young body slipping fast through the broken ranks of the crowd.

Ciaran caught one more glimpse of Mouse before he lost her among the others. She was crying, without knowing or remembering why.

If Bas died, if Bas was defeated, she would never know nor remember.

Ciaran led them as far as he could, clear to the wall of the pit. He stopped playing. They stopped, too, standing like cattle, looking at nothing, with eyes turned inward to their clouded dreams.

Ciaran left them there, running out alone across the empty floor.

He followed the direction Bas had taken. He ran, fast, but it was like a nightmare where you run and run and never get anywhere. The lights glared down and the metal monster sighed and churned high up over his head, and there was no other sound, no other movement but his own.

Then, abruptly, the lights went out.

He stumbled on, hitting brutally against unseen pillars, falling and scrambling in scrap heaps. And after an eternity he saw light again, up ahead.

The Light he had seen before, here in the pit. The glorious opalescent light that drew a man's mind and held it fast to be chained.

Ciaran crept in closer.

There was a control panel on a stone dais—a meaningless jumbled mass, of dials and wires. The androids stood before it. One of them was bent over, its yellowish hands working delicately with the controls. The other stood erect beside it, holding a staff. The metal ball at the top was open, spilling the opalescent blaze into the darkness.

Ciaran crouched in the shelter of a pillar, shielding his eyes. Even now he wanted to walk into that light and be its slave.

The android with the staff said harshly, “Can't you find the wavelength? He should have been dead by now.”

The bending one tensed and then straightened, the burning light sparkling across its metal sheath. Its eyes were black and limitless, like evil itself, and no more human.

“Yes,” it said. “I have it.”

The light began to burst stronger from the staff, a swirling dangerous fury of it.

Ciaran was hardly breathing. The light-source, whatever it was, was part of the power of the Stone of Destiny. Wavelengths meant nothing to him, but it seemed the danger was to the Stone—and Bas carried it.

The android touched the staff. The light died, clipped off as the metal ball closed.

“If there's any power left in the Stone,” it whispered, “our power-wave will blast its subatomic reserve—and Bas the Immortal with it!”

Silence. And then in the pitch darkness a coal began to glow.

It came closer. It grew brighter, and a smudged reflection behind and above it became the head and shoulders of Bas the Immortal.

The android whispered, “Stronger! *Hurry!*”

A yellowish hand made a quick adjustment. The Stone of Destiny burned brighter. It burst with light. It was like a sunball, stabbing its hot fury into the darkness.

The android whispered, “*More!*”

The Stone filled all the pit with a deadly blaze of glory.

Bas stopped, looking up at the dais. He grinned. A naked boy, beautiful with youth, his gray eyes veiled and sleepy under dark lashes.

He threw the Stone of Destiny up on the dais. An idle boy tossing stones at a treetop.

Light. An explosion of it, without sound, without physical force. Ciaran dropped flat on his face behind the pillar. After a long time he raised his head again. The overhead lights were on, and Bas stood on the dais beside two twisted, shining lumps of man-made soulless men.

The android flesh had taken the radiation as leather takes heat, warping, twisting, turning black.

“Poor freaks,” said Bas softly, “They were like me, with no place in the universe that belonged to them. So they dreamed, too—only their dreams were evil.”

He stooped and picked up something—a dull, dark stone, a thing with no more life nor light than a waterworn pebble.

He sighed and rolled it once between his palms, and let it drop.

“If they had had time to learn their new machine a little better, I would never have lived to reach them in time.” He glanced down at Ciaran, standing uncertainly below. “Thanks to you, little man, they didn’t have quite time enough.”

He gestured to a staff. “Bring it, and I’ll free your Mouse.”

Seven

A long time afterward Mouse and Ciaran and Bas the Immortal stood in the opal-tinted glow of the great room of the *crux ansata*. Outside the world was normal again, and safe. Bas had left full instructions about controlling and tending the centrifugal power plant.

The slaves were freed, going home across the Forbidden

Plains—forbidden no longer. The Kalds were sleeping, mercifully; the big sleep from which they would never wake. The world was free, for humanity to make or mar on its own responsibility.

Mouse stood very close to Ciaran, her arm around his waist, his around her shoulders. Crimson rags mingling with yellow; fair shaggy hair mixing with black. Bas smiled at them.

“Now,” he said, “I can be happy, until the planet itself is dead.”

“You won’t stay with us? Our gratitude, our love...”

“Will be gone with the coming generations. No, little man. I built myself a world where I belong—the only world where I can ever belong. And I’ll be happier in it than any of you, because it *is* my world—free of strife and ugliness and suffering. A beautiful world, for me and Marsali.”

There was a radiance about him that Ciaran would put into a song someday, only half understanding.

“I don’t envy you,” whispered Bas, and smiled. Youth smiling in a spring dawn. “Think of us sometimes, and be jealous.”

He turned and walked away, going lightly over the wide stone floor and up the steps to the dais. Ciaran struck the harpstrings. He sent the music flooding up against the high vault, filling all the rocky space with a thrumming melody.

He sang. The tune he had sung for Mouse, on the ridge above the burning sea. A simple tune, about two people in love.

Bas lay down on the couch of furs and colored silks, soft on the shaft of the stone cross. He looked back at them once, smiling. One slim white arm raised in a brief salute and swept down across the black stone.

The milky light rose on the platform. It wavered, curdled, and thickened to a wall of warm pearl. Through it, for a moment, they could see him, his dark head pillowed on his forearm, his body sprawled in careless, angular grace. Then there was only the warm, soft shell of light.

Ciaran’s harp whispered to silence. The tunnel into the pit was sealed. Mouse and Ciaran went out through the golden doors and closed them, very quietly—doors that would never be opened again as long as the world lived.

Then they came into each other’s arms, and kissed.

Rough, tight arms on living flesh, lips that bruised and breaths that mingled, hot with life. Temper and passion, empty bellies, a harp that sang in crowded market squares, and no roof to fight under but the open sky.

And Ciaran didn't envy the dark-haired boy, dreaming on the stone cross.

The End