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A Baen Ebook
Baen Publishing Enterprises
P.O. Box 1403
Riverdale, NY 10471
www.baen.com

ISBN 10: 0-345-25954-8
ISBN 13: 978-0-345-25954-7

Cover art by Doug Chaffee

First ebook, February 2008

Electronic version by WebWrights
www.webwrights.com

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Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton

Authors' introduction to "Stark and the Star Kings"

Twenty-six-and-a-half years ago, when we got married, we thought collaboration would be an easy and delightful thing. We could, we thought, begin now to turn out twice as many stories with half the effort.

We tried it.

Once.

Hamilton had to know the whole plot right to the last line before he began. Brackett was only interested in the opening. In short, our methods of working were diametrically opposed, and in order to keep peace in the family we made a firm decision that each one should stick to his/her own typewriter.

Over the years we find our working methods have changed. Hamilton no longer has to have a complete outline on paper. Brackett generally has one in her head. Ideas and style have changed as well. So we decided to try it again and see what happened, being in general agreement on basic concepts, and utilizing our own favorite characters.

So here is our first, one and only, true, authentic collaboration.

—Leigh Brackett
Edmond Hamilton

The great Rift Valley runs southeast just below the equator, a stupendous gash across the dry brown belly of Mars. Two and a half thousand miles it runs in length, and as much as twenty thousand feet in depth, and all that enormous emptiness is packed and brimming over with the myths and superstitions of more thousands of years than even the Martians can count.

Along the nighted floor of the valley, Eric John Stark went alone.

The summons had been for him alone. It had reached him unexpectedly in the gritty chill of a Dryland camp. A voice of power had spoken in his mind. A quiet voice, as compelling as death.

"Oh, N'Chaka," the voice had said. "Man-Without-a-Tribe. The Lord of the Third Bend bids you come."

All Mars knew that the one who called himself Lord of the Third Bend had laired for many lifetimes in the hidden depths of the Great Rift Valley. Human? No one could say. Even the Ramas, those nearly-immortal Martians with whom Stark had once done battle in the dead city of Sinharat, had known nothing about him. But they feared his strength.

Stark had thought about it for perhaps an hour, watching red dust blow across a time-eaten land made

weird and unfamiliar by the strangely diminished sunlight.

It was odd that the summons should come now. It was odd that the Lord of the Third Bend should know enough about him to call him by that name that few men knew and fewer still ever used; not his true patronymic but his first-name, given him by the sub-human tribe that had reared him. It was odd, in fact, that the Lord of the Third Bend should call him by any name, at any time, as though he might have need of him.

Perhaps he did.

And in any case, it was not often that one was invited into the presence of Legend.

So Stark was riding his scaly beast through the perpetual night of the valley, toward the Third Bend. Although that voice of power had not spoken again in his mind, he had known exactly how to reach his destination.

He was approaching it now.

Far ahead, to the right, a little light showed. The rays were as feeble as though strangled at birth, but the light was there. It grew slowly brighter, shifting in his view as the beast changed direction. They were rounding the Third Bend.

The ruddy glow of light strengthened, contracting from a vague glow into a discrete point.

The beast shied suddenly. It turned its ungainly head and hissed, staring through the darkness to the left.

"And now what?" Stark asked it, his hand going to the weapon at his belt.

He could see nothing. But it seemed to him that he heard a faint sound as of laughter, and not in a human voice.

He took his hand away from his weapon. Stark did not doubt that the Lord of the Third Bend had servants, and there was no reason that the servants need be human.

Stark cuffed his mount and rode on, looking neither to right nor left. He had been invited here, and he was damned if he would show fear.

The beast padded on reluctantly, and the far-off witch-laughter drifted through the darkness, now louder and again soft and far away. The point of ruddy light ahead expanded and became an upright rectangle, partly veiled by mists that seemed to curl through it from beyond.

The glowing rectangle was a great open door, with a light beyond it. The door was in the side of a building whose shape and dimensions were unguessable in the shrouding darkness. Stark got the impression of a huge sombre citadel going up into the perpetual night of the abyss and showing only this one opening.

He rode up to the portal and dismounted, and went through into the curling mists beyond. He could see nothing of whatever hall or cavern he had entered, but there was a feeling of space, of largeness.

He stopped and waited.

For a time there was no sound at all. Then, from somewhere in the mist, whispered the sweet and evil laughter that was not quite human.

Stark said to it, "Tell your master that N'Chaka awaits his pleasure."

There were hidden titterings and scurryings that seemed to circle upon themselves, and then that quiet compelling voice he remembered spoke to him. He was not sure for a moment whether he heard it with his ears or with his mind. Perhaps both. It said,

"I am here, N'Chaka."

"Then show yourself," said Stark. "I bargain with no one whose face I cannot see."

No one appeared, and the voice said with infinite softness, "Bargain? Was there mention of bargaining? Does the knife in one's hand bargain with its owner?"

"This knife does," said Stark. "You must have need of me or you would not have brought me here. If you have need of me, you will not destroy out of mere annoyance. Therefore show yourself, and let us talk."

"Here in my remoteness," said the voice, "the winds have told me much of the Earthman with two names who is not of Earth. It appears that what I heard was true."

There came a sound of sandals upon the stone. The mists rolled back. The Lord of the Third Bend stood before Stark.

He was a young man, dressed in the very old High Martian costume of a toga-like garment whose ends brushed the floor. His smooth face was incredibly handsome.

"You may call me Aarl," he said. "It was my man-name once, long ago."

Stark felt the hairs lift on the back of his neck. The eyes in that young face were as black as space, as old, and as deep. They were eyes of knowledge and strength beyond anything human, eyes to steal a man's soul and drown it. They frightened him. He felt that if he looked full into them he would be shattered like flawed glass. Yet he was too proud to glance away. He said,

"Am I to understand that you have existed in this shape for all these ages?"

"I have had many shapes," said Aarl. "The outward semblance is only illusion."

"Perhaps for you," said Stark. "Mine is somewhat more integral. Well. I have come far and I am tired, hungry, and thirsty. Are wizards above the laws of hospitality?"

"Not this one," said Aarl. "Come with me."

They began walking through what Stark took, from the echoes, to be a high-roofed hall of some length. There was no more sound from the unseen servitors.

The mists drew farther back. Now Stark could see walls of dark stone that went up to a great height. Upon them were designs of fire, shining arabesques that constantly moved and changed shape. Something about them bothered Stark. After a moment he realised that the fiery designs were corroded,

tarnished, like the sunlight of upper Mars.

"So," he said. "The darkness is here, too."

"It is," said Aarl. He glanced sideling at Stark as they walked. "How do the wise men of science explain this darkness to the people of the nine worlds?"

"You already know that, of course."

"Yes. Nevertheless, tell me."

"They say that the whole solar system has moved into a cosmic dust cloud that is dimming the sun."

"Do they believe that, these wise men with all their instruments?"

"I don't know. That is what they must say, of course, to forestall panic."

"Do you believe it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have been among the tents of the Dryland nomads. Their wise men say differently. They say it is not an inert thing but an active force."

"They are wise indeed. It is not a dust cloud. It is more than that, very much more than that."

Aarl stopped walking and spoke with feverish intensity.

"Can you conceive of a vampire something that drinks energy, that steals it from across a great void . . . a greater void than you imagine? A thing that will, if it is not stopped, devour not only the light of the sun but even the force of gravity that holds this family of worlds together? That will literally destroy the solar system?"

Stark stared at him appalled, not wanting to believe yet knowing somehow that it was so.

The Lord of the Third Bend reached out and grasped Stark's wrist with an icy hand.

"I'm afraid, Stark. My powers are great, but against this they're useless without help. That is why I need you. Yes. *Need* you. Come, and I'll show you why."

* * *

They sat in a mist-bordered chamber high in the citadel. And Stark was remembering the words of an ancient bardic chant.

Fear the Lord of the Third Bend. Fear him, for he is the master of time.

"The great void of which I spoke," said Aarl, "is not only a dimension of space. Look."

Stark looked at the curtain of mist. And was caught by the incredible scene that formed within it.

A panorama of stars, the great glooms of the void a background for a wilderness of flaring suns. He felt himself drawn into that immensity, to rush through it at incredible speed. Chains of stars rose up before him, mountain-ranges of high-piled, shining nebulae loomed on either hand. He swept past them in all their glory and left them far behind.

The view shifted, changed perspective. And Stark beheld ships ahead of him, gleaming starships that raced through the celestial jungle.

He saw them brilliant and small as toys. With a vertiginous wrench he returned to the reality of his own body and the coldness of the stone he sat upon.

"You are adept," he said, "at putting all this into my mind. Which is what you're doing."

"True," said Aarl. "But it is not mere imagining. You see what I have seen across two hundred thousand years of time. You see the future."

Stark believed it. The Lord of the Third Bend had not acquired his stature in the minds of generations of men by means of fraud. The sort of shabby trickery known to any village thaumaturgist would not have stood the test. Aarl wielded the lost knowledge of forgotten Mars, a science that differed greatly from the science of Earth but was none the less a science.

He looked at the vision on the screen of mist. Two hundred thousand years.

"Those ships," said Aarl, "those very powerful ships that travel with such speed, are the ships of the Star Kings."

That name, heard for the first time, rang in Stark's mind like the strident call of a bugle.

"The Star Kings?"

"The men who rule that future universe, each in his own kingdom, principality, or barony."

"Ah," said Stark, and looked again. "That is right and fitting. The starlands are too bright for grubby clerks, and bureaucrats in ruffled suits each trying to be more common than the next. Yes. Let there be Star Kings."

"You must go there, Stark. Into the future."

A small pulse began to beat beneath the angle of Stark's jaw. "Into the future. Bodily? Your knowledge can send me bodily across two hundred thousand years?"

"Two years or two million. It is all the same."

"Can you bring me back? Bodily."

"If you survive."

"Hm," said Stark, and looked again at the vision. "How would I go? I mean, in what capacity?"

"As an envoy, a messenger. Someone must go and meet these Star Kings face to face." Aarl's voice was

angry. "I have ascertained that this menace to our solar system exists in their time. I have attempted to contact them by mental arts, without success. They simply did not hear. That is why I sent for you, Stark."

"You sent for N'Chaka," Stark said, and smiled. N'Chaka, the Man-without-a-tribe who could not remember his real parents, naked fosterling of the beast-folk of wild sun-shattered Mercury; N'Chaka, who wore his acquired humanity like an uncomfortable garment and who still tended to use his teeth when angered. "Why N'Chaka as an ambassador to the courts of the Star Kings?"

"Because N'Chaka is an animal at heart, though he has a man's brain. Animals do not lie, they do not turn traitor because of greed for money or power, or because of that worse tempter, philosophical doubt." Aarl studied him with those space-deep eyes, "in other words, I can trust you."

"You think that if someone offered me a throne at Algol or Betelgeuse, I wouldn't take it?" Stark laughed. "The Lord of the Abyss overestimates the purity of the beast."

"I think not."

"And anyway, why a bastard Earthman? Why not a Martian?"

"We're too concerned with our past, too deeply rooted in our own sacred soil. You have no roots. You do have a devouring curiosity, and a rare capacity for survival. Otherwise you would not be here." He held up his hand to forestall comment. "Look."

The scene on the mist-curtain changed abruptly. Now a madman's dream of space appeared, a tangled nightmare of crowding suns, dead stars, filamentary nebulae. Stark seemed to be racing at blinding speed through this cosmic jungle.

"The region at the western limb of the galaxy," said Aarl. "it is called, in that future time, The Marches of Outer Space. It holds a number of the smaller star-kingdoms. It also holds this."

Two old red suns like ruby brooches pinned a ragged veil of darkness across the starfield. Stark plunged into the gloom of the dark nebula, past dim drowned stars dragging their nighted planets. The coiling dust seemed to tear like smoke with the wind of his passing. Out on the other side there was light again, but it was strangely bent, distorted around an area of blankness, of nothingness quite different from the dusty darkness of the nebula. He could not see into it. The vision seemed to recoil, as though struck back by a blow.

"Not even my arts can penetrate that blind area," said Aarl. "But it is from there that the force comes, leaping back through time, draining the energy from our solar system."

"And my task, if I go, will be a simple one," Stark said. "Find out what that force is, who is responsible for it, and put an end to it." He shook his head. "Your faith in my abilities is touching, but do you know what I think, Aarl? I think you've lived in this dark hole far too long. I think your senses have left you."

He stood up, turning his back to the screen of mist.

"The task is impossible, and you know it."

"Yet it must be done."

"If it's a natural phenomenon, some freak warping of the continuum . . ."

"Then of course we are helpless. But I don't think it is." Aarl rose. He seemed to have grown taller and his eyes were hypnotic in their intensity. "You have no love for Earth because of what Earthmen did to your foster-tribe, yet I think you would not truly wish all those millions dead and the planet with them, long before its time. And what of Mars, which has been something of a home to you? She too has a while to go before the night overtakes her."

The pulse hammered more strongly under Stark's jaw. "I wouldn't even know where to start. It could take a lifetime."

"We do not have a lifetime," said Aarl, "nor even half of one. The energy-drain is accelerating rapidly. And I can tell you where to begin. With a man named Shorr Kan, King of Aldeshar in the Marches. The most powerful of the petty kings, and wily enough for two. You will find him sympathetic."

"How so?"

"Because this strange force is causing *him* immediate trouble. You must find a way to enlist his help."

"You speak as though I've already made my decision."

"You have."

Stark turned and looked at the mist-curtain again. It was blank now, only mist and nothing more. Yet he could still see the ships of the Star Kings and the untamed jungle of the Marches. The future, undiscovered, unexplored. Could he have the chance to see it, and refuse?

He said, "I suppose you're right."

Aarl nodded. "You had no choice, really. I was sure of that before I summoned you."

Stark shrugged. Suppose he tried and failed; it was better than sitting helplessly. And he could make his own decision about coming back.

He followed Aarl out of the chamber.

They came at length into a long hall crowded with objects. Stark recognized several instruments of modern Earth science; there was a fine seismograph, spectroscopic equipment, an array of electronic items, the latest in lasers. There were other things that seemed to have survived out of ancient Mars, arrangements of crystalline shapes that had no meaning whatever for Stark. There were yet other objects that he surmised had been constructed by the Lord of the Third Bend himself.

One of these was a sort of helical cage of crystal ribbons whose upper part spiralled away toward the high-vaulted roof. It appeared to vanish up there. Stark attempted to follow its progressively blurring outlines and was forced to stop, overcome with vertigo.

Aarl took his place within the lower part of the cage. "This helix amplifies my mental powers and enables me to manipulate the time-dimension. Stand anywhere. I shall be able to retain contact with your mind, since we are now attuned to communication, but I shall not waste precious energy on conversation. When you are ready to come back, tell me."

He did something with his hands. The crystal ribbons began to run with subtle fires.

"When you awaken you will be in the future, and I shall have given you such knowledge of it as I possess."

Before the darkness took him, Stark felt an incongruous pang of hunger. Aarl's promised hospitality had not been forthcoming.

* * *

He had a strange dream. He was infinite. He was transparent. The spaces between his atoms were large enough to let whole constellations through. He moved, but his motion was neither forward nor backward; it was a sly sneaky sidelong slither through . . . what?

In his dream the motion made him very sick. He felt like vomiting, but there was nothing inside him and so he could only retch.

Perhaps that was why Aarl had not bothered to feed him.

Retching, he awoke.

And saw that he had stopped moving. There was solid ground beneath his feet. His stomach received this information gratefully.

The light was peculiar. It was greenish. He looked up and saw a green sun blazing in a blue-green sky flecked with minty clouds.

He recognized the sun. It was Aldeshar, in the Marches of Outer Space.

The planet whose solidity was so welcome to him must be Altoh, the throne-world.

He had appeared, materialized, reassembled . . . whatever it was he had done . . . on a low ridge above an alien city. It was a pleasant city, low-roofed and rambling, with here and there a tall fluted tower for variety. The people had done without the ugly cubism of functional building. A network of canals glittered in the sunlight. There was a profusion of trees and flowering shrubs. The wandering streets were thronged with people and the canals were busy with boats. There seemed to be no motorized traffic on the surface, so the air was blessedly clean.

All the movement in the streets seemed to be converging toward a point in the southwestern sector of the city, where he could see a clump of more imposing buildings, with taller towers and an enormous square. The city was Donalyr, the capital, and the buildings would be Shorr Kan's palace and the administrative center of the star-kingdom.

A vast deep-bass humming sound suddenly filled the heavens, drawing Stark's attention away from the city. Down across the sky, ablaze with light and roaring with the thunder of God, a colossal ship slanted into its landing pattern. Stark's gaze followed it down, to a starport far out beyond the northern boundaries of Donalyr. The ground trembled beneath him, and was still.

Stark went down to the city. In the time it took him to reach the outskirts, three more ships had landed.

He let himself be carried along with the flow of people toward the palace square. He found that Aarl had supplied him with a working knowledge of the language; he could understand the chatter around him. The

folk of Altoh were tall and strong, with ruddy tan skins and sharp eyes and faces. They wore loose brightly-colored garments suitable to the mild climate. But there were many foreigners, in this place where the starships came and went, men and women and a sprinkling of non-humans, in all shapes and sizes and colors, wearing every sort of dress. Donalyr, apparently, was quite used to strangers.

Even so, the people he passed turned their heads to look at Stark. Perhaps it was his height and the way he moved, or perhaps it was something arresting about the harsh planes of his face and the peculiar lightness of his eyes, accentuated by a skin-color that spoke of long exposure to a savage sun. They sensed some difference in him. Stark ignored them, secure in the knowledge that they could not possibly guess the degree of his differentness.

Ships continued to drop in rolling thunder out of the sky. He had counted nine by the time he reached the edge of the great square. He looked upward to watch number ten come in, and he felt the tiniest movement close to him in the crowd, the lightest of touches as though a falling leaf had brushed him. He whipped his right hand round behind him, snapped it shut on something bony, and turned to see what he had caught.

A little old man stared up at him with the bright, unrepentant face of a squirrel caught stealing nuts from someone else's hoard.

"You're too fast," he said. "Even so, you'd never have had me if your clothing wasn't so unfamiliar. I thought I knew where every pocket and purse in the Marches is situated. You must come from way back in."

"Far enough," said Stark. The old man wore a baggy tunic of no particular color, neither light nor dark, brilliant nor dull. If you didn't look hard at him you wouldn't see him in the throng. Beneath the hem he showed knobby knees and pipestem shanks. "Well," said Stark, "and what shall we do with you, Grandfather?"

"I took nothing," said the old man. "And it's my word against yours . . . you can't prove that I even tried."

"Hm," said Stark. "How good is your word?"

"What a question to ask!" said the old man, drawing himself up.

"I'm asking it."

The old man shot off on another tack. "You're a stranger here. You'll need a guide. I know every stone of this city. I can show you all of its delights. I can keep you out of the hands of . . ."

". . . of thieves and pickpockets. Yes." Stark pulled his captive around to a more comfortable position. "What's your name?"

"Song Durr."

"All right, Song Durr. There's no hurry, we can always decide later what to do." He kept a strong hold on the thin wrist. "Tell me what's going on here."

"The Lords of the Marches are gathering for a conference with Shorr Kan." He laughed. "Conference, my eye. What's your name, by the way?" Stark told him. "That's an odd one. I don't seem to place the world of origin."

"I am also called N'Chaka."

"Ah. From Strior, perhaps? Or Naroten?" He looked keenly at Stark. "Well, no matter." His voice dropped. "Perhaps that is your Brotherhood name?"

A brotherhood of thieves, of course. Stark shrugged and let the old man interpret the gesture as he would. "Why did you say, 'Conference, my eye'?"

"Some starships have been lost. The rulers of a dozen or so little kingdoms are hopping mad about it. They suspect that Shorr Kan is responsible." Song Durr cackled admiringly. "And I wouldn't be surprised if he were. He's the hell and all of a king. Give him a little more time and he'll rule all the Marches. Him, that didn't have a pan to cook in when he first came here." He added, "My hand will be quite ruined, Brother N'Chaka,"

"Not just yet. How were these ships lost?"

"They simply disappeared. Somewhere out beyond Dendrid's Veil."

"Dendrid's Veil. That would be a dark nebula? Yes. And who is Dendrid?"

"The Goddess of Death."

It seemed a fitting name. "And why do they blame Shorr Kan?"

Song Durr stared at him. "You *must* be from way back in. That's no man's land out there, and there's been a lot of pawing and picking at it . . . quarrels over boundaries, annexations, all that. A lot of it is still unexplored. Shorr Kan has been the most daring and ambitious in his activities, or the most unscrupulous, whichever way you want to put it, though they'd all do the same themselves if they had the courage. Also, *we* haven't lost any ships." He rubbed his skinny nose and grinned. "I'd like to be a fly on the wall when they have that conference."

Stark said, "Brother Song Durr, let us be two flies."

The old man's eyes popped. "You mean, get right inside the palace?" He pulled sharply against Stark's grip. "Oh, no."

"You mistake me," Stark said. "I don't mean to break in like thieves. I mean to walk in, like kings."

Or like ambassadors. Envoys, from another time and place. Stark wondered if Aarl were listening, in his misty Martian citadel two hundred thousand years ago.

Song Durr stood, rigid in all his stringy sinews, while Stark told him what he was going to have to do if he wanted to keep his freedom.

In the end, Song Durr began to smile.

"I think I would like that," he said. "Yes, I think that would be better than another stay in the convict pens. I don't know why . . . if it were anyone but you, Brother N'Chaka, I'd take the pens, but somehow you make me believe that we can get away with it." He shook his head. "You do have large ideas, for a country boy."

Cackling, he led the way toward the surrounding streets.

"We'll have to hurry, Brother. The Star Kings will be arriving soon, and we mustn't be late to the party!"

* * *

The procession of the Star Kings glittered its way from the landing place at the far end of the palace square, where the hover-cars came down, along the central space held open by rows of tough-looking guardsmen in white uniforms, toward the palace itself. There were jewels enough and royal costumes of divers sorts, and faces of many colors, four of them definitely non-human; a brilliant pageant, Stark thought, and suitable to the place, with the magnificent towers looming above in the fierce green glare of the sun, the vast crowd, the humming silence, the intricately carved and fluted portico where Shorr Kan, Sovereign Lord of Aldeshar, sat upon a seat of polished stone . . . a tiny figure at this distance, but somehow radiating power even so, a signal brightness among grouped and shining courtiers.

The brazen voice of a chamberlain echoed across the square, reproduced from clusters of speakers.

"Burrul Opis, King of the worlds of Maktoo, Lord Paramount of the Nebula Zorind. Kan Martann, King of the Twin Suns of Keldar. Flane Fell, King of Tranett and Baron of Leth"

One by one the Star Kings approached the seat of Shorr Kan and were greeted, and passed on into the palace with their retinues.

"Now," said Stark, and pushed Song Durr forward. From between two of the guardsmen the old man cried out,

"Wait! Wait, there! One other is here to confer with our sovereign lord! Eric John Stark, Ambassador Ex"

His voice squeaked off as the guardsmen grabbed him. The chamberlain who was turning away from the last departing hover-car, looked with surprised annoyance at the commotion.

Stark stepped forward, thrusting the guardsmen apart. "Eric John Stark, Ambassador Extraordinary from the worlds of Sol."

He had shed his travel-stained garments, still patched with the red dust of Mars. He was clad all in black now, a rich tunic heavy with embroidery over soft trousers and fine boots. Song Durr had stolen them from one of the best shops catering to off-worlders. He had wanted to steal some jewels as well, but Stark had settled for a gold chain. For a moment everything went into a tableau as the chamberlain stared at Stark and the guardsmen hesitated over whether or not they should kill him where he stood.

Stark said to the chamberlain, "Tell your master that my mission is urgent, and deals with the subject of the conference."

"But you were not on the list. Your credentials"

"I have travelled a very long way," said Stark, "to speak with your king. What I have to say concerns the death of suns. Are you a man of such courage that you dare turn me away?"

"I am not a brave man at all," said the chamberlain. "Hold them." The guardsmen held. The chamberlain sent an attendant scurrying toward the palace. Shorr Kan had paused in his rising, his attention drawn to

the interruption. There was some hurried talk, and Stark saw Shorr Kan make a decisive gesture. The attendant came scurrying back.

"The Ambassador from Sol may approach, with an escort."

The chamberlain looked relieved. He nodded to the guardsmen, who stepped out of line, weapons at the ready, and positioned themselves behind Stark and Song Durr, who was now gloriously robed in crimson. The little man was breathing hard, holding himself nervously erect.

They strode through a rising babble as the crowd pushed and craned to see this new curiosity. They mounted the palace steps. And Stark stood before Shorr Kan, King of Aldeshar in the Marches of Outer Space.

King he might be, but he had not grown fat on it, nor unwatchful. He was still the hunting tiger, the cool-eyed predator with prey under his paw and his whiskers a-twitch with eagerness to get more. He looked at Stark with a kind of deadly good humor, baring strong white teeth in a strong hard face.

"Ambassador Extraordinary from the worlds of Sol. Tell me, Ambassador . . . where is Sol?"

That was a good question, and one Stark did not attempt to answer. "Very far away," he said, "but even so, of interest to Your Majesty."

"How so?"

"The problem facing you here in the Marches also affects us. When I heard of the conference, I didn't wait to present my credentials in the normal manner. It's vital that I attend." Was Shorr Kan ignorant of Sol because of its distance and unimportance, or because it no longer existed? In which case . . . Stark forced the thought resolutely away. If he let his mind become involved with time paradoxes he would never get anywhere.

"Vital," Shorr Kan was asking, "to whom?"

"This power beyond Dendrid's Veil, whatever it may be, is killing our sun, our solar system. Yours may be next. I would say it's vital to all of us to find out what that power is."

Deep in the tiger eyes Stark saw the stirring of a small shadow and recognized it for what it was. Fear.

Shorr Kan nodded his dark head once. "The Ambassador from Sol may enter."

The guardsmen stepped back. Stark and Song Durr followed the king and his courtiers through the great portal.

"I almost believed you myself," Song Durr whispered. His step was light now, his face crinkled in a greedy smile. "For a country boy, you do well."

Stark wondered how he would feel about that later on.

The conference was a stormy one, held in a huge high-vaulted hall that made kings and courtiers seem like dressed-up children huddled in the midst of its ringing emptiness. Some predecessor of Shorr Kan's had designed it most carefully. The dwindling effect of the architecture was deliberate. The throne-chair was massive, set so high that everyone must look up and become aware, not only of the throne and its

occupant, but of the enormous winged deities that presided on either side of the dais. They had identical faces, very fierce and jut-nosed and ugly. Eyes made of precious stones glared down at the lesser kings. Stark surmised that the original of those unpleasant faces had been the builder's own.

Shorr Kan sat there now, and listened to his enemies.

Flane Fell, King of Tranett, seemed to be spokesman for the group, and the foremost in angry accusation. His skin was the color of old port, his features vulturine. He wore gray, with a diamond sunburst on his breast, and his bald skull, narrow as a bird's, was surmounted by a kind of golden tower. After a great deal of bickering and shouting he cried out,

"If you are not responsible for the loss of our ships, then who is? What is? Tell us, Shorr Kan!"

Shorr Kan smiled. He was younger than Stark had expected, but then youth was nothing against a conqueror.

"You believe that I am developing some great secret weapon out there beyond Dendrid's Veil. Why?"

"Your ambitions are well known. You'll rule the Marches alone, if you can."

"Of course," said Shorr Kan. "Isn't that true of every one of us? It's not my ambitions you fear, it's my ability. And I'd remind you that I've not needed any secret weapons so far." All their silken plumage rustled with indignation, and he laughed. "You have formed an alliance against me, I'm told."

"Yes."

"How do you propose to use it?"

"Force," said Flane Fell, and the others shouted agreement. "Overwhelming force, if you drive us to it. Your navy is powerful, but against our combined fleets Aldeshar couldn't stand for a week."

"True," said Shorr Kan, "but consider. What if I do in fact possess a secret weapon? What would happen then to your lovely fleets? I doubt if you'll take that chance."

"Don't be too sure, upstart," said Kan Martann furiously. "We've all lost ships, all but you, Shorr Kan. If you have no weapon, and you're truly ignorant of the force beyond Dendrid's Veil, why are you preserved from misfortune?"

"Because I'm smarter than you are. After the first ship disappeared, I kept mine out of there." He made a sweeping gesture, bringing Stark into the group. "I present to you Eric John Stark, Ambassador Extraordinary from the worlds of Sol. Perhaps we ought to hear what he has to say. It seems to have some bearing on our quarrel."

Stark knew from the beginning that he was talking against the barrier of completely closed minds. Still, he told them the meticulous truth, leaving out only the mention of time and characterizing Aarl simply as a scientist. They barely let him finish.

"What did you hope to gain by this?" asked Flane Fell, addressing the throne. "The fellow is an obvious imposter, intended to convince us that because some mythical system on the other side of the galaxy is being attacked by this menace, you could have nothing to do with it. Did you think we'd believe it?"

"I think you're a parcel of fools," said Shorr Kan, when the clamor had subsided. "Suppose he's telling the truth. If this thing can kill one sun, it can kill another . . . Aldeshar, Tranett, Maktoo, the Twins of Keldar."

"We're not that easily deceived!"

"Which simply means that you're frightened out of your royal wits. You want to believe in a weapon controlled by me because you feel you can do something about that. But suppose it's a weapon *not* controlled by me? Suppose it's some wild freak of nature not controlled, or controllable, by anyone? Wouldn't you be wiser to find out?"

"We've tried," said Flane Fell grimly. "We lost ships and gained no knowledge. Now it's up to you. This is our ultimatum, Shorr Kan. Dismantle your weapon, or give us proof that the thing is not of your making. In one month's time an unmanned vessel will be sent beyond the Veil. If it vanishes, and your proofs have not been forthcoming, it means war."

They lifted their clenched fists all together and shouted, "War!"

"I hear you, brother kings. Now go."

The group departed with a clatter of jewelled heels on the echoing floor.

"You, too," said Shorr Kan, and dismissed his courtiers. "Stay," he said to Stark. "And you, little thief . . ."

"Majesty," said Song Durr, "I am chamberlain to the Ambassador . . ."

"Don't lie to me," said Shorr Kan. "I was one of the Brotherhood myself, before I became a king. You have my permission to steal, if you can do it without being caught, as much as will not bulge that borrowed finery. In one hour I shall send men to hunt for you, but they will not look beyond the palace doors."

"Majesty," said Song Durr, "I embrace your knees. And yours, country boy. We were well met indeed. Good luck to you." He scampered away, thin shanks twinkling beneath his robe.

"His worries are small," said Shorr Kan, and smiled.

"But you don't envy him."

"If I did, I would be in his place." Shorr Kan came down from the throne and stood before Stark. "You're a strange man, Ambassador. You make me uneasy, and you bring disturbing news. Perhaps I ought to have you killed at once. That is what my brother kings would do. But I'm not a born king, you see, I'm an upstart, and so I keep my eyes and ears and especially my mind wide open. Also, I have another advantage over my colleagues. I know I'm telling the truth when I say that. I have no secret weapon, and I do not know what force this is that eats up ships and stars. Do you believe me, Ambassador?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"If you controlled the force, you'd use it."

Shorr Kan Laughed. "You see that, do you? Of course you do. That pack . . ." He jerked his chin contemptuously at the doorway. "Their spite blinds them. Their chief hope is to be rid of me, no matter what else befalls them."

"You must admit they've mousetrapped you rather neatly."

"They think they have. But they are only petty kings, Ambassador, and there is nothing more petty than a petty king."

He looked up and around the great hall. "Hideous, isn't it? And those two fellows there beside the throne, with their ugly great faces. I've thought of putting hats on them, but they look silly enough already. Aldeshar was always a petty kingdom, always will be. But first steps must be small, Ambassador. There are larger thrones ahead."

Ambition, intelligence, energy, ruthlessness, shone in him like a brilliant light. They made him beautiful, with the beauty of things which are perfect in their design and flawless in their functioning.

"Now there is a problem to be solved, eh?" The tiger eyes came back to Stark, fixed on him. "Why did you come to me, Ambassador? All this long, long way from Sol."

"It seemed that we might help each other."

"You need help from me," said Shorr Kan. "Do I need help from you?"

"How can I answer that until we know what threatens us?"

Shorr Kan nodded. "I have a feeling about you, Ambassador Stark. We shall be great friends, or great enemies, and if it's the latter, I'll not hesitate to kill you."

"I know that."

"Good, we understand each other. Now, there is much to do. My scientific advisors will want to hear your story. Then . . ."

"Your Majesty," said Stark, "of your mercy . . . it's been a long time since I tasted food."

A scant two hundred thousand years.

* * *

Two old red suns like ruby brooches pinned a ragged curtain of darkness across the starfield. Dendrid's Veil, looking exactly as Stark had seen it in the mist of Aarl's citadel chamber. The view was still a projection, this time on the simulator screen of a Phantom scout, the fastest ship in Shorr Kan's fleet, loaded with special gear.

Stark and Shorr Kan stood together studying the simulator. Beneath Stark and around him, tormenting the whole of the ship's fabric and his own flesh, was the throb and hum of the FTL drive, a subliminal sense of wrenching displacement coupled with a suffocating feeling of being trapped inside a shell of unimaginable power like an unhatched chick in an egg. The image on the screen was an electronic trick no more genuine than Aarl's, except that the actual nebula was ahead.

The flight was no spur-of-the-moment thing. There had been endless hasslings with counsellors; scientific advisors, military and civilian advisors, all of whom pulled furiously in totally different directions. In the end, Shorr Kan had had his way.

"A king is made for ruling. When he ceases to have the courage and the vision necessary to perform that function, he had damn well better abdicate. My kingdom is threatened with destruction by two things, war and the unknown. Unless the unknown is made known, war is inevitable. Therefore it is my duty to find out what lies beyond Dendrid's Veil."

"But not in person," said his counsellors. "The risk is too great."

"The risk is too great to send anyone but myself," said Shorr Kan. Nobility radiated from him, illumined the throne and the ugly genies. It was easy to see how he drew his followers to him. "What is a king, if he does not think first of the safety of his people? Prepare a ship."

After all the orders were given and the counsellors sent off to deal with them, Shorr Kan grinned at Stark. They were alone then in the great hall.

"Nobility is all very well, but one must be practical too. Do you see my point, Ambassador?"

Stark's patience had worn somewhat with the wrangling and delay. He had been conscious of an increasing urgency, as though Aarl were putting a silent message into his mind; "*Hurry!*"

He said rather curtly, "At best you'll bait your brother kings to follow you because they'll be afraid to let you go alone. You may find a way to destroy them, or use them as allies, whichever seems advisable at the time. At worst, with a fast ship under you, you may hope to have a line of escape open if things go too far wrong. How can you be sure they won't simply blow you out of space, thus negating both possibilities?"

"They'll want me to lead them to the weapon. I think they'll wait." Shorr Kan put his hand confidently on Stark's shoulder. "And since you'll be with me, you had better hope that I'm right. I've made some enquiries about you, Ambassador."

"Oh?"

"I thought perhaps you might be a spy for my brother kings, or even an assassin. You do have the look of one, you know. But my agents could find no trace of you, and you don't seem to have sprung from any of our local planets. So I must believe you're what you say you are. There's only one small problem . . ." He smiled at Stark. "We still haven't been able to locate Sol. So I'm keeping you by me, Ambassador, close by, as an unknown quantity."

An unknown quantity, Stark thought, to be used or discarded. Yet he could not help liking Shorr Kan.

And now he stood in the bridge of the scout and wondered whether Shorr Kan had read his brother kings aright. Because the ships of the Kings of the Marches had followed them, were following, at a discreet distance but hanging stubbornly in their wake.

"We'll make planetfall in the nebula," said Shorr Kan. "Ceidri, the farthest inhabited world we know and the closest to the edge of this unknown power. They're strange folk, the Ceidrins, but the Marches are full of strange folk, the beginnings of new evolutions and the rags and bobtails of old ones driven out here

by successive waves of interstellar conquest. Perhaps they can tell us something."

"They're scientists?"

"In their own peculiar way."

The chief of the scientists who had accompanied the battery of instruments mounted aboard made a derisive sound.

"Sorcerors. And not even human."

"And what have you been able to tell us?" Shorr Kan demanded. "That there is an area of tremendous force beyond the Veil, force sufficient to warp space around it, destroying everything that comes near it? We knew that. Can you tell us how to approach this force, how to learn its source without being destroyed ourselves?"

"Not yet."

"When you know, tell me. Until then, I'll take whatever knowledge I can get regardless of the source."

Time passed, time that was running out for all of them, here and now and for the nine little worlds of Sol two hundred thousand years in the past. The ship plunged into the dark nebula as into a cloud of smoke, and it was as Stark had seen it on Aarl's misty curtain, the coiling wraiths seeming to shred away with the speed of the ship's passing. An illusion, and then the ship dropped out of FTL into normal space. Here at the edge of the nebula the veil was thin and a half-drowned star burned with a lurid light, hugging one small planet close to it for warmth.

Through the torn openings of Dendrid's Veil, Stark could see what lay beyond, the area of blankness, secret and strange.

It seemed to have grown since last he saw it.

They landed on the planet, a curious shadowed world beneath its shrouded sun, a hothouse of pale vegetation. There was a town, with narrow lanes straggling off among the trees and houses that were themselves like clumps of vegetation, woven of living vines that bloomed heavily with dark flowers.

The people of Ceidri were dark too, and small, deep-eyed and shambling, with clever hands and coats of rich glossy fur that shed the rain. They received their visitors out of doors, where there was room for them to stand erect. Night came on and the sky glowed with twisting dragon-shapes of dull fire where the parent star lit drifts of dust.

Talk was through an interpreter, but Stark was aware of more than the spoken words. There were powerful undercurrents of both fear and excitement.

"It is growing," said the chief, "it reaches, grasps, sucks. It is a strong child. It has begun to think."

There came a silence over the clearing. A shower of rain fell lightly and passed on.

"You are saying," said Shorr Kan in a strangely flat voice, "that that thing out there is alive? Interpreter, make certain of the meaning!"

"It lives," said the chief. His eyes glowed in his small snubby face. "We feel it." And he added, "It will kill us soon."

"Then it is evil?"

