

"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!"

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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.

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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.

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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 scree 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 Iskarrians.

"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 wailing 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 gravating 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.