"Not evil. No." His narrow shoulders lifted. "It lives."

Shorr Kan turned to his scientists. "Can this be possible? Can a force . . . a . . . nothing be alive?"

"It has been postulated that the final evolution might be a creature of pure energy, alive in the sense that it would feed on energy, as all life-forms do in one form or another, and be sentient . . . to what degree we can only guess, anything from amoeboid to God-like."

The chief of the scientists stared at the heavens, and then at the small brown creatures who watched with their strange eyes. "We cannot accept it. Not on this evidence. Such a momentous occurrence . . ."

". . . ought to have been discovered by the proper authorities," said Shorr Kan, and added a short word. "It may be so, it may not be so, but let us keep an open mind." To the headman of the Ceidrins he said urgently, "Can you speak to the thing? Communicate?"

"It does not hear us. Do you hear the cry of the organisms in the air you breathe or the water you drink?"

"But you can hear . . . it?"

"Oh, yes, we hear. It grows swiftly. Soon we shall hear nothing else."

"Can you make us able to hear?"

"You are men, and men tend to be deafened by their own noises. But there is one here . . ." His glossy head turned. His eyes met Stark's. "One here is not like the rest, he is not quite deaf. Perhaps we can help him to hear."

"Very well, Ambassador," said Shorr Kan, "You came to learn what it is that eats your sun. Here is your chance."

They told him what to do. He knelt upon the ground and they formed a ring of small dark shapes around him, with the dark flowers shedding a heavy scent, and the dragon sky above. He looked into the glowing eyes of the chief, and felt his mind becoming malleable, being drawn out, a web of sensitive threads, stretching, linking with the circled minds.

Gradually, he began to hear.

He heard imperfectly with his limited human brain, and he was glad instinctively that this was so. He could not have supported the full blaze of that consciousness. Even the echo of it stunned him.

Stunned him with joy.

The joy of being alive, of being sentient and aware, of being young, thrusting, vibrant, strong. The joy of *being* .

There was no evil in that joy, no cruelty in the strength that pulsed and grew, sucking life from the

cradling universe as simply and naturally as a blade of grass sucks nourishment from the soil. Energy was its food and it ate and was not conscious of life destroyed. That conception was impossible to it. In its view nothing could be destroyed, only changed from one form to another. It saw all of creation as one vast source of fuel for its eternal fires, and that creation now included all of time as well as space. The tremendous force gathering at the heart of the thing had begun to twist the fabric of the continuum itself, deforming it so fantastically that the Sol of two hundred thousand years ago was as accessible as the drowned sun of Ceidri.

It was very young. It was without sin. Its mental potential spanned parsecs. Already it had intimations of its own greatness. It would *think*, and grow, while the myriad wheeling galaxies swarmed like bees in the sheer beauty of their being, and in due course it would create. God knew what it would create, but all its impulses shone and were pure.

It was innocent. And it was a killer.

Yet Stark yearned to be a part of that divine strength and joyousness. He desired to be lost forever within it, relieved of self and all the petty agonies that went with human living. He felt that he had almost achieved this goal when the contract was broken and he found himself still kneeling with the Ceidrins round him and a soft rain falling. The rain had wet his cheeks, and he was desolate.

Shorr Kan spoke to him, and he answered.

"It is alive. A new species. And it means the end of ours, if we don't kill it. If it can be killed."

He stood up, and he saw their faces staring at him, the King of Aldeshar and his scientists and his experts in war and weaponry, doubtful and afraid. Afraid to believe, afraid not to believe.

And Stark added, "If it should be killed."

The voices began then, clamoring all at once, until they were silenced by a new sound.

Down across the dragon sky, the ships of the Star Kings came to land.

Shorr Kan said, "We'll wait for them here." He looked at Stark. "While your mind was straining at its tether to be gone, I had a report from my ship. The power cells are being drained. Only an infinitesimal loss so far, but definite. I wonder what my brother kings will make of it all."

His brother kings were jubilant. They had left their heavy cruisers standing off Ceidri, an overwhelming force against Shorr Kan's scout. They were delighted to have caught their fox so easily.

"If you have a weapon, you can't use it against us now without using it against yourself," Flane Fell told him. He had laid aside his silks and jewels, and his golden crown. Like the others, he was dressed for war.

"If I had a weapon," said Shorr Kan tranquilly, "that thought would have occurred to me. I imagine you're having the planet searched for hidden installations, possible control centers, and the like?"

"We are."

"And do you still suppose that any human agency could possibly create or control the force that lies out there?"

"All the evidence will be fairly evaluated, Shorr Kan."

"That gives me great comfort. In the meantime, have your technicians monitor the power cells of your ships with great care. Have them monitor mine as well. And don't be too long about your decision."

"Why?" demanded Flane Fell.

Shorr Kan beckoned to Stark. "Tell them."

Stark told them.

The Kings of the Marches, the human kings, looked at the Ceidrins and Flane Fell said, "What are these that we should believe them? Little lost brute-things on a lost planet. And as for this so-called ambassador . . ."

He did not finish. One of the non-human kings had stepped forward to confront him. This fellow's dawn-ancestor had bequeathed to him a splendid rangy build, a proud head with an aristocratic snout and only a suggestion of fangs, and a suit of fine white fur banded handsomely with gray. His smile was fearsome.

"As a brute-thing myself," he said, "I speak for my fellow kings of the minority, and I say that the hairless son of an ape is no less a brute-thing than we, and no more competent to judge truthfulness in any form. We ourselves will speak with the Ceidrins."

They went to do so. Shorr Kan smiled. "The King of Tranett has already given me allies. I'm grateful."

Stark had gone apart. He looked at the sky and remembered.

The morning came dark with drifting rain. When the clouds broke it seemed to Stark that the shrouded sun was dimmer than he remembered, but that of course was imagination. The four non-human kings rejoined the group. Their faces were solemn, and the chief of the Ceidrins was with them.

"The man Stark spoke truly," said the gray-barred king. "The thing has already begun to draw the life from this sun. The Ceidrins know they're doomed, and so shall we be in our turn if this thing is not destroyed."

Reports came in from the ships, those that had landed and those still free in space awaiting orders. All had unexplained losses of energy from the power cells.

"Well, brother kings," said Shorr Kan, "what is your decision?"

The four non-humans ranged themselves with the King of Aldeshar. "Our fleets are at your disposal, and the best of our scientific minds." The gray-barred king looked at Flane Fell with blazing golden eyes. "Leave your little spite behind, apeling, or all our kind, all things that breathe and move, are foredone."

Shorr Kan said, "You can always kill me later on, if we live."

Flane Fell made an angry gesture. "Very well. Let all our efforts be combined, to the end that this thing shall die."

* * *

"Let all our efforts be combined . . ."

Messages were flashed to the scientific centers of the far-flung star-worlds. Messages all asking the same question.

How can this thing be killed, before it kills us?

The ships had left Ceidri and returned to the hither side of the nebula, where they hung like a shoal of fingerlings against the Veil, catching palely the light of distant suns. They waited for answers. Answers began to come.

"Energy!" said Shorr Kan, and cursed. "The thing *is* energy. It devours energy. It lives on suns. How can it be destroyed with energy?"

Narin Har, chief of the joint scientific missions now aboard Flane Fell's flagship, that being the largest and possessed of the most sophisticated communications center, answered Shorr Kan.

"We have results from the three great computers at Vega, Rigel, and Fomalhaut. They all agree that we must use energy against energy, in the form of our most potent missiles."

Shorr Kan said, "Anti-matter?"

"Yes."

"But won't that simply feed its strength?"

"They're working on the equations now. But judging from the relatively slow rate at which it is presently absorbing energy from the stars it has attacked, we ought to be able to introduce the violent energy of anti-matter missiles into it in such quantities that it will be unable to assimilate rapidly enough. The result is expected to be total annihilation."

"How many missiles?"

"That is the information we're waiting for now."

It came.

Narin Har read the figures to the Kings of the Marches, assembled in the flagship. These figures meant little to Stark, who was present, but he could see by the faces of the kings that the impact of them was staggering.

"We must ask for every ship available from every ruler in the galaxy," said Shorr Kan. "Every available anti-matter missile, which may not be enough since the supply is limited, and a full complement of conventional atomics. We must beg for them, and with all speed."

The scout ship, sent back through the Veil, had brought word that the thing was growing now with frightening rapidity.

The message was sent, backed by all the scientific evidence they could muster.

Again they waited.

Beyond the Veil the thing fed contentedly and dreamed its cosmic dreams. And grew.

"If the Empire sends its ships," said Shorr Kan, "the rest will follow." He pounded his fist on the table. "How long does it take the fools to deliberate? If they insist on wagging their tongues forever . . ." He stood up. "I'll speak with Jhal Arn myself."

"Jhal Arn?" asked Stark.

"You are a country boy, Ambassador. Jhal Arn is ruler of the Mid-Galactic Empire, the most potent force in the galaxy."

"You sound as though you don't love him."

"Nor the Empire. That is beside the point now. Come along, if you like."

In the communications room, Stark watched the screen of the sub-space telecom spring to life.

"The Hall of Suns," said Shorr Kan, "at Throon, royal planet of Canopus and center of the Empire. Ah, yes. The Imperial Council is in session."

The hall was vast, splendid with the banners and insignia of a thousand star-kingdoms, Stark caught only a fleeting glimpse of that magnificence, and of the many alien personages . . . ambassadors, he thought, representing their governments at this extraordinary session, princes and nobles from worlds he did not know. The view narrowed in upon the throne chair, where a tall man sat looking into the apparatus before him so that he seemed to be staring straight at Shorr Kan. Which he was, across half a galaxy.

Shorr Kan wasted no time on regal courtesies.

"Jhal Arn," he said, "you have no cause to love me, nor I you, and you have no cause to trust me, either. Still, we are both citizens of this galaxy, and here we both must live or die, and all our people with us. We of the Marches are committed, but we have not the strength to fight this thing alone. If you do not lead the way for the Star Kings, if you do not send the ships we need, then you will have condemned your own Empire to destruction."

Jhal Arn had a fine strong face, worn with the strain of governing. There was wisdom in his eyes. He inclined his head slightly.

"Your feelings, and mine, are of equal unimportance, Shorr Kan. The lords of the Council have now understood that. We have conferred with all our scientists and advisors. The decision has been taken. You shall have the ships."

The screen went dark.

And they waited, watching the blank heavens where the far suns burned, while the great blazing wheel of the galaxy turned on its hub of stars, one infinitesimal fraction of a revolution so long that only a computer could comprehend it.

At last the ships came.

Stark watched them on the screens as they came, dropping out of the void. Shorr Kan told him what they were. The squadrons of Fomalhaut Kingdom, with the blazon of the white sun on their bows. The ships of Rigel and Deneb, Algol and Altair, Antares and Vega. The fleets of wide-flung Kingdoms of Lyra and Cygnus and Cassiopeia, of Lepus and Corvus and Orion. The ships of the Barons of Hercules, ensigned with the golden cluster. And on and on until Stark's head was ringing with star names and giddy with the sheer numbers of that mustering.

Last of all, huge sombre shadows of interstellar war, came the great battle-cruisers of the Empire.

The ships of the Star Kings, in massed rendezvous off Dendrid's Veil. The heavens were aglitter with them.

There was much coming and going of star-captains, discussions of strategy, endless pawings-over of data and clackings of on-board computers. The vast armada hung in the starshine, and Stark remembered the battle plans he had made in his own life, in a former time; the plotted charges of the men of Kesh and Shun in the Martian Drylands, the deadly tribal prowlings in the swamps and seas of Venus. Exercises for prattling babes. Here, on the screen, was magnificence beyond belief.

And on the other side of the Veil was an adversary beyond his former imagining.

He wondered if Aarl still waited and listened. He wondered if the worlds of Sol still lived.

At length Shorr Kan told him, "We are ready. The combined fleets will move in exactly six units, Galactic Arbitrary Time."

* * *

The fleets of the Star Kings moved. Rank on shining rank, they plunged into the gloom of the nebula, crashed headlong through the coiling clouds of dust to burst into open space beyond where the twisted enigma waited, sprawled carelessly across space and time.

Stark stood with Shorr Kan by the screens of the small scout, attached now to Shorr Kan's navy, three heavy cruisers and a swarm of lighter craft, everything that could carry a missile.

Aldeshar's fleet was in the first attack wave, with the other fleets of the Marches. The scout leaped away from the nebula, fired its conventional atomics into the looming blankness of the thing ahead, then spiraled upward and away, skirting the edges of destruction. It took up station where it could see, and if necessary, run. Shorr Kan was again being practical.

The first wave struck like a thunderbolt, loosing the full batteries of their missiles and swerving away a complicated three-dimensional dance of death, carefully plotted to avoid being swallowed by the enemy and to leave the way clear for the following wave.

And they came, the silver fleets with their proud insignia of suns and clusters and constellations; the might of the Star Kings against the raw power of creation.

They poured their salvos of unthinkable energy into the child of energy, lighting smothered flares across the parsecs, pounding at the fabric of the universe with which the creature was entwined until space itself was shaken and the scout ship lurched in the backlash as though upon a heavy sea.

The creature, roused, struck back.

Bolts of naked force shot from its blind face, spearing ships, wiping the heavens clean. Yet more ships came on, more missiles sped to seed the thing with deadly anti-matter. More dark lightnings flashed. But the thing still lived, and fought, and killed.

"It's defending itself," Stark said. "Not only itself, but its whole species, just as we are."

He could sense the bewilderment it felt, the fear, the outraged anger. Probably his previous contact through the Ceidrins had given him that ability, and he was sorry it had, dim though the echo was. The creature was still, he thought, unaware of living beings as such. It only knew that this sudden bursting of strange energy within it was dangerous. It had located the source of that energy and was trying to destroy it.

It appeared to have succeeded.

The fleets drew off. There was a cessation of all action. The lightnings ceased. The thing lay apparently untouched, undiminished.

Stark said, "Have we lost?" He was soaked with sweat and shaking as though he had himself been fighting.

Shorr Kan only said, "Wait."

The ships of the Barons of Hercules detached themselves from the massed ranks of the fleet. They sped away as though in flight.

"Are they running?" asked Stark.

Again Shorr Kan said, "Wait."

Presently Stark understood. Far away, greatly daring along the uncharted flank of this creature, the fleet of the Cluster struck. Annihilating lightnings danced and flared, and the creature struck out at those ships, forgetting the massed fleets that had now moved into a pattern of semi-englobement. It was after all a child, and ignorant of even simple strategies.

The fleets charged, loosing a combined shellfire of raving energies at a single area of the creature's being.

This time the fires they lit did not go out.

They spread. They burned and brightened. Great gouts of energy burst nova-like from out of that twisted blankness, catching ships, destroying them, but without aim or purpose. The savage bolts were random now, blind emissions of a dying force.

The fleets regrouped, pouring in all they had left to them of death.

And Stark heard . . . felt, with the atoms of his flesh . . . the last unbelieving cry of despair, the anguish of loss as strength and joy faded and the wheeling galaxies in all their beauty went from sight, a flight of brilliant butterflies swept away on a cruel wind.

It died.

The fleets of the Star Kings fled from the violence of that dying, while space rocked around them and

stars were shattered, while the insane fury of total destruction blazed and roiled and fountained across the parsecs and the stuff of the universe trembled.

The ships took refuge beyond Dendrid's Veil. They waited, afraid that the chain-reaction they had set in motion might yet engulf them. But gradually the turbulence quietened, and when their instruments registered only normal radiation, the scout ship and a few others ventured to return.

The shape of the nebula was altered. Ceidri and its dim sun had vanished. Out beyond, there was a new kind of blankness, the empty blankness of death.

Even Flane Fell was awed by the enormity of what they had done. "It is a heavy thing to be God."

"Perhaps a heavier one to be man," said Shorr Kan. "God, as I recall, never doubted He was right."

They turned back then, and the fleets of the Star Kings, such as had survived that killing, dispersed, each one homing on its separate star.

Shorr Kan returned to Aldeshar.

In the hall of the ugly genie he spoke to Stark. "Well, Ambassador? Your little sun is safe now, if salvation didn't come too late. Will you return there, or will you stay with me? I could make your fortune."

Stark shook his head. "I like you, King of Aldeshar. But I'm no good running mate, and sooner or later we'd come to that enmity you spoke of. Besides, you're born for trouble, and I prefer to make my own."

Shorr Kan laughed. "You're probably right, Ambassador. Though I'm sorry. Let us part friends."

They shook hands. Stark left the palace and walked through the streets of Donalyr toward the hills, and through all the voices and the sounds around him he could still hear that last despairing cry.

He went up on the ridge above the city. And Aarl brought him home.

* * *

They sat in the mist-bordered chamber high in the ancient citadel.

"We ought not to have killed it," Stark said. "You never touched its consciousness. I did. It was . . . God-like."

"No," said Aarl. "Man is God-like, which is to say creator, destroyer, savior, kind father and petty tyrant, ruthless, bloodthirsty, bigoted, merciful, loving, murderous, and noble. This creature was far beyond mere godliness, and so perhaps more worthy than we to survive . . . *but it did not survive* . And that is the higher law."

Aarl fixed him with those space-black eyes.

"No life exists but at the expense of other life. We kill the grain to make our bread, and the grain in time kills the soil it grows in. Do not reproach yourself for that. In due course another such super-being may be born which will survive in spite of us, and then it will be our turn to go. Meanwhile, *we* survive, and that is our proof of right. There is no other."

He led Stark down the long and winding ways to the portal, where his saddled beast was waiting. Stark mounted and rode away, turning his back forever on the Third Bend.

And so he had seen the future, and touched beauty, and the thing was done, for better or worse. Beauty had died beyond Dendrid's Veil, and high above, where the walls of the Great Rift Valley towered against the sky, the sun was shining on the old proud face of Mars. Some good, some evil, and perhaps in the days to come Aarl's words would soothe his conscience.

And conscience or not, he would never forget the splendor of the ships of the Star Kings massed for battle.

ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS

Leigh Brackett

I

The ship moved slowly across the Red Sea, through the shrouding veils of mist, her sail barely filled by the languid thrust of the wind. Her hull, of a thin light metal, floated without sound, the surface of the strange ocean parting before her prow in silent rippling streamers of flame.

Night deepened toward the ship, a river of indigo flowing out of the west. The man known as Stark stood alone by the after rail and watched its coming. He was full of impatience and a gathering sense of danger, so that it seemed to him that even the hot wind smelled of it.

The steersman lay drowsily over his sweep. He was a big man, with skin and hair the color of milk. He did not speak, but Stark felt that now and again the man's eyes turned toward him, pale and calculating under half-closed lids, with a secret avarice.

The captain and the two other members of the little coasting vessel's crew were forward, at their evening meal. Once or twice Stark heard a burst of laughter, half-whispered and furtive. It was as though all four shared in some private joke, from which he was rigidly excluded.

The heat was oppressive. Sweat gathered on Stark's dark face. His shirt stuck to his back. The air was heavy with moisture, tainted with the muddy fecundity of the land that brooded westward behind the eternal fog.

There was something ominous about the sea itself. Even on its own world, the Red Sea is hardly more than legend. It lies behind the Mountains of White Cloud, the great barrier wall that hides away half a planet. Few men have gone beyond that barrier, into the vast mystery of Inner Venus. Fewer still have come back.

Stark was one of that handful. Three times before he had crossed the mountains, and once he had stayed for nearly a year. But he had never quite grown used to the Red Sea. It was not water. It was gaseous, dense enough to float the buoyant hulls of the metal ships, and it burned perpetually with its

deep inner fires. The mists that clouded it were stained with the bloody glow. Beneath the surface Stark could see the drifts of flame where the lazy currents ran, and the little coiling bursts of sparks that came upward and spread and melted into other bursts, so that the face of the sea was like a cosmos of crimson stars.

It was very beautiful, glowing against the blue, luminous darkness of the night. Beautiful, and strange.

There was a padding of bare feet, and the captain, Malthor, came up to Stark, his outlines dim and ghostly in the gloom. "We will reach Shuruun," he said, "before the second glass is run."

Stark nodded. "Good." The voyage had seemed endless, and the close confinement of the narrow deck had got badly on his nerves.

"You will like Shuruun," said the captain jovially. "Our wine, our food, our women—all superb. We don't have many visitors. We keep to ourselves, as you will see. But those who do come . . ."

He laughed, and clapped Stark on the shoulder. "Ah, yes. You will be happy in Shuruun!"

It seemed to Stark that he caught an echo of laughter from the unseen crew, as though they listened and found a hidden jest in Malthor's words. Stark said, "That's fine."

"Perhaps," said Malthor, "you would like to lodge with me. I could make you a good price."

He had made a good price for Stark's passage from up the coast. An exorbitantly good one.

Stark said, "No."

"You don't have to be afraid," said the Venusian, in a confidential tone. "The strangers who come to Shuruun all have the same reason. It's a good place to hide. We're out of everybody's reach."

He paused, but Stark did not rise to his bait. Presently he chuckled and went on, "In fact, it's such a safe place that most of the strangers decide to stay on. Now, at my house, I could give you . . ."

Stark said again, flatly, "No."

The captain shrugged. "Very well. Think it over, anyway." He peered ahead into the red, coiling mists. "Ah! See there?" He pointed, and Stark made out the shadowy loom of cliffs. "We are coming into the strait now."

Malthor turned and took the steering sweep himself, the helmsman going forward to join the others. The ship began to pick up speed. Stark saw that she had come into the grip of a current that swept toward the cliffs, a river of fire racing ever more swiftly in the depths of the sea.

* * *

The dark wall seemed to plunge toward them. At first Stark could see no passage. Then, suddenly, a narrow crimson streak appeared, widened, and became a gut of boiling flame, rushing silently around broken rocks. Red fog rose like smoke. The ship quivered, sprang ahead, and tore like a mad thing into the heart of the inferno.

In spite of himself, Stark's hands tightened on the rail. Tattered veils of mist swirled past them. The sea, the air, the ship itself, seemed drenched in blood. There was no sound, in all that wild sweep of current

through the strait. Only the sullen fires burst and flowed.

The reflected glare showed Stark that the Straits of Shuruun were defended. Squat fortresses brooded on the cliffs. There were ballistae, and great windlasses for the drawing of nets across the narrow throat. The men of Shuruun could enforce their law, that barred all foreign shipping from their gulf.

They had reason for such a law, and such a defense. The legitimate trade of Shuruun, such as it was, was in wine and the delicate laces woven from spider-silk. Actually, however, the city lived and thrived on piracy, the arts of wrecking, and a contraband trade in the distilled juice of the *vela* poppy.

Looking at the rocks and the fortresses, Stark could understand how it was that Shuruun had been able for more centuries than anyone could tell to victimize the shipping of the Red Sea, and offer a refuge to the outlaw, the wolf's-head, the breaker of taboo.

With startling abruptness, they were through the gut and drifting on the still surface of this all but landlocked arm of the Red Sea.

Because of the shrouding fog, Stark could see nothing of the land. But the smell of it was stronger, warm damp soil and the heavy, faintly rotten perfume of vegetation half jungle, half swamp. Once, through a rift in the wreathing vapor, he thought he glimpsed the shadowy bulk of an island, but it was gone at once.

After the terrifying rush of the strait, it seemed to Stark that the ship barely moved. His impatience and the subtle sense of danger deepened. He began to pace the deck, with the nervous, velvet motion of a prowling cat. The moist, steamy air seemed all but unbreathable after the clean dryness of Mars, from whence he had come so recently. It was oppressively still.

Suddenly he stopped, his head thrown back, listening.

The sound was borne faintly on the slow wind. It came from everywhere and nowhere, a vague dim thing without source or direction. It almost seemed that the night itself had spoken—the hot blue night of Venus, crying out of the mists with a tongue of infinite woe.

It faded and died away, only half heard, leaving behind it a sense of aching sadness, as though all the misery and longing of a world had found voice in that desolate wail.

Stark shivered. For a time there was silence, and then he heard the sound again, now on a deeper note. Still faint and far away, it was sustained longer by the vagaries of the heavy air, and it became a chant, rising and falling. There were no words. It was not the sort of thing that would have need of words. Then it was gone again.

Stark turned to Malthor. "What was that?"

The man looked at him curiously. He seemed not to have heard.

"That wailing sound," said Stark impatiently.

"Oh, that," The Venusian shrugged "A trick of the wind. It sighs in the hollow rocks around the strait."

* * *

He yawned, giving place again to the steersman, and came to stand beside Stark. The Earthman ignored him. For some reason, that sound half heard through the mists had brought his uneasiness to a sharp

pitch.

Civilization had brushed over Stark with a light hand. Raised from infancy by half-human aboriginals, his perceptions were still those of a savage. His ear was good.

Malthor lied. That cry of pain was not made by any wind.

"I have known several Earthmen," said Malthor, changing the subject, but not too swiftly. "None of them were like you."

Intuition warned Stark to play along. "I don't come from Earth," he said. "I come from Mercury."

Malthor puzzled over that. Venus is a cloudy world, where no man has ever seen the Sun, let alone a star. The captain had heard vaguely of these things. Earth and Mars he knew of. But Mercury was an unknown word.

Stark explained. "The planet nearest the Sun. It's very hot there. The Sun blazes like a huge fire, and there are no clouds to shield it."

"Ah. That is why your skin is so dark." He held his own pale forearm close to Stark's and shook his head. "I have never seen such skin," he said admiringly. "Nor such great muscles."

Looking up, he went on in a tone of complete friendliness, "I wish you would stay with me. You'll find no better lodgings in Shuruun. And I warn you, there are people in the town who will take advantage of strangers—rob them, even slay them. Now, I am known by all as a man of honor. You could sleep soundly under my roof."

He paused, then added with a smile, "Also, I have a daughter. An excellent cook—and very beautiful."

The woeful chanting came again, dim and distant on the wind, an echo of warning against some unimagined fate.

Stark said for the third time, "No."

He needed no intuition to tell him to walk wide of the captain. The man was a rogue, and not a very subtle one.

A flint-hard, angry look came briefly into Malthor's eyes. "You're a stubborn man. You'll find that Shuruun is no place for stubbornness."

He turned and went away. Stark remained where he was. The ship drifted on through a slow eternity of time. And all down that long still gulf of the Red Sea, through the heat and the wreathing fog, the ghostly chanting haunted him, like the keening of lost souls in some forgotten hell.

Presently the course of the ship was altered. Malthor came again to the after-deck, giving a few quiet commands. Stark saw land ahead, a darker blur on the night, and then the shrouded outlines of a city.

Torches blazed on the quays and in the streets, and the low buildings caught a ruddy glow from the burning sea itself. A squat and ugly town, Shuruun, crouching witch-like on the rocky shore, her ragged skirts dipped in blood.

The ship drifted in toward the quays.

* * *

Stark heard a whisper of movement behind him, the hushed and purposeful padding of naked feet. He turned, with the astonishing swiftness of an animal that feels itself threatened, his hand dropping to his gun.

A belaying pin, thrown by the steersman, struck the side of his head with stunning force. Reeling, half blinded, he saw the distorted shapes of men closing in upon him. Malthor's voice sounded, low and hard. A second belaying pin whizzed through the air and cracked against Stark's shoulder.

Hands were laid upon him. Bodies, heavy and strong, bore him down. Malthor laughed.

Stark's teeth glinted bare and white. Someone's cheek brushed past, and he sank them into the flesh. He began to growl, a sound that should never have come from a human throat. It seemed to the startled Venusians that the man they had attacked had by some wizardry become a beast, at the first touch of violence.

The man with the torn cheek screamed. There was a voiceless scuffling on the deck, a terrible intensity of motion, and then the great dark body rose and shook itself free of the tangle, and was gone, over the rail, leaving Malthor with nothing but the silken rags of a shirt in his hands.

The surface of the Red Sea closed without a ripple over Stark. There was a burst of crimson sparks, a momentary trail of flame going down like a drowned comet, and then—nothing.

II

Stark dropped slowly downward through a strange world. There was no difficulty about breathing, as in a sea of water. The gases of the Red Sea support life quite well, and the creatures that dwell in it have almost normal lungs.

Stark did not pay much attention at first, except to keep his balance automatically. He was still dazed from the blow, and he was raging with anger and pain.

The primitive in him, whose name was not Stark but N'Chaka, and who had fought and starved and hunted in the blazing valleys of Mercury's Twilight Belt, learning lessons he never forgot, wished to return and slay Malthor and his men. He regretted that he had not torn out their throats, for now his trail would never be safe from them.

But the man Stark, who had learned some more bitter lessons in the name of civilization, knew the unwisdom of that. He snarled over his aching head, and cursed the Venusians in the harsh, crude dialect that was his mother tongue, but he did not turn back. There would be time enough for Malthor.

It struck him that the gulf was very deep.

Fighting down his rage, he began to swim in the direction of the shore. There was no sign of pursuit, and he judged that Malthor had decided to let him go. He puzzled over the reason for the attack. It could hardly be robbery, since he carried nothing but the clothes he stood in, and very little money.

No. There was some deeper reason. A reason connected with Malthor's insistence that he lodge with

him. Stark smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. He was thinking of Shuruun, and the things men said about it, around the shores of the Red Sea.

Then his face hardened. The dim coiling fires through which he swam brought him memories of other times he had gone adventuring in the depths of the Red Sea.

He had not been alone then. Helvi had gone with him—the tall son of a barbarian kinglet up-coast by Yarell. They had hunted strange beasts through the crystal forests of the sea-bottom and bathed in the welling flames that pulse from the very heart of Venus to feed the ocean. They had been brothers.

Now Helvi was gone, into Shuruun. He had never returned.

Stark swam on. And presently he saw below him in the red gloom something that made him drop lower, frowning with surprise.

There were trees beneath him. Great forest giants towering up into an eerie sky, their branches swaying gently to the slow wash of the currents.

Stark was puzzled. The forests where he and Helvi had hunted were truly crystalline, without even the memory of life. The "trees" were no more trees in actuality than the branching corals of Terra's southern oceans.

But these were real, or had been. He thought at first that they still lived, for their leaves were green, and here and there creepers had starred them with great nodding blossoms of gold and purple and waxy white. But when he floated down close enough to touch them, he realized that they were dead—trees, creepers, blossoms, all.

They had not mummified, nor turned to stone. They were pliable, and their colors were very bright. Simply, they had ceased to live, and the gases of the sea had preserved them by some chemical magic, so perfectly that barely a leaf had fallen.

Stark did not venture into the shadowy denseness below the topmost branches. A strange fear came over him, at the sight of that vast forest dreaming in the depths of the gulf, drowned and forgotten, as though wondering why the birds had gone, taking with them the warm rains and the light of day.

He thrust his way upward, himself like a huge dark bird above the branches. An overwhelming impulse to get away from that unearthly place drove him on, his half-wild sense shuddering with an impression of evil so great that it took all his acquired common-sense to assure him that he was not pursued by demons.

* * *

He broke the surface at last, to find that he had lost his direction in the red deep and made a long circle around, so that he was far below Shuruun. He made his way back, not hurrying now, and presently clambered out over the black rocks.

He stood at the end of a muddy lane that wandered in toward the town. He followed it, moving neither fast nor slow, but with a wary alertness.

Huts of wattle-and-daub took shape out of the fog, increased in numbers, became a street of dwellings. Here and there rush-lights glimmered through the slitted windows. A man and a woman clung together in a low doorway. They saw him and sprang apart, and the woman gave a little cry. Stark went on. He did

not look back, but he knew that they were following him quietly, at a little distance.

The lane twisted snakelike upon itself, crawling now through a crowded jumble of houses. There were more lights, and more people, tall white-skinned folk of the swamp-edges, with pale eyes and long hair the color of new flax, and the faces of wolves.

Stark passed among them, alien and strange with his black hair and sun-darkened skin. They did not speak, nor try to stop him. Only they looked at him out of the red fog, with a curious blend of amusement and fear, and some of them followed him, keeping well behind. A gang of small naked children came from somewhere among the houses and ran shouting beside him, out of reach, until one boy threw a stone and screamed something unintelligible except for one word—*Lhari*. Then they all stopped, horrified, and fled.

Stark went on, through the quarter of the lacemakers, heading by instinct toward the wharves. The glow of the Red Sea pervaded all the air, so that it seemed as though the mist was full of tiny drops of blood. There was a smell about the place he did not like, a damp miasma of mud and crowding bodies and wine, and the breath of the *vela* poppy. Shuruun was an unclean town, and it stank of evil.

There was something else about it, a subtle thing that touched Stark's nerves with a chill finger. Fear. He could see the shadow of it in the eyes of the people, hear its undertone in their voices. The wolves of Shuruun did not feel safe in their own kennel. Unconsciously, as this feeling grew upon him, Stark's step grew more and more wary, his eyes more cold and hard.

He came out into a broad square by the harbor front. He could see the ghostly ships moored along the quays, the piled casks of wine, the tangle of masts and cordage dim against the background of the burning gulf. There were many torches here. Large low buildings stood around the square. There was laughter and the sound of voices from the dark verandas, and somewhere a woman sang to the melancholy lilting of a reed pipe.

A suffused glow of light in the distance ahead caught Stark's eye. That way the streets sloped to a higher ground, and straining his vision against the fog, he made out very dimly the tall bulk of a castle crouched on the low cliffs, looking with bright eyes upon the night, and the streets of Shuruun.

Stark hesitated briefly. Then he started across the square toward the largest of the taverns.

There were a number of people in the open space, mostly sailors and their women. They were loose and foolish with wine, but even so they stopped where they were and stared at the dark stranger, and then drew back from him, still staring.

Those who had followed Stark came into the square after him and then paused, spreading out in an aimless sort of way to join with other groups, whispering among themselves.

The woman stopped singing in the middle of a phrase.

A curious silence fell on the square. A nervous sibilance ran round and round under the silence, and men came slowly out from the verandas and the doors of the wine shops. Suddenly a woman with disheveled hair pointed her arm at Stark and laughed, the shrieking laugh of a harpy.

* * *

Stark found his way barred by three tall young men with hard mouths and crafty eyes, who smiled at him as hounds smile before the kill.

"Stranger," they said. "Earthman."

"Outlaw," answered Stark, and it was only half a lie.

One of the young men took a step forward. "Did you fly like a dragon over the Mountains of White Cloud? Did you drop from the sky?"

"I came on Malthor's ship."

A kind of sigh went round the square, and with it the name of Malthor. The eager faces of the young men grew heavy with disappointment. But the leader said sharply, "I was on the quay when Malthor docked. You were not on board."

It was Stark's turn to smile. In the light of the torches, his eyes blazed cold and bright as ice against the sun.

"Ask Malthor the reason for that," he said. "Ask the man with the torn cheek. Or perhaps," he added softly, "you would like to learn for yourselves."

The young men looked at him, scowling, in an odd mood of indecision. Stark settled himself, every muscle loose and ready. And the woman who had laughed crept closer and peered at Stark through her tangled hair, breathing heavily of the poppy wine.

All at once she said loudly, "He came out of the sea. That's where he came from. He's . . ."

One of the young men struck her across the mouth and she fell down in the mud. A burly seaman ran out and caught her by the hair, dragging her to her feet again. His face was frightened and very angry. He hauled the woman away, cursing her for a fool and beating her as he went. She spat out blood, and said no more.

"Well," said Stark to the young men. "Have you made up your minds?"

"Minds!" said a voice behind them—a harsh-timbered, rasping voice that handled the liquid vocables of the Venusian speech very clumsily indeed. "They have no minds, these whelps! If they had, they'd be off about their business, instead of standing here badgering a stranger."

The young men turned, and now between them Stark could see the man who had spoken. He stood on the steps of the tavern. He was an Earthman, and at first Stark thought he was old, because his hair was white and his face deeply lined. His body was wasted with fever, the muscles all gone to knotty strings twisted over bone. He leaned heavily on a stick, and one leg was crooked and terribly scarred.

He grinned at Stark and said, in colloquial English, "Watch me get rid of 'em!"

He began to tongue-lash the young men, telling them that they were idiots, the misbegotten offspring of swamp-toads, utterly without manners, and that if they did not believe the stranger's story they should go and ask Malthor, as he suggested. Finally he shook his stick at them, fairly screeching.

"Go on, now. Go away! Leave us alone—my brother of Earth and I!"

The young men gave one hesitant glance at Stark's feral eyes. Then they looked at each other and

shrugged, and went away across the square half sheepishly, like great loutish boys caught in some misdemeanor.

The white-haired Earthman beckoned to Stark. And, as Stark came up to him on the steps he said under his breath, almost angrily, "You're in a trap."

Stark glanced back over his shoulder. At the edge of the square the three young men had met a fourth, who had his face bound up in a rag. They vanished almost at once into a side street, but not before Stark had recognized the fourth man as Malthor.

It was the captain he had branded.

With loud cheerfulness, the lame man with me, in Venusian, "Come in and drink brother, and we will talk of Earth."

III

The tavern was of the standard low-class Venusian pattern—a single huge room under bare thatch, the wall half open with the reed shutters rolled up, the floor of split logs propped up on piling out of the mud. A long low bar, little tables, mangy skins and heaps of dubious cushions on the floor around them, and at one end the entertainers—two old men with a drum and a reed pipe, and a couple of sulky, tired-looking girls.

The lame man led Stark to a table in the corner and sank down, calling for wine. His eyes, which were dark and haunted by long pain, burned with excitement. His hands shook. Before Stark had sat down he had begun to talk, his words stumbling over themselves as though he could not get them out fast enough.

"How is it there now? Has it changed any? Tell me how it is—the cities, the lights, the paved streets, the women, the Sun. Oh Lord, what I wouldn't give to see the Sun again, and women with dark hair and their clothes on!" He leaned forward, staring hungrily into Stark's face, as though he could see those things mirrored there. "For God's sake, talk to me—talk to me in English, and tell me about Earth!"

"How long have you been here?" asked Stark.

"I don't know. How do you reckon time on a world without a Sun, without one damned little star to look at? Ten years, a hundred years, how should I know? Forever. Tell me about Earth,"

Stark smiled wryly. "I haven't been there for a long time. The police were too ready with a welcoming committee. But the last time I saw it, it was just the same."

The lame man shivered. He was not looking at Stark now, but at some place far beyond him.

"Autumn woods," he said. "Red and gold on the brown hills. Snow. I can remember how it felt to be cold. The air bit you when you breathed it. And the women wore high-heeled slippers. No big bare feet tromping in the mud, but little sharp heels tapping on clean pavement."

Suddenly he glared at Stark, his eyes furious and bright with tears.

"Why the hell did you have to come here and start me remembering? I'm Larrabee. I live in Shuruun. I've

been here forever, and I'll be here till I die. There isn't any Earth. It's gone. Just look up into the sky, and you'll know it's gone. There's nothing anywhere but clouds, and Venus, and mud."

He sat still, shaking, turning his head from side to side. A man came with wine, put it down, and went away again. The tavern was very quiet. There was a wide space empty around the two Earth-men. Beyond that people lay on the cushions, sipping the poppy wine and watching with a sort of furtive expectancy.

Abruptly, Larrabee laughed, a harsh sound that held a certain honest mirth.

"I don't know why I should get sentimental about Earth at this late date. Never thought much about it when I was there."

Nevertheless, he kept his gaze averted, and when he picked up his cup his hand trembled so that he spilled some of the wine.

Stark was staring at him in unbelief. "Larrabee," he said. "You're Mike Larrabee. You're the man who got half a million credits out of the strong room of the *Royal Venus!*"

Larrabee nodded. "And got away with it, right over the Mountains of White Cloud, that they said couldn't be flown. And do you know where that half a million is now? At the bottom of the Red Sea, along with my ship and my crew, out there in the gulf. Lord knows why I lived," He shrugged. "Well, anyway, I was heading for Shuruun when I crashed, and I got here. So why complain?"

He drank again, deeply, and Stark shook his head.

"You've been here nine years, then, by Earth time," he said. He had never met Larrabee, but he remembered the pictures of him that had flashed across space on police bands. Larrabee had been a young man then, dark and proud and handsome.

Larrabee guessed his thought. "I've changed, haven't I?"

Stark said lamely, "Everybody thought you were dead."

* * *

Larrabee laughed. After that, for a moment, there was silence. Stark's ears were straining for any sound outside. There was none.

He said abruptly, "What about this trap I'm in?"

"I'll tell you one thing about it," said Larrabee. "There's no way out. I can't help you. I wouldn't if I could, get that straight. But I can't, anyway."

"Thanks," Stark said sourly. "You can at least tell me what goes on."

"Listen," said Larrabee. "I'm a cripple, and an old man, and Shuruun isn't the sweetest place in the Solar System to live. But I do live. I have a wife, a slatternly wench I'll admit, but good enough in her way. You'll notice some little dark-haired brats rolling in the mud. They're mine, too. I have some skill at setting bones and such, and so I can get drunk for nothing as often as I will—which is often. Also, because of this bum leg, I'm perfectly safe. So don't ask me what goes on. I take great pains not to know."

Stark said, "Who are the Lhari?"

"Would you like to meet them?" Larrabee seemed to find something very amusing in that thought. "Just go on up to the castle. They live there. They're the Lords of Shuruun, and they're always glad to meet strangers."

He leaned forward suddenly. "Who are you anyway? What's your name, and why the devil did you come here?"

"My name is Stark. And I came here for the same reason you did."

"Stark," repeated Larrabee slowly, his eyes intent. "That rings a faint bell. Seems to me I saw a *Wanted* flash once, some idiot that had led a native revolt somewhere in the Jovian Colonies—a big cold-eyed brute they referred to colorfully as the wild man from Mercury."

He nodded, pleased with himself. "Wild man, eh? Well, Shuruun will tame you down!"

"Perhaps," said Stark. His eyes shifted constantly, watching Larrabee, watching the doorway and the dark veranda and the people who drank but did not talk among themselves. "Speaking of strangers, one came here at the time of the last rains. He was Venusian, from up coast. A big young man. I used to know him. Perhaps he could help me."

Larrabee snorted. By now, he had drunk his own wine and Stark's too. "Nobody can help you. As for your friend, I never saw him. I'm beginning to think I should never have seen you." Quite suddenly he caught up his stick and got with some difficulty to his feet. He did not look at Stark, but said harshly, "You better get out of here." Then he turned and limped unsteadily to the bar.

Stark rose. He glanced after Larrabee, and again his nostrils twitched to the smell of fear. Then he went out of the tavern the way he had come in, through the front door. No one moved to stop him. Outside, the square was empty. It had begun to rain.

Stark stood for a moment on the steps. He was angry, and filled with a dangerous unease, the hair-trigger nervousness of a tiger that senses the beaters creeping toward him up the wind. He would almost have welcomed the sight of Malthor and the three young men. But there was nothing to fight but the silence and the rain.

* * *

He stepped out into the mud, wet and warm around his ankles. An idea came to him, and he smiled, beginning now to move with a definite purpose, along the side of the square.

The sharp downpour strengthened. Rain smoked from Stark's naked shoulders, beat against thatch and mud with a hissing rattle. The harbor had disappeared behind boiling clouds of fog, where water struck the surface of the Red Sea and was turned again instantly by chemical action into vapor. The quays and the neighboring streets were being swallowed up in the impenetrable mist. Lightning came with an eerie bluish flare, and thunder came rolling after it.

Stark turned up the narrow way that led toward the castle.

Its lights were winking out now, one by one, blotted by the creeping fog. Lightning etched its shadowy bulk against the night, and then was gone. And through the noise of the thunder that followed, Stark

thought he heard a voice calling.

He stopped, half crouching, his hand on his gun. The cry came again, a girl's voice, thin as the wail of a sea-bird through the driving rain. Then he saw her, a small white blur in the street behind him, running, and even in that dim glimpse of her every line of her body was instinct with fright.

Stark set his back against a wall and waited. There did not seem to be anyone with her, though it was hard to tell in the darkness and the storm.

She came up to him, and stopped, just out of his reach, looking at him and away again with a painful irresoluteness. A bright flash showed her to him clearly. She was young, not long out of her childhood, and pretty in a stupid sort of way. Just now her mouth trembled on the edge of weeping, and her eyes were very large and scared. Her skirt clung to her long thighs, and above it her naked body, hardly fleshed into womanhood, glistened like snow in the wet. Her pale hair hung dripping over her shoulders.

Stark said gently, "What do you want with me?"

She looked at him, so miserably like a wet puppy that he smiled. And as though that smile had taken what little resolution she had out of her, she dropped to her knees, sobbing.

"I can't do it!" she wailed. "He'll kill me, but I just can't do it!"

"Do what?" asked Stark.

She stared up at him. "Run away," she urged him. "Run away *now!* You'll die in the swamps, but that's better than being one of the Lost Ones!" She shook her thin arms at him. "*Run away!*"

IV

The street was empty. Nothing showed, nothing stirred anywhere. Stark leaned over and pulled the girl to her feet, drawing her in under the shelter of the thatched eaves.

"Now then," he said. "Suppose you stop crying and tell me what this is all about."

Presently, between gulps and hiccoughs, he got the story out of her.

"I am Zareth," she said. "Malthor's daughter. He's afraid of you, because of what you did to him on the ship, so he ordered me to watch for you in the square, when you would come out of the tavern. Then I was to follow you, and . . ."

She broke off, and Stark patted her shoulder. "Go on."

But a new thought had occurred to her. "If I do, will you promise not to beat me, or . . ." She looked at his gun and shivered.

"I promise."

She studied his face, what she could see of it in the darkness, and then seemed to lose some of her fear.

"I was to stop you. I was to say what I've already said, about being Malthor's daughter and the rest of it, and then I was to say that he wanted me to lead you into an ambush while pretending to help you escape, but that I couldn't do it, and would help you to escape anyhow because I hated Malthor and the whole business about the Lost Ones. So you would believe me, and follow me, and I would lead you into the ambush."

She shook her head and began to cry again, quietly this time, and there was nothing of the woman about her at all now. She was just a child, very miserable and afraid. Stark was glad he had branded Malthor.

"But I can't lead you into the ambush. I do hate Malthor, even if he is my father, because he beats me. And the Lost Ones . . ." She paused. "Sometimes I hear them at night, chanting way out there beyond the mist. It is a very terrible sound."

"It is," said Stark. "I've heard it. Who are the Lost Ones, Zareth?"

"I can't tell you that," said Zareth. "It's forbidden even to speak of them. And anyway," she finished honestly, "I don't even know. People disappear, that's all. Not our own people of Shuruun, at least not very often. But strangers like you—and I'm sure my father goes off into the swamps to hunt among the tribes there, and I'm sure he comes back from some of his voyages with nothing in his hold but men from some captured ship. Why, or what for, I don't know. Except I've heard the chanting."

"They live out there in the gulf, do they, the Lost Ones?"

"They must. There are many islands there."

"And what of the Lhari, the Lords of Shuruun? Don't they know what's going on? Or are they part of it?"

She shuddered, and said, "It's not for us to question the Lhari, nor even to wonder what they do. Those who have are gone from Shuruun, nobody knows where."

Stark nodded. He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then Zareth's little hand touched his shoulder.

"Go," she said. "Lose yourself in the swamps. You're strong, and there's something about you different from other men. You may live to find your way through."

"No. I have something to do before I leave Shuruun." He took Zareth's damp fair head between his hands and kissed her on the forehead. "You're a sweet child, Zareth, and a brave one. Tell Malthor that you did exactly as he told you, and it was not your fault I wouldn't follow you."

"He will beat me anyway," said Zareth philosophically, "but perhaps not quite so hard."

"He'll have no reason to beat you at all, if you tell him the truth—that I would not go with you because my mind was set on going to the castle of the Lhari."

* * *

There was a long, long silence, while Zareth's eyes widened slowly in horror, and the rain beat on the thatch, and fog and thunder rolled together across Shuruun.

"To the castle," she whispered. "Oh, no! Go into the swamps, or let Malthor take you—but don't go to the castle!" She took hold of his arm, her fingers biting into his flesh with the urgency of her plea. "You're a stranger, you don't know . . . Please, don't go up there!"

"Why not?" asked Stark. "Are the Lhari demons? Do they devour men?" He loosened her hands gently. "You'd better go now. Tell your father where I am, if he wishes to come after me."

Zareth backed away slowly, out into the rain, staring at him as though she looked at someone standing on the brink of hell, not dead, but worse than dead. Wonder showed in her face, and through it a great yearning pity. She tried once to speak, and then shook her head and turned away, breaking into a run as though she could not endure to look upon Stark any longer. In a second she was gone.

Stark looked after her for a moment, strangely touched. Then he stepped out into the rain again, heading upward along the steep path that led to the castle of the Lords of Shuruun.

The mist was blinding. Stark had to feel his way, and as he climbed higher, above the level of the town, he was lost in the sullen redness. A hot wind blew, and each flare of lighting turned the crimson fog to a hellish purple. The night was full of a vast hissing where the rain poured into the gulf. He stopped once to hide his gun in a cleft between the rocks.

At length he stumbled against a carved pillar of black stone and found the gate that hung from it, a massive thing sheathed in metal. It was barred, and the pounding of his fists upon it made little sound.

Then he saw the gong, a huge disc of beaten gold beside the gate. Stark picked up the hammer that lay there, and set the deep voice of the gong rolling out between the thunderbolts.

A barred slit opened and a man's eyes looked out at him. Stark dropped the hammer.

"Open up!" he shouted. "I would speak with the Lhari!"

From within he heard an echo of laughter. Scraps of voices came to him on the wind, and then more laughter, and then, slowly, the great valves of the gate creaked open, wide enough only to admit him.

He stepped through, and the gateway shut behind him with a ringing clash.

He stood in a huge open court. Enclosed within its walls was a village of thatched huts, with open sheds for cooking, and behind them were pens for the stabling of beasts, the wingless dragons of the swamps that can be caught and broken to the goad.

He saw this only in vague glimpses, because of the fog. The men who had let him in clustered around him, thrusting him forward into the light that streamed from the huts.

"He would speak with the Lhari!" one of them shouted, to the women and children who stood in the doorways watching. The words were picked up and tossed around the court, and a great burst of laughter went up.

Stark eyed them, saying nothing. They were a puzzling breed. The men, obviously, were soldiers and guards to the Lhari, for they wore the harness of fighting men. As obviously, these were their wives and children, all living behind the castle walls and having little to do with Shuruun.

But it was their racial characteristics that surprised him. They had interbred with the pale tribes of the Swamp-Edges that had peopled Shuruun, and there were many with milk-white hair and broad faces. Yet even these bore an alien stamp. Stark was puzzled, for the race he would have named was unknown here behind the Mountains of White Cloud, and almost unknown anywhere on Venus at Sea-level,

among the sweltering marshes and the eternal fogs.

* * *

They stared at him even more curiously, remarking on his skin and his black hair and the unfamiliar modeling of his face. The women nudged each other and whispered, giggling, and one of them said aloud, "They'll need a barrel-hoop to collar that neck!"

The guards closed in around him. "Well, if you wish to see the Lhari, you shall," said the leader, "but first we must make sure of you."

Spear-points ringed him round. Stark made no resistance while they stripped him of all he had, except for his shorts and sandals. He had expected that, and it amused him, for there was little enough for them to take.

"All right," said the leader. "Come on."

The whole village turned out in the rain to escort Stark to the castle door. There was about them the same ominous interest that the people of Shuruun had had, with one difference. They knew what was supposed to happen to him, knew all about it, and were therefore doubly appreciative of the game.

The great doorway was square and plain, and yet neither crude nor ungraceful. The castle itself was built of the black stone, each block perfectly cut and fitted, and the door itself was sheathed in the same metal as the gate, darkened but not corroded.

The leader of the guard cried out to the warder, "Here is one who would speak with the Lhari!"

The warder laughed. "And so he shall! Their night is long, and dull."

He flung open the heavy door and cried the word down the hallway. Stark could hear it echoing hollowly within, and presently from the shadows came servants clad in silks and wearing jeweled collars, and from the guttural sound of their laughter Stark knew that they had no tongues.

Stark faltered, then. The doorway loomed hollowly before him, and it came to him suddenly that evil lay behind it and that perhaps Zareth was wiser than he when she warned him from the Lhari.

Then he thought of Helvi, and of other things, and lost his fear in anger. Lightning burned the sky. The last cry of the dying storm shook the ground under his feet. He thrust the grinning warder aside and strode into the castle, bringing a veil of the red fog with him, and did not listen to the closing of the door, which was stealthy and quiet as the footfall of approaching Death.

Torches burned here and there along the walls, and by their smoky glare he could see that the hallway was like the entrance—square and unadorned, faced with the black rock. It was high, and wide, and there was about the architecture a calm reflective dignity that had its own beauty, in some ways more impressive than the sensuous loveliness of the ruined palaces he had seen on Mars.

There were no carvings here, no paintings nor frescoes. It seemed that the builders had felt that the hall itself was enough, in its massive perfection of line and the somber gleam of polished stone. The only decoration was in the window embrasures. These were empty now, open to the sky with the red fog wreathing through them, but there were still scraps of jewel-toned panes clinging to the fretwork, to show what they had once been.

A strange feeling swept over Stark. Because of his wild upbringing, he was abnormally sensitive to the sort of impressions that most men receive either dully or not at all.

Walking down the hall, preceded by the tongueless creatures in their bright silks and blazing collars, he was struck by a subtle *difference* in the place. The castle itself was only an extension of the minds of its builders, a dream shaped into reality. Stark felt that that dark, cool, curiously timeless dream had not originated in a mind like his own, nor like that of any man he had ever seen.

Then the end of the hall was reached, the way barred by low broad doors of gold fashioned in the same chaste simplicity.

A soft scurrying of feet, a shapeless tittering from the servants, a glancing of malicious, mocking eyes. The golden doors swung open, and Stark was in the presence of the Lhari.

V

They had the appearance in that first glance, of creatures glimpsed in a fever-dream, very bright and distant, robed in a misty glow that gave them an illusion of unearthly beauty.

The place in which the Earthman now stood was like a cathedral for breadth and loftiness. Most of it was in darkness, so that it seemed to reach without limit above and on all sides, as though the walls were only shadowy phantasms of the night itself. The polished black stone under his feet held a dim translucent gleam, depthless as water in a black tarn. There was no substance anywhere.

Far away in this shadowy vastness burned a cluster of lamps, a galaxy of little stars to shed a silvery light upon the Lords of Shuruun.

There had been no sound in the place when Stark entered, for the opening of the golden doors had caught the attention of the Lhari and held it in contemplation of the stranger. Stark began to walk toward them in this utter stillness.

Quite suddenly, in the impenetrable gloom somewhere to his right, there came a sharp scuffling and a scratching of reptilian claws, a hissing and a sort of low angry muttering, all magnified and distorted by the echoing vault into a huge demoniac whispering that swept all around him.

Stark whirled around, crouched and ready, his eyes blazing and his body bathed in cold sweat. The noise increased, rushing toward him. From the distant glow of the lamps came a woman's tinkling laughter, thin crystal broken against the vault. The hissing and snarling rose to hollow crescendo, and Stark saw a blurred shape bounding at him.

His hands reached out to retrieve the rush, but it never came. The strange shape resolved itself into a boy of about ten, who dragged after him on a bit of rope a young dragon, new and toothless from the egg, and protesting with all its strength.

Stark straightened up, feeling let down and furious—and relieved. The boy scowled at him through a forelock of silver curls. Then he called him a very dirty word and rushed away, kicking and hauling at the little beast until it raged like the father of all dragons and sounded like it, too, in that vast echo chamber.

A voice spoke. Slow, harsh, sexless, it rang thinly through the vault. Thin—but a steel blade is thin, too.

It speaks inexorably, and its word is final.

The voice said, "Come here, into the light."

Stark obeyed the voice. As he approached the lamps, the aspect of the Lhari changed and steadied. Their beauty remained, but it was not the same. They had looked like angels. Now that he could see them clearly, Stark thought that they might have been the children of Lucifer himself.

There were six of them, counting the boy. Two men, about the same age as Stark, with some complicated gambling game forgotten between them. A woman, beautiful, gowned in white silk, sitting with her hands in her lap, doing nothing. A woman, younger, not so beautiful perhaps, but with a look of stormy and bitter vitality. She wore a short tunic of crimson, and a stout leather glove on her left hand, where perched a flying thing of prey with its fierce eyes hooded.

The boy stood beside the two men, his head poised arrogantly. From time to time he cuffed the little dragon, and it snapped at him with its impotent jaws. He was proud of himself for doing that. Stark wondered how he would behave with the beast when it had grown its fangs.

Opposite him, crouched on a heap of cushions, was a third man. He was deformed, with an ungainly body and long spidery arms, and in his lap a sharp knife lay on a block of wood, half formed into the shape of an obese creature half woman, half pure evil. Stark saw with a flash of surprise that the face of the deformed young man, of all the faces there, was truly human, truly beautiful. His eyes were old in his boyish face, wise, and very sad in their wisdom. He smiled upon the stranger, and his smile was more compassionate than tears.

* * *

They looked at Stark, all of them, with restless, hungry eyes. They were the pure breed, that had left its stamp of alienage on the pale-haired folk of the swamps, the serfs who dwelt in the huts outside.

They were of the Cloud People, the folk of the High Plateaus, kings of the land on the farther slopes of the Mountains of White Cloud. It was strange to see them here, on the dark side of the barrier wall, but here they were. How they had come, and why, leaving their rich cool plains for the fetor of these foreign swamps, he could not guess. But there was no mistaking them—the proud fine shaping of their bodies, their alabaster skin, their eyes that were all colors and none, like the dawn sky, their hair that was pure warm silver.

They did not speak. They seemed to be waiting for permission to speak, and Stark wondered which one of them had voiced that steely summons.

Then it came again. "Come here—come closer." And he looked beyond them, beyond the circle of lamps into the shadows again, and saw the speaker.

She lay upon a low bed, her head propped on silken pillows, her vast, her incredibly gigantic body covered with a silken pall. Only her arms were bare, two shapeless masses of white flesh ending in tiny hands. From time to time she stretched one out and took a morsel of food from the supply laid ready beside her, snuffling and wheezing with the effort, and then gulped the tidbit down with a horrible voracity.

Her features had long ago dissolved into a shaking formlessness, with the exception of her nose, which rose out of the fat curved and cruel and thin, like the bony beak of the creature that sat on the girl's wrist and dreamed its hooded dreams of blood. And her eyes . . .

Stark looked into her eyes and shuddered. Then he glanced at the carving half formed in the cripple's lap, and knew what thought had guided the knife.

Half woman, half pure evil. And strong. Very strong. Her strength lay naked in her eyes for all to see, and it was an ugly strength. It could tear down mountains, but it could never build.

He saw her looking at him. Her eyes bored into his as though they would search out his very guts and study them, and he knew that she expected him to turn away, unable to bear her gaze. He did not. Presently he smiled and said, "I have out-stared a rock-lizard, to determine which of us should eat the other. And I've out-stared the very rock while waiting for him."

She knew that he spoke the truth. Stark expected her to be angry, but she was not. A vague mountainous rippling shook her and emerged at length as a voiceless laughter.

"You see that?" she demanded, addressing the others. "You whelps of the Lhari—not one of you dares to face me down, yet here is a great dark creature from the gods know where who can stand and shame you."

She glanced again at Stark. "What demon's blood brought you forth, that you have learned neither prudence nor fear?"

Stark answered somberly, "I learned them both before I could walk. But I learned another thing also—a thing called anger."

"And you are angry?"

"Ask Malthor if I am, and why!"

He saw the two men start a little and a slow smile crossed the girl's face.

"Malthor," said the hulk upon the bed, and ate a mouthful of roast meat dripping with fat. "That is interesting. But rage against Malthor did not bring you here. I am curious, Stranger. Speak."

"I will."

* * *

Stark glanced around. The place was a tomb, a trap. The very air smelled of danger. The younger folk watched him in silence. Not one of them had spoken since he came in, except the boy who had cursed him, and that was unnatural in itself. The girl leaned forward, idly stroking the creature on her wrist so that it stirred and ran its knife-like talons in and out of their bony sheathes with sensuous pleasure. Her gaze on Stark was bold and cool, oddly challenging. Of them all, she alone saw him as a man, to the others he was a problem, a diversion—something less than human.

Stark said, "A man came to Shuruun at the time of the last rains. His name was Helvi, and he was son of a little king by Yarell. He came seeking his brother, who had broken taboo and fled for his life. Helvi came to tell him that the ban was lifted, and he might return. Neither one came back."

The small evil eyes were amused, blinking in their tallowy creases. "And so?"

"And so I have come after Helvi, who is my friend."

Again there was the heaving of that bulk of flesh, the explosion of laughter that hissed and wheezed in snakelike echoes through the vault.

"Friendship must run deep with you, Stranger. Ah, well. The Lhari are kind of heart. You shall find your friend."

And as though that were the signal to end their deferential silence, the younger folk burst into laughter also, until the vast hall rang with it, giving back a sound like demons laughing on the edge of Hell.

The cripple only did not laugh, but bent his bright head over his carving, and sighed.

The girl sprang up. "Not yet, Grandmother! Keep him awhile."

The cold, cruel eyes shifted to her. "And what will you do with him, Varra? Haul him about on a string, like Bor with his wretched beast?"

"Perhaps—though I think it would need a stout chain to hold him." Varra turned and looked at Stark, bold and bright, taking in the breadth and the height of him, the shaping of the great smooth muscles, the iron line of the jaw. She smiled. Her mouth was very lovely, like the red fruit of the swamp tree that bears death in its pungent sweetness.

"Here is a man," she said. "The first man I have seen since my father died."

The two men at the gaming table rose, their faces flushed and angry. One of them strode forward and gripped the girl's arm roughly.

"So I am not a man," he said, with surprising gentleness. "A sad thing, for one who is to be your husband. It's best that we settle that now, before we wed."

Varra nodded. Stark saw that the man's fingers were cutting savagely into the firm muscle of her arm, but she did not wince.

"High time to settle it all, Egil. You have borne enough from me. The day is long overdue for my taming. I must learn now to bend my neck, and acknowledge my lord."

For a moment Stark thought she meant it, the note of mockery in her voice was so subtle. Then the woman in white, who all this time had not moved nor changed expression, voiced again the thin, tinkling laugh he had heard once before. From that, and the dark suffusion of blood in Egil's face, Stark knew that Varra was only casting the man's own phrases back at him. The boy let out one derisive bark, and was cuffed into silence.

Varra looked straight at Stark. "Will you fight for me?" she demanded.

Quite suddenly, it was Stark's turn to laugh. "No!" he said.

Varra shrugged. "Very well, then. I must fight for myself."

"Man," snarled Egil. "I'll show you who's a man, you scapegrace little vixen!"

He wrenched off his girdle with his free hand, at the same time bending the girl around so he could get a

fair shot at her. The creature of prey, a Terran falcon, clung to her wrist, beating its wings and screaming, its hooded head jerking.

* * *

With a motion so quick that it was hardly visible, Varra slipped the hood and flew the creature straight for Egil's face.

He let go, flinging up his arms to ward off the talons and the tearing beak. The wide wings beat and hammered. Egil yelled. The boy Bor got out of range and danced up and down shrieking with delight.

Varra stood quietly. The bruises were blackening on her arm, but she did not deign to touch them. Egil blundered against the gaming table and sent the ivory pieces flying. Then he tripped over a cushion and fell flat, and the hungry talons ripped his tunic to ribbons down the back.

Varra whistled, a clear peremptory call. The creature gave a last peck at the back of Egil's head and flopped sullenly back to its perch on her wrist. She held it, turning toward Stark. He knew from the poise of her that she was on the verge of launching her pet at him. But she studied him and then shook her head.

"No," she said, and slipped the hood back on. "You would kill it."

Egil had scrambled up and gone off into the darkness, sucking a cut on his arm. His face was black with rage. The other man looked at Varra.

"If you were pledged to me," he said, "I'd have that temper out of you!"

"Come and try it," answered Varra.

The man shrugged and sat down. "It's not my place. I keep the peace in my own house." He glanced at the woman in white, and Stark saw that her face, hitherto blank of any expression, had taken on a look of abject fear.

"You do," said Varra, "and, if I were Arel, I would stab you while you slept. But you're safe. She had no spirit to begin with."

Arel shivered and looked steadfastly at her hands. The man began to gather up the scattered pieces. He said casually, "Egil will wring your neck some day, Varra, and I shan't weep to see it."

All this time the old woman had eaten and watched, watched and eaten, her eyes glittering with interest.

"A pretty brood, are they not?" she demanded of Stark. "Full of spirit, quarrelling like young hawks in the nest, That's why I keep them around me, so—they are such sport to watch. All except Treon there," She indicated the crippled youth. "He does nothing. Dull and soft-mouthed, worse than Arel. What a grandson to be cursed with! But his sister has fire enough for two." She munched a sweet, grunting with pride.

Treon raised his head and spoke, and his voice was like music, echoing with an eerie liveliness in that park place.

"Dull I may be, Grandmother, and weak in body, and without hope. Yet I shall be the last of the Lhari. Death sits waiting on the towers, and he shall gather you all before me. I know, for the winds have told

me."

He turned his suffering eyes upon Stark and smiled, a smile of such woe and resignation that the Earthman's heart ached with it. Yet there was a thankfulness in it too, as though some long waiting was over at last.

"You," he said softly, "Stranger with the fierce eyes. I saw you come, out of the darkness, and where you set foot there was a bloody print. Your arms were red to the elbows, and your breast was splashed with the redness, and on your brow was the symbol of death. Then I knew, and the wind whispered into my ear, 'It is so. This man shall pull the castle down, and its stones shall crush Shuruun and set the Lost Ones free'."

He laughed, very quietly. "Look at him, all of you. For he will be your doom!"

There was a moment's silence, and Stark, with all the superstitions of a wild race thick within him, turned cold to the roots of his hair. Then the old woman said disgustedly, "Have the winds warned you of this, my idiot?"

And with astonishing force and accuracy she picked up a ripe fruit and flung it at Treon.

"Stop your mouth with that," she told him. "I am weary to death of your prophecies."

* * *

Treon looked at the crimson juice trickling slowly down the breast of his tunic, to drip upon the carving in his lap. The half formed head was covered with it. Treon was shaken with silent mirth.

"Well," said Varra, coming up to Stark, "what do you think of the Lhari? The proud Lhari, who would not stoop to mingle their blood with the cattle of the swamps. My half-witted brother, my worthless cousins, that little monster Bor who is the last twig of the tree—do you wonder I flew my falcon at Egil?"

She waited for an answer, her head thrown back, the silver curls framing her face like wisps of storm-cloud. There was a swagger about her that at once irritated and delighted Stark. A hellcat, he thought, but a mighty fetching one, and bold as brass. Bold—and honest. Her lips were parted, midway between anger and a smile.

He caught her to him suddenly and kissed her, holding her slim strong body as though she were a doll. He was in no hurry to set her down. When at last he did, he grinned and said, "Was that what you wanted?"

"Yes," answered Varra. "That was what I wanted." She spun about, her jaw set dangerously. "Grandmother . . ."

She got no farther. Stark saw that the old woman was attempting to sit upright, her face purpling with effort and the most terrible wrath he had ever seen.

"You," she gasped at the girl. She choked on her fury and her shortness of breath, and then Egil came soft-footed into the light, bearing in his hand a thing made of black metal and oddly shaped, with a blunt, thick muzzle.

"Lie back, Grandmother," he said. "I had a mind to use this on Varra—"

Even as he spoke he pressed a stud, and Stark in the act of leaping for the sheltering darkness, crashed down and lay like a dead man. There had been no sound, no flash, nothing, but a vast hand that smote him suddenly into oblivion.

Egil finished, "—but I see a better target."

VI

Red. Red. Red. The colour of blood. Blood in his eyes. He was remembering now. The quarry had turned on him, and they had fought on the bare, blistering rocks.

Nor had N'Chaka killed. The Lord of the Rocks was very big, a giant among lizards, and N'Chaka was small. The Lord of the Rocks had laid open N'Chaka's head before the wooden spear had more than scratched his flank.

It was strange that N'Chaka still lived. The Lord of the Rocks must have been full fed. Only that had saved him.

N'Chaka groaned, not with pain, but with shame. He had failed. Hoping for a great triumph, he had disobeyed the tribal law that forbids a boy to hunt the quarry of a man, and he had failed. Old One would not reward him with the girdle and the flint spear of manhood. Old One would give him to the women for the punishment of little whips. Tika would laugh at him, and it would be many seasons before Old One would grant him permission to try the Man's Hunt.

Blood in his eyes.

He blinked to clear them. The instinct of survival was prodding him. He must arouse himself and creep away, before the Lord of the Rocks returned to eat him.

The redness would not go away. It swam and flowed, strangely sparkling. He blinked again, and tried to lift his head, and could not, and fear struck down upon him like the iron frost of night upon the rocks of the valley.

It was all wrong. He could see himself clearly, a naked boy dizzy with pain, rising and clambering over the ledges and the shale to the safety of the cave. He could see that, and yet he could not move.

All wrong. Time, space, the universe, darkened and turned.

A voice spoke to him. A girl's voice. Not Tika's and the speech was strange.

Tika was dead. Memories rushed through his mind, the bitter things, the cruel things. Old One was dead, and all the others . . .

The voice spoke again, calling him by a name that was not his own.

Stark.

Memory shattered into a kaleidoscope of broken pictures, fragments, rushing, spinning. He was adrift among them. He was lost, and the terror of it brought a scream into his throat.

Soft hands touching his face, gentle words, swift and soothing. The redness cleared and steadied, though it did not go away, and quite suddenly he was himself again, with all his memories where they belonged.

* * *

He was lying on his back, and Zareth, Malthor's daughter, was looking down at him. He knew now what the redness was. He had seen it too often before not to know. He was somewhere at the bottom of the Red Sea—that weird ocean in which a man can breathe.

And he could not move. That had not changed, nor gone away. His body was dead.

The terror he had felt before was nothing to the agony that filled him now. He lay entombed in his own flesh, staring up at Zareth, wanting an answer to a question he dared not ask.

She understood, from the look in his eyes.

"It's all right," she said, and smiled. "It will wear off. You'll be all right. It's only the weapon of the Lhari. Somehow it puts the body to sleep, but it will wake again."

Stark remembered the black object that Egil had held in his hands. A projector of some sort, then, beaming a current of high-frequency vibration that paralyzed the nerve centers. He was amazed. The Cloud People were barbarians themselves, though on a higher scale than the swamp-edge tribes, and certainly had no such scientific proficiency. He wondered where the Lhari had got hold of such a weapon.

It didn't really matter. Not just now. Relief swept over him, bringing him dangerously close to tears. The effect would wear off. At the moment, that was all he cared about.

He looked up at Zareth again. Her pale hair floated with the slow breathing of the sea, a milky cloud against the spark-shot crimson. He saw now that her face was drawn and shadowed, and there a terrible hopelessness in her eyes. She had been alive when he first saw her—frightened, not too bright, but full of emotion and a certain dogged courage. Now the spark was gone, crushed out.

She wore a collar around her white neck, a ring of dark metal with the ends fused together for all time.

"Where are we?" he asked.

And she answered, her voice carrying deep and hollow in the dense substance of the sea, "We are in the place of the Lost Ones."

Stark looked beyond her, as far as he could see, since he was unable to turn his head. And wonder came to him.

Black walls, black vault above him, a vast hall filled with the wash of the sea that slipped in streaks of whispering flame through the high embrasures. A hall that was twin to the vault of shadows where he had met the Lhari.

"There is a city," said Zareth dully. "You will see it soon. You will see nothing else until you die."

Stark said, very gently, "How do you come here, little one?"

"Because of my father. I will tell you all I know, which is little enough. Malthor has been slaver to the Lhari for a long time. There are a number of them among the captains of Shuruun, but that is a thing that is never spoken of—so I, his daughter, could only guess. I was sure of it when he sent me after you."

She laughed, a bitter sound. "Now I'm here, with the collar of the Lost Ones on my neck. But Malthor is here, too." She laughed again, ugly laughter to come from a young mouth. Then she looked at Stark, and her hand reached out timidly to touch his hair in what was almost a caress. Her eyes were wide, and soft, and full of tears.

"Why didn't you go into the swamps when I warned you?"

Stark answered stolidly, "Too late to worry about that now," Then, "You say Malthor is here, a slave?"

"Yes." Again, that look of wonder and admiration in her eyes. "I don't know what you said or did to the Lhari, but the Lord Egil came down in a black rage and cursed my father for a bungling fool because he could not hold you. My father whined and made excuses, and all would have been well—only his curiosity got the better of him and he asked the Lord Egil what had happened. You were like a wild beast, Malthor said, and he hoped you had not harmed the Lady Varra, as he could see from Egil's wounds that there had been trouble.

"The Lord Egil turned quite purple. I thought he was going to fall in a fit."

"Yes," said Stark. "That was the wrong thing to say." The ludicrous side of it struck him, and he was suddenly roaring with laughter. "Malthor should have kept his mouth shut!"

"Egil called his guard and ordered them to take Malthor. And when he realized what had happened, Malthor turned on me, trying to say that it was all my fault, that I let you escape."

Stark stopped laughing.

Her voice went on slowly, "Egil seemed quite mad with fury. I have heard that the Lhari are all mad, and I think it is so. At any rate, he ordered me taken too, for he wanted to stamp Malthor's seed into the mud forever. So we are here."

There was a long silence. Stark could think of no word of comfort, and as for hope, he had better wait until he was sure he could at least raise his head. Egil might have damaged him permanently, out of spite. In fact, he was surprised he wasn't dead.

He glanced again at the collar on Zareth's neck. Slave. Slave to the Lhari, in the city of the Lost Ones.

What the devil did they do with slaves, at the bottom of the sea?

The heavy gases conducted sound remarkably well, except for an odd property of diffusion which made it seem that a voice came from everywhere at once. Now, all at once, Stark became aware of a dull clamor of voices drifting towards him.

He tried to see, and Zareth turned his head carefully so that he might.

The Lost Ones were returning from whatever work it was they did.

* * *

Out of the dim red murk beyond the open door they swam, into the long, long vastness of the hall that was filled with same red murk, moving slowly, their white bodies trailing wakes of sullen flame. The host of the damned drifting through a strange red-lit hell, weary and without hope.

One by one they sank onto pallets laid in rows on the black stone floor, and lay there, utterly exhausted, their pale hair lifting and floating with the slow eddies of the sea. And each one wore a collar.

One man did not lie down. He came toward Stark, a tall barbarian who drew himself with great strokes of his arms so that he was wrapped in wheeling sparks. Stark knew his face.

"Helvi," he said, and smiled in welcome.

"Brother!"

Helvi crouched down—a great handsome boy he had been the time Stark saw him, but he was a man now, with all the laughter turned to grim deep lines around his mouth and the bones of his face standing out like granite ridges.

"Brother," he said again, looking at Stark through a glitter of unashamed tears. "Fool!" And he cursed Stark savagely because he had come to Shuruun to look for an idiot who had gone the same way, and was already as good as dead.

"Would you have followed me?" asked Stark.

"But I am only an ignorant child of the swamps," said Helvi. "You come from space, you know the other worlds, you can read and write—you should have better sense!"

Stark grinned. "And I'm still an ignorant child of the rocks. So we're two fools together. Where is Tobal?"

Tobal was Helvi's brother, who had broken taboo and looked for refuge in Shuruun. Apparently he had found peace at last, for Helvi shook his head.

"A man cannot live too long under the sea. It is not enough merely to breathe and eat. Tobal overran his time, and I am close to the end of mine." He held up his hand and then swept it down sharply, watching the broken fires dance along his arms.

"The mind breaks before the body," said Helvi casually, as though it were a matter of no importance.

Zareth spoke. "Helvi has guarded you each period while the others slept."

"And not I alone," said Helvi. "The little one stood with me."

"Guarded me!" said Stark. "Why?"

For answer, Helvi gestured toward a pallet not far away. Malthor lay there, his eyes half open and full of malice, the fresh scar livid on his cheek.

"He feels," said Helvi, "that you should not have fought upon his ship."

Stark felt an inward chill of horror. To lie here helpless, watching Malthor come toward him with, open

fingers reaching for his helpless throat . . .

He made a passionate effort to move, and gave up, gasping. Helvi grinned.

"Now is the time I should wrestle you, Stark, for I never could throw you before." He gave Stark's head a shake, very gentle for all its apparent roughness. "You'll be throwing me again. Sleep now, and don't worry."

He settled himself to watch, and presently in spite of himself Stark slept, with Zareth curled at his feet like a little dog.

There was no time down there in the heart of the Red Sea. No daylight, no dawn, no space of darkness. No winds blew, no rain nor storm broke the endless silence. Only the lazy currents whispered by on their way to nowhere, and the red sparks danced, and the great hall waited, remembering the past.

Stark waited, too. How long he never knew, but he was used to waiting. He had learned his patience on the knees of the great mountains whose heads lift proudly into open space to look at the Sun, and he had absorbed their own contempt for time.

Little by little, life returned to his body. A mongrel guard came now and again to examine him, pricking Stark's flesh with his knife to test the reaction, so that Stark should not malingering.

He reckoned without Stark's control.

The Earthman bore his prodding without so much as a twitch until his limbs were completely his own again. Then he sprang up and pitched the man half the length of the hall, turning over and over, yelling with startled anger.

At the next period of labor. Stark was driven with the rest out into the City of the Lost Ones.

VII

Stark had been in places before that oppressed him with a sense of their strangeness or their wickedness—Sinharat, the lovely ruin of coral and gold lost in the Martian wastes; Jekkara, Valkis—the Low-Canal towns that smell of blood and wine; the cliff-caves of Arianrhod on the edge of Darkside, the buried tomb-cities of Callisto. But this—this was nightmare to haunt a man's dreams.

He stared about him as he went in the long line of slaves, and felt such a cold shuddering contraction of his belly as he had never known before.

Wide avenues paved with polished blocks of stone, perfect as ebon mirrors. Buildings, tall and stately, pure and plain, with a calm strength that could outlast the ages. Black, all black, with no fripperies of paint or carving to soften them, only here and there a window like a drowned jewel glinting through the red.

Vines, like drifts of snow cascading down the stones. Gardens with close-clipped turf and flowers lifting bright on their green stalks, their petals open to a daylight that was gone, their head bending as though to some forgotten breeze. All neat, all tended, the branches pruned, the fresh soil turned this morning—by whose hand?

Stark remembered the great forest dreaming at the bottom of the gulf, and shivered. He did not like to think how long ago these flowers must have opened their young bloom to the last light they were ever going to see. For they were dead—dead as the forest, dead as the city. Forever bright—and dead.

Stark thought that it must always have been a silent city. It was impossible to imagine noisy throngs flocking to a market square down those immense avenues. The black walls were not made to echo song or laughter. Even the children must have moved quietly along the garden paths, small wise creatures born to an ancient dignity.

He was beginning to understand now the meaning of that weird forest. The Gulf of Shuruun had not always been a gulf. It had been a valley, rich, fertile, with this great city in its arms, and here and there on the upper slopes the retreat of some noble or philosopher—of which the castle of the Lhari was a survivor.

A wall or rock had held back the Red Sea from this valley. And then, somehow, the wall had cracked, and the sullen crimson tide had flowed slowly, slowly into the fertile bottoms, rising higher, topping the towers and the tree-tops in swirling flame, drowning the land forever. Stark wondered if the people had known the disaster was coming, if they had gone forth to tend their gardens for the last time so that they might remain perfect in the embalming gases of the sea.

* * *

The columns of slaves, herded by overseers armed with small black weapons similar to the one Egil had used, came out into a broad square whose farther edges were veiled in the red murk. And Stark looked on ruin.

A great building had fallen in the centre of the square. The gods only knew what force had burst its walls and tossed the giant blocks like pebbles into a heap. But there it was, the one untidy thing in the city, a mountain of debris.

Nothing else was damaged. It seemed that this had been the place of temples, and they stood unharmed, ranked around the sides of the square, the dim fires rippling through their open porticoes. Deep in their inner shadows Stark thought he could make out images, gigantic things brooding in the spark-shot gloom.

He had no chance to study them. The overseers cursed them on, and now he saw what use the slaves were put to. They were clearing away the wreckage of the fallen building.

Helvi whispered, "For sixteen years men have slaved and died down here, and the work is not half done. And why do the Lhari want it done at all? I'll tell you why. Because they are mad, mad as swamp-dragons gone *musth* in the spring!"

It seemed madness indeed, to labor at this pile of rocks in a dead city at the bottom of the sea. It was madness. And yet the Lhari, though they might be insane, were not fools. There was a reason for it, and Stark was sure it was a good reason—good for the Lhari, at any rate.

An overseer came up to Stark, thrusting him roughly toward a sledge already partly loaded with broken rocks. Stark hesitated, his eyes turning ugly, and Helvi said, "Come on, you fool! Do you want to be down flat on your back again?"

Stark glanced at the little weapon, blunt and ready, and turned reluctantly to obey. And there began his servitude.

It was a weird sort of life he led. For a while he tried to reckon time by the periods of work and sleep, but he lost count, and it did not greatly matter anyway.

He labored with the others, hauling the huge blocks away, clearing out the cellars that were partly bared, shoring up weak walls underground. The slaves clung to their old habit of thought, calling the work-periods "days" and the sleep-periods "nights".

Each "day" Egil, or his brother Cond, came to see what had been done, and went away black-browed and disappointed, ordering the work speeded up.

Treon was there also much of the time. He would come slowly in his awkward crabwise way and perch like a pale gargoyle on the stones, never speaking, watching with his sad beautiful eyes. He woke a vague foreboding in Stark. There was something awesome in Treon's silent patience, as though he waited the coming of some black doom, long delayed but inevitable. Stark would remember the prophecy, and shiver.

It was obvious to Stark after a while that the Lhari were clearing the building to get at the cellars underneath. The great dark caverns already bared had yielded nothing, but the brothers still hoped. Over and over Cond and Egil sounded the walls and the floors, prying here and there, and chafing at the delay in opening up the underground labyrinth. What they hoped to find, no one knew.

Varra came, too. Alone, and often, she would drift down through the dim mist-fires and watch, smiling a secret smile, her hair like blown silver where the currents played with it. She had nothing but curt words for Egil, but she kept her eyes on the great dark Earthman, and there was a look in them that stirred his blood. Egil was not blind, and it stirred his too, but in a different way.

* * *

Zareth saw that look. She kept as close to Stark as possible, asking no favors, but following him around with a sort of quiet devotion, seeming contented only when she was near him. One "night" in the slave barracks she crouched beside his pallet, her hand on his bare knee. She did not speak, and her face was hidden by the floating masses of her hair.

Stark turned her head so that he could see her, pushing the pale cloud gently away.

"What troubles you, little sister?"

Her eyes were wide and shadowed with some vague fear. But she only said, "It's not my place to speak."

"Why not?"

"Because . . ." Her mouth trembled, and then suddenly she said, "Oh, it's foolish, I know. But the woman of the Lhari . . ."

"What about her?"

"She watches you. Always she watches you! And the Lord Egil is angry. There is something in her mind, and it will bring you only evil. I know it!"

"It seems to me," said Stark wryly "that the Lhari have already done as much evil as possible to all of

us."

"No," answered Zareth, with an odd wisdom. "Our hearts are still clean."

Stark smiled. He leaned over and kissed her. "I'll be careful, little sister."

Quite suddenly she flung her arms around his neck and clung to him tightly, and Stark's face sobered. He patted her, rather awkwardly, and then she had gone, to curl up on her own pallet with her head buried in her arms.

Stark lay down. His heart was sad, and there was a stinging moisture in his eyes.

The red eternities dragged on. Stark learned what Helvi had meant when he said that the mind broke before the body. The sea bottom was no place for creatures of the upper air. He learned also the meaning of the metal collars, and the manner of Tobal's death.

Helvi explained.

"There are boundaries laid down. Within them we may range, if we have the strength and the desire after work. Beyond them we may not go. And there is no chance of escape by breaking through the barrier. How this is done I do not understand, but it is so, and the collars are the key to it.

"When a slave approaches the barrier the collar brightens as though with fire, and the slave falls. I have tried this myself, and I know. Half-paralyzed, you may still crawl back to safety. But if you are mad, as Tobal was, and charge the barrier strongly . . ."

He made a cutting motion with his hands.

Stark nodded. He did not attempt to explain electricity or electronic vibrations to Helvi, but it seemed plain enough that the force with which the Lhari kept their slaves in check was something of the sort. The collars acted as conductors, perhaps for the same type of beam that was generated in the hand-weapons. When the metal broke the invisible boundary line it triggered off a force-beam from the central power station, in the manner of the obedient electric eye that opens doors and rings alarm bells. First a warning—then death.

* * *

The boundaries were wide enough, extending around the city and enclosing a good bit of forest beyond it. There was no possibility of a slave hiding among the trees, because the collar could be traced by the same type of beam, turned to low power, and the punishment meted out to a retaken man was such that few were foolish enough to try that game.

The surface, of course, was utterly forbidden. The one unguarded spot was the island where the central power station was, and here the slaves were allowed to come sometimes at night. The Lhari had discovered that they lived longer and worked better if they had an occasional breath of air and a look at the sky.

Many times Stark made that pilgrimage with the others. Up from the red depths they would come, through the reeling bands of fire where the currents ran, through the clouds of crimson sparks and the sullen patches of stillness that were like pools of blood, a company of white ghosts shrouded in flame, rising from their tomb for a little taste of the world they had lost.

It didn't matter that they were so weary they had barely the strength to get back to the barracks and sleep. They found the strength. To walk again on the open ground, to be rid of the eternal crimson dusk and the oppressive weight on the chest—to look up into the hot blue night, of Venus and smell the fragrance of the *liha* -trees borne on the land wind . . . They found the strength.

They sang here, sitting on the island rocks and staring through the mists toward the shore they would never see again. It was their chanting that Stark had heard when he came down the gulf with Malthor, that wordless cry of grief and loss. Now he was here himself, holding Zareth close to comfort her and joining his own deep voice into that primitive reproach to the gods.

While he sat, howling like the savage he was, he studied the power plant, a squat blockhouse of a place. On the nights the slaves came guards were stationed outside to warn them away. The blockhouse was doubly guarded with the shock-beam. To attempt to take it by force would only mean death for all concerned.

Stark gave that idea up for the time being. There was never a second when escape was not in his thoughts, but he was too old in the game to break his neck against a stone wall. Like Malthor, he would wait.

Zareth and Helvi both changed after Stark's coming. Though they never talked of breaking free, both of them lost their air of hopelessness. Stark made neither plans nor promises. But Helvi knew him from of old, and the girl had her own subtle understanding, and they held up their heads again.

Then, one "day" as the work was ending, Varra came smiling out of the red murk and beckoned to him, and Stark's heart gave a great leap. Without a backward look he left Helvi and Zareth, and went with her, down the wide still avenue that led outward to the forest.

VIII

They left the stately buildings and the wide spaces behind them, and went in among the trees. Stark hated the forest. The city was bad enough, but it was dead, honestly dead, except for those neat nightmare gardens. There was something terrifying about these great trees, full-leafed and green, rioting with flowering vines and all the rich undergrowth of the jungle, standing like massed corpses made lovely by mortuary art. They swayed and rustled as the coiling fires swept them, branches bending to that silent horrible parody of wind. Stark always felt trapped there, and stifled by the stiff leaves and the vines.

But he went, and Varra slipped like a silver bird between the great trunks, apparently happy.

"I have come here often, ever since I was old enough. It's wonderful. Here I can stoop and fly like one of my own hawks." She laughed and plucked a golden flower to set in her hair, and then darted away again, her white legs flashing.

Stark followed. He could see what she meant. Here in this strange sea one's motion was as much flying as swimming, since the pressure equalized the weight of the body. There was a queer sort of thrill in plunging headlong from the tree-tops, to arrow down through a tangle of vines and branches and then sweep upward again.

She was playing with him, and he knew it. The challenge got his blood up. He could have caught her easily but he did not, only now and again he circled her to show his strength. They sped on and on,

trailing wakes of flame, a black hawk chasing a silver dove through the forests of a dream.

But the dove had been fledged in an eagle's nest. Stark wearied of the game at last. He caught her and they clung together, drifting still among the trees with the momentum of that wonderful weightless flight.

Her kiss at first was lazy, teasing and curious. Then it changed. All Stark's smoldering anger leaped into a different kind of flame. His handling of her was rough and cruel, and she laughed, a little fierce voiceless laugh, and gave it back to him, and remembered how he had thought her mouth was like a bitter fruit that would give a man pain when he kissed it.

She broke away at last and came to rest on a broad branch, leaning back against the trunk and laughing, her eyes brilliant and cruel as Stark's own. And Stark sat down at her feet.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What do you want with me?"

She smiled. There was nothing sidelong or shy about her. She was bold as a new blade.

"I'll tell you, wild man."

He started. "Where did you pick up that name?"

"I have been asking the Earthman Larrabee about you. It suits you well." She leaned forward. "This is what I want of you. Slay me Egil and his brother Cond. Also Bor, who will grow up worse than either—although that I can do myself, if you're adverse to killing children, though Bor is more monster than child. Grandmother can't live forever, and with my cousins out of the way she's no threat. Treon doesn't count."

"And if I do—what then?"

"Freedom. And me. You'll rule Shuruun at my side."

Stark's eyes were mocking. "For how long, Varra?"

"Who knows? And what does it matter? The years take care of themselves." She shrugged. "The Lhari blood has run out, and it's time there was a fresh strain. Our children will rule after us, and they'll be men."

Stark laughed. He roared with it.

"It's not enough that I'm a slave to the Lhari. Now I must be executioner and herd bull as well!" He looked at her keenly. "Why me, Varra? Why pick on me?"

"Because, as I have said, you are the first man I have seen since my father died. Also, there is something about you . . ."

She pushed herself upward to hover lazily, her lips just brushing his.

"Do you think it would be so bad a thing to live with me, wild man?"

She was lovely and maddening, a silver witch shining among the dim fires of the sea, full of wickedness and laughter. Stark reached out and drew her to him.

"Not bad," he murmured. "Dangerous."

He kissed her, and she whispered, "I think you're not afraid of danger."

"On the contrary, I'm a cautious man." He held her off, where he could look straight into her eyes. "I owe Egil something on my own, but I will not murder. The fight must be fair, and Cond will have to take care of himself."

"Fair! Was Egil fair with you—or me?"

He shrugged. "My way, or not at all."

* * *

She thought it over a while, then nodded. "All right. As for Cond, you will give him a blood debt, and pride will make him fight. The Lhari are all proud," she added bitterly. "That's our curse. But it's bred in the bone, as you'll find out."

"One more thing. Zareth and Helvi are to go free, and there must be an end to this slavery."

She stared at him. "You drive a hard bargain, wild man!"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes *and* no. Zareth and Helvi you may have, if you insist, though the gods know what you see in that pallid child. As to the other . . ." She smiled very mockingly. "I'm no fool, Stark. You're evading me, and two can play that game."

He laughed. "Fair enough. And now tell me this, witch with the silver curls—how am I to get at Egil that I may kill him?"

"I'll arrange that"

She said it with such vicious assurance that he was pretty sure she would arrange it. He was silent for a moment, and then he asked,

"Varra—what are the Lhari searching for at the bottom of the sea?"

She answered slowly, "I told you that we are a proud clan. We were driven out of the High Plateaus centuries ago because of our pride. Now it's all we have left, but it's a driving thing."

She paused, and then went on. "I think we had known about the city for a long time, but it had never meant anything until my father became fascinated by it. He would stay down here days at a time, exploring, and it was he who found the weapons and the machine of power which is on the island. Then he found the chart and the metal book, hidden away in a secret place. The book was written in pictographs—as though it was meant to be deciphered—and the chart showed the square with the ruined building and the temples, with a separate diagram of catacombs underneath the ground.

"The book told of a secret—a thing of wonder and of fear. And my father believed that the building had been wrecked to close the entrance to the catacombs where the secret was kept. He determined to find it."

Sixteen years of other men's lives. Stark shivered. "What was the secret, Varra?"

"The manner of controlling life. How it was done I do not know, but with it one might build a race of giants, of monsters, or of gods. You can see what that would mean to us, a proud and dying clan."

"Yes," Stark answered slowly. "I can see."

The magnitude of the idea shook him. The builders of the city must have been wise indeed in their scientific research to evolve such a terrible power. To mold the living cells of the body to one's will—to create, not life itself but its form and fashion . . .

A race of giants, or of gods. The Lhari would like that. To transform their own degenerate flesh into something beyond the race of men, to develop their followers into a corps of fighting men that no one could stand against, to see that their children were given an unholy advantage over all the children of men . . . Stark was appalled at the realization of the evil they could do if they ever found that secret.

Varra said, "There was a warning in the book. The meaning of it was not quite clear, but it seemed that the ancient ones felt that they had sinned against the gods and been punished, perhaps by some plague. They were a strange race, and not human. At any rate, they destroyed the great building there as a barrier against anyone who should come after them, and then let the Red Sea in to cover their city forever. They must have been superstitious children, for all their knowledge."

"Then you all ignored the warning, and never worried that a whole city had died to prove it."

She shrugged. "Oh, Treon has been muttering prophecies about it for years. Nobody listens to him. As for myself, I don't care whether we find the secret or not. My belief is it was destroyed along with the building, and besides, I have no faith in such things."

"Besides," mocked Stark shrewdly, "you wouldn't care to see Egil and Cond striding across the heavens of Venus, and you're doubtful just what your own place would be in the new pantheon."

She showed her teeth at him. "You're too wise for your own good. And now good bye." She gave him a quick, hard kiss and was gone, flashing upward, high above the tree tops where he dared not follow.

Stark made his way slowly back to the city, upset and very thoughtful.

As he came back into the great square, heading toward the barracks, he stopped, every nerve taut.

Somewhere, in one of the shadowy temples, the clapper of a votive bell was swinging, sending its deep pulsing note across the silence. Slowly, slowly, like the beating of a dying heart it came, and mingled with it was the faint sound of Zareth's voice, calling his name.

IX

He crossed the square, moving very carefully through the red murk, and presently he saw her.

It was not hard to find her. There was one temple larger than all the rest. Stark judged that it must once have faced the entrance of the fallen building, as though the great figure within was set to watch over the

scientists and the philosophers who came there to dream their vast and sometimes terrible dreams.

The philosophers were gone, and the scientists had destroyed themselves. But the image still watched over the drowned city, its hand raised both in warning and in benediction.

Now, across its reptilian knees, Zareth lay. The temple was open on all sides, and Stark could see her clearly, a little white scrap of humanity against the black unhuman figure.

Malthor stood beside her. It was he who had been tolling the votive bell. He had stopped now, and Zareth's words came clearly to Stark.

"Go away, go away! They're waiting for you. Don't come in here!"

"I'm waiting for you, Stark," Malthor called out, smiling. "Are you afraid to come?" And he took Zareth by the hair and struck her, slowly and deliberately, twice across the face.

All expression left Stark's face, leaving it perfectly blank except for his eyes, which took on a sudden lambent gleam. He began to move toward the temple, not hurrying even then, but moving in such a way that it seemed an army could not have stopped him.

Zareth broke free from her father. Perhaps she was intended to break free.

"Egil!" she screamed. "It's a trap . . ."

Again Malthor caught her and this time he struck her harder, so that she crumpled down again across the image that watched with its jeweled, gentle eyes and saw nothing.

"She's afraid for you," said Malthor. "She knows I mean to kill you if I can. Well, perhaps Egil is here also. Perhaps he is not. But certainly Zareth is here. I have beaten her well, and I shall beat her again, as long as she lives to be beaten, for her treachery to me. And if you want to save her from that, you outland dog, you'll have to kill me. Are you afraid?"

Stark was afraid. Malthor and Zareth were alone in the temple. The pillared colonnades were empty except for the dim fires of the sea. Yet Stark was afraid, for an instinct older than speech warned him to be.

It did not matter. Zareth's white skin was mottled with dark bruises, and Malthor was smiling at him, and it did not matter.

Under the shadow of the roof and down the colonnade he went; swiftly now, leaving a streak of fire behind him. Malthor looked into his eyes, and his smile trembled and was gone.

He crouched. And at the last moment, when the dark body plunged down at him as a shark plunges, he drew a hidden knife from his girdle and struck.

Stark had not counted on that. The slaves were searched for possible weapons every day, and even a sliver of stone was forbidden. Somebody must have given it to him, someone . . .

The thought flashed through his mind while he was in the very act of trying to avoid that death blow. *Too late, too late, because his own momentum carried him onto the point . . .*

Reflexes quicker than any man's, the hair-trigger reactions of a wild thing. Muscles straining, the centre of balance shifted with an awful wrenching effort, hands grasping at the fire-shot redness as though to force it to defy its own laws. The blade ripped a long shallow gash across his breast. But it did not go home. By a fraction of an inch, it did not go home.

While Stark was still off balance, Malthor sprang.

* * *

They grappled. The knife blade glittered redly, a hungry tongue eager to taste Stark's life. The two men rolled over and over, drifting and tumbling erratically, churning the sea to a froth of sparks, and still the image watched, its calm reptilian features unchangingly benign and wise. Threads of a darker red laced heavily across the dancing fires.

Stark got Malthor's arm under his own and held it there with both hands. His back was to the man now. Malthor kicked and clawed with his feet against the backs of Stark's thighs, and his left arm came up and tried to clamp around Stark's throat. Stark buried his chin so that it could not, and then Malthor's hand began to tear at Stark's face, searching for his eyes.

Stark voiced a deep bestial sound in his throat. He moved his head suddenly, catching Malthor's hand between his jaws. He did not let go. Presently his teeth were locked against the thumb-joint, and Malthor was screaming, but Stark could give all his attention to what he was doing with the arm that held the knife. His eyes had changed. They were all beast now, the eyes of a killer blazing cold and beautiful in his dark face.

There was a dull crack, and the arm ceased to strain or fight. It bent back upon itself, and the knife fell, drifting quietly down. Malthor was beyond screaming now. He made one effort to get away as Stark released him, but it was a futile gesture, and he made no sound as Stark broke his neck.

He thrust the body from him. It drifted away, moving lazily with the suck of the currents through the colonnade, now and again touching a black pillar as though in casual wonder, wandering out at last into the square. Malthor was in no hurry. He had all eternity before him.

Stark moved carefully away from the girl, who was trying feebly now to sit up on the knees of the image. He called out, to some unseen presence hidden in the shadows under the roof, "Malthor screamed your name, Egil. Why didn't you come?"

There was a flicker of movement in the intense darkness of the ledge at the top of the pillars.

"Why should I?" asked the Lord Egil of the Lhari. "I offered him his freedom if he could kill you, but it seems he could not—even though I gave him a knife, and drugs to keep your friend Helvi out of the way."

He came out where Stark could see him, very handsome in a tunic of yellow silk, the blunt black weapon in his hands.

"The important thing was to bait a trap. You would not face me because of this—" He raised the weapon. "I might have killed you as you worked, of course, but my family would have had hard things to say about that. You're a phenomenally good slave."

"They'd have said hard words like 'coward', Egil," Stark said softly. "And Varra would have set her bird at you in earnest."

Egil nodded. His lip curved cruelly. "Exactly. That amused you, didn't it? And now my little cousin is training another falcon to swoop at me. She hooded you today, didn't she, Outlander?"

He laughed. "Ah well. I didn't kill you openly because there's a better way. Do you think I want it gossiped all over the Red Sea that my cousin jilted me for a foreign slave? Do you think I wish it known that I hated you, and why? No. I would have killed Malthor anyway, if you hadn't done it, because he knew. And when I have killed you and the girl I shall take your bodies to the barrier and leave them there together, and it will be obvious to everyone, even Varra, that you were killed trying to escape."

The weapon's muzzle pointed straight at Stark, and Egil's finger quivered on the trigger stud. Full power, this time. Instead of paralysis, death. Stark measured the distance between himself and Egil. He would be dead before he struck, but the impetus of his leap might carry him on, and give Zareth a chance to escape. The muscles of his thighs stirred and tensed.

A voice said, "And it will be obvious how and why *I* died, Egil? For if you kill them, you must kill me too."

* * *

Where Treon had come from, of when, Stark did not know. But he was there by the image, and his voice was full of a strong music, and his eyes shone with a fey light.

Egil had started, and now he swore in fury. "You idiot! You twisted freak! How did you come here?"

"How does the wind come, and the rain? I am not as other men." He laughed, a somber sound with no mirth in it. "I am here, Egil, and that's all that matters. And you will not slay this stranger who is more beast than man, and more man than any of us. The gods have a use for him."

He had moved as he spoke, until now he stood between Stark and Egil.

"Get out of the way," said Egil.

Treon shook his head.

"Very well," said Egil. "If you wish to die, you may."

The fey gleam brightened in Treon's eyes. "This is a day of death," he said softly, "but not of his, or mine."

Egil said a short, ugly word, and raised the weapon up.

Things happened very quickly after that. Stark sprang, arching up and over Treon's head, cleaving the red gasses like a burning arrow. Egil started back, and shifted his aim upward, and his finger snapped down on the trigger stud.

Something white came between Stark and Egil, and took the force of the bolt.

Something white. A girl's body, crowned with streaming hair, and a collar of metal glowing bright around the slender neck.

Zareth.

They had forgotten her, the beaten child crouched on the knees of the image. Stark had moved to keep her out of danger, and she was no threat to the mighty Egil, and Treon's thoughts were known only to himself and the winds that taught him. Unnoticed, she had crept to a place where one last plunge would place her between Stark and death.

The rush of Stark's going took him on over her, except that her hair brushed softly against his skin. Then he was on top of Egil, and it had all been done so swiftly that the Lord of the Lhari had not had time to loose another bolt.

Stark tore the weapon from Egil's hand. He was cold, icy cold, and there was a strange blindness on him, so that he could see nothing clearly but Egil's face. And it was Stark who screamed this time, a dreadful sound like the cry of a great cat gone beyond reason or fear.

Treon stood watching. He watched the blood stream darkly into the sea, and he listened to the silence come, and he saw the thing that had been his cousin drift away on the slow tide, and it was as though he had seen it all before and was not surprised.

Stark went to Zareth's body. The girl was still breathing, very faintly, and her eyes turned to Stark, and she smiled.

Stark was blind now with tears. All his rage had run out of him with Egil's blood, leaving nothing but an aching pity and a sadness, and a wondering awe. He took Zareth very tenderly into his arms and held her, dumbly, watching the tears fall on her upturned face. And presently he knew that she was dead.

Sometime later Treon came to him and said softly, "To this end she was born, and she knew it, and was happy. Even now she smiles. And she should, for she had a better death than most of us." He laid his hand on Stark's shoulder. "Come, I'll show you where to put her. She will be safe there, and tomorrow you can bury her where she would wish to be."

Stark rose and followed him, bearing Zareth in his arms.

Treon went to the pedestal on which the image sat. He pressed in a certain way upon a series of hidden springs, and a section of the paving slid noiselessly back, revealing stone steps leading down.

X

Treon led the way down, into darkness that was lightened only by the dim fires they themselves woke in passing. No currents ran here. The red gas lay dull and stagnant, closed within the walls of a square passage built of the same black stone.

"These are the crypts," he said. "The labyrinth that is shown on the chart my father found." And he told about the chart, as Varra had.

He led the way surely, his misshapen body moving without hesitation past the mouths of branching corridors and the doors of chambers whose interiors were lost in shadow.

"The history of the city is here. All the books and the learning, that they had not the heart to destroy. There are no weapons. They were not a warlike people, and I think that the force we of the Lhari have

used differently was defensive only, protection against the beasts and the raiding primitives of the swamps."

With a great effort, Stark wrenched his thoughts away from the light burden he carried.

"I thought," he said dully, "that the crypts were under the wrecked building."

"So we all thought. We were intended to think so. That is why the building was wrecked. And for sixteen years we of the Lhari have killed men and women with dragging the stones of it away. But the temple was shown also in the chart. We thought it was there merely as a landmark, an identification for the great building. But I began to wonder . . ."

"How long have you known?"

"Not long. Perhaps two rains. It took many seasons to find the secret of this passage. I came here at night, when the others slept."

"And you didn't tell?"

"No!" said Treon. "You are thinking that if I had told, there would have been an end to the slavery and the death. But what then? My family, turned loose with the power to destroy a world, as this city was destroyed? No! It was better for the slaves to die."

He motioned Stark aside, then between doors of gold that stood ajar, into a vault so great that there was no guessing its size in the red and shrouding gloom.

"This was the burial place of their kings," said Treon softly. "Leave the little one here."

Stark looked around him, still too numb to feel awe, but impressed even so.

They were set in straight lines, the beds of black marble—lines so long that there was no end to them except the limit of vision. And on them slept the old kings, their bodies, marvelously embalmed, covered with silken palls, their hands crossed upon their breasts, their wise unhuman faces stamped with the mark of peace.

Very gently, Stark laid Zareth down on a marble couch, and covered her also with silk, and closed her eyes and folded her hands. And it seemed to him that her face, too, had that look of peace.

He went out with Treon, thinking that none of them had earned a better place in the hall of kings than Zareth.

"Treon," he said.

"Yes?"

"That prophecy you spoke when I came to the castle—I will hear it out."

Treon nodded. "That is the way of prophecies."

He did not return toward the temple, but led the way deeper into the heart of the catacombs. A great excitement burned within him, a bright and terrible thing that communicated itself to Stark. Treon had

suddenly taken on the stature of a figure of destiny, and the Earthman had the feeling that he was in the grip of some current that would plunge on irresistibly until everything in its path was swept away. Stark's flesh quivered.

* * *

They reached the end of the corridor at last. And there, in the red gloom, a shape sat waiting before a black, barred door. A shape grotesque and incredibly misshapen, so horribly malformed that by it Treon's crippled body appeared almost beautiful. Yet its face was as the faces of the images and the old kings, and its sunken eyes had once held wisdom, and one of its seven-fingered hands were still slim and sensitive.

Stark recoiled. The thing made him physically sick, and he would have turned away, but Treon urged him on.

"Go closer. It is dead, embalmed, but it has a message for you. It has waited all this time to give that message."

Reluctantly, Stark went forward.

Quite suddenly, it seemed that the thing spoke.

Behold me. Look upon me, and take counsel before you grasp that power which lies beyond the door!

Stark leaped back, crying out, and Treon smiled.

"It was so with me. But I have listened to it many times since then. It speaks not with a voice, but within the mind, and only when one has passed a certain spot."

Stark's reasoning mind pondered over that. A thought-record, obviously, triggered off by an electronic beam. The ancients had taken good care that their warning would be heard and understood by anyone who should solve the riddle of the catacombs. Thought-images, speaking directly to the brain, know no barrier of time or language.

He stepped forward again, and once more the telepathic voice spoke to him.

"We tampered with the secrets of the gods. We intended no evil. It was only that we love perfection, and wished to shape all living things as flawless as our buildings and our gardens. We did not know that it was against the Law . . .

"I was one of those who found the way to change the living cell. We used the unseen force that comes from the Land of the Gods beyond the sky, and we so harnessed it that we could build from the living flesh as the potter builds from the clay. We healed the halt and the maimed, and made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg, and for a time we were as brothers to the gods themselves. I myself, even I, knew the glory of perfection. And then came the reckoning.

"The cell, once made to change, would not stop changing. The growth was slow, and for a while we did not notice it, but when we did it was too late. We were becoming a city of monsters. And the force we had used was worse than useless, for the more we tried to mould the monstrous flesh to its normal shape, the more the stimulated cells grew and grew, until the bodies we labored over were like things of wet mud that flow and change even as you look at them.

"One by one the people of the city destroyed themselves. And those of us who were left realized the judgment of the gods, and our duty. We made all things ready, and let the Red Sea hide us forever from our own kind, and those who should come after.

"Yet we did not destroy our knowledge. Perhaps it was our pride only that forbade us, but we could not bring ourselves to do it. Perhaps other gods, other races wiser than we, can take away the evil and keep only the good. For it is good for all creatures to be, if not perfect, at least strong and sound.

"But heed this warning, whoever you may be that listen. If your gods are jealous, if your people have not the wisdom or the knowledge to succeed where we failed in controlling this force, then touch it not! Or you, and all your people, will become as I."

* * *

The voice stopped. Stark moved back again, and said to Treon incredulously, "And your family would ignore that warning?"

Treon laughed. "They are fools. They are cruel and greedy and very proud. They would say that this was a lie to frighten away intruders, or that human flesh would not be subject to the laws that govern the flesh of reptiles. They would say anything, because they have dreamed this dream too long to be denied."

Stark shuddered and looked at the black door. "The thing ought to be destroyed."

"Yes," said Treon softly.

His eyes were shining, looking into some private dream of his own. He started forward, and when Stark would have gone with him he thrust him back, saying, "No. You have no part in this." He shook his head.

"I have waited," he whispered, almost to himself. "The winds bade me wait, until the day was ripe to fall from the tree of death. I have waited, and at dawn I knew, for the wind said, *Now is the gathering of the fruit at hand.*"

He looked suddenly at Stark, and his eyes had in them a clear sanity, for all their feyness.

"You heard, Stark. 'We made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg'. I will have my hour. I will stand as a man for the little time that is left."

He turned, and Stark made no move to follow. He watched Treon's twisted body recede, white against the red dusk, until it passed the monstrous watcher and came to the black door. The long thin arms reached up and pushed the bar away.

The door swung slowly back. Through the opening Stark glimpsed a chamber that held a structure of crystal rods and discs mounted on a frame of metal, the whole thing glowing and glittering with a restless bluish light that dimmed and brightened as though it echoed some vast pulse-beat. There was other apparatus, intricate banks of tubes and condensers, but this was the heart of it, and the heart was still alive.

Treon passed within and closed the door behind him.

Stark drew back some distance from the door and its guardian, crouched down, and set his back against the wall. He thought about the apparatus. Cosmic rays, perhaps—the unseen force that came

from beyond the sky. Even yet, all their potentialities were not known. But a few luckless spacemen had found that under certain conditions they could do amazing things to human tissue.

It was a line of thought Stark did not like at all. He tried to keep his mind away from Treon entirely. He tried not to think at all. It was dark there in the corridor, and very still, and the shapeless horror sat quiet in the doorway and waited with him. Stark began to shiver, a shallow animal-twitching of the flesh.

He waited. After a while he thought Treon must be dead, but he did not move. He did not wish to go into that room to see.

He waited.

Suddenly he leaped up, cold sweat bursting out all over him. A crash had echoed down the corridor, a clashing of shattered crystal and a high singing note that trailed off into nothing.

The door opened.

A man came out. A man tall and straight and beautiful as an angel, a strong-limbed man with Treon's face, Treon's tragic eyes. And behind him the chamber was dark. The pulsing heart of power had stopped.

The door was shut and barred again. Treon's voice was saying, "There are records left, and much of the apparatus, so that the secret is not lost entirely. Only it is out of reach."

He came to Stark and held out his hand. "Let us fight together, as men. And do not fear. I shall die, long before this body changes." He smiled, the remembered smile that was full of pity for all living things. "I know, for the winds have told me."

Stark took his hand and held it.

"Good," said Treon. "And now lead on, stranger with the fierce eyes. For the prophecy is yours, and the day is yours, and I who have crept about like a snail all my life know little of battles. Lead, and I will follow."

Stark fingered the collar around his neck. "Can you rid me of this?"

Treon nodded. "There are tools and acid in one of the chambers."

He found them, and worked swiftly, and while he worked Stark thought, smiling—and there was no pity in that smile at all.

They came back at last into the temple, and Treon closed the entrance to the catacombs. It was still night, for the square was empty of slaves. Stark found Egil's weapon where it had fallen, on the ledge where Egil died.

"We must hurry," said Stark. "Come on."

XI

The island was shrouded heavily in mist and the blue darkness of the night. Stark and Treon crept silently among the rocks until they could see the glimmer of torchlight through the window-slits of the power station.

There were seven guards, five inside the blockhouse, two outside to patrol.

When they were close enough, Stark slipped away, going like a shadow, and never a pebble turned under his bare foot. Presently he found a spot to his liking and crouched down. A sentry went by not three feet away, yawning and looking hopefully at the sky for the first signs of dawn. Treon's voice rang out, the sweet unmistakable voice. "Ho, there, guards!"

The sentry stopped and whirled around. Off around the curve of the stone wall someone began to run, his sandals thud-thudding on the soft ground, and the second guard came up.

"Who speaks?" one demanded. "The Lord Treon?"

They peered into the darkness, and Treon answered, "Yes." He had come forward far enough so that they could make out the pale blur of his face, keeping his body out of sight among the rocks and the shrubs that sprang up between them.

"Make haste," he ordered. "Bid them open the door, there." He spoke in breathless jerks, as though spent. "A tragedy—a disaster! Bid them open!"

One of the men leaped to obey, hammering on the massive door that was kept barred from the inside. The other stood goggle-eyed, watching. Then the door opened, spilling a flood of yellow torchlight into the red fog.

"What is it?" cried the men inside. "What has happened?"

"Come out!" gasped Treon. "My cousin is dead, the Lord Egil is dead, murdered by a slave."

He let that sink in. Three or more men came outside into the circle of light, and their faces were frightened, as though somehow they feared they might be held responsible for this thing.

"You know him," said Treon. "The great black-haired one from Earth. He has slain the Lord Egil and got away into the forest, and we need all extra guards to go after him, since many must be left to guard the other slaves, who are mutinous. You, and you—" He picked out the four biggest ones. "Go at once and join the search. I will stay here with the others."

It nearly worked. The four took a hesitant step or two, and then one paused and said doubtfully, "But, my lord, it is forbidden that we leave our posts, for any reason. Any reason at all, my lord! The Lord Cond would slay us if we left this place."

"And you fear the Lord Cond more than you do me," said Treon philosophically. "Ah, well. I understand."

He stepped out, full into the light.

A gasp went up, and then a startled yell. The three men from inside had come out armed only with swords, but the two sentries had their shock-weapons. One of them shrieked, "It is a demon, who speaks with Treon's voice!"

And the two black weapons started up.

Behind them, Stark fired two silent bolts in quick succession, and the men fell, safely out of the way for hours. Then he leaped for the door.

He collided with two men who were doing the same thing. The third had turned to hold Treon off with his sword until they were safely inside.

Seeing that Treon, who was unarmed, was in danger of being spitted on the man's point, Stark fired between the two lunging bodies as he fell, and brought the guard down. Then he was involved in a thrashing tangle of arms and legs, and a lucky blow jarred the shock-weapon out of his hand.

Treon added himself to the fray. Pleasuring in his new strength, he caught one man by the neck and pulled him off. The guards were big men, and powerful, and they fought desperately. Stark was bruised and bleeding from a cut mouth before he could get in a finishing blow.

Someone rushed past him into the doorway. Treon yelled. Out of the tail of his eyes Stark saw the Lhari sitting dazed on the ground. The door was closing.

Stark hunched up his shoulders and sprang.

* * *

He hit the heavy panel with a jar that nearly knocked him breathless. It slammed open, and there was a cry of pain and the sound of someone falling. Stark burst through, to find the last of the guards rolling every which way over the floor. But one rolled over onto his feet again, drawing his sword as he rose. He had not had time before.

Stark continued his rush without stopping. He plunged headlong into the man before the point was clear of the scabbard, bore him over and down, and finished the man off with savage efficiency.

He leaped to his feet, breathing hard, spitting blood out of his mouth, and looked around the control room. But the others had fled, obviously to raise the warning.

The mechanism was simple. It was contained in a large black metal oblong about the size and shape of a coffin, equipped with grids and lenses and dials. It hummed softly to itself, but what its source of power was Stark did not know. Perhaps those same cosmic rays, harnessed to a different use.

He closed what seemed to be a master switch, and the humming stopped, and the flickering light died out of the lenses. He picked up the slain guard's sword and carefully wrecked everything that was breakable. Then he went outside again.

Treon was standing up, shaking his head. He smiled ruefully.

"It seems that strength alone is not enough," he said. "One must have skill as well."

"The barriers are down," said Stark. "The way is clear."

Treon nodded, and went with him back into the sea. This time both carried shock weapons taken from the guards—six in all, with Egil's. Total armament for war.

As they forged swiftly through the red depths, Stark asked, "What of the people of Shuruun? How will they fight?"

Treon answered, "Those of Malthor's breed will stand for the Lhari. They must, for all their hope is there. The others will wait, until they see which side is safest. They would rise against the Lhari if they dared, for we have brought them only fear in their lifetimes. But they will wait, and see."

Stark nodded. He did not speak again.

They passed over the brooding city, and Stark thought of Egil and of Malthor who were part of that silence now, drifting slowly through the empty streets where the little currents took them wrapped in their shrouds of dim fire.

He thought of Zareth sleeping in the hall of kings, and his eyes held a cold, cruel light.

They swooped down over the slave barracks. Treon remained on watch outside. Stark went in, taking with him the extra weapons.

The slaves still slept. Some of them dreamed, and moaned in their dreaming, and others might have been dead, with their hollow faces white as skulls.

Slaves. One hundred and four, counting the women.

Stark shouted out to them, and they woke, starting up on their pallets, their eyes full of terror. Then they saw who it was that called them, standing collarless and armed, and there was a great surging and a clamor that stilled as Stark shouted again, demanding silence. This time Helvi's voice echoed his. The tall barbarian had wakened from his drugged sleep.

Stark told them, very briefly, all that happened.

"You are freed from the collar," he said. "This day you can survive or die as men, and not slaves." He paused, then asked, "Who will go with me into Shuruun?"

They answered with one voice, the voice of the Lost Ones, who saw the red pall of death begin to lift from over them. The Lost Ones, who had found hope again.

Stark laughed. He was happy. He gave the extra weapons to Helvi and three others that he chose, and Helvi looked into his eyes and laughed too.

Treon spoke from the open door. "They are coming!"

* * *

Stark gave Helvi quick instructions and darted out, taking with him one of the other men. With Treon, they hid among the shrubbery of the garden that was outside the hall, patterned and beautiful, swaying its lifeless brilliance in the lazy drifts of fire.

The guards came. Twenty of them, tall armed men, to turn out the slaves for another period of labor, dragging the useless stones.

And the hidden weapons spoke with their silent tongues.

Eight of the guards fell inside the hall. Nine of them went down outside. Ten of the slaves died with blazing collars before the remaining three were overcome.

Now there were twenty swords among ninety-four slaves, counting the women.

They left the city and rose up over the dreaming forest, a flight of white ghosts with flames in their hair, coming back from the red dusk and the silence to find the light again.

Light, and vengeance.

The first pale glimmer of dawn was sifting through the clouds as they came up among the rocks below the castle of the Lhari. Stark left them and went like a shadow up the tumbled cliffs to where he had hidden his gun on the night he had first come to Shuruun. Nothing stirred. The fog lifted up from the sea like a vapor of blood, and the face of Venus was still dark. Only the high clouds were touched with pearl.

Stark returned to the others. He gave one of his shock-weapons to a swamp-lander with a cold madness in his eyes. Then he spoke a few final words to Helvi and went back with Treon under the surface of the sea.

Treon led the way. He went along the face of the submerged cliff, and presently he touched Stark's arm and pointed to where a round mouth opened in the rock.

"It was made long ago," said Treon, "so that the Lhari and their slavers might come and go and not be seen. Come—and be very quiet."

They swam into the tunnel mouth, and down the dark way that lay beyond, until the lift of the floor brought them out of the sea. Then they felt their way silently along, stopping now and again to listen.

Surprise was their only hope. Treon had said that with the two of them they might succeed. More men would surely be discovered, and meet a swift end at the hands of the guards.

Stark hoped Treon was right.

They came to a blank wall of dressed stone. Treon leaned his weight against one side, and a great block swung slowly around on a central pivot. Guttering torchlight came through the crack. By it Stark could see that the room beyond was empty.

They stepped through, and as they did so a servant in bright silks came yawning into the room with a fresh torch to replace the one that was dying.

He stopped in mid-step, his eyes widening. He dropped the torch. His mouth opened to shape a scream, but no sound came, and Stark remembered that these servants were tongueless—to prevent them from telling what they saw or heard in the castle, Treon said.

The man spun about and fled, down a long dim-lit hall. Stark ran him down without effort. He struck once with the barrel of his gun, and the man fell and was still.

Treon came up. His face had a look almost of exaltation, a queer shining of the eyes that made Stark shiver. He led on, through a series of empty rooms, all somber black, and they met no one else for a while.

He stopped at last before a small door of burnished gold. He looked at Stark once, and nodded, and thrust the panels open and stepped through.

XII

They stood inside the vast echoing hall that stretched away into darkness until it seemed there was no end to it. The cluster of silver lamps burned as before, and within their circle of radiance the Lhari started up from their places and stared at the strangers who had come in through their private door.

Cond, and Arel with her hands idle in her lap. Bor, pummeling the little dragon to make it hiss and snap, laughing at its impotence. Varra, stroking the winged creature on her wrist, testing with her white finger the sharpness of its beak. And the old woman, with a scrap of fat meat halfway to her mouth.

They had stopped, frozen, in the midst of these actions. And Treon walked slowly into the light.

"Do you know me?" he said.

A strange shivering ran through them. Now, as before, the old woman spoke first, her eyes glittering with a look as rapacious as her appetite.

"You are Treon," she said, and her whole vast body shook.

The name went crying and whispering off around the dark walls, *Treon! Treon! Treon!* Cond leaped forward, touching his cousin's straight strong body with hands that trembled.

"You have found it," he said. "The secret."

"Yes." Treon lifted his silver head and laughed, a beautiful ringing bell-note that sang from the echoing corners. "I found it, and it's gone, smashed, beyond your reach forever. Egil is dead, and the day of the Lhari is done."

There was a long, long silence, and then the old woman whispered, "*You lie!*"

Treon turned to Stark.

"Ask him, the stranger who came bearing doom upon his forehead. Ask him if I lie."

Cond's face became something less than human. He made a queer crazed sound and flung himself at Treon's throat.

Bor screamed suddenly. He alone was not much concerned with the finding or the losing of the secret, and he alone seemed to realize the significance of Stark's presence. He screamed, looking at the big dark man, and went rushing off down the hall, crying for the guard as he went, and the echoes roared and racketed. He fought open the great doors and ran out, and as he did so the sound of fighting came through from the compound.

The slaves, with their swords and clubs, with their stones and shards of rock, had come over the wall from the cliffs.

Stark had moved forward, but Treon did not need his help. He had got his hands around Cond's throat, and he was smiling. Stark did not disturb him.

The old woman was talking, cursing, commanding, choking on her own apoplectic breath. Arel began to laugh. She did not move, and her hands remained limp and open in her lap. She laughed and laughed, and Varra looked at Stark and hated him.

"You're a fool, wild man," she said. "You would not take what I offered you, so you shall have nothing—only death."

She slipped the hood from her creature and set it straight at Stark. Then she drew a knife from her girdle and plunged it into Treon's side.

* * *

Treon reeled back. His grip loosened and Cond tore away, half throttled, raging, his mouth flecked with foam. He drew his short sword and staggered in upon Treon.

Furious wings beat and thundered around Stark's head, and talons were clawing for his eyes. He reached up with his left hand and caught the brute by one leg and held it. Not long, but long enough to get one clear shot at Cond that dropped him in his tracks. Then he snapped the falcon's neck.

He flung the creature at Varra's feet, and picked up the gun again. The guards were rushing into the hall now at the lower end, and he began to fire at them.

Treon was sitting on the floor. Blood was coming in a steady trickle from his side, but he had the shock-weapon in his hands, and he was still smiling.

There was a great boiling roar of noise from outside. Men were fighting there, killing, dying, screaming their triumph or their pain. The echoes raged within the hall, and the noise of Stark's gun was like a hissing thunder. The guards, armed only with swords, went down like ripe wheat before the sickle, but there were many of them, too many for Stark and Treon to hold for long.

The old woman shrieked and shrieked, and was suddenly still.

Helvi burst in through the press, with a knot of collared slaves. The fight dissolved into a whirling chaos. Stark threw his gun away. He was afraid now of hitting his own men. He caught up a sword from a fallen guard and began to hew his way to the barbarian.

Suddenly Treon cried his name. He leaped aside, away from the man he was fighting, and saw Varra fall with the dagger still in her hand. She had come up behind him to stab, and Treon had seen and pressed the trigger stud just in time.

For the first time, there were tears in Treon's eyes.

A sort of sickness came over Stark. There was something horrible in this spectacle of a family destroying itself. He was too much the savage to be sentimental over Varra, but all the same he could not bear to look at Treon for a while.

Presently he found himself back to back with Helvi, and as they swung their swords—the shock weapons had been discarded for the same reason as Stark's gun—Helvi panted, "It has been a good fight, my brother! We cannot win, but we can have a good death, which is better than slavery!"

It looked as though Helvi was right. The slaves, unfortunately, weakened by their long confinement, worn out by overwork, were being beaten back. The tide turned, and Stark was swept with it out into the compound, fighting stubbornly.

The great gate stood open. Beyond it stood the people of Shuruun, watching, hanging back—as Treon had said, they would wait and see.

In the forefront, leaning on his stick, stood Larrabee the Earthman.

Stark cut his way free of the press. He leaped up onto the wall and stood there, breathing hard, sweating, bloody, with a dripping sword in his hand. He waved it, shouting down to the men of Shuruun.

"What are you waiting for, you scuts, you women? The Lhari are dead, the Lost Ones are freed—must we of Earth do all your work for you?"

And he looked straight at Larrabee.

Larrabee stared back, his dark suffering eyes full of a bitter mirth. "Oh, well," he said in English. "Why not?"

He threw back his head and laughed, and the bitterness was gone. He voiced a high, shrill rebel yell and lifted his stick like a cudgel, limping toward the gate, and the men of Shuruun gave tongue and followed him.

After that, it was soon over.

* * *

They found Bor's body in the stable pens, where he had fled to hide when the fighting started. The dragons, maddened by the smell of the blood, had slain him very quickly.

Helvi had come through alive, and Larrabee, who had kept himself carefully out of harm's way after he had started the men of Shuruun on their attack. Nearly half the slaves were dead, and the rest wounded. Of those who had served the Lhari, few were left.

Stark went back into the great hall. He walked slowly, for he was very weary, and where he set his foot there was a bloody print, and his arms were red to the elbows, and his breast was splashed with the redness. Treon watched him come, and smiled, nodding.

"It is as I said. And I have outlived them all."

Arel had stopped laughing at last. She had made no move to run away, and the tide of battle had rolled over her and drowned her unaware. The old woman lay still, a mountain of inert flesh upon her bed. Her hand still clutched a ripe fruit, clutched convulsively in the moment of death, the red juice dripping through her ringers.

"Now I am going, too," said Treon, "and I am well content. With me goes the last of our rotten blood, and Venus will be the cleaner for it. Bury my body deep, stranger with the fierce eyes. I would not have it looked on after this."

He sighed and fell forward.

Bor's little dragon crept whimpering out from its hiding place under the old woman's bed and scurried away down the hall, trailing its dragging rope.

* * *

Stark leaned on the afloat, watching the dark mass of Shuruun recede into the red mists.

The decks were crowded with the outland slaves, going home. The Lhari were gone, the Lost Ones freed forever, and Shuruun was now only another port on the Red Sea. Its people would still be wolf's-heads and pirates, but that was natural and as it should be. The black evil was gone.

Stark was glad to see the last of it. He would be glad also to see the last of the Red Sea.

The offshore wind set the ship briskly down the gulf. Stark thought of Larrabee, left behind with his dreams of winter snows and city streets and women with dainty feet. It seemed that he had lived too long in Shuruun, and had lost the courage to leave it.

"Poor Larrabee," he said to Helvi, who was standing near him. "He'll die in the mud, still cursing it."

Someone laughed behind him. He heard a limping step on the deck and turned to see Larrabee coming toward him.

"Changed my mind at the last minute," Larrabee said. "I've been below, lest I should see my muddy brats and be tempted to change it again." He leaned beside Stark, shaking his head. "Ah, well, they'll do nicely without me. I'm an old man, and I've a right to choose my own place to die in. I'm going back to Earth, with you."

Stark glanced at him. "I'm not going to Earth."

Larrabee sighed. "No. No, I suppose you're not. After all, you're no Earthman, really, except for an accident of blood. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Away from Venus, but I don't know yet where."

Larrabee's dark eyes surveyed him shrewdly. "'A restless, cold-eyed tiger of a man', that's what Varra said. He's lost something, she said. He'll look for it all his life, and never find it."

After that there was silence. The red fog wrapped them, and the wind rose and sent them scudding before it.

Then, faint and far off, there came a moaning wail, a sound like broken chanting that turned Stark's flesh cold.

All on board heard it. They listened, utterly silent, their eyes wide, and somewhere a woman began to weep.

Stark shook himself. "It's only the wind," he said roughly, "in the rocks by the strait."

The sound rose and fell, weary, infinitely mournful, and the part of Stark that was N'Chaka said that he lied. It was not the wind that keened so sadly through the mists. It was the voices of the Lost Ones who were forever lost—Zareth, sleeping in the hall of kings, and all the others who would never leave the

dreaming city and the forest, never find the light again.

Stark shivered, and turned away, watching the leaping fires of the strait sweep toward them.

"THE LAKE OF THE GONE FOREVER"

Leigh Brackett

Chapter I: Landing on Iskar

IN his cabin aboard the spaceship *Rohan*, Rand Conway slept—and dreamed.

He stood in a narrow valley. On both sides the cliffs of ice rose up, sheer and high and infinitely beautiful, out of the powdery snow. The darkling air was full of whirling motes of frost, like the dust of diamonds, and overhead the shining pinnacles stood clear against a sky of deepest indigo, spangled with great stars.

As always the place was utterly strange to Conway and yet, somehow, not strange at all. He began to walk forward through the drifting snow and he seemed almost to know what he was seeking around the bend of the valley.

Fear came upon him then but he could not stop.

And as always in that icy place his dead father stood waiting. He stood just as he had years ago, on the night he died, and he spoke slowly and sadly the words he had spoken then to his uncomprehending small son.

"I can never go back to Iskar, to the Lake of the Gone Forever."

Tears dropped slowly from under the closed lids of his eyes and the echo went to and fro between the cliffs, saying, ". . . Lake of the Gone Forever . . . Gone Forever . . ."

Conway crept on, trembling. Above him the golden stars wheeled in the dark blue sky and the beauty of them was evil and the shimmering turrets of the ice were full of lurking laughter.

He passed into the shadows under the sheathed rocks that hid the end of the valley and as he did so the dead man cried out in a voice of agony, "I can never to back to Iskar!"

And the cliffs caught up the name and shouted it thunderously through the dream.

Iskar! Iskar!

Rand Conway started up in his bunk, wide awake, shaken and sweating as always by the strangeness of that vision. Then his hands closed hard on the edge of the bunk and he laughed.

"You couldn't go back," he whispered to the man dead twenty years. "But I'm going. By heaven, I'm going, at last!"

It seemed to him that the very fabric of the ship murmured the name as it rushed on into deep space, that the humming machines purred it, that the thundering jets bellowed it.

Iskar! Iskar!

A savage triumph rose in Conway. So many times he had awakened from that dream to hopelessness—the hopelessness of ever reaching his goal. So many times, in these years of hard dangerous spaceman's toil, the lost little world that meant power and riches had seemed remote beyond attainment.

But he had hung on, too stubborn ever quite to give up. He had waited and planned and hoped until finally he had made his chance. And he was on his way now to the place that his father had lost and never regained.

"Iskar!"

* * *

Conway started up, his face swiftly losing its brooding look. That wasn't just an echo of his dream. Someone was shouting the name outside his cabin door. "Conway! Rand Conway! We've sighted *Iskar!*"

Of course! Why else would the jets be thundering? He had been half asleep still, not to know it at once. He sprang up and crossed the dimly-lighted cabin, a tall man, very lean and hard, yet with a certain odd grace about him, a certain beauty in the modeling of his bones. His eyes, of a color somewhere between grey and blue, were brilliant with excitement and full of a wolfish hunger.

He flung open the door. The glare from the corridor set him to blinking painfully—an inherited sensitivity to light was his one weakness and he had often cursed his father for passing it on to him. Through a dancing haze he saw Peter Esmond's mild good-looking face, as excited as his own.

Esmond said something, but Conway neither heard it nor cared what it was. He pushed past him and went with long strides down the passage and up the ladder to the observation bridge.

It was dark up there under the huge port. Immediately everything came clear to his vision—the blue-black sky of the Asteroid Belt, full of flashing golden stars where the little worlds caught the light of the distant Sun.

And ahead, dead ahead, he saw the tiny misty globe that was Iskar.

He stood for a long time, staring at it, and he neither moved nor spoke except that a deep trembling ran through him.

Close beside him he heard Charles Rohan's deep voice. "Well, there's the new world. Quite a thrill, eh?"

Instantly Conway was on his guard. Rohan was no fool. A man does not make forty million dollars by being a fool and it was going to be hard enough to get away with this without tipping his hand to Rohan now.

Inwardly he cursed, not Rohan, but his daughter Marcia.

It was she who had talked her father into going along to see about opening up trade with Iskar. Rohan controlled the lion's share of trade with the Jovian Moons and the idea was logical enough. Marcia's interest, naturally, was not financial. It was simply that she could not bear to be parted from Esmond and there was no other way for her to go with him.

Conway glanced at Marcia, who was standing with her arm around her fiancé. A nice girl. A pretty girl. Ordinarily he would have liked her. But she didn't belong here and neither did Rohan—not for Conway's purposes.

Esmond alone he could have handled easily. Esmond was the Compleat Ethnologist to his fingertips. As long as he had a brand-new race to study and catalogue he would neither know nor care what other treasures a world might hold.

Now that he looked back on it the whole chain of circumstances seemed flimsy and unsure to Conway—his meeting with Esmond on a deep-space flight from Jupiter, the sudden inspiration when he learned of Esmond's connection with the Rohans, the carefully casual campaign to get the ethnologist interested in the unknown people of Iskar, the final business of producing his father's fragmentary notes to drive Esmond quite mad with longing to see this inhabited world that only one other Earthman had ever seen.

Esmond to Marcia Rohan, Marcia to her father—and now here they were. Esmond was going to get a Fellowship in the Interplanetary Society of Ethnologists and Rand Conway was going to get what he had lusted for ever since he had stumbled upon his father's notes and read in them the story of what lay in the Lake of the Gone Forever, waiting to be picked up by the first strong pair of hands.

That portion of the notes he had never shown to anyone.

Here they were, plunging out of the sky toward Iskar, and it had all been so easy—too easy. Conway was a spaceman and therefore superstitious, whether he liked it or not. He had a sudden feeling that he was going to have to pay for that easiness before he got through.

* * *

Esmond had pressed forward in the cramped space, staring raptly out at the distant glittering of silver light that was Iskar.

"I wonder what they're like?" he said as he had said a million times before. Marcia smiled. "You'll soon know," she answered. "It *is* odd," said Rohan, "that your father didn't tell more about the people of Iskar, Conway. His notes were strangely fragmentary—almost as though he had written much more and then destroyed it."

Conway tried to detect an edge of suspicion in Rohan's voice, but could not.

"Perhaps he did," said Conway. "I never could find any more."

With that one exception it was the truth. Marcia's face was thoughtful and a little sad, in the dim glow of that outer sky.

"I've read those notes over and over again," she said. "I think you're right, Dad. I think Mr. Conway

wrote his whole heart into those notes and then destroyed them because he couldn't bear to have them read, even by his son."

She put a sympathetic hand on Conway's arm. "I can understand your wanting to know, Rand. I hope you'll find your answer."

"Thanks," said Conway gravely.

He had had to account for his own interest in Iskar and he had been able to do that too without lying except by omission. The story of his father was true enough—the dark brooding man, broken in health and spirit, living alone with a child and a dream. He had died before Rand was ten, by his own hand and with the name of Iskar on his lips. *I can never go back, to the Lake of the Gone Forever!*

Conway himself had never doubted what his father's secret tragedy was. He had found a fortune on Iskar and had not been able to go back to claim it. That was enough to drive any man mad.

But it was easy, out of his childhood memories and those strangely incoherent notes, to build a romantic mystery around the lonely prospector's discovery of an unknown world and his subsequent haunted death. Marcia had found it all fascinating and did not doubt for a moment Conway's statement that he was seeking to solve that mystery which, he said, had overshadowed his whole life.

And it had. Waking or sleeping, Rand Conway could not forget Iskar and the Lake of the Gone Forever.

He watched the misty globe grow larger in the sky ahead, and the beating of his heart was a painful thing. Already his hands ached with longing to close around Iskar and wring from it the power and the wealth that would repay him for all the bitter years of waiting.

He thought of his dream. It was always unpleasantly vivid, and remained with him for hours after he woke. But this time it was different. He thought of the vision of his father, standing in the crystal valley, alone with his dark sorrow, and he said to the vision, *You should have waited. You should have had the courage to wait, like me.*

For the first time he was not sorry for his father.

Then he forgot his father. He forgot time and Esmond and the Rohans. He forgot everything but Iskar.

The *Rohan* shuddered rhythmically to the brake-blasts. Iskar filled the port, producing a skyline of shimmering pinnacles so like his dream that Conway shuddered too in spite of himself.

The pinnacles shot up swiftly into a wall of ice and the *Rohan* swept in to a landing.

Chapter II: The White City

The spaceship lay like a vast black whale, stranded on a spotless floe. Behind it the ice-wall rose, its upper spires carved by the wind into delicate fantastic shapes. Spreading away from it to the short curve of the horizon was a sloping plain of snow, broken here and there by gleaming tors. In the distance other ranges lifted sharply against the deep dark blue of the sky.

Rand Conway stood apart from the others. His face had a strange look. He slipped the warm hood back, lifting his head in the icy wind.

Great golden stars wheeled overhead and the air was full of dancing motes of frost. The wind played with the powdery snow, whirling it up into shining veils, smoothing it again into curious patterns of ripples.

The pain, the sky, the frozen spires, had a wondrous beauty of color, infinitely soft and subtle. There was no glare here to plague Conway's eyes. Iskar glimmered in a sort of misty twilight, like the twilight of a dream.

Iskar—the bulk of it solid under his feet at last after all these years. Conway trembled and found it difficult to breathe. His eyes, black and luminous as a cat's now with the expansion of the pupils, glistened with a hard light. *Iskar!*

Quite suddenly he was afraid.

Fear rushed at him out of the narrow valleys, down from the singing peaks. It came in the wind and rose up from the snow under his feet. It wrapped him in a freezing shroud and for a moment reality slipped away from him and he was lost.

The shadows were deep under the icy cliffs and the mouths of the valleys were black and full of whispers. It seemed to him that the lurking terror of his dream was very close, close and waiting.

He must have made some sound or sign, for Marcia Rohan came to him and took him by the arm.

"Rand," she said. "Rand, what is it?"

He caught hold of her. In a moment everything was normal again and he was able to force what might pass for a laugh.

"I don't know," he said. "Something came to me just then." He could not tell her about the dream. He told her instead what he knew must be the cause of it.

"My father must have told me something about this place when I was a child, something I can't remember. Something ugly. I—" He paused and then plunged on.

"I thought for a moment that I had been here before, that I knew . . ."

He stopped. The shadow was gone now. To the devil with dreams and subconscious memories. The reality was all that mattered—the reality that was going to make Rand Conway richer than the Rohans. He stared away across the plain. For a moment his face was unguarded and Marcia was startled by the brief cruel look of triumph that crossed it.

The others came up, Rohan and young Esmond and Captain Frazer, the well-fed but very competent skipper of the *Rohan*. They were all shivering slightly in spite of their warm coveralls. Esmond looked at Conway, who was still bare-headed.

"You'll freeze your ears off," he said.

Conway laughed, not without a faint edge of contempt. "If you had kicked around in deep space as many years as I have you wouldn't be bothered by a little cold."

He pointed off to where the distant ranges were, across the plain.

"According to my father's maps, the village, or what have you, lies between those ranges."

"I think," said Marcia, "that we had better break out the sledges and go before Peter bursts something."

Esmond laughed. He was obviously trembling with eagerness.

"I hope nothing's happened to them," he said. "I mean, since your father was here. You know—famine, plague or anything."

"I imagine they're a pretty hardy lot," said Rohan, "or they couldn't have survived at all in this godforsaken place." He turned to Frazer, laughing. "For heaven's sake, get the sledges."

* * *

Frazer nodded. The crew had come tumbling out and were rollicking like schoolboys in the snow, glad to be released from the long confinement of the voyage. The Second Officer and the engineer were coming up and Frazer went to meet them. The Second turned back to round up his men.

The sledges came presently out of the cargo hatch. There were three of the light plastic hulls—two to carry the exploring party, one to be left with the ship in case of emergency. They were fully equipped, including radio and the efficient Samson riot guns, firing shells of anesthetic gas.

Rohan looked at his daughter. "I want you to stay here, Marcia."

The girl must have been expecting that, Conway thought, because her only reaction was to set her jaw so that she looked ridiculously like her father—smaller and prettier but even more stubborn.

"No," said Marcia,

Esmond said, "Please, darling. These people may not be friendly at first. You can go next time."

"No," said Marcia.

"Marcia," said Rohan pleasantly. "I don't want any foolishness about this. Go with Frazer, back to the ship."

Marcia studied him. Then she turned and kissed Esmond lightly on the cheek and said, "Good luck, darling." She went off with Frazer. Conway saw that there were tears in her eyes. He warmed to Marcia. She hadn't been trying to show off. She just wanted to be with Esmond in case anything happened.

Rohan said, "I guess we might as well go."

They climbed in, six men to a sledge, all burly space-hands with the exception of Rohan and the ethnologist and Conway, who had sweated his way up from the ranks to Master Pilot.

The small jets hissed, roared and settled down to a steady thrumming. The sledges shot out across the trackless plain like two small boats on a white sea, throwing up waves of snowy spray.

Conway was in the leading sledge. He leaned forward like a leashed hound, impatient to be slipped. Part

of him was mad with excitement and another part, completely cool and detached, was making plans.

The spaceship began to grow smaller. Almost imperceptibly the gleaming pinnacles of ice lengthened into the sky.

Presently the pace of the sledges grew slower and slower still. Tors, half rock, half ice, rose up out of the snow and here and there a reef, mailed and capped with the shining armor, was scoured clear by the wind. The man at the controls thrust his head forward, squinting.

"What's the matter?" asked Conway. "Why the delay?"

The man said irritably, "I'm afraid of ramming into something, sir. It's so bloody dark and shadowy, I can't see."

"Is that all!" Conway laughed and shoved him aside. "Here—let an owl do it."

He took the controls and sent the sledge spinning ahead. Every reef and tor, every ripple in the snow, was as clear to him as it would have been to most men in broad daylight. He laughed again.

"I'm beginning to like Iskar," he said to Rohan. "I think I'll start a colony for people with hemeralopia, and we can all be as happy as bats in the dark. My father must have loved it here."

Rohan glanced up at him. Conway had forgotten to put his hood back up. The wind was whipping an icy gale through his hair and there was rime on his lashes. He seemed to be enjoying it. Rohan shivered.

"I'm nyctalopic myself," he said. "I'll stick to plenty of sunlight—*and* heat!"

Esmond did not bother to listen to either one of them. His dream was as strong as Conway's and at this moment he had room for nothing else.

The sledges rushed on across the plain, the one following the tiny jet-flares of the other. The spaceship was lost in the white distance behind them. Ahead the twin ranges grew against the stars. Nothing stirred but the wind. It was very lovely, very peaceful, Conway thought. A cold, sweet jewel of a world.

The words sang in his ears, the words that had themed his father's death and run through his own life as a promise and a challenge. "The Lake of the Gone Forever—Gone Forever . . ."

He had long ago ceased to wonder what that name meant. Only in his nightmare dream did it have the power to frighten him. He wanted what was there and nothing else mattered.

The Lake of the Gone Forever. Soon—soon—soon!

Yet it seemed a very long time to Conway before they entered the broad defile between the twin ranges.

He was forced to slow his breakneck pace because here the ground was broken and treacherous. Finally he stopped altogether.

"We'll have to go on foot from here," he said.

* * *

In a fever of impatience he waited while the men climbed out, shouldering the Samson guns. They left two

to guard the sledges and went on, scrambling in single file over the tumbled rocks. The wind howled between the mountain walls so that the air was blind with snow. There was no sight of the city.

Conway was in the lead. He was like a man driven by fiends. Where the others slipped and stumbled he went over the rough ground like a cat, swift and surefooted even among the deceptive drifts. Several times he was forced to stop and wait lest he leave the party too far behind.

Suddenly, above the organ notes of the wind, there was another sound.

Conway lifted his head to listen. Clear and sweet and strong he heard the winding of horns from the upper slopes. They echoed away down the valley, calling one to the other with ringing voices that stirred Conway's blood to a wild excitement. He shook the snow out of his hair and plunged on, leaving the rest to follow as best they could.

A jutting shoulder of the mountains loomed before him. The wind blew and the deep-throated horns called and called again across the valley. The blown drifts leaped at him and the icy screes were a challenge to his strength but they could not slow him down. He laughed and went on around the shoulder and saw the white city glittering under the stars.

It spread across the valley floor and up the slopes as though it grew from the frozen earth, a part of it, as enduring as the mountains. At Conway's first glance, it seemed to be built all of ice, its turrets and crenellations glowing with a subtle luminescence in the dusky twilight, fantastically shaped, dusted here and there with snow. From the window openings came a glow of pearly light.

Beyond the city the twin ranges drew in and in until their flanks were parted only by a thin line of shadow, a narrow valley with walls of ice reaching up to the sky.

Conway's heart contracted with a fiery pang.

A narrow valley— *The valley.*

For a moment everything vanished in a roaring darkness. Dream and reality rushed together—his father's notes, his father's dying cry, his own waking visions and fearful wanderings beyond the wall of sleep.

It lies beyond the city, in a narrow place between the mountains—The Lake of the Gone Forever. And I can never go back!

Conway said aloud to the wind and the snow and the crying horns, "But *I* have come back. I have come!"

Exulting, triumphant, he looked again at the city, the white beauty of it, the wind-carved towers bright beneath the golden stars.

It was a strong place, walled and fortified against whatever enemies there might be on this world of Iskar. Conway ran toward it and as he did so the braying of horns rose louder and then was joined by the shrill war-cry of pipes.

They went skirling along the wall and through the snow-mist he saw that men were there above him looking down. The glitter of their spears ran like a broken line of silver from both sides of the great stone gate.

Chapter III: The Fear

Conway's blood leaped hot within him. The pipes set him mad and he flung up his arm and shouted at the men, a long hail. He could see them clearly now. They were tall lean men with bodies tough as rawhide and strong bone in their faces and eyes like the eyes of eagles. They wore the white furs of beasts kilted about them, thrown loosely over their naked shoulders, and they were bareheaded and careless of the cold. Their spears rose up and menaced him.

He stopped. Once again he cried out, a cry as wild and shrill as the martial pipes. Then he stood still, waiting.

Slowly behind him came Rohan and the others. They formed into a sort of knot around him. Some of the men reached nervously for their riot guns and Rohan spoke sharply. The pipes fell silent and the sounding horns. They waited, all of them.

There was movement on the wall and an old man came forward among the warriors, a cragged gnarled old man with a proud face and fierce eyes, standing strong as a granite rock.

He looked down at the alien men below him. His hair and his long beard blew in the bitter wind, and the white furs whipped around him, and for a long time he did not speak. His eyes met Conway's and there was hatred in them and deep pain.

Finally he said, very slowly, as though the words came haltingly from some long-locked vault of memory, "Men of Earth!"

Conway started. It had not occurred to him that his father might have left some knowledge of English behind him.

"Yes," he answered, holding out his empty hands, "Friends."

The old man shook his head. "No. Go, or we kill."

He looked again at Conway, very strangely, and a little chill ran through the Earthman. Was it possible that the old man saw in him some resemblance to the Conway he had known before? He and his father had not looked alike.

Esmond stepped forward. "Please," he said. "We mean you no harm. We only want to talk to you. We will obey you, we will bring no weapons—only let us in!"

He was very like a child pleading, almost on the verge of tears. It was unthinkable that he should be denied now.

The old man said again, "Go!"

Rohan spoke. "We have gifts, many things for your people. We want nothing. We come as friends."

The old man flung up his head and laughed, and his mirth was like vitriol poured on the wind.

"*Friend!* Conna was my friend. In my house, as my own son, lived Conna, my friend!"

He cried out something in his own harsh tongue and Conway knew that it was a curse and he knew that Conna was his own name. They had not forgotten his father on Iskar, it seemed.

He was suddenly angry, more terribly angry than he had ever been in his life. Beyond the city, almost within reach, lay the valley of the Lake and nothing, not all their spears, not death itself, was going to stop now.

He strode up under the wall and looked at the old man with eyes as black and baleful as his own.

"We know nothing of this Conna," he said. "We come in peace. But if you want war we will make war. If you kill us others will come—many others. Our ship is huge and very terrible. Its fire alone can destroy your city. Will you let us in, old man, or must we . . ."

After a long time the other said slowly, "What is your name?"

"Rand," said Conway.

"Rand," repeated the old man softly. "Rand." He was silent for a time, brooding, his chin sunk on his breast. His eyes were hooded and he did not look again at Conway.

Abruptly he turned and issued orders in his own tongue. Then, to the Earthmen, he shouted, "*Enter!*"

The great stone was rolled away.

Conway went back to the others. Both Esmond and Rohan were furious.

"Who gave you the right—" Rohan began, and Esmond broke in passionately, "You shouldn't have threatened them! A little more talk would have convinced them."

Conway looked at them contemptuously.

"You wanted in, didn't you?" he demanded. "All right, the gate's open and they'll think twice about getting tough with us after we're through it"

* * *

He unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it, holster and all, to a man on the wall. It was a gesture and no more because he had hidden a small anesthetic needle-gun under his coverall in case of need—but it would look good to the Iskarians.

"I'd do the same if I were you," he said to the others. "Also, I would send the men back. They're not going to do us any good inside the wall and they might do us harm. Tell them to bring the trade goods and one of the radios from the sledges and then return to the ship—and stand by."

Rohan scowled. He did not like having the command taken from him. But Conway's orders made sense and he relayed them. Then he tossed his own gun to one of the warriors. Esmond did not carry one. The men went away, back to the sledges.

"Remember," said Conway, "you never heard of 'Conna', or his son."

The others nodded. They turned then and went into the city and the stone gate was closed behind them.

The old man was waiting for them, and with him a sort of honor guard of fifteen tall fighting men.

"I am Krah," said the old patriarch. He waited politely until Esmond and Rohan had said their names and then he said, "Come."

The guard formed up. The Earthmen went—half guest, half captive—into the streets of the city.

They were narrow winding streets, rambling up and down over the broken ground. In some places they were scoured clean to the ice by the whistling wind, in others they were choked by drifts. Conway could see now that the buildings were all of solid stone, over which the cold shining mail had formed for centuries, except where the openings were kept clear.

The people of the city were gathered to watch as the strangers went by.

It was a strangely silent crowd. Men, women and children, old and young, all of them as stalwart and handsome as mountain trees, with their wide black pupils and pale hair, the men clad in skins, the women in kirtles of rough woolen cloth. Conway noticed that the women and children did not mingle with the men.

Silent, all of them, and watching. There was something disquieting in their stillness. Then, somewhere, an old woman sent up a keening cry of lament, and another took it up, and another, until the eerie *ochone* echoed through the twisting streets as though the city itself wept in pain.

The men began to close in. Slowly at first, now one stepping forward, now another, like the first pebbles rolling before the rush of the avalanche. Conway's heart began to pound and there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

Esmond cried out to the old man, "Tell them not to fear us! Tell them we are friends!"

Krah looked at him and smiled. His eyes went then to Conway and he smiled again.

"I will tell them!" he said.

"Remember," said Conway harshly. "Remember the great ship and its fires."

Krah nodded. "I will not forget."

He spoke to the people, shouting aloud, and reluctantly the men drew back and rested the butts of their spears on the ground. The women did not cease to wail.

Conway cursed his father for the things he had not written in his notes.

Quite suddenly, out of a steep side lane, a herd boy drove his flock with a scramble and a clatter. The queer white-furred beasts milled in the narrow space, squealing, filling the air with their sharp, not unpleasant odor.

As though that pungency were a trigger, a shutter clicked open somewhere in Conway's mind and he knew that he had seen these streets before, known the sounds and smells of the city, listened to the harsh staccato speech. The golden wheeling of the stars overhead hurt him with a poignant familiarity.

Conway plunged again into that limbo between fact and dream. It was far worse this time. He wanted to sink down and cling to something until his mind steadied again but he did not dare do anything but walk behind the old man as though nothing on Iskar could frighten him.

Yet he was afraid—afraid with the fear of madness, where the dream becomes the reality.

Beads of sweat came out on his face and froze there. He dug his nails into his palms and forced himself to remember his whole life, back to his earliest memory and beyond, when his father must have talked and talked of Iskar, obsessed with the thought of what he had found there and lost again.

He had not spoken so much of Iskar when his son was old enough to understand. But it seemed that the damage was already done. The formative years, the psychologists call them, when the things learned and forgotten will come back to haunt one later on.

Conway was a haunted man, walking through that strange city. And old Krah watched him sidelong and smiled and would not be done with smiling.

The women wailed, howling like she wolves to the dark heavens.

Chapter IV: "Go Ask of Her . . ."

It seemed like centuries to Conway, but it could not have been so long in actual time before Krah stopped beside a doorway and pulled aside the curtain of skins that covered it.

"Enter," he said and the Earthmen filed through, leaving the guard outside, except for five who followed the old man.

"My sons!" said Krah.

All grown men, far older than Conway, and scarred, tough-handed warriors. Yet they behaved toward Krah with the deference of children.

The ground floor of the house was used for storage. Frozen sides of meat and bundles of a dried moss-like stuff occupied one side. On the other was a pen and a block for butchering. Apparently there was no wood on Iskar, for the pen was built of stone and there were no doors, only the heavy curtains.

Krah lifted another one of these, leading the way up a closed stair that served as a sort of airlock to keep out the draughts and the extreme cold of the lower floor. The upper chamber was freezing by any Earthly standards but a small, almost smokeless fire of moss burned on the round hearth and the enormously thick walls were perfect insulation against the wind. Immediately Conway began to sweat, probably from sheer nervousness.

A girl sat by the hearth, tending the spit and the cooking pot. Obviously she had only just run back in from the street, for there was still snow in her silvery hair and her sandals were wet with it.

She did not lift her head when the men came in, as though such happenings were not for her to notice.

Yet Conway caught a sidelong glance of her eyes. In the soft light of the stone lamps her pupils had contracted to show the clear blue iris, and for all her apparent meekness, he saw that her eyes were bright and rebellious and full of spirit. Conway smiled.

She met his gaze fairly for a moment with a curious intensity, as though she would tear away his outer substance and see everything that lay beneath it—his heart, his soul, his innermost thoughts, greedily, all in a minute. Then the old man spoke and she was instantly absorbed in the turning of the spit.

"Sit," said Krah, and the Earthmen sat on heaps of furs spread over cushions of moss.

The five tall sons sat also but Krah remained standing.

"So you know nothing of Conna," he said, and Conna's son answered blandly, "No."

"Then how came you to Iskar?"

Conway shrugged. "How did Conna come? The men of Earth go everywhere." Unconsciously he had slipped into Krah's ceremonial style of phrasing. He leaned forward, smiling.

"My words were harsh when I stood outside your gate. Let them be forgotten, for they were only the words of anger. Forget Conna also. He has nothing to do with us."

"Ah," said the old man softly. "Forget. That is a word I do not know. Anger, yes—and vengeance also. But not forget."

He turned to Rohan and Esmond and spoke to them and answered them courteously while they explained their wishes. But his gaze, frosty blue now in the light, rested broodingly on Conway's face and did not waver. Conway's nerves tightened and tightened and a great unease grew within him.

He could have sworn that Krah knew who he was and why he had come to Iskar.

Reason told him that this was ridiculous. It had been many years since Krah had seen his father and in any case they were physically dissimilar. Nor did it seem likely that he should have preserved intact any of his father's mannerisms.

Yet he could not be sure and the uncertainty preyed upon him. The old man's bitter gaze was hard to bear.

The five sons neither moved nor spoke. Conway was sure that they understood the conversation perfectly and he reflected that, according to Krah, they had lived with Conna as his brothers. They seemed to be waiting, quite patiently, as though they had waited a long time and could afford to wait a little longer.

From time to time the girl stole a secret smoldering look at Conway and in spite of his uneasiness he grew very curious about her, wondering what devil of unrest lurked in her mind. She had a fascinating little face, full of odd lights and shadows where the glow of the fire touched it.

"Trade," said Krah at last. "Friendship. Study. They are good words. Let us eat now, and then rest, and I will think of these good words, which I have heard before from Conna."

"Look here," said Rohan rather testily, "I don't know what Conna did here but I see no reason to

condemn us for his sins."

"We speak the truth," said Esmond gently. He glanced at Conway, waiting for him to ask the question that was his to ask. But Conway could not trust himself and finally Esmond's curiosity drove him to blurt out, "What was Conna's crime?"

The old man turned upon him a slow and heavy look.

"Do not ask of me," he said. "Ask of her who waits, by the Lake of the Gone Forever."

* * *

That name stung Conway's nerves like a whiplash. He was afraid he had betrayed himself but if he started no one seemed to notice. The faces of Esmond and Rohan were honestly blank.

"The Lake of the Gone Forever," Esmond repeated. "What is that?"

"Let there be an end to talk," said Krah.

He turned and spoke to the girl in his own tongue and Conway caught the name Ciel. She rose obediently and began to serve the men, bringing the food on platters of thin carved stone. When she was done she sat down again by the fire and ate her own dinner from what was left, a slim, humble shadow whose eyes were no more humble than the eyes of a young panther. Conway stole her a smile and was rewarded by a brief curving of her red mouth.

When the meal was finished Krah rose and led the Earthmen down a corridor. There were two curtained doorways on each side and beyond them were small windowless cells, with moss and furs heaped soft to make a sleeping place.

Ciel came quietly to light the stone lamps and it seemed to Conway that she took special note of the cubicle he chose for his own.

"Sleep," said Krah, and left them. Ciel vanished down a narrow back stair at the end of the hall.

The Earthmen stood for a moment, looking at each other, and then Conway said sullenly, "Don't ask me any questions because I don't know the answers."

He turned and went into his chamber, dropping the curtain behind him. In a vile mood he sat down on the furs and lighted a cigarette, listening to Rohan's low half-angry voice telling Esmond that he thought Rand was acting very strangely. Esmond answered soothingly that the situation would be a strain on anyone. Presently Conway heard them go to bed. He blew out his lamp.

He sat for quite awhile, in a terrible sweat of nerves, thinking of Krah, thinking of the narrow valley that lay so nearly within his reach, thinking of his father, hating him because of the black memories he had left behind on Iskar, so that now the way was made very hard for his son.

Heaven help him if old Krah ever found out!

He waited for some time after everything was still. Then, very carefully, he lifted the curtain and stepped out into the hall.

He could see into the big main room. Four of Krah's brawny sons slept on the furs by the embers. The

fifth sat cross-legged, his spear across his knees, and he did not sleep.

Conway glanced at the back stair. He was perfectly sure that it led to the women's quarters and that any venturing that way would bring the whole house around his ears. He shrugged and returned to his cell.

Stretched out on the furs he lay frowning into the dark, trying to think. He had not counted on the hatred of the Iskarians for Earthmen. He wondered for the hundredth time what his father had done to make all the women of Iskar wail a dirge when they were reminded of him. *Ask of her who waits, by the Lake of the Gone Forever . . .*

It didn't really matter. All that mattered was that they were under close watch and that it was a long way through the city for an Earthman to go and stay alive, even if he could get away from Krah.

Quite suddenly, he became aware that someone had crept down the hall outside and stopped at his door.

Without making a sound, Conway reached into the breast of his coverall and took hold of the gun that was hidden there. Then he waited.

The curtain moved a little, then a little more, and Conway lay still and breathed like a sleeping man. Faint light seeped in, outlining the widening gap of the curtain, showing clearly to Conway's eyes the figure that stood there, looking in.

Ciel, a little grey mouse in her hodden kirtle, her hair down around her shoulders like a cape of moonbeams. Ciel, the mouse with the wildcat's eyes.

Partly curious to see what she would do, partly afraid that a whisper might attract attention from the other room, Conway lay still, feigning sleep.

For a long moment the girl stood without moving, watching him. He could hear the sound of her breathing, quick and soft. At last she took one swift step forward, then paused, as though her courage had failed her. That was her undoing.

The big man with the spear must have caught some flicker of movement, the swirl of her skirt, perhaps, for she had made no noise. Conway heard a short exclamation from the main room, and Ciel dropped the curtain and ran. A man's heavier footfalls pelted after her.

There was a scuffling at the other end of the hall and some low intense whispering. Conway crept over and pulled the curtain open a crack.

* * *

Krah's son held the girl fast. He seemed to be lecturing her, more in sorrow than in anger, and then, deliberately and without heat, he began to beat her. Ciel bore it without a whimper but her eyes glazed and her face was furious.

Conway stepped silently out into the hall. The man's back was turned, but Ciel saw him. He indicated in pantomime what she should do and she caught the idea at once—or perhaps only the courage to do it.

Twisting like a cat, she set her teeth hard in the arm that held her.

The man let her go from sheer astonishment rather than pain. She fled down the woman-stair and he

stood staring after her, his mouth wide open, as dumbfounded as though the innocent stones he walked on had risen suddenly and attacked him. Conway got the feeling that such a thing had never happened before in the history of Iskar.

He leaned lazily against the wall and said aloud, "What's going on?"

Krah's son turned swiftly and the look of astonishment was replaced instantly by anger.

Conway made a show of yawning, as though he had just waked up. "Was that Ciel you were thrashing? She's a pretty big girl to be spanked." He grinned at the marks on the man's arm. "By the way, who is she—Krah's granddaughter?"

The answer came slowly in stumbling but understandable English.

"Krah's fosterling, daughter of my sister's friend. Ciel drank wickedness with mother's milk—wickedness she learn from my sister, who learn from Conna."

Quite suddenly the big man reached out and took Conway's jacket-collar in a throttling grip. Amazingly there were tears in his eyes and a deep, bitter rage.

"I will warn you, man of Earth," he said softly. "Go—go swiftly while you still live."

He flung Conway from him and turned away, back to the big room to brood again by the fire. And the Earth-man was left to wonder whether the warning was for them all or for himself alone.

Hours later he managed to fall into an uneasy sleep, during which he dreamed again of the icy valley and the hidden terror that waited for him beyond the wall of rock. It seemed closer to him than ever before, so close that he awoke with a strangled cry. The stone cell was like a burial vault, and he left it, in a mood of desperation such as he had never known before. Outside, the wind was rising.

He came into the big room just as Krah entered from the outer stair. Behind him, very white-faced and proud, came Marcia Rohan. Her cheek was bleeding and her lovely dark hair was wet and draggled and her eyes hurt Conway to look at them.

"Marcia!" he cried and she ran to him, clinging with tight hands like a frightened child. He held her, answering her question before she could gasp it out, "Peter's safe," he said. "So is your father. They're quite safe."

Old Krah spoke. There was a strange stony quality about him now, as though he had come to some decision from which nothing could shake him. He looked at Conway.

"Go," he said. "Call your friends."

Chapter V: Warrior of Iskar

Conway went, taking Marcia with him. Rohan came out at once but Esmond was sleeping like the dead. Apparently he had worked for hours by the light of the stone lamp, making notes on the people of Iskar.

Conway wondered, as he shook him awake, whether any of that data was going to get safely back to

Earth. He knew, as certainly as he knew his own name, that their stay here was ended and he did not like the look in Krah's eyes.

"It's nobody's fault," Marcia was saying, over and over. "I couldn't stand it. I didn't know whether you were alive or dead. Your radio didn't answer. I stole a sledge."

"Did you come alone?" asked Rohan.

"Yes."

"My God!" said Esmond softly, and picked her up in his arms. She laid her bleeding cheek against his and sobbed out. "They stoned me, Peter, the women did. The men brought me through the streets and the women stoned me."

Esmond's mild face became perfectly white. His eyes turned cold as the snow outside. He strode down the hall bearing Marcia in his arms, and his very step was stiff with fury. Rohan followed, crowding on his heels.

Old Krah never gave them a chance to speak. His five sons were ranged behind him and there was something very formidable about them, the five tall fair men and the tall old one who was like an ancient dog-wolf, white with years but still leader of the pack.

Krah held up his hand, and the Earthmen stopped. From her place by the fire Conway saw that Ciel was watching, staring with fascinated eyes at the alien woman who had come alone across the snow-fields to stand beside her men. The wind piped loud in the window embrasures, coming down from the high peaks with a rush and a snarl that set Conway's nerves to quivering with a queer excitement.

Krah spoke, looking at Marcia.

"For this I am sorry," he said. "But the woman should not have come." His frosty gaze rose then to take in all of them. "I offer you your lives. Go now—leave the city, leave Iskar and never return. If you do not I cannot save you."

"Why did they stone her?" demanded Esmond. He had one thing on his mind, no room for any other thought.

"Because she is different," said Krah simply, "and they fear her. She wears the garments of a man and she walks among men and these things are against their beliefs. Now, will you go?"

Esmond set the girl on her feet beside him, leaving his arm around her shoulders.

"*We* will go," he said. "And I will kill the first one who touches her."

Krah was gentleman enough to ignore the emptiness of that very sincere threat. He bowed his head.

"That," he said, "is as it should be."

He looked at Rohan.

"Don't worry," Rohan snapped. "We'll leave and may you all go to the devil. This is a fit world for wolves and only wolves live in it!"

He started toward the door with Esmond and his daughter and Krah's eyes turned now to Conway. He asked softly, "And you, man who is called Rand?"

Conway shrugged, as though the whole thing were a matter of no importance to him. "Why should I want to stay?" His hands were shaking so that he thrust them into his pockets to conceal it and little trickles of sweat ran down his back. He nodded toward the window opening.

"There's a white wind blowing, Krah," he said. He drew himself erect, and his voice rose and rang. "It will catch us on the open plain. The woman will surely die and perhaps the rest of us also. Nevertheless we will go. But let it be told through the city that Krah has laid aside his manhood and put on a woman's kirtle, for he has slain by stealth and not by an honest spear!"

There was silence. Esmond stopped and turned in the doorway, the girl held close in the circle of his arm. Rohan stopped also, and their faces showed the shock of this new thought.

Conway's heart beat like a trip-hammer. He was bluffing—with all the resources of the sledge, he thought, their chances of perishing were fairly small, but there was just that germ of truth to pitch it on. He was in agony while he waited to see if the bluff had worked. Once inside the city walls he knew that the Lake was lost to him as it had been to his father.

After what seemed a very long time, Krah sighed and said quietly, "The white wind. Yes. I had forgotten that the Earth stock is so weak."

A subtle change had come over the old man. It was almost as though he too had been waiting tensely for some answer and now it had come. A deep, cold light crept into his eyes and burned there, something almost joyous.

"You may stay," he said, "until the wind drops."

Then he turned sharply and went away down the stair and his sons went with him.

Esmond stared after them and Conway was amused to see the wolfish fury in his round, mild face.

"He would have sent us out to die," said Esmond, as though he wished he could kill Krah on the spot. Danger to Marcia had transformed him from a scientist into a rather primitive man. He turned to Conway.

"Thanks. You were right when you threatened them on the wall. And if anything happens to us I hope Frazer will make them pay for it!"

"Nothing's going to happen," said Conway. "Take Marcia back to the sleeping rooms—it's warmer there and she can lie down." He looked at Ciel and said sharply, "Can you understand me?"

She nodded, rather sullenly.

Conway pointed to Marcia. "Go with her. Bring water, something to put on that cut."

Ciel rose obediently but her eyes watched him slyly as she followed the Earth-folk out and down the hall.

Conway was left quite alone.

* * *

He forced himself to stand still for a moment and think. He forced his head to stop pounding and his hands to stop shaking. He could not force either his elation or his fear to leave him.

His way was clear now, at least for the moment. Why was it clear? Why had Krah gone away and taken his sons with him?

The wind swooped and screamed, lifting the curtains of hide, scattering snow on the floor. The white wind. Conway started. He had this chance. He would never have another.

He turned and went swiftly into the second corridor that opened opposite the one where the others had gone. It too contained four small sleeping rooms. One, however, was twice as large as the others and Conway was sure it belonged to Krah.

He slipped into it, closing the curtain carefully behind him.

All that he needed was there. All that he needed to make possible this one attempt that he could ever make upon the hidden valley of his dream.

He began to strip. The coverall, the thin jersey he wore underneath, the boots—everything that was of Earth. He must go through the city and he could not go as an Earthman. He had realized that there was only one way. He was glad of the white wind, for that would make his deception easier.

It would be cold and dangerous. But he was contemptuous of cold and beyond caring about danger. He was not going to eat his heart out and die, as his father had, because his one chance was lost forever.

In a few minutes Rand Conway was gone and in the stone chamber stood a nameless warrior of Iskar, a tall fair man wrapped in white furs, shod in rough hide boots and carrying a spear.

He retained two things, hidden carefully beneath his girdle—the little gun and a small vial, sheathed and stoppered with lead.

He turned, and Ciel was standing there, staring at him with wide astonished eyes.

She had slipped in so quietly that he had not heard her. And he knew that with one loud cry she could destroy all his plans.

In two swift angry strides he had caught her and put one hand hard over her mouth.

"Why did you come here?" he snarled. "What do you want?"

Her eyes looked up at him, steady and fierce as his own. He said, "Don't cry out or I'll kill you." She shook her head and he took his hand away a little, not trusting her.

In slow painful English she said, "Take me with you."

"Where?"

"To Earth!"

It was Conway's turn to be astonished.

"But why?"

She said vehemently, "Earth-woman proud like man. Free."

So that was the smoldering anger she had in her. She was not patient like the other women of Iskar, for she had had a glimpse of something else. He remembered what Krah's son had said.

"Did Conna teach this?"

She nodded. "You take me?" she demanded. "You take me? I run away from Krah. Hide. You take me?"

Conway smiled. He liked her. They were the same kind, he and she—nursing a hopeless dream and risking everything to make it come true.

"Why not?" he said. "Sure, I'll take you."

Her joy was a savage thing. "If you lie," she whispered, "I kill you!" Then she kissed him.

He could tell it was the first time she had ever kissed a man. He could also tell that it was not going to be the last.

He thrust her away. "You must help me then. Take these." He handed her the bundle of his discarded clothing. "Hide them. Is there a back way from the house?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me. Then wait for me—and talk to no one. *No one*. Understand?"

"Where you go?" she asked him. The look of wonder came back into her eyes, and something of fear. "What you do, man of Iskar?"

He shook his head. "If you don't help me, if I die—you'll never see Earth."

"Come," she said, and turned.

Esmond and Rohan were still with Marcia, still full of their fears and angers—too full to worry about Conway, the outsider. The house of Krah was empty and silent except for the wind that swept through the embrasures with a shriek of laughter, like the laughter of wolves before the kill. Conway shivered, an animal twitching of the skin.

Ciel led him down a little stair and showed him a narrow passage built for the taking of offal from the slaughtering pen—woman's work, unfit for warriors.

"I wait," she said. Her fingers closed hard on the muscles of his arm. "Come back. Come soon!"

Her fear was not for him but for herself, lest now in this last hour her hope of freedom should be snatched away. Conway knew how she felt.

He bent and gave her a quick rough kiss. "I'll come back." Then he lifted the curtain of hide and slipped out into the darkness.

Chapter VI: Echoes of a Dream

The city was alive and vocal with the storm. The narrow streets shouted with it, the icy turrets of the houses quivered and rang. No snow was falling but the thick brown whiteness drove and leaped and whirled, carried across half of Iskar in the rush of the wind. Above the tumult the stars burned clear and steady in the sky.

The cold bit deep into Conway's flesh, iron barbs reaching for his heart. He drew the warm furs closer. His heartbeats quickened. His blood raced, fighting back the cold, and a strange exaltation came over him, something born out of the wild challenge of the wind. His pupils dilated, black and feral as a cat's. He began to walk, moving at a swift pace, setting his feet down surely on the glare ice and the frozen stones.

He knew the direction he must take. He had determined that the first time he saw the city and it was burned into his memory for all time.

The way to the Lake, the Lake of the Gone Forever.

There were not many in the streets and those he passed gave him no second look. The white wind laid a blurring veil over everything and there was nothing about Conway to draw attention, a lean proud-faced man bent against the wind, a solitary warrior on an errand of his own.

Several times he tried to see if he were being followed. He could not forget Krah's face with its look of secret joy, nor cease to wonder uneasily why the old man had so suddenly left the Earthfolk unwatched. But he could see nothing in that howling smother.

He made sure of the little gun and smiled.

He found his way by instinct through the twisting streets, heading always in the same direction. The houses began to thin out. Quite suddenly they were gone and Conway stood in the open valley beyond. High above he could distinguish the shining peaks of the mountains lifting against the stars.

The full sweep of the wind met him here. He faced it squarely, laughing, and went on over the tumbled rocks. The touch of madness that had been in him ever since he reached Iskar grew into an overwhelming thing.

Part of his identity slipped away. The wind and the snow and the bitter rocks were part of him. He knew them and they knew him. They could not harm him. Only the high peaks looked down on him with threatening faces and it seemed to him that they were angry.

He was beginning to hear the echoes of his dream but they were still faint. He was not yet afraid. He was, in some strange way, happy. He had never been more alone and yet he did not feel lonely. Something wild and rough woke within him to meet the wild roughness of the storm and he felt a heady

pride, a certainty that he could stand against any man of Iskar on his own ground.

The city was lost behind him. The valley had him between its white walls vague and formless now, closing in upon him imperceptibly beyond the curtain of the storm. There was a curious timelessness about his journey, almost a spacelessness, as though he existed in a dimension of his own.

* * *

And in that private world of his it did not seem strange nor unfitting that Ciel's voice should cry out thinly against the wind, that he should turn to see her clambering after him, nimble-footed, reckless with haste.

She reached him, spent with running. "Krah," she gasped. "He go ahead with four. One follow. I see. I follow too." She made a quick, sharp gesture that took in the whole valley. "Trap. They catch. They kill. Go back."

Conway did not stir. She shook him, in a passion of urgency. "Go back! Go back now!"

He stood immovable, his head raised, his eyes questing into the storm, seeking the enemies he only half believed were there. And then, deep and strong across the wind, came the baying of a Hunter's horn. It was answered from the other side of the valley. Another spoke, and another, and Conway counted them. Six—Krah and his five sons around and behind him, so that the way back to the city was closed.

Conway began to see the measure of the old man's cunning and he smiled, and animal baring of the teeth.

"You go," he said to Ciel. "They will not harm you."

"What I do they punish," she answered grimly. "No. You must live. They hunt you but I know trails, ways. Go many times to Lake of the Gone Forever. They not kill there. Come!"

She turned but he caught her and would not let her go, full of a quick suspicion.

"Why do you care so much about me?" he demanded. "Esmond or Rohan could take you to Earth as well."

"Against Krah's will?" She laughed. "They are soft men, not like you." Her eyes met his fairly in the gloom, the black pupils wide and lustrous, looking deep into him so that he was strangely stirred. "But there is more," she said. "I never love before. Now I do. And—you are Conna's son."

Conway said, very slowly, "How did you know that?"

"Krah know. I hear him talk."

Then it had been a trap all along, from the beginning. Krah had known. The old man had given him one chance to go from Iskar and he had not taken it—and Krah had been glad. After that he had withdrawn and waited for Conway to come to him.

The girl said, "But I know without hearing. Now come, son of Conna."

She led off, swift as a deer, her skirts kilted above her knees. Conway followed and behind and around them the horns bayed and answered with the eager voices of hounds that have found the scent and will never let it go.

All down the long valley the hunters drove them and the mountain walls narrowed in and in, and the ringing call of the horns came closer. There was a sound of joy in them, and they were without haste. Never once, beyond the white spume of the blowing snow, did Conway catch a glimpse of his pursuers. But he knew without seeing that old Krah's face bore a bleak and bitter smile, the terrible smile of a vengeance long delayed.

Conway knew well where the hunt would end. The horns would cry him into the throat of the cleft, and then they would be silent. He would not be permitted to reach the Lake.

Again he touched the little gun and his face could not have been less savage than Krah's. He was not afraid of spears.

The girl led him swiftly, surely, among the tangled rocks and the spurs of ice, her skirt whipping like a grey flag in the wind. High overhead the cold peaks filled the sky, leaving only a thin rift of stars. And suddenly, as though they were living things, the walls of the valley rushed together upon him, and the shouting of the horns rose to an exultant clamor in his ears, racing, leaping toward him.

He flung up his head and yelled, an angry, defiant cry. Then there was silence, and through the driven veils of snow he saw the shapes of men and the dim glittering of spears.

He would have drawn the gun and loosed its bright spray of instant sleep into the warriors. The drug would keep them quiet long enough for him to do what he had to do. But Ciel gave him no time. She wrenched at him suddenly, pulling him almost bodily into a crack between the rocks.

"Hurry!" she panted. "*Hurry!*"

The rough rock scraped him as he jammed his way through. He could hear voices behind him, loud and angry. It was pitch dark, even to his eyes, but Ciel caught his furs and pulled him along—a twist, a turn, a sharp corner that almost trapped him where her smallness slipped past easily. Then they were free again and he was running beside her, following her urgent breathless voice.

For a few paces he ran and then his steps slowed and dragged at last to a halt. There was no wind here in this sheltered place. There were no clouds of blowing snow to blur his vision.

He stood in a narrow cleft between the mountains. On both sides the cliffs of ice rose up, sheer and high and infinitely beautiful out of the powdery drifts. The darkling air was full of whirling motes of frost, like the dust of diamonds, and overhead the shining pinnacles stood clear against a sky of deepest indigo, spangled with great stars.

He stood in the narrow valley of his dream. And now at last he was afraid.

Truth and nightmare had come together like the indrawn flanks of the mountains and he was caught between them. Awake, aware of the biting cold and the personal sensation of his flesh, still the nameless terror of the dream beset him.

He could almost see the remembered shadow of his father weeping by the sheathed rocks that hid the end of the cleft, almost hear that cry of loss—*I can never go back to the Lake of the Gone Forever!*

He knew that now he was going to see the end of the dream. He would not wake this time before he passed the barrier rocks. The agonizing fear that had no basis in his own life stood naked in his heart and

would not go. He had known, somehow, all his life that this time must come. Now that it was here he found that he could not face it. The formless baseless terror took his strength away and not all his reasoning could help him. He could not go on.

And yet he went, as always, slowly forward through the drifting snow.

He had forgotten Ciel. He was surprised when she caught at him, urging him to run. He had forgotten Krah. He remembered only the despairing words whispered back and forth by the cold lips of the ice. *Gone Forever . . . Gone Forever . . .* He looked up and the golden stars wheeled above him in the dark blue sky. The beauty of them was evil and the shimmering turrets of the ice were full of lurking laughter.

Nightmare—and he walked in it broad awake.

It was not far. The girl dragged him on, drove him, and he obeyed automatically, quickening his slow pace. He did not fight. He knew that it was no use. He went on as a man walks patiently to the gallows.

He passed the barrier rocks. He was not conscious now of movement. In a sort of stasis, cold as the ice, he entered the cave that opened beyond them and looked at last upon the Lake of the Gone Forever.

Chapter VII: Black Lake

It was black, that Lake. Utterly black and very still, lying in its ragged cradle of rock under the arching roof where, finally, the mountains met.

A strange quality of blackness, Conway thought, and shuddered deeply with the hand of nightmare still upon him. He stared into it, and suddenly, as though he had always known, he realized that the lake was like the pupil of a living eye, having no light of its own but receiving into itself all light, all impression.

He saw himself reflected in that great unstirring eye and Ciel beside him. Where the images fell there were faint lines of frosty radiance, as though the substance of the Lake were graving upon itself in glowing acid the memory of what it saw.

Soft-footed from behind him came six other shadows—Krah and his five sons—and Conway could see that a great anger was upon them. But they had left their spears outside.

"We may not kill in this place," said Krah slowly, "but we can keep you from the thing you would do."

"How do you know what I mean to do?" asked Conway and his face was strange as though he listened to distant voices speaking in an unknown tongue.

Krah answered, "As your father came before you, so you have come—to steal from us the secret of the Lake!"

"Yes," said Conway absently. "Yes, that is so."

The old man and his tall sons closed in around Conway and Ciel came and stood between them.

"Wait!" she said.

For the first time they acknowledged the presence of the girl.

"For your part in this," said Krah grimly, "you will answer later."

"No!" she cried defiantly. "I answer no! Listen. Once you love Conna. You learn from him good things. His mate happy, not slave. He bring wisdom to Iskar—but now you hate Conna, you forget.

"I go to Earth with Conna's son. But first he must come here. It is right he come. But you kill, you full of hate for Rand—so I come to save him."

She stood up to Krah, the little grey mouse transfigured into a bright creature of anger, blazing with it, alive with it.

"All my life—hate! Because of Rand you try to kill memory of Conna, you teach people hate and fear. But my mother learn from Conna. I learn from her—and I no forget! Rand happy, free. My mother know—and I no forget."

It came to Conway with a queer shock that she was not speaking of him but of another Rand. He listened to the girl and there was a stillness in him as deep and lightless as the stillness of the lake.

"You not kill, old man," Ciel whispered. "Not yet. Let him see, let him know. Then kill if he is evil."

She swung around.

"Son of Conna! Look into the Lake. All the dead of Iskar buried here. They gone forever but memory lives. All come here in life, so that the Lake remember. Look, son of Conna, and think of your father!"

Still with that strange quiet heavy on his heart Rand Conway looked into the Lake and did as Ciel told him to do. Krah and his sons looked also and did not move.

At first there was nothing but the black infinite depth of the Lake. *It is semi-liquid*, said his father's notes, the notes he had kept secret from everyone— *and in this heavy medium are suspended particles of some transuranic element—perhaps an isotope of uranium itself that is unknown to us. Incalculable wealth—incalculable pain! My soul is there, lost in the Lake of the Gone Forever.*

Rand Conway stood waiting and the thought of his father was very strong in him. His father, who had died mourning that he could never come back.

Slowly, slowly, the image of his father took shape in the substance of the lake, a ghostly picture painted with a brush of cold firs against the utter dark.

It was no projection of Rand Conway's own memory mirrored there, for this was not the man he had known, old before his time and broken with longing. This man was young, and his face was happy.

He turned and beckoned to someone behind him, and the shadowy figure of a girl came into the circle of his outstretched arm. They stood together, and a harsh sob broke from old Krah's throat. Conway knew that his father and the pale-haired lovely girl had stood where he stood now on the brink of the Lake and looked down as he was looking, that their images might be forever graven into the heart of the strange darkness below.

They kissed. And Ciel whispered, "See her face, how it shines with joy."

The figures moved away and were gone. Conway watched, beyond emotion, beyond fear. Some odd portion of his brain even found time to theorize on the electrical impulses of thought and how they could shape the free energy in the unknown substance of the Lake, so that it became almost a second subconscious mind for everyone on Iskar, storehouse from which the memories of a race could be called at will.

The eye of the Lake had seen and now, at the urging of those intense minds, it produced the pictures it had recorded like the relentless unreeling of some cosmic film.

* * *

Rand Conway watched, step by step, the disintegration of a man's soul. And it was easy for him to understand, since his own life had been ruled by that same consuming greed.

Conna came again and again to the Lake, alone. It seemed to hold a terrible fascination for him. After all he was a prospector, with no goal before him for many years but the making of a big strike. Finally he brought instruments and made tests and after that the fascination turned to greed and the greed in time to a sort of madness.

It was a madness that Conna fought against and he had reason. The girl came again. With her this time were Krah and his sons, all younger and less bitter than now, and others whom Conway did not know. It was obviously a ritual visit and it had to do with the newborn child the girl held in her arms.

Rand Conway's heart tightened until it was hardly beating. And through the frozen numbness that held him the old fear began to creep back, the nightmare fear of the dream, where something was hidden from him that he could not endure to see.

Conna, the girl, and a new-born child.

I cannot escape. I cannot wake from this.

Conna's inward struggle went on. He must have suffered the tortures of hell, for it was plain that what he meant to do would cut him off from all he loved. But he was no longer quite sane. The Lake mocked him, taunted him with its unbelievable wealth, and he could not forget it.

The last time that Conna came to the Lake of the Gone Forever, he had laid aside the furs and the spear of Iskar, and put on again his spaceman's leather and the bolstered gun. He brought with him a leaden container, to take back proof of the Lake and what it held.

But while he worked to take his sample—the sample that would, in the end, mean the destruction of the Lake and all it meant to Iskar—the pale-haired girl came, her eyes full of pain and pleading, and the child was with her, a well-grown boy now, nearly two years old.

And Conna's son cried out suddenly and swayed so that Ciel put out her hand to him, and he clung to it, with the universe dark and reeling about him.

I know now! I know the fear behind the dream!

Within the Lake the shadowy child watched with uncomprehending horror how his mother snatched the

little heavy box from his father's hands—his father who had grown so strange and violent and was dressed so queerly in black.

He watched how his mother wept and cried out to his father, pleading with him, begging him to stop and think and not destroy them all.

But Conna would not stop. He had fought his fight and lost and he would not stop.

He tried to take the box again. There was a brief moment when he and the girl swayed together on the brink of the Lake. And then—quickly, so very quickly that she had only time for one look at Conna as she fell—the girl fell over the edge. The disturbed cold fires of the Lake boiled up and overwhelmed her and there was no sight of her ever again.

The child screamed and ran to the edge of the rock. He too would have fallen if his father had not held him back.

For a long while Conna stood there, holding the whimpering child in his arms. The girl had taken the leaden box with her but Conna had forgotten that. He had forgotten everything except that his mate was dead, that he had killed her. And it was as though Conna too had died.

Then he turned and fled, taking the boy with him.

* * *

The surface of the Lake was as it had been, dark and still.

Rand Conway went slowly to his knees. He felt dully as though he had been ill for a long time. All the strength was gone out of him. He stayed there on the icy rock, motionless and silent, beyond feeling, beyond thought. He was only dimly aware that Ciel knelt beside him, that he was still clinging to her hand.

Presently he looked up at Krah.

"That was why you gave me my chance to leave Iskar. I was Conna's son—but I was the son of your daughter, too."

"For her sake," said Krah slowly, "I would have let you go."

Conway nodded. He was very tired. So many things were clear to him now. Everything had changed, even the meaning of the name he bore. Rand. It was all very strange, very strange indeed.

Ciel's hand was warm and comforting in his.

Slowly he took from his girdle the little gun and the leaden vial, and let them drop and slide away.

"Father of my mother!" he said to Krah, "let me live!" He bowed his head and waited.

But Krah did not answer. He only said, "Does Conna live?"

"No. He paid for her life, Krah, with his own."

"That is well," whispered the old man. And his sons echoed, "That is well."

Conway stood up. His mood of weary submission had left him.

"Krah," he said. "I had no part in Conna's crime and for my own—you know. I am of your blood, old man. I not beg again. Take your spears and give me mine and we will see who dies!"

A ghost of a grim smile touched Krah's lips. He looked deeply into his grandson's eyes and presently he nodded.

"You are of my blood. And I think you will not forget. There will be no taking of spears."

He stepped back and Conway said, "Let the others go. They know nothing of the Lake and will not know. I will stay on Iskar."

He caught Ciel to him. "One thing, Krah. Ciel must not be punished!"

Again the grim smile. Some of the frosty cold had gone from Krah's eyes. In time, Conway thought, the old bitterness might vanish altogether.

"You have stood together by the Lake," said Krah. "It is our record of marriage. So if Ciel is beaten that is up to you."

He turned abruptly and left the cavern and his sons went with him. Slowly, having yet no words to say, Rand Conway and Ciel followed them—into the narrow valley that held no further terrors for the man who had at last found his own world.

Behind them, the Lake of the Gone Forever lay still and black, as though it pondered over its memories, the loves and hatreds and sorrows of a world gathered from the beginning of time, safe there now until the end of it.

"CHILD OF THE SUN"

Leigh Brackett

Eric Falken stood utterly still, staring down at his leashed and helpless hands on the controls of the spaceship *Falcon*.

The red lights on his indicator panel showed Hiltonist ships in a three-dimensional half-moon, above, behind, and below him. Pincer jaws, closing fast.

The animal instinct of escape prodded him, but he couldn't obey. He had fuel enough for one last burst of speed. But there was no way through that ring of ships. Tractor-beams, criss-crossing between them, would net the *Falcon* like a fish.

There was no way out ahead, either. Mercury was there, harsh and bitter in the naked blaze of the sun. The ships of Gantry Hilton, President of the Federation of Worlds, inventor of the Psycho-Adjuster, and ruler of men's souls, were herding him down to a landing at the lonely Spaceguard outpost.

A landing he couldn't dodge. And then

For Paul Avery, a choice of death or Happiness. For himself and Sheila Moore, there was no choice. It was death.

The red lights blurred before Falken's eyes. The throb of the plates under his feet faded into distance. He'd stood at the controls for four chronometer days, ever since the Hiltonists had chased him up from Losangles, back on Earth.

He knew it was because he was exhausted that he couldn't think, or stop the nightmare of the past days from tramping through his brain, hammering the incessant question at him. *How?*

How had the Hiltonists traced him back from New York? Paul Avery, the Unregenerate recruit he went to get, had passed a rigid psycho-search—which, incidentally, revealed the finest brain ever to come to the Unregenerate cause. He couldn't be a spy. And he'd spoken to no one but Falken.

Yet they were traced. Hiltonist Black Guards were busy now, destroying the last avenues of escape from Earth, avenues that he, Falken, had led them through.

But how? He knew he hadn't given himself away. For thirty years he'd been spiriting Unregenerates away from Gantry Hilton's strongholds of Peace and Happiness. He was too old a hand for blunders.

Yet, somehow, the Black Guards caught up with them at Losangles, where the *Falcon* lay hidden. And, somehow, they got away, with a starving green-eyed girl named Kitty

"Not Kitty," Falken muttered. "Kitty's Happy. Hilton took Kitty, thirty years ago. On our wedding day."

A starving waif named Sheila Moore, who begged him for help, because he was Eric Falken and almost a god to the Unregenerates. They got away in the *Falcon*, but the Hiltonist ships followed.

Driven, hopeless flight, desperate effort to shake pursuit before he was too close to the Sun. Time and again, using precious fuel and accelerations that tried even his tough body, Falken thought he had escaped.

But they found him again. It was uncanny, the way they found him.

Now he couldn't run any more. At least he'd led the Hiltonists away from the pitiful starving holes where his people hid, on the outer planets and barren asteroids and dark derelict hulks floating far outside the traveled lanes.

And he'd kill himself before the Hiltonist psycho-search could pick his brain of information about the Unregenerates. Kill himself, if he could wake up.

He began to laugh, a drunken, ragged chuckle. He couldn't stop laughing. He clung to the panel edge and laughed until the tears ran down his scarred, dark face.

"Stop it," said Sheila Moore. "Stop it, Falken!"

"Can't. It's funny. We live in hell for thirty years, we Unregenerates, fighting Hiltonism. We're licked, now. We were before we started.

"Now I'm going to die so they can suffer hell a few weeks more. It's so damned funny!"

* * *

Sleep dragged at him. Sleep, urgent and powerful. So powerful that it seemed like an outside force gripping his mind. His hands relaxed on the panel edge.

"Falken," said Sheila Moore. "Eric Falken!"

Some steely thing in her voice lashed him erect again. She crouched on the shelf bunk against the wall, her feral green eyes blazing, her thin body taut in its torn green silk.

"You've got to get away, Falken. You've got to escape."

He had stopped laughing. "Why?" he asked dully.

"We need you, Falken. You're a legend, a hope we cling to. If you give up, what are we to go on?"

She rose and paced the narrow deck. Paul Avery watched her from the bunk on the opposite wall, his amber eyes dull with the deep weariness that slackened his broad young body.

Falken watched her, too. The terrible urge for sleep hammered at him, bowed his grey-shot, savage head, drew the strength from his lean muscles. But he watched Sheila Moore.

That was why he had risked his life, and Avery's, and broken Unregenerate law to save her, unknown and untested. She blazed, somehow. She stabbed his brain with the same cold fire he had felt after Kitty was taken from him.

"You've got to escape," she said. "We can't give up, yet."

Her voice was distant, her raw-gold hair a detached haze of light. Darkness crept on Falken's brain.

"How?" he whispered.

"I don't know . . . Falken!" She caught him with thin painful fingers. "They're driving you down on Mercury. Why not trick them? Why not go—beyond?"

He stared at her. Even he would never have thought of that. Beyond the orbit of Mercury there was only death.

Avery leaped to his feet. For a startled instant Falken's brain cleared, and he saw the trapped, wild terror in Avery's face.

"We'd die," said Avery hoarsely. "The heat . . ."

Sheila faced him. "We'll die anyway, unless you want Psycho-Change. Why not try it, Eric? Their instruments won't work close to the Sun. They may even be afraid to follow."

The wiry, febrile force of her beat at them. "Try, Eric. We have nothing to lose."

Paul Avery stared from one to the other of them and then to the red lights that were ships. Abruptly he sank down on the edge of his bunk and dropped his broad, fair head in his hands. Falken saw the cords like drawn harp-strings on the backs of them.

"I . . . can't," whispered Falken. The command to sleep was once more a vast shout in his brain. "I can't think."

"You must!" said Sheila. "If you sleep, we'll be taken. You won't be able to kill yourself. They'll pick your brain empty. Then they'll Hiltonize you with the Psycho-Adjuster."

"They'll blank your brain with electric impulses and then transmit a whole new memory-pattern, even shifting the thought-circuits so that you won't think the same way. They'll change your metabolism, your glandular balance, your pigmentation, your face, and your fingerprints."

He knew she was recounting these things deliberately, to force him to fight. But still the weak darkness shrouded him.

"Even your name will be gone," she said. "You'll be placid and lifeless, lazing your life away, just one of Hilton's cattle." She took a deep breath and added, "Like Kitty."

He caught her shoulders, then, grinding the thin bone of them. "How did you know?"

"That night, when you saw me, you said her name. Perhaps I made you think of her. I know how it feels, Eric. They took the boy I loved away from me."

He clung to her, the blue distant fire in his eyes taking life from the hot, green blaze of hers. There was iron in her. He could feel the spark and clash of it against his mind.

"Talk to me," he whispered. "Keep me awake. I'll try."

Waves of sleep clutched Falken with physical hands. But he turned to the control panel.

The bitter blaze of Mercury stabbed his bloodshot eyes. Red lights hemmed him in. He couldn't think. And then Sheila Moore began to talk. Standing behind him, her thin vital hands on his shoulders, telling him the story of Hiltonism.

"Gantry Hilton's Psycho-Adjuster was a good thing at first. Through the mapping and artificial blanking of brain-waves and the use of electro-hypnotism—the transmission of thought-patterns directly to the brain—it cured non-lesional insanity, neuroses, and criminal tendencies. Then, at the end of the Interplanetary War . . ."

Red lights closing in. How could he get past the Spaceguard battery? Sheila's voice fought back the darkness. Speed, that was what he needed. And more guts than he'd ever had to use in his life before. And luck.

"Keep talking, Sheila. Keep me awake."

". . . Hilton boomed his discovery. The people were worn out with six years of struggle. They wanted Hiltonism, Peace and Happiness. The passion for escape from life drove them like lunatics."

He found the emergency lever and thrust it down. The last ounce of hoarded power slammed into the rocket tubes. The *Falcon* reared and staggered.

Then she shot straight for Mercury, with the thin high scream of tortured metal shivering along the cabin

walls.

Spaceshells burst. They shook the *Falcon*, but they were far behind. The ring of red lights was falling away. Acceleration tore at Falken's body, but the web of sleep was loosening. Sheila's voice cried to him, the story of man's slavery.

The naked, hungry peaks of Mercury snarled at Falken. And then the guns of the Spaceguard post woke up.

"Talk, Sheila!" he cried. "Keep talking!"

"So Gantry Hilton made himself a sort of God, regulating the thoughts and emotions of his people. There is no opposition now, except for the Unregenerates, and we have no power. Humanity walks in a placid stupor. It cannot feel dissatisfaction, disloyalty, or the will to grow and change. It cannot fight, even morally.

"Gantry Hilton is a god. His son after him will be a god. And humanity is dying."

There was a strange, almost audible snap in Falken's brain. He felt a quick, terrible stab of hate that startled him because it seemed no part of himself. Then it was gone, and his mind was clear.

He was tired to exhaustion, but he could think, and fight.

Livid, flaming stars leaped and died around him. Racked plates screamed in agony. Falken's lean hands raced across the controls. He knew now what he was going to do.

Down, down, straight into the black, belching mouths of the guns, gambling that his sudden burst of speed would confuse the gunners, that the tiny speck of his ship hurtling bow-on would be hard to see against the star-flecked depths of space.

Falken's lips were white. Sheila's thin hands were a sharp unnoticed pain on his shoulders. Down, down . . . The peaks of Mercury almost grazed his hull.

A shell burst searingly, dead ahead. Blinded, dazed, Falken held his ship by sheer instinct. Thundering rockets fought the gravitational pull for a moment. Then he was through, and across.

Across Mercury, in free space, a speeding mote lost against the titanic fires of the Sun.

* * *

Falken turned. Paul Avery lay still in his bunk, but his golden eyes were wide, staring at Falken. They dropped to Sheila Moore, who had slipped exhausted to the floor, and came back to Falken and stared and stared with a queer, stark look that Falken couldn't read.

Falken cut the rockets and locked the controls. Heat was already seeping through the hull. He looked through shaded ports at the vast and swollen Sun.

No man in the history of space travel had ventured so close before. He wondered how long they could stand the heat, and whether the hull could screen off the powerful radiations.

His brain, with all its knowledge of the Unregenerate camps, was safe for a time. Knowing the hopelessness of it, he smiled sardonically, wondering if sheer habit had taken the place of reason.

Then Sheila's bright head made him think of Kitty, and he knew that his tired body had betrayed him. He could never give up.

He went down beside Sheila. He took her hands and said:

"Thank you. Thank you, Sheila Moore."

And then, quite peacefully, he was asleep with his head in her lap.

* * *

The heat was a malignant, vampire presence. Eric Falken felt it even before he wakened. He was lying in Avery's bunk, and the sweat that ran from his body made a sticky pool under him.

Sheila lay across from him, eyes closed, raw-gold hair pushed back from her temples. The torn green silk of her dress clung damply. The starved thinness of her gave her a strange beauty, clear and brittle, like sculptured ice.

She'd lived in alleys and cellars, hiding from the Hiltonists, because she wouldn't be Happy. She was strong, that girl. Like an unwanted cat that simply wouldn't die.

Avery sat in the pilot's chair, watching through the shaded port. He swung around as Falken got up. The exhaustion was gone from his square young face, but his eyes were still veiled and strange. Falken couldn't read them, but he sensed fear.

He asked, "How long have I slept?"

Avery shrugged. "The chronometer stopped. A long time, though. Twenty hours, perhaps."

Falken went to the controls. "Better go back now. We'll swing wide of Mercury, and perhaps we can get through." He hoped their constant velocity hadn't carried them too far for their fuel.

Relief surged over Avery's face. "The size of that Sun," he said jerkily. "It's terrifying. I never felt . . ."

He broke off sharply. Something about his tone brought Sheila's eyes wide open.

Suddenly, the bell of the mass-detector began to ring, a wild insistent jangle.

"Meteor!" cried Falken and leaped for the Visor screen. Then he froze, staring.

It was no meteor, rushing at them out of the vast blaze of the Sun. It was a planet.

A dark planet, black as the infinity behind it, barren and cruel as starvation, touched in its jagged peaks with subtle, phosphorescent fires.

Paul Avery whispered, "Good Lord! A planet, here? But it's impossible!"

Sheila Moore sprang up.

"No! Remember the old legends about Vulcan, the planet between Mercury and the Sun? Nobody

believed in it, because they could never find it. But they could never explain Mercury's crazy orbit, either, except by the gravitational interference of another body."

Avery said, "Surely the Mercurian observatories would have found it?" A pulse began to beat in his strong white throat.

"It's there," snapped Falken impatiently. "And we'll crash it in a minute if we . . . Sheila! Sheila Moore!"

The dull glare from the ports caught the proud, bleak lines of his gypsy face, the sudden fire in his blue eyes.

"This is a world, Sheila! It might be a world for us, a world where Unregenerates could live, and wait!"

She gasped and stared at him, and Paul Avery said:

"Look at it, Falken! No one, nothing could live there."

Falken said softly, "Afraid to land and see?"

Yellow eyes burned into his, confused and wild. Then Avery turned jerkily away.

"No. But you can't land, Falken. Look at it."

Falken looked, using a powerful search-beam, probing. Vulcan was smaller even than Mercury. There was no atmosphere. Peaks like splinters of black glass bristled upward, revolving slowly in the Sun's tremendous blaze.

The beam went down into the bottomless dark of the canyons. There was nothing there, but the glassy rock and the dim glints of light through it.

"All the same," said Falken, "I'm going to land." If there was even a tiny chance, he couldn't let it slip.

Unregeneracy was almost dead in the inhabited worlds. Paul Avery was the only recruit in months. And it was dying in the miserable outer strongholds of independence.

Starvation, plague, cold, and darkness. Insecurity and danger, and the awful lost terror of humans torn from earth and light. Unless they could find a place of safety, with warmth and light and dirt to grow food in, where babies could be born and live, Gantry Hilton would soon have the whole Solar System for his toy.

There were no more protests. Falken set the ship down with infinite skill on a ledge on the night side. Then he turned, feeling the blood beat in his wrists and throat.

"Vac suits," he said. "There are two and a spare."

They got into them, shuffled through the airlock, and stood still, the first humans on an undiscovered world.

* * *

Lead weights in their boots held them so that they could walk. Falken thrust at the rock with a steel-shod alpenstock.

"It's like glass," he said. "Some unfamiliar compound, probably, fused out of raw force in the Solar disturbance that created the planets. That would explain its resistance to heat."

Radio headphones carried Avery's voice back to him clearly, and Falken realized that the stuff of the planet insulated against Solar waves, which would normally have blanketed communication.

"Whatever it is," said Avery, "it sucks up light. That's why it's never been seen. Only little glimmers seep through, too feeble for telescopes even on Mercury to pick up against the Sun. Its mass is too tiny for its transits to be visible, and it doesn't reflect."

"A sort of dark stranger, hiding in space," said Sheila, and shivered. "Look, Eric! Isn't that a cave mouth?"

Falken's heart gave a great leap of hope. There were caves on Pluto. Perhaps, in the hidden heart of this queer world

They went toward the opening. It was surprisingly warm. Falken guessed that the black rock diffused the Sun's heat instead of stopping it.

Thin ragged spires reared overhead, stabbing at the stars. Furtive glints of light came and went in ebon depths. The cave opened before them, and their torches showed glistening walls dropping sheer away into blackness.

Falken uncoiled a thousand-foot length of synthetic fiber rope from his belt. It was no larger than a spider web, and strong enough to hold Falken and Avery together. He tied one each of their metal boots to it and let it down.

It floated endlessly out, the lead weight dropping slowly in the light gravity. Eight hundred, nine hundred feet. When there were five feet of rope left in Falken's hand it stopped.

"Well," he said. "There *is* a bottom."

Paul Avery caught his arm. "You aren't going down?"

"Why not?" Falken scowled at him, puzzled. "Stay here, if you prefer. Sheila?"

"I'm coming with you."

"All right," whispered Avery. "I'll come." His amber eyes were momentarily those of a lion caught in a pit. Afraid, and dangerous.

Dangerous? Falken shook his head irritably. He drove his alpenstock into a crack and made the rope fast.

"Hang onto it," he said. "We'll float like balloons, but be careful. I'll go first. If there's anything wrong down there, chuck off your other boot and climb up fast."

They went down, floating endlessly on the weighted rope. Little glints of light fled through the night-dark walls. It grew hot. Then Falken struck a jog in the cleft wall and felt himself sliding down a forty-five-degree offset. Abruptly, there was light.

Falken yelled, in sharp, wild warning.

The thing was almost on him. A colossus with burning eyes set on foot-long stalks, with fanged jaws agape and muscles straining.

Falken grabbed for his blaster. The quick motion over-balanced him. Sheila slid down on him and they fell slowly together, staring helplessly at destruction charging at them through a rainbow swirl of light.

The creature rushed by, in utter silence.

Paul Avery landed, his blaster ready. Falken and Sheila scrambled up, cold with the sweat of terror.

"What was it?" gasped Sheila.

Falken said shakily, "God knows!" He turned to look at their surroundings.

And swept the others back into the shadow of the cleft.

Riders hunted the colossus. Riders of a shape so mad that even in madness no human could have conceived them. Riders on steeds like the arrowing tails of comets, hallooing on behind a pack of nightmare hounds

Cold sweat drenched him. "How can they live without air?" he whispered. "And why didn't they see us?"

There was no answer. But they were safe, for the moment. The light, a shifting web of prismatic colors, showed nothing moving.

They stood on a floor of the glassy black rock. Above and on both sides walls curved away into the wild light—sunlight, apparently, splintered by the shell of the planet. Ahead there was an ebon plain, curving to match the curve of the vault.

Falken stared at it bitterly. There was no haven here. No life as he knew it could survive in this pit. Yet there was life, of some mad sort. Another time, they might not escape.

"Better go back," he said wearily, and turned to catch the rope.

The cleft was gone.

Smooth and unbroken, the black wall mocked him. Yet he hadn't moved more than two paces. He smothered a swift stab of fear.

"Look for it," he snapped. "It must be here."

But it wasn't. They searched, and came again together, to stare at each other with eyes already a little mad.

Paul Avery laughed sharply. "There's something here," he said. "Something alive."

Falken snarled, "Of course, you fool! Those creatures"

"No. Something else. Something laughing at us."

"Shut up, Avery," said Sheila. "We can't go to pieces now."

"And we can't just stand here glaring." Falken looked out through the rainbow dazzle. "We may as well explore. Perhaps there's another way out."

Avery chuckled, without mirth. "And perhaps there isn't. Perhaps there was never a way in. What happened to it, Falken?"

"Control yourself," said Falken silkily, "or I'll rip off your oxygen valve. All right. Let's go."

They went a long way across the plain in the airless, unechoing silence, slipping on glassy rock, dazzled by the wheeling colors.

Then Falken saw the castle.

It loomed quite suddenly—a bulk of squat wings with queer, twisted turrets and straggling windows. Falken scowled. He was sure he hadn't seen it before. Perhaps the light . . .

They hesitated. Icy moth-wings flittered over Falken's skin. He would have gone around, but black walls seemed to stretch endlessly on either side of the castle.

"We go in," he said, and shuddered at the thought of meeting folk like those who hunted the flaming-eyed colossus.

Blasters ready, they went up flat titanic steps. A hall without doors stretched before them. They went down it.

* * *

Falken had a dizzy sense of *change*. The walls quivered as though with a wash of water over them. And then there were doors opening out of a round hall.

He opened one. There was a round hall beyond, with further doors. He turned back. The hall down which they had come had vanished. There were only doors. Hundreds of them, of odd shapes and sizes, like things imperfectly remembered.

Paul Avery began to laugh.

Falken struck him, hard, over the helmet. He stopped, and Sheila caught Falken's arm, pointing.

Shadows came, rushing and wheeling like monstrous birds. Cold dread caught Falken's heart. Shadows, hunting them . . .

He choked down the mad laughter rising in his own throat. He opened another door.

Halls, with doors. The shadows swept after them. Falken hurled the doors open, faster and faster, but there was never anything beyond but another hall, with doors.

His heart was gorged and painful. His clothing was cold on his sweating body. He plunged on and on through black halls and drifting shards of light, with the shadows dancing all around and doors, doors,

doors.

Paul Avery made a little empty chuckle. "It's laughing," he mumbled and went down on the black floor. The shadows leaped.

Sheila's eyes were staring fire in her starved white face. Her terror shocked against Falken's brain and steadied it.

"Take his feet," he said harshly. "Take his feet."

They staggered on with their burden. And presently there were no more doors, and no roof overhead. Only the light and the glassy walls, and the dancing shadows.

The walls were thin in places. Through them Falken saw the dark colossus with its flaming eyes, straining through the spangled light. After it came the hounds and hunters, not gaining nor falling back, riding in blind absorption.

The walls faded, and the shadows. They were alone in the center of the black plain. Falken looked back at the castle.

There was nothing but the flat and naked rock.

He laid Avery down. He saw Sheila Moore fall beside him. He laughed, one small, mad chuckle. Then he crouched beside the others, his scarred gypsy face a mask of living stone.

Whether it was then, or hours later that he heard the voice, Falken never knew. But it spoke loudly in his mind, that voice. It brought him up, his futile blaster raised.

"You are humans," said the voice. "How wonderful!"

Falken looked upward, sensing a change in the light.

Something floated overhead. A ten-foot area of curdled glory, a core of blinding brilliance set in a lacy froth of fire.

The beauty of it caught Falken's throat. It shimmered with a sparkling opalescence, infinitely lovely—a living, tender flame floating in the rainbow light. It caught his heart, too, with a deep sadness that drifted in dim, faded colors beneath the brilliant veil.

It said, clearly as a spoken voice in his mind:

"Yes. I live, and I speak to you."

Sheila and Avery had risen. They stared, wide-eyed, and Sheila whispered, "What are you?"

The fire-thing coiled within itself. Little snapping flames licked from its edges, and its colors laughed.

"A female, isn't it? Splendid! I shall devise something very special." Colors rippled as its thoughts changed. "You amaze me, humans. I cannot read your minds, beyond thoughts telepathically directed at me, but I can sense their energy output.

"I had picked the yellow one for the strongest. He appeared to be so. Yet he failed, and you others fought through."

Avery stared at Falken with the dawn of an appalled realization in his amber eyes. Falken asked of the light:

"What are you?"

The floating fire dipped and swirled. Preening peacock tints rippled through it, to be drowned in fierce, proud scarlet. It said: "I am a child of the Sun."

It watched them gape in stunned amazement, and laughed with mocking golden notes.

"I will tell you, humans. It will amuse me to have an audience not of my own creating. Watch!"

A slab of the glassy rock took form before them. Deep in it, a spot of brilliance grew:

It was a Sun, in the first blaze of its virile youth. It strode the path of its galactic orbit alone. Then, from the wheeling depths of space, a second Sun approached.

It was huge, burning with a blue-white radiance. There was a mating, and the nine worlds were born in a rush of supernal fire.

And there was life. Not on the nine burning planets. But in free space, little globes of fire, bits of the Sun itself shocked somehow to intelligence in the vast explosion of energy.

The picture blurred. The colors of the floating light were dulled and dreamy.

"There were many of us," it sighed. "We were like tiny Suns, living on the conversion of our own atoms. We played, in open space"

Dim pictures washed the screen, glories beyond human comprehension—a faded vision of splendor, of alien worlds and the great wheeling Suns of outer space. The voice murmured:

"Like Suns, we radiated our energy. We could draw strength from our parent, but not enough. We died. But I was stronger than the rest, and more intelligent. I built myself a shell."

"Built it!" whispered Avery. "But how?"

"All matter is built of raw energy, electron and proton existing in a free state. With a part of my own mass I built this world around myself, to hold the energy of the Sun and check the radiation of my own vitality.

"I have lived, where my race died. I have watched the planets cool and live and die. I am not immortal. My mass grows less as it drains away through my shell. But it will be a long, long time. I shall watch the Sun die, too."

The voice was silent. The colors were ashes of light. Falken was stricken with a great poignant grief.

Then, presently, the little malicious flames frothed to life again, and the voice said.

"My greatest problem is amusement. Here in this black shell I am forced to devise pleasures from my own imagination."

Falken gasped. "The hunters, the cleft that vanished, and that hellish castle?" He was suddenly cold and hot at once.

"Clever, eh? I created my hunt some eons ago. According to my plan the beast can neither escape nor the hunters catch him. But, owing to the uncertainty factor, there is one chance in some hundreds of billions that one or the other event may occur. It affords me endless amusement."

"And the castle?" said Falken silkily. "That amused you, too."

"Oh, yes! Your emotional reactions . . . Most interesting!" Falken raised his blaster and fired at the core of the light.

Living fire coiled and writhed. The Sun-child laughed.

"Raw energy only feeds me. What, are there no questions?"

Falken's voice was almost gentle. "Do you think of nothing but amusement?"

Savage colors rippled against the dim, sad mauves. "What else is there, to fill the time?"

Time. Time since little frozen Pluto was incandescent gas.

"You closed the opening we came through," said Avery abruptly.

"Of course."

"But you'll open it again? You'll let us go?"

The tone of his voice betrayed him. Falken knew, and Sheila.

"No," said Sheila throatily. "It won't let us go. It'll keep us up here to play with, until we die."

Ugly dark reds washed the Sun-child. "Death!" it whispered. "My creatures exist until I bid them vanish. But death, true death—that would be a supreme amusement!"

* * *

A DESPERATE, helpless rage gripped Falken. The vast empty vault mocked him with his dead hopes. It jeered at him with solid walls that were built and shifted like smoke by the power of this lovely, soulless flame.

Built, and shifted . . .

Sudden fire struck his brain. He stood rigid, stricken dumb by the sheer magnificence of his idea. He began to tremble, and the wild hope swelled in him until his veins were gorged and aching.

He said, with infinite care, "You can't create real living creatures, can you?"

"No," said the Sun-child. "I can build the chemicals of their bodies, but the vital spark eludes me. My

creatures are simply toys activated by the electrical interplay of atoms. They think, in limited ways, and they feel crude emotions, but they do not live in the true sense."

"But you can build other things? Rocks, soil, water, air?"

"Of course. It would take a great deal of my strength, and it would weaken my shell, since I should have to break down part of the rock to its primary particles and rebuild. But even that I could do, without serious loss."

There was silence. The blue distant fires flared in Falken's eyes. He saw the others staring at him. He saw the chances of failure bulk over him like black thunderheads, crowned with madness and death.

But his soul shivered in ecstasy at the thing that was in it.

The Sun-child said silkily, "Why should I do all this?"

"For amusement," whispered Falken. "The most colossal game you have ever had."

Brilliant colors flared. "Tell me, human!"

"I must make a bargain first."

"Why should I bargain? You're mine, to do with as I will."

"Quite. But we couldn't last very long. Why waste your imagination on the three of us when you might have thousands?"

Avery's amber eyes opened wide. A shocked incredulity slackened Sheila's rigid muscles. The voice cried:

"Thousands of humans to play with?"

The eager greed sickened Falken. Like a child wanting a bright toy—only the toys were human souls.

"Not until the bargain is made," he said.

"Well? What is the bargain? Quick!"

"Let us go, in return for the game which I shall tell you."

"I might lose you, and then have nothing."

"You can trust us," Falken insisted. He was shaking, and his nerves ached. "Listen. There are thousands of my people, living like hunted beasts in the deserts of the Solar System. They need a world, to survive at all. If you'll build them one in the heart of this planet, I'll bring them here.

"You wouldn't kill them. You'd let them live, to admire and praise you for saving them. It would amuse you just to watch them for some time. Then you could take one, once in a while, for a special game.

"I don't want to do this. But it's better that they should live that way than be destroyed."

"And better for you, too, eh?" The Sun-child swirled reflectively. "Breed men like cattle, always have a supply. It's a wonderful idea . . ."

"Then you'll do it?" Sweat dampened Falken's brow.

"Perhaps . . . Yes! Tell me, quickly, what you want!"

Falken swung to his stunned and unbelieving companions. He gripped an arm of each, painfully hard.

"Trust me. Trust me, for God's sake!" he whispered. Then, aloud, "Help me to tell it what we need."

There was a little laughing ripple of golden notes in the Sun-child's light, but Falken was watching Sheila's eyes. A flash of understanding crossed them, a glint of savage hope.

"Oxygen," she said. "Nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon dioxide . . ."

"And soil," said Falken. "Lime, iron, aluminum, silicon . . ."

* * *

They came to on a slope of raw, red earth, still wet from the rain. A range of low hills lifted in the distance against a strange black sky. Small tattered clouds drifted close above in the rainbow's light.

Falken got to his feet. As far as he could see there were rolling stretches of naked earth, flecked with brassy pools and little ruddy streams. He opened his helmet and breathed the warm wet air. He let the rich soil trickle through his fingers and thought of the Unregenerates in their frozen burrows.

He smiled, because there were tears in his hard blue eyes.

Sheila gave a little sobbing laugh and cried, "Eric, it's done!" Paul Avery lifted dark golden eyes to the hills and was silent.

There was a laughing tremble of color in the air where the Sun-child floated. Small wicked flames drowned the sad, soft mauves. The Sun-child said:

"Look, Eric Falken. There, behind you."

Falken turned—and looked into his own face.

It stood there, his own lean body in the worn vac suit, his own gypsy face and the tangle of frosted curls. Only the eyes were different. The chill, distant blue was right, but there were spiteful flecks of gold, a malicious sparkle that was like . . .

"Yes," purred the Sun-child. "Myself, a tiny particle, to activate the shell. A perfect likeness, no?"

A slow, creeping chill touched Falken's heart. "Why?" he asked.

"Long ago I learned the art of lying from men. I lied about reading minds. Your plan to trick me into building this world and then destroy me was plain on the instant of conception."

Laughing wicked colors coiled and spun.

"Oh, but I'm enjoying this! Not since I built my shell have I had such a game! Can you guess why I made your double?"

Falken's lips were tight with pain, his eyes savage with remorse at his own stupidity.

"It—he will go in my ship to bring my people here."

He knew that the Sun-child had picked his unwitting brain as cleanly as any Hiltonist psycho-search.

In sudden desperation he drew his blaster and shot at the mocking likeness. Before he tripped the trigger-stud a wall of ebon glass was raised between them. The blast-ray slid away in harmless fire and died, burned out.

The other Falken turned and strode away across the new land. Falken watched him out of sight, not moving nor speaking, because there was nothing to do, nothing to say.

The lovely wicked fire of the Sun-child faded suddenly.

"I am tired," it said. "I shall suckle the Sun, and rest."

It floated away. For all his agony, Falken felt the heart-stab of its sad, dim colors. It faded like a wisp of lonely smoke into the splintered light.

Presently there was a blinding flash and a sharp surge of air as a fissure was opened. Falken saw the creature, far away, pressed to the roof of the vault and pulsing as it drank the raw blaze of the Sun.

"Oh, God," whispered Falken. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

Falken laughed, one harsh wild cry. Then he stood quite still his hands at his sides, his face a mask cut deep in dark stone.

"Eric," whispered Sheila. "Please. I can't be brave for you all the time."

He was ashamed of himself then. He shook the black despair away with cynical fatalism.

"All right, Sheila. We'll be heroes to the bitter end. You, Avery. Get your great brain working. How can we save our people, and, incidentally, our own skins?"

Avery flinched as though some swift fear had stabbed him. "Don't ask me, Falken. Don't!"

"Why not? What the devil's the matter . . ." Falken broke off sharply. Something cold and fierce and terrifying came into his face. "Just a minute, Avery," he said gently. "Does that mean you think you know a way?"

"I . . . For God's sake, let me alone!"

"You do know a way," said Falken inexorably. "Why shouldn't I ask you, Paul Avery? Why shouldn't you try to save your people?"

Golden eyes met his, desperate, defiant, bewildered, and pitiful all at once.

"They're not my people," whispered Avery.

They were caught, then, in a strange silence. Soundless wheeling rainbows brushed the new earth, glimmered in the brassy pools. Far up on the black crystal of the vault the Sun-child pulsed and breathed. And there was stillness, like the morning of creation.

Eric Falken took one slow, taut step, and said, "Who are you?"

The answer whispered across the raw red earth.

"Miner Hilton, the son of Gantry."

* * *

Falken raised the blaster, forgotten in his hand. Miner Hilton, who had been Paul Avery, looked at it and then at Falken's face, a shield of dark iron over cold, terrible flame.

He shivered, but he didn't move, nor speak.

"You know a way to fight that thing," said Falken, very softly, in his throat. "I want to kill you. But you know a way."

"I—I don't know. I can't . . ." Golden tortured eyes went to Sheila Moore and stayed there, with a dreadful lost intensity.

Falken's white teeth showed. "You want to tell, Miner Hilton. You want to help us, don't you? Because of Sheila!"

Young Hilton's face flamed red, and then went white. Sheila cried sharply, "Eric, don't! Can't you see he's suffering?"

But Falken remembered Kitty, and the babies who were born and died on freezing rock, without sun or shelter. He said, "She'd never have you, Hilton. And I'll tell you this. Perhaps I can't force out of you what you know. But if I can't, I swear to God I'll kill you with my own hands."

He threw back his head and laughed suddenly "Gantry Hilton's son—in love with an Unregenerate!"

"Wait, Eric." Sheila Moore put a hand on his arm to stop him, and went forward. She took Miner Hilton by the shoulders and looked up at him, and said, "It isn't so impossible, Miner Hilton. Not if what I think is true."

Falken stared at her in stunned amazement, beyond speech or movement. Then his heart was torn with sudden pain, and he knew, with the clarity of utter truth, that he loved Sheila Moore.

She said to Miner Hilton, "Why did you do this? And how?"

Young Hilton's voice was flat and strained. He made a move as though to take her hands from his shoulders, but he didn't. He stared across her red-gold head, at Falken.

"Something had to be done to stamp out the Unregenerates. They're a barrier to complete peace, a constant trouble. Eric Falken is their god, as—as Sheila said. If we could trap him, the rest would be easy. We could cure his people.

"My father couldn't do it himself. He's old, and too well-known.

"He sent me, because mine is the only other brain that could stand what I had to do. My father has trained me well.

"To get me by the psycho-search, my father gave me a temporary brain pattern. After I was accepted as a refugee, I established mental contact with him"

"Mental contact," breathed Falken. "That was it. That's why you were always so tired, why I couldn't shake pursuit."

"Go on," said Sheila, with a queer gentleness.

Hilton stared into space, without seeing.

"I almost had you in Losangles, Falken, but you were too quick for the Guards. Then, when we were trapped at Mercury, I tried to make you sleep. I was leading those ships, too.

"But I was tired, and you fought too well, you and Sheila. After that we were too close to the Sun. My thought waves wouldn't carry back to the ships."

He looked at Falken, and then down at Sheila's thin face.

"I didn't know there were people like you," he whispered. "I didn't know men could feel things, and fight for them like that. In my world, no one wants anything, no one fights, or tries . . . And I have no strength. I'm afraid."

Sheila's green eyes caught his, compelled them.

"Leave that world," she said. "You see it's wrong. Help us to make it right again."

In that second, Falken saw what she was doing. He was filled with admiration, and joy that she didn't really care for Hilton—and then doubt, that perhaps she did.

Miner Hilton closed his eyes. He struck her hands suddenly away and stepped back, and his blaster came ready into his hand.

"I can't," he whispered. His lips were white. "My father has taught me. He trusts me. And I believe in him. I must!"

Hilton looked where the glow of the Sun-child pulsed against ebon rock. "The Unregenerates won't trouble us anymore."

He raised the muzzle of his blaster to his head.

* * *

It was then that Falken remembered his was empty. He dropped it and sprang. He shocked hard against Hilton's middle, struck him down, clawing for his gun arm. But Hilton was heavy, and strong.

He rolled away and brought his barrel lashing down across Falken's temple. Falken crouched, dazed

and bleeding, in the mud.

He laughed, and said, "Why don't you kill me, Hilton?"

Hilton looked from Falken's uncowed, snarling face to Sheila. The blaster slipped suddenly from his fingers. He covered his face with his hands and was silent, shivering.

Falken said, with curious gentleness, "That proves it. You've got to have faith in a thing, to kill or die for it."

Hilton whispered, "Sheila!" She smiled and kissed him, and Falken looked steadfastly away, wiping the blood out of his eyes.

Hilton grasped suddenly at the helmet of his vac-suit. He talked, rapidly, as he worked.

"The Sun-child creates with the force of its mind. It understands telekinesis, the control of the basic electrical force of the universe by thought, just as the wise men of our earth understood it. The men who walked on the water, and moved mountains, and healed the sick.

"We can only attack it through its mind. We'll try to weaken its thought-force, destroy anything it sends against us."

His fingers flashed between the helmet radio and the repair kit which is a part of every vac suit, using wires, spare parts, tools.

"There," said Hilton, after a long time. "Now yours."

Falken gave him his helmet. "Won't the Sun-child know what we're doing?" he asked, rather harshly.

Hilton shook his fair head. "It's weak now. It won't think about us until it has fed. Perhaps two hours more."

"Can you read its thoughts?" demanded Falken sourly.

"A very little," said Hilton, and Sheila laughed, quietly.

Hilton worked feverishly. Falken watched his deft fingers weaving a bewildering web of wires between the three helmets, watched him shift and change, tune and adjust. He watched the Sun-child throb and sparkle as the strength of the Sun sank into it. He watched Sheila Moore, staring at Hilton with eyes of brilliant green.

He never knew how much time passed. Only that the Sun-child gave a little rippling sigh of light and floated down. The fissure closed above it. Sheila caught her breath, sharp between her teeth.

Hilton rose. He said rapidly,

"I've done the best I can. It's crude, but the batteries are strong. The helmets will pick up and amplify the energy-impulses of our brains. We'll broadcast a single negative impulse, opposed to every desire the Sun-thing has.

"Stay close together, because if the wires are broken between the helmets we lose power, and it's going

to take all the strength we have to beat that creature."

Falken put on his helmet. Little copper discs, cut from the sheet in the repair kit and soldered to wires with Hilton's blaster, fitted to his temples. Through the vision ports he could see the web of wires that ran from the three helmets through a maze of spare grids and a condenser, and then into the slender shaft of a crude directional antenna.

Hilton said, "Concentrate on the single negative, *No.* "

Falken looked at the lovely shimmering cloud, coming toward them.

"It won't be easy," he said grimly, "to concentrate."

Sheila's eyes were savage and feral, watching that foam of living flame. Hilton's face was hidden. He said, "Switch on your radios."

Power hummed from the batteries. Falken felt a queer tingle in his brain.

The Sun-child hovered over them. Its mind-voice was silent, and Falken knew that the electrical current in his helmet was blanking his own thoughts.

They linked arms. Falken set his brain to beating out an impulse, like a radio signal, opposing the negative of his mind to the positive of the Sun-child's.

* * *

Falken stood with the others on spongy, yielding soil. Dim plant-shapes rose on all sides as far as he could see, forming an impenetrable tangle of queer geometric shapes that made him reel with a sense of spatial distortion.

Overhead, in a sea-green sky, three tiny suns wheeled in mad orbits about a common center. There was a smell in the air, a rotting stench that was neither animal or vegetable.

Falken stood still, pouring all his strength into that single mental command to stop.

The tangled geometric trees wavered momentarily. Dizzily, through the wheeling triple suns, the Sun-child showed, stabbed through with puzzled, angry scarlet.

The landscape steadied again. And the ground began to move.

It crawled in small hungry wavelets about Falken's feet. The musky, rotten smell was heavy as oil. Sheila and Hilton seemed distant and unreal, their faces hidden in the helmets.

Falken gripped them together and drove his brain to its task. He knew what this was. The reproduction of another world, remembered from the Sun-child's youth. If they could only stand still, and not think about it

He felt the earth lurch upward, and guessed that the Sun-child had raised its creation off the floor of the cavern.

The earth began to coil away from under his feet.

* * *

For a giddy instant Falken saw the true world far below, and the Sun-child floating in rainbow light.

It was angry. He could tell that from its color. Then suddenly the anger was drowned in a swirl of golden motes.

It was laughing. The Sun-child was laughing.

Falken fought down a sharp despair. A terrible fear of falling oppressed him. He heard Sheila scream. The world closed in again.

Sheila Moore looked at him from between two writhing trees.

He hadn't let her go. But she was there. Hairy branches coiled around her, tore her vac-suit. She shrieked

Falken cried out and went forward. Something held him. He fought it off, driven by the agony in Sheila's cry.

Something snapped thinly. There was a flaring shock inside his helmet. He fell, and staggered up and on, and the hungry branches whipped away from the girl.

She stood there, her thin white body showing through the torn vac-suit, and laughed at him.

He saw Miner Hilton crawling dazed on the living ground, toward the thing that looked like Sheila and laughed with mocking golden motes in its eyes.

A vast darkness settled on Falken's soul. He turned. Sheila Moore crouched where he had thrown her from him, in his struggle to help the lying shell among the trees.

He went and picked her up. He said to Miner Hilton, "Can we fix these broken wires?"

Hilton shook his head. The shock of the breaking seemed to have steadied him a little. "No," he said. "Too much burned out."

"Then we're beaten." Falken turned a bitter, snarling face to the green sky, raised one futile fist and shook it. Then he was silent, looking at the others.

Sheila Moore said softly, "This is the end, isn't it?"

Falken nodded. And Miner Hilton said, "I'm not afraid now." He looked at the trees that hung over them, waiting, and shook his head. "I don't understand. Now that I know I'm going to die, I'm not afraid."

Sheila's green eyes were soft and misty. She kissed Hilton, slowly and tenderly, on the lips.

Falken turned his back and stared at the twisted ugly trees. He didn't see them. And he wasn't thinking of the Unregenerates and the world he'd won and then lost.

* * *

Sheila's hand touched him. She whispered, "Eric . . ."

Her eyes were deep, glorious green. Her pale starved face had the brittle beauty of wind-carved snow. She held up her arms and smiled.

Falken took her and buried his gypsy face in the raw gold of her hair.

"How did you know?" he whispered. "How did you know I loved you?"

"I just—knew."

"And Hilton?"

"He doesn't love me, Eric. He loves what I stand for. And anyway . . . I can say this now, because we're going to die. I've loved you since I first saw you. I love you more than Tom, and I'd have died for him."

Hungry tree branches reached for them, barely too short. Buds were shooting up underfoot. But Falken forgot them, the alien life and the wheeling suns that were only a monstrous dream, and the Sun-child who dreamed them.

For that single instant he was happy, as he had not been since Kitty was lost.

Presently he turned and smiled at Hilton, and the wolf look was gone from his face. Hilton said quietly, "Maybe she's right, about me. I don't know. There's so much I don't know. I'm sorry I'm not going to live to find out."

"We're all sorry," said Falken, "about not living." A sudden sharp flare lighted his eyes. "Wait a minute!" he whispered. "There may be a chance"

He was taut and quivering with terrible urgency, and the buds grew and yearned upward around their feet.

"You said we could only attack it through its mind. But there may be another way. Its memories, its pride"

He raised his scarred gypsy face to the green sky and shouted, "You, Child of the Sun! Listen to me! You have beaten us. Go ahead and kill us. But remember this. You're a child of the Sun, and we're only puny humans, little ground-crawlers, shackled with weakness and fear.

"But we're greater than you! Always and forever, greater than you!"

The writhing trees paused, the buds faltered in their hungry growth. Faintly, very faintly, the landscape flickered. Falken's voice rose to a ringing shout.

"You were a child of the Sun. You had the galaxy for a toy, all the vast depths of space to play in. And what did you do? You sealed yourself like a craven into a black tomb, and lost all your greatness in the whimsies of a wicked child.

"You were afraid of your destiny. You were too weak for your own strength. We fought you, we little humans, and our strength was so great that you had to beat us by a lying trick.

"You can read our minds, Sun-child. Read them. See whether we fear you. And see whether we respect you, you who boast of your parentage and dream dreams of lost glory, and hide in a dark hole like a

frightened rat!"

* * *

For one terrible moment the alien world was suffused with a glare of scarlet—anger so great that it was almost tangible. Then it greyed and faded, and Falken could see Sheila's face, calm and smiling, and Hilton's fingers locked in hers.

The ground dropped suddenly. Blurred trees writhed against a fading sky, and the suns went out in ebon shadow. Falken felt clean earth under him. The rotting stench was gone.

He looked up. The Sun-child floated overhead, under the rocky vault. They were back in the cavern world.

The Sun-child's voice spoke in his brain, and its fires were a smoldering, dusky crimson.

"What was that you said, human?"

"Look into my mind and read it. You've thrown away your greatness. We had little, compared to you, but we kept it. You've won, but your very winning is a shame to you, that a child of the Sun should stoop to fight with little men."

The smoldering crimson burned and grew, into glorious wicked fire that was sheer fury made visible. Falken felt death coiling to strike him out of that fire. But he faced it with bitter, mocking eyes, and he was surprised, even then, that he wasn't afraid.

And the raging crimson fire faded and greyed, was quenched to a trembling mist of sad, dim mauves.

"You are right," whispered the Sun-child. "And I am shamed."

The ashes of burned-out flame stirred briefly. "I think I began to realize that when you fought me so well. You, Falken, who let your love betray you, and then shook your fist at me. I could kill you, but I couldn't break you. You made me remember . . ."

Deep in the core of the Sun-child there was a flash of the old proud scarlet.

"I am a child of the Sun, with the galaxy to play with. I have so nearly forgotten. I have tried to forget, because I knew that what I did was weak and shameful and craven. But you haven't let me forget, Falken. You've forced me to see, and know.

"You have made me remember. Remember! I am very old. I shall die soon, in open space. But I wish to see the Sun unveiled, and play again among the stars. The hunger has torn me for eons, but I was afraid. Afraid of death!

"Take this world, in payment for the pain I caused you. My creature will return here in Falken's ship and vanish on the instant of landing. And now . . ."

The scarlet fire burned and writhed. Shafts of joyous gold pierced through it. The Sun-child trembled, and its little foaming flames were sheer glory, the hearts of Sun-born opals.

It rose in the rainbow air, higher and higher, rushing in a cloud of living light toward the black crystal of the vault.

Once more there was a blinding flash and a quick sharp rush of air. Faintly, in Falken's mind, a voice said, "Thank you, human! Thank you for waking me from a dying sleep!"

A last wild shout of color on the air. And then it was gone, into open space and the naked fire of the Sun, and the rocky roof was whole.

Three silent people stood on the raw red earth of a new world.

"RETREAT TO THE STARS"

Leigh Brackett

Arno was just entering the big common hall when the lights blinked. One-two. One-two. That meant ships landing on the icy field outside. And ships meant only one thing this time. Ralph's squadron had come back.

He stopped beside the doorway to let the mob stream through from the dormitories, workshops and kitchen. Everything stopped when those lights blinked, except the ceaseless hammering from the place where the rebels labored on their great ship. Arno watched them come; the men whose drawn lots had said *No*, the erect, brazen women, the children, the old and the maimed.

They would make my world like that! thought Arno. The hate, unveiled for a brief moment, made his straight, strong features like marble. Those people, streaming into the big, barren hall to wait, breathless, until the ships landed and brought news of the raid—they would bring their dissonance into his ordered, patterned world; their restlessness, their pagan heresies, their eternal striving.

It made him feel savagely good, that tall blond man standing in the shadow, to know that through him, the State held their destiny to its own pleasure.

Marika came striding from the workshop, the sweat and grime of labor dark on her naked arms and legs. Arno noted her broad shoulders, her wide brow and clear, authoritative eyes, with distaste. The women of these incorrigibles offended him far more than the men. And yet Marika, dressed in her brief leather kirtle, her tawny mane falling heavy on her shoulders

Arno hated himself for having to control even the slightest impulse toward Marika. There should be none in him. And yet

"They're back, Arno!" she said. "Ralph's back!"

She caught his arm, and they fought their way together toward the doors on the far side. The spy, his mask of friendship slipped easily into place, still could not stop the question that rose so often in his mind.

"It would matter a lot, wouldn't it, if Ralph didn't come back?"

"It would matter everything!" said Marika softly. "Everything. But he has, this time. If anything ever happens to him, I'll know."

Arno wondered how, and shook his head mentally for the thousandth time. The mechanics of this barbaric relationship between men and women he accepted, but he could not understand. Though he was only twenty-five, he had already given the State three sons and a daughter, and he couldn't conceive of either one of his appointed mates caring more for him than he did for them. If his life should be snuffed out, it wouldn't change their lives any. Woman's sole duty was the bearing of children and the keeping of the living quarters, wherever the State saw fit to send her.

* * *

The hall was full now, silent as nearly seven thousand people can make a place. The distant clangor from the mysterious ship-building echoed loudly.

Arno could follow the operations outside as clearly as though he saw them; battered ships roaring in one after the other from the dark space, landing on the frigid, airless field, being towed by ancient tugs into the camouflaged dome of the hangar.

Arno well knew how the ships of the Tri-State, combing the Solar System for this last outpost of anarchy, had passed by the savage Trojans, over the very structures that housed their quarry.

A slender, dark girl with a child in her arms came to Marika, and again Arno, acknowledging her shy smile with a friendly, "Hello, Laura," was stricken with the wastefulness of these rebels. They cheerfully coddled and supported people unable to do their full share of work—women like Laura, crippled men who should have been eliminated as deterrent factors.

Laura said, "I'm frightened, Marika. I'm always frightened, for fear Karl He has come back, hasn't he, Marika?"

"Of course!" Marika took woman and child in the curve of one sturdy arm. "Listen. That's the lock opening."

The crowd surged forward just a bit. Heavy double doors swung back. And there was Ralph, with his men shouldering through behind him.

Ralph, fighting leader of the rebels, was neither tall, nor handsome, nor powerfully built. One's eyes slid past him, were caught somehow, forced back to see the compact, challenging strength of him, the tough, indestructible something that looked from his reckless blue eyes, spoke in his harshly vibrant voice, laughed from his cynical mouth. And once seeing, they never forgot.

Ralph wasn't laughing now. The crowd knew the instant he came in that something was wrong. He was white with weariness, his stubbled jaw set and ugly. Arno felt a little pulse of excitement stir in his heart; he knew so well what was coming.

A wave of sound swept the hall, people shouting questions, names. Ralph raised his hand, and the clamor died.

"We lost three ships," he said quietly, but the words rang to the far corners. "Vern, Parlo, and Karl. The raid was a failure."

There was a moment of utter silence. Arno saw Laura's white face, saw Marika's strong arm ease her

sudden fall. Somewhere a woman sobbed, a child sent up a wail.

Then a man, one of the weary, hard-driven scientists, shouted, "But damn it, Ralph, this is the third time! We've got to have supplies, equipment, if we're to go on!"

"You'll get them," said Ralph. The stubborn fire of his gaze swept them. "Go easy on what you have. We'll try again."

He turned to Marika, his men mingling with the crowd.

"Poor kid," he muttered, looking down at Laura. "I wish it had been"

"No!" blazed Marika. "Never wish it had been you! It may be soon enough." She kissed him, with a strange, bitter fierceness.

Ralph smiled.

"Black becomes you," he said mockingly. "Don't you want to be a hero's widow?" He stopped her lips with another kiss. Laura's boy was squalling. Ralph gave him to Marika and picked up the white, still girl. "Come on. I want food and a shave. Arno, will you get Frane and Father Berrens and bring them along?"

"Of course." A small flame of triumph was burning behind Arno's mask. Ralph had lost three ships, thirty men—ships and men he could ill afford to lose. Fools, to think they could defy the State! The scar on his temple, placed there by Tri-State's skillful surgeons, reddened with the flow of blood to his brain, and he put his hand up to hide it, lest it betray him. That scar kept him from being assigned to fighting duty, kept him at base, where the information was.

Before he found the two men who, with Ralph, controlled the destinies of the Trojan base, therefore of all the rebels in the System, Arno retired to his own small room. Concealed in the heavy buckle of his belt was a tiny, incredibly powerful radio, operating on a tight beam that changed synchronization automatically every fourth second. Only the receiver of the People's Protector, back on Terra, could catch that beam.

Arno gave his call letter and waited until the cold, precise voice of the People's Protector, head of all the anti-revolution activities of the Tri-State, answered him.

Then he said, "They are much upset over the failure of the raid. They need supplies, metal especially, for fuel and repairs. I am being drawn daily more close to the heart of things; Ralph and Marika are particularly friendly. I will transmit information as I receive it."

"You have not yet found the secret of the ship they build?"

"No. They guard that carefully."

"Nor the location of their planetary headquarters?"

"No."

"These things are most important. The destruction of these anarchists must be complete, to the last man." The Protector's voice altered just the faintest trifle from its emotionless inflexibility. "You are in a unique position. The State would find it most difficult, under the circumstances, to replace you. Remember your

duty, your faith, and be cautious. *There must be no failure.* "

The contact broke with a click, and Arno was conscious of a small, uneasy twinge. Strange that in these eight months he hadn't quite realized that. Accustomed from birth to consider himself merely a more or less efficient cog in a machine, replaceable at a moment's notice, he hadn't quite understood how his status had changed. He had a moment of positive vertigo, as though the firm ground on which he stood had suddenly given way.

And then he recovered himself. There would be no failure. The State had classified him as Brain-type 1-04, best adapted to this type of work. The State had assigned and trained him. He couldn't fail. All he had to do was follow orders.

* * *

Twenty minutes later he sat in the cubicle that served Ralph and Marika as home. Frane, the head of the scientific group, sat on a metal chair taken from a wrecked ship; a stringy, tired man with grey hair. Berrens, civilian chief, occupied the table. He was a priest of their pagan religion, and wore a bit of cloth about his throat to show it. His big frame showed the universal signs of underfeeding, but his chin and eyes were stubborn, his mouth twisted in a smile that wouldn't die. Ralph, with his usual restlessness, paced the floor, puffing savagely at a battered pipe.

That left Arno to sit with Marika on the worn remains of a couch. She had changed her working leather for a carefully mended dress of sultry red that offended Arno's eye, yet provoked a buried something in him. Time and again he found his gaze straying back to her. She was so different from the colorless, broad-hipped women of his world. He could feel the unwomanly strength of her, see it in the sweeping lines of her body.

She never took her eyes off Ralph. What strange thing was it that made a woman look at a man like that?

Ralph swung about abruptly. "Sorry, Arno. Council of war. Come and have dinner with us."

"Right." Arno smiled and rose.

Marika jumped up too.

"I'll go with you. I'm anxious about Laura."

The door closed behind them, shutting them out of that council. Arno felt a moment of rage. If only he could get at the heart of things, instead of relying on generalities picked up from Marika, with an occasional specific bit about the raids.

Marika sighed and thrust back her tawny mane with work-hardened fingers. "It must have been wonderful in the old days! To have lived in real houses, walked on real earth, with sunlight and real air! To have had pretty clothes and silk stockings, and something to do besides work and worry and shake hands with Death every morning!"

Her vehemence startled him. "Why, Marika"

"Two thousand years ago. Why couldn't I have been born two thousand years ago?"

* * *

The strangeness of it came over Arno—how Marika could look back to the Twentieth Century as day before darkness, and he as darkness before dawn. In the Twenty-first Century the last Terran rebels had fled to Venus, and from there to Mars, and from there to the state where they were now. The all-encompassing strength of the State had followed them, driving out their heresies, their anarchies, their haphazard individualism.

Now there was peace and system everywhere, except for the hidden plague-spots on the planets and this barren asteroid, which, through him, the Tri-State would soon destroy.

"I wonder," said Marika, softly, "what it would be like to be full fed, and full clothed, and to kiss your husband goodbye knowing that he'd live to be kissed hello?"

Her mouth quivered, and there were tears on her lashes. Arno's heart gave a strange, sudden leap, quite beyond his comprehension. He downed it firmly.

"What will Ralph do now?"

"Do!" said Marika savagely. "He'll go out again, and again, and again, until he dies, like Karl." She stopped and faced him, almost defiantly under the dim radium light. "I've got to cry, Arno. I've held it in and held it in, but I can't hold it any longer. We're fighting a losing battle, Arno. Ralph's going to die for it. All of us. And just once, I've got to stop being brave!"

And all at once she was crying, with her hands painfully tight on his arms and her tawny head thrust hard against his shoulder. In spite of himself, some tiny crack was made in the armor surrounding his brain, and he saw this place as she saw it; a tomb of dead hope, dead glory, dead life. What made them struggle on, knowing this?

He found his hands on Marika, his arms around her. He didn't remember putting them there. She was like an animal, warm and vitally alive.

He caught his hands away, shaken with sudden fear. It was as though he recoiled from the brink of a chasm, from the unknown. He stood silently while she cried herself out, still silently when she had her breath again and moved away from him. His arms ached where her fingers had gripped.

Marika dashed an arm across reddened eyes and swore. "Damn me for a sniveling ass! But I feel better. Guess a woman's got to be one once in a while, even if she is a mechanic! Don't tell Ralph, and—well, thanks, Arno."

He watched her go, down the corridor to Laura's home. Her red dress was almost black in that light, her hair dull gold. Arno tried to think about that meeting back there, about his duty. But his eyes followed Marika.

* * *

On the other side of the locked door, Ralph paced restlessly in a cloud of smoke.

"Something's wrong," he said. "With that new invisible paint, we should have been safe, since the ships are non-magnetic. But they took us in the back, as though they knew where to look."

Both men eyed him sharply. "You know what you're saying?"

"I know!" Ralph rumped his short brown hair with impatient fingers. "It's incredible that one of our own

people No, Tri-State may have planted a spy."

"A possibility. Remote, but a possibility." Father Berrens shook his head wearily.

"If there's a spy," said Frane grimly, "we'll have to catch him quickly. We need supplies."

"How long can we last without them, Frane?"

"Three weeks, possibly a day or two longer. No more."

"Good God." Ralph's strong-boned face tightened; the knowledge took him like a blow over the heart. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were doing your best," said Father Berrens gently. "We didn't want to make it harder."

"Three weeks! My God, has it come so close to the end? To fight for two thousand years, and now Three weeks!"

Berrens managed a smile. "You'll make a successful raid."

"But if I don't! If I don't!" Ralph paced savagely. Responsibility, weariness, a sense of futility weighed on him like a leaden cloud. The room was silent for a long moment. Then, "The ship, Frane. You've got to have it finished in ten days."

Frane nodded. "I'll triple the shifts. I'll have to strip the domes for the metal."

"Anything, as long as we can still breathe. But get that ship finished!"

"Perhaps," said Frane somberly, "it would be better to call the people in from the planetary bases, without waiting."

"No! This Solar System belongs to us. I'm not going to surrender it without fighting!"

"But we've fought so long, Ralph." Father Berrens' voice was infinitely tired. "The Tri-State has twenty centuries of rigid weeding and training behind it. It's hard to break through that wall. And their people are at least housed and fed. When a man's belly is full it's hard to stir him, even if his brain and soul are starved."

"Granted. But damn it" Ralph came to a truculent stand, his eyes reckless and uncompromising. "We've got to hang on! Their machine is running down of its own weight. They've lost their best brains to us; that, or purged them. They're beginning to stagnate, and stagnation means retrogression. Without their science they wouldn't have stood two centuries. Now even their science is failing them. They've produced nothing new in the last ninety years."

"If we can just hang on a little longer"

Frane's mouth shut hard. "You can't fight without men and weapons."

"We can do with the men we have. And I'll bring you the metal you need. Give me four hours to sleep, and I'll go out again. This time I'll try Titan."

"Titan! You're mad, Ralph! It's the strongest mining center in the System. You'll be destroyed!"

"Perhaps. But that needn't worry anyone but me. I'm going alone, in the old Sparling."

Ralph knew, as well as the others, that he had one chance in a thousand. The Sparling was a relic of other days, an intricate fighting mechanism capable of being controlled by one man and equipped with tractor beams for hauling prizes back to base. But it needed a super-man to fly it. It was tricky and temperamental and capable of an infinite variety of misdeeds. That was why they hadn't built any more after the first ten. They lost nine in a month.

Ralph went on. "They won't be looking for me near Titan. There'll be less chance of detection with one ship. If I'm not back in ten days, start loading."

Berrens said, "Try once more with the squadron."

"There isn't time if we fail. And the way the last three raids have gone, there isn't much use anyway. Understand, I want no one to know where I've gone, or when. Not even Marika."

"But," said Frane, "if there is a spy here, Tri-State knows the location of the base. Why don't they simply bomb us out of the sky?"

"They want information," said Ralph grimly. "But they may bomb us yet. However, that's something we'll just have to pray about. Find the spy if you can. But get ready, and don't wait for me!"

Father Berrens shook his head. Barring a miracle, they'd never in three weeks catch a spy clever enough to have evaded all their safeguards and actually penetrated the base.

"It seems a case for prayer," he admitted. "We'll try, Ralph. Be careful—and for all our sakes, come back."

* * *

It was more than four hours later that Arno, checking a series of reports for the commissary and exulting over the shortness of supplies, looked up to see Marika standing by his desk. She was white and rigid, her hands locked tight, every bone in her face gauntly clear. "Arno," she said, "Ralph's gone. He wouldn't tell me where, but I checked his men. He's gone alone, and I found out that the old Sparling is missing. Arno, I'm afraid."

Ralph gone on a lone raid! He'd have to tell the Protector. He'd play out his part as Marika's good friend until he could get rid of her, and then

What was it that made a woman look that way about a man? What barbaric emotion was it that the State had taken out of its people?

He had lived among these rebels for eight months, and viewed them as impersonally as a scientist views a microbe. He had been a coldly efficient machine, carrying out orders in the most effective way possible to him. He had not understood these people, nor wished to understand them. His whole devotion had been to the State, the will of the State, the needs of the State.

But the machine that was Arno suddenly was not responding as it should. Things were growing in him, impulses, the strangeness and power of which frightened him, the more so because they were inexplicable by his philosophy.

"Arno," whispered Marika, "I'm frightened. I've been frightened too often. I'm not strong any more. Ralph's gone. He's going to die."

She's a rebel, thought Arno. She sets herself above the State. He told himself that it was only because he had a part to play that he stepped forward. Her arms went out to him, quite naturally, like a child that needs comforting. He felt the life flowing through her, meeting something that leaped in himself. Her lips were close to his, cut full and clear in the marble of her face.

He kissed her. And was stricken with horror, with self-hatred. He had never kissed a woman before. It was treachery—a weakening to the individual, a subtle challenge to the State.

He broke roughly away and left her standing, staring after him.

Arno locked his door and took the radio from his belt. Twice he started to send out his call letter, and twice he stopped. He was aghast at his own hesitancy, but Marika's face kept coming between him and the radio. What would she do if Ralph didn't come back? Would she be like Laura, like so many of the women who lost their men? Why did he care? He felt unsteady, lost, shaken.

The tiny thing in his hand looked up at him accusingly, and it steadied him. These rebels and their barbarisms were no concern of his. The State had given him certain orders. The entire end and aim of his life was to serve the State, without question or thought.

The words of the Creed, taught from infancy, came to him. "I believe in the State, which protects me, and deny all faiths but this, that my life may be spent in obedience and service."

What greater end could a man have than to serve the State?

Arno's voice was steady as he spoke to the People's Protector.

"The war leader has gone on a lone raid in an obsolete ship—a Sparling. Destination unknown, but the rebels are desperate for supplies."

"All mines will be warned," said the Protector. "Continue to follow orders."

* * *

Frane was as good as his word. Shifts were tripled, taking every available man, woman and youth. Even Arno, still pleading his simulated head injury, was pronounced fit for light work and sent to the hangar. Because of the need for haste, much of the veil of secrecy was discarded. Only the ultimate purpose of the ship and the design of the engines were kept quiet.

Arno gasped at his first sight of the ship. It was enormous. He estimated that it could hold fully ten thousand people and concentrated supplies. There was nothing like it, even in the trade lanes of the Tri-State.

Gossip was rife among the people, of course. These rebels were terribly lax; anyone might talk as he pleased. All kinds of rumors circulated. The ship was a weapon of offense. It was going to destroy the planets. It was going to become a floating world. It was going to haunt the space-lanes, picking off the State ships.

Arno reported all this, but got no nearer to the truth. Nine days passed with no word from Ralph. There

was no ship-to-base radio, because of the danger of triangulation and subsequent discovery of the Trojan base. Rations were cut. Fuel for light and heat was cut to a minimum, but the food synthesizers clacked and roared incessantly. The domes were stripped of everything metallic save the walls themselves and the pumping units. Forges worked day and night. Endless streams of men and women labored, carrying, welding, hammering, fitting. Sleep was reduced to four-hour periods, pitifully inadequate for exhausted bodies.

And on the tenth day, it was finished.

Men dropped in their tracks to rest. Frane and Father Berrens spoke to Marika beneath the huge loom of the ship, and Arno, who took care never to be far from his source of information, overheard.

There wasn't much to overhear.

Frane said dully, "Ten days. I'll have to begin calling them in."

Marika, too tired even for emotion, stared at them. "Ralph's not coming back, is he?"

Father Berrens put a hand on her shoulder. "It's not too late to hope. We don't leave for nearly two weeks yet."

Arno kept his eyes from Marika's face. Call who in? Leave for where? He must watch, and report carefully. The Rebels were planning some desperate attempt; the State must be warned.

He remembered the Protector's words: *There must be no failure.*

* * *

The Sparling hung motionless, an invisible mote in utter darkness. Saturn wheeled its flashing rings against infinity. Ralph, cramped with fourteen days of close confinement, red-eyed with lack of sleep, hunched over a telescopic view-plate in the midst of a bewildering tangle of instruments.

He was following Titan, watching the rocket flares of ore carriers as they took off. For the ten days he had hung here not one had been sufficiently under-convoyed so that he might have the faintest chance of succeeding.

"There must be a spy at base," he said aloud, for the hundredth time. The sound of his harsh voice echoing against metal was some relief for the ghastly silence. "He's not getting intimate information, but he doesn't need it. Just general movements, and the Tri-State can blanket everything. Oh, God, give Frane and Berrens the wit not to let him sabotage that ship!"

Ralph's cynical mouth twisted to a short laugh. "He can't sabotage it. Short of an atomite bomb, he can't touch it, and he couldn't have got an atomite bomb past the searchers when he entered base. The only thing he can do"

He shook his thoughts savagely away from that possibility. Mustn't for a second let himself believe that. Somehow, they'd get through all right. God wouldn't let them down, not after all the centuries they'd fought.

Gnawing hunger forced his attention away from the view-plate. He let one of his meager supply of food capsules dissolve slowly, thinking of the things he'd read about in the old books. Real steaks, fresh vegetables, juicy fruits. The concentrate broke through to his tongue. He swallowed hurriedly, cursing.

Through the view-plates he could see Earth, Venus and Mars, flying in wide-flung orbits about the tiny, distant Sun. He'd been born on Trojan base. He'd never seen sunlight, or blue skies, or grass, or breathed air that didn't come from a chemical tank. All those things the State had taken from his people, except for the gallant handful that lived and preached in hiding on the planets.

"Someday," said Ralph softly, "we'll have them back."

His reckless blue eyes, the fire of them dulled with weariness, went back to Titan. The chronometer clacked off the hours. Five ore carriers went out into the void, heavily convoyed. Inevitably, sleep overtook him. When he woke, the fifteenth day was gone.

"I've got to go, if I'm going with them. Four days to get back." He cursed bitterly. It was hard to give up after all this time. Hard to be beaten because of a few tons of metal. Unwillingly, his hand went out to the starting lever.

And then he stiffened. A streak of flame shot across the view-plate, up from Titan. An ore carrier, with only a three-ship convoy! A chance! A mad, tempting chance!

* * *

Too tempting. Why, having sent six fighters out with the others, cut the guards to three? A trap, perhaps. They couldn't know he was here, but they might be doing the same thing at all mines. And then again, they might have relaxed vigilance, thinking he'd given up.

He thought of that ship at base and all it meant to him. He thought of Marika. Most of all, he thought of Marika. And then he looked at those three worlds that had once been theirs, and at the ore carrier that meant they might have them again. He knew he was right about the Tri-State. If they could only hold on

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispered to the Sparling. "Let's see what you can do!"

Like a wild meteor he plunged down on that ore carrier, his hands flying over the banks of keys before him. One convoy ship burst into flame under his ray. Another shot fused the tubes of the carrier, so that she hurtled on at constant velocity, a mere hulk.

The Sparling bucked dangerously under his hands. He cursed it, whirled it toward another fighter. The third was maneuvering for a tube shot. Ralph's heat-ray raked out. The fighter, hulled, reeled away as her men died in the vacuum.

The Sparling wrenched frantically aside, and the stern shot took her briefly in the ribs instead. In spite of himself, Ralph screamed with the searing heat. Half blinded, he fought the ship to safety, and then he poised for his final attack.

And then he saw them—Tri-State ships pouring out from bases on Saturn's moons. It had been a trap! No chance to fight now. No chance to hitch a tractor beam to that ore carrier. Just run. Run—and pray!

The Sparling danced perversely. Ralph cursed it, cursed the man who invented it, cursed himself for a fool. A mad angle shot fused the tubes of the remaining fighter.

A beam raked his hull, heating it cherry-red, and then he was free.

He poured speed into the Sparling, but she wobbled. One of those heat-beams had damaged some filament in her intricate controls. He could hear a change in the rhythmic vibration of the ship, and she handled more and more sluggishly. The Tri-State ships were coming up fast.

For just a moment he sat quite still, staring at his hands spread over the keys. After all, he'd known this day would come. He'd chosen this career of his own free will, knowing that. It hurt like hell, now that it was here—knowing Marika was waiting, knowing about the ship. But

He could afford it now. He swallowed his remaining capsules and opened the cock on the oxygen tank. He'd go out at least with a full belly and his lungs full of air.

Swinging the bucking Sparling around, he headed back toward Saturn and that flight of ships.

His mouth twisted, and his harsh voice said, quite conversationally, "Hold the airlocks open, God. Here comes a free man."

* * *

The eighteenth day had come and gone. The domes were cold, almost too cold to endure. The air was thin. One pump had stopped entirely, worn out, so that ten thousand men, women and children huddled gasping in the hangar and the workshops. Hidden in a far corner behind a massive pillar, Arno was speaking in a low voice.

"They're all here. All the people from the planetary bases. The last ship came in an hour ago. The purpose of the big ship is still unknown, but all loading has been completed. They're waiting for Ralph, but they must do what they plan to do within the next two days. Fuel is almost gone."

Then he asked, because he couldn't help it, "Is Ralph dead?"

"Yes." The voice of the People's Protector was precise, cold. "There is no need to know the purpose of the ship. Since all the Rebel population of the System is collected in the Trojan base, it can be destroyed at once."

Arno nodded. That meant a fleet, of course, and bombs. His work was done.

"How will I be taken off, Excellency?"

There was just the faintest note of surprise in the Protector's voice. "Taken off? The task for which the State chose and prepared you is done. The State has no further use for you."

The tiny radio in Arno's hand was abruptly silent. He stood staring at it, with a spinning cloud across his eyes.

But of course. He'd given three sons and a daughter to the State. He'd done his job. He was a specialized cog; he wouldn't fit anywhere else. And the State had no dearth of cogs.

Terra was the nearest Tri-State base—a two-hour trip for their fast bombers at the present orbital intersection. Two hours. The rebels would wait until the last minute for Ralph, who was dead. That meant at least another day.

Two hours! If only it had been at once! The waiting, the tension—!

The bombs would destroy the domes, shatter them to cosmic dust, and the asteroid with them. Two thousand years of agitation would end, and there would be peace in the Tri-State.

The whirling cloud steadied as Arno saw the truth, the logical, inescapable truth. He himself was nothing. His usefulness to the State was ended. What matter if he died?

He was still staring at the useless radio. Now he saw the hand that held it—a strong, young hand, corded with sinews, the healthy blood ruddy under the skin.

His hand. The Tri-State directed it, but he felt the pain if it was injured.

The radio smashed on the floor, but he didn't notice it. He was looking at his body as though he had never seen it before, running his fingers along the hard curve of his thighs, feeling the breath lift his lungs, hearing the beat of his blood along his veins. Then he looked out, across the vast, barren dome, with those ten thousand men, women and children waiting under the loom of the ship.

A group of young men were singing off to his right, an old, old forbidden song about a girl named Susannah. Here and there a family—that anarchistic word never heard in the Tri-State—pressed close together, talking softly. Arno searched their faces. Some were happy, some sad, some frightened, some eager, but each face was different. There was no unit of so many males, so many females, so many young. There were ten thousand *people* .

Arno caught fiercely at his creed. And then he realized that these people had a creed too, and served it with their lives. Like Karl, and Ralph. Ralph—on whose return ten thousand people waited.

* * *

Two hours! How would these people feel if they knew that in two hours they would die? Maybe they did know. They knew the ship meant something strange. They guessed it might mean something impossible. But they were going.

The State chose . . . the State prepared . . . the State has no further use

Arno put his hands to his head to stop its blasphemy, and his touch only made him more conscious of his own flesh.

He plunged out into that sea of humanity, stumbling over legs, catching at shoulders.

Bodies, and eyes that looked at him, and brains behind them! He could feel the tension that filled the dome, feel the queer life-wave that always comes with a large crowd.

Marika's tawny head and broad shoulders rose against the black mass of the hull, and Arno went toward her. Men cursed him as he stumbled over them, but he had to get to Marika. He didn't know why, only that he had to.

He saw Laura beside her. Laura had her son clasped in her arms. She spoke to Marika. Then she kissed the boy and smiled.

Arno thought, *I gave three sons to the State, but I never kissed them. It was a duty.*

Duty! It was his duty now to die for the State. That duty had been so well understood he'd never thought of it subjectively. How had these rebels poisoned him, that he found it strange now?

He was close to Marika now.

She was pale, and her face was lined, but she asked, "What's the matter, Arno? You look ill."

"I—I don't know."

He stared at her, and suddenly he knew what was the matter with him. He'd read all about it in the forbidden books given him to prepare him for this duty. He was in love.

Out in space, Tri-State bombers were thundering up. His duty was plain before him. And he was in love— *in love, like a pagan rebel!*

Marika's strong hand caught his ragged tunic, shook him. "What's the matter, Arno? Tell me!"

He couldn't meet her eyes. And then Father Berrens' voice rang out over the audio system, and every head in that vast place turned to listen.

"It is time," said the priest quietly, "to explain why we've called you here, and why we've built this ship. We have kept it secret for two reasons. We wished to take no chance of having our purpose reported to the Tri-State, and we saw no reason to upset all our people while there was still a chance that we wouldn't have to use it. Now"

Bombers, thought Arno. *How long now?*

Father Berrens went on. "We'll wait till the last minute for Ralph, but we must be prepared. In four hours we'll begin shipping you. Please listen, and try to understand. Have courage and faith! We need them both now, more than ever before.

"For two thousand years we've fought against tyranny, against regimentation, against the destruction of God and man as an individual. We've been weak; the State has been strong. We waited too long in the beginning. Now, just as it began to seem we might have a chance, just as the machine of the State was bogging down in the mire of its own creation, we learned we might have to go—because of a few tons of metal.

"If there is truly a spy among you, I congratulate him. The State should reward him well. Our men have died trying, but we have no metal. All that's left is flight—or death at the hands of the State."

Arno heard him through a haze. The minutes ticked away with his heartbeats. *His* heartbeats—which the State could destroy but not control.

* * *

Marika's hand was half throttling him. Laura was standing motionless beyond her, the child held tight, whimpering. He could feel those ten thousand people, listening, waiting.

"Don't wait any longer for Ralph," he said.

He didn't want to say it. It was because Marika was looking at him so.

Her hand tightened. "Why not, Arno?"

"I—nothing. It's foolish, that's all."

"Foolish! When he's out there, alone, trying Arno! *What do you know?* "

Her hands were hurting his arms now, as they had that day she cried in the hall.

In a little while even pain would be gone.

The State has no further use

But suppose he did? Suppose he, Arno, wanted his body, wanted to know what it felt like to love a woman and father a child that was his own and not a cog in a machine? He looked wildly away from Marika, putting up a last battle for his belief, his religion.

And he saw ten thousand people—waiting.

He met Marika's eyes.

"Ralph's dead," he said. "I killed him. I killed Karl and all the others. I'm the spy."

She fell away from him. Laura cried out, a strange, high-pitched wail, and Father Berrens stopped talking.

"Ralph!" whispered Marika. "Ralph But I knew it. *A spy!*"

Arno gasped, stricken with horror at what he had done, lost in the chaos of shattering standards. He could still destroy them. He had only to keep still about the bombers, and it wouldn't matter.

Ten thousand people Frane and Berrens and Laura Marika, with a cold, terrible something growing in her eyes, something he had put there because he'd killed Ralph. His own mates would never miss him. They'd bear children patiently for some other unsmiling cog in the machine of State.

Marika. Always Marika. She was his downfall, and his answer. She was everything. Looking at her, watching what was growing back of her eyes, Arno shivered with awe and bitter longing. If only he could have known, before

"Father Berrens!" he shouted.

It seemed the words came out of themselves. And though some stubborn part of himself recoiled in horror, he spoke more words and more words. When he was finished, Berrens' face was grim, his voice unfamiliarly harsh as he issued orders.

There was chaos about Arno, and then a kind of frenzied order. In a world miles beyond him, lines of men and women formed and streamed into the ship through vast ports. But all he could see was Marika.

It would be nice to believe, as the rebels believed, that a man lived after his body died.

That was blasphemy in the State. But it would be nice.

Father Berrens came up, breathing hard. "Time! Time! But we may do it. God helping, we may do it!"

Then Berrens was shouting, "Marika!"

He couldn't stop her. The gun she had taken from Frane's belt was already aimed. Arno saw it coming.

The poisoned needle made a fiery prick over his heart.

He had a last glimpse of Marika's broad-browed face, her tawny mane lying heavy on her wide shoulders. She was like a thing of stone. She watched him fall, dispassionately, as she would have watched a roach die in strangling powder. Then she turned and went steadily into the ship.

A dark mist rolled across his brain, dulled the sound of exodus. Through it he heard Laura's voice.

"But Father! All the planets are closed to us. Where can we go?"

"For the time, we've lost the planets, yes. But the ship was built to go beyond them. My daughter, *the stars still remain.*"

"THE JEWEL OF BAS"

Leigh Brackett

1

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 short cuts! 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 short cuts."

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.

2

The Kalds started the line moving again, using the wands like ox-goads. 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 any time."

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 any time 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 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 half way 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.

3

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 away 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 zig-zag 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 off 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 short cuts!"

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 market-places and smoky wine-shops. 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."

4

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, mesmeric voice were getting him. He hit his own jaw with his knuckles, thanking whatever gods there were that the source of the 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 half way 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 banded 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 red 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 market places, 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.

5

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 up flung 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 had 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 out, "*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. Music—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 that 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 Ciaran 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 priests 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.

6

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. Blank-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 wave length? 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. Wave lengths 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."

7

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 some day, 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

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