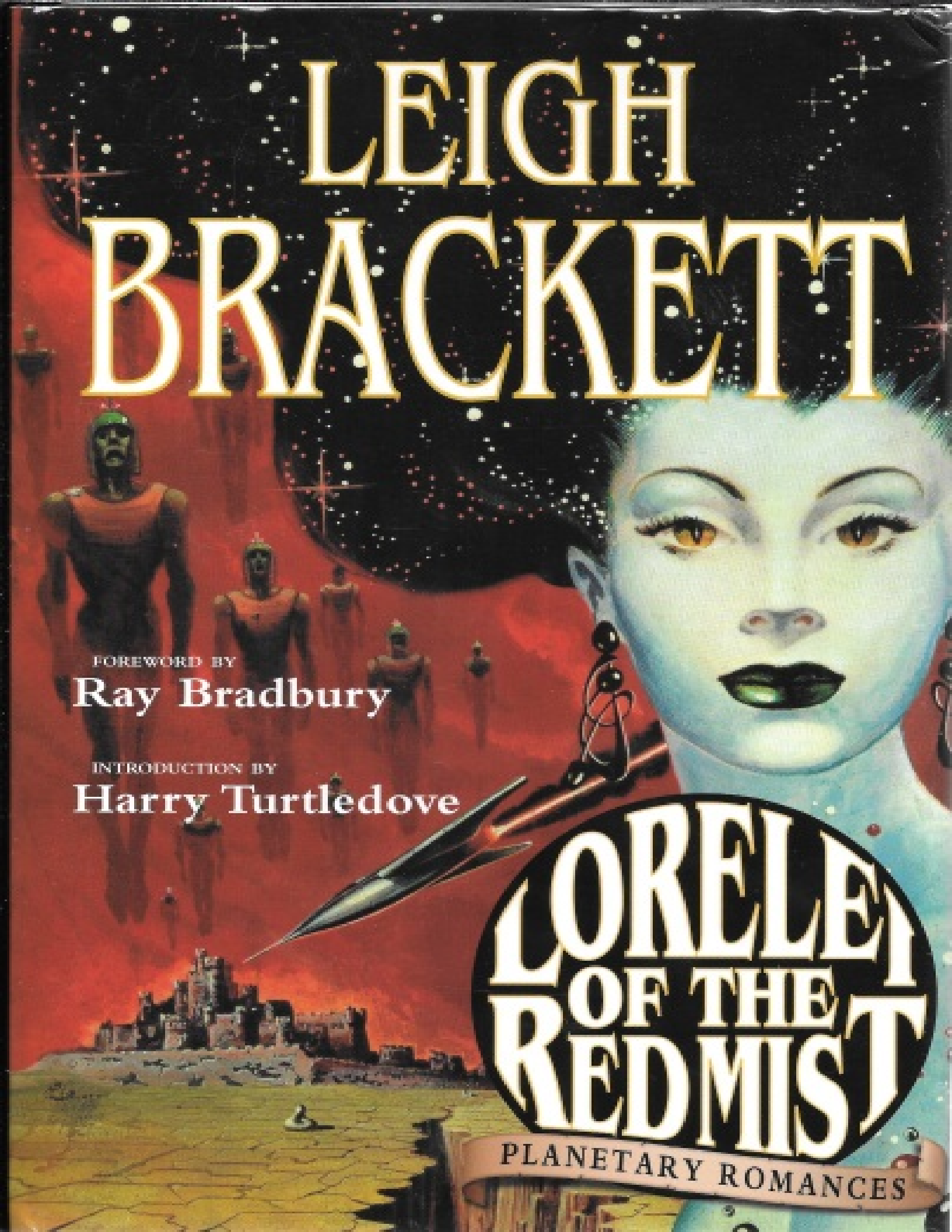


LEIGH BRACKETT



FOREWORD BY
Ray Bradbury

INTRODUCTION BY
Harry Turtledove

**LORELEI
OF THE
REDMIST**

PLANETARY ROMANCES

Lorelei of the Red Mist
Planetary Romances

LEIGH
BRACKETT

Forword by
Ray Bradbury

Introduction by
Harry Turtledove



HAFFNER PRESS
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2007

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Science Fiction

Shadow Over Mars (aka The Nemesis from Terra)
Starmen (aka The Starmen of Llyrdis)
The Sword of Rhiannon
The Long Tomorrow
Alpha Centauri or Die!
The Adventures of Eric John Stark:
The Secret of Sinharat / The People of the Talisman (aka Eric John Stark: Outlaw of Mars)
The Ginger Star
The Hounds of Skaith: collected as The Book of Skaith:
The Reavers of Skaith: The Adventures of Eric John Stark:
Stark and the Star Kings (w/Edmond Hamilton) (forthcoming)

Mystery / Suspense

No Good From A Corpse
Stranger at Home (as by George Sanders)
An Eye For An Eye
The Tiger Among Us
Silent Partner

Western

Rio Bravo
Follow the Free Wind

Collections

The Coming of the Terrans
The Halfling and Other Stories
The Book of Skaith: The Adventures of Eric John Stark
The Best of Leigh Brackett (Edmond Hamilton, ed.)
No Good from a Corpse
The Pulp Detective Fiction of Leigh Brackett
Martian Quest: The Earley Brackett

Lorelei Of the Red Mist: Planetary Romances (forthcoming)
Shannach--The Last: Farewell to Mars (forthcoming) as Editor
The Best of Planet Stories #1
The Best of Edmond Hamilton

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FOR LEIGH BRACKETT

for whom I wrote this,
but who left before it was done.
Damn. I miss you.
Some years just about everyone gets up and goes away
No day appears but someone vanishes
God banishes the best. The rest, those left behind
The lame, the halt, the blind
Misshapen intellects with gargoyle souls,
Dumb moles and diplomats, retired dinosaurs,
THEY COME TO FILL MY HOURS WITH WIND AND SOUR RAIN,
They tap my windowpane and knock my door
What fore? We're here to bore you, they all cry.
I wish they'd die and leave me with my better ghosts,
Those friends who went before and are now missed.
I tell them this. They're pissed.
But, being Hamlet's analyst and his dad's ghost
My favorite haunt, I boast on friends late dead
Lock out those left, snap lights, and go to bed.
The bores persist. Ennui as a grist they'd give me.
Oh, Christ, these brutes will ALL outlive me.
And when I'm dead? They'll phone some other fool in bed.
He's gone to Hell, they'll cry, with glee.
"Yes, yes, I know, oh how I wish that I were he."

—Ray Bradbury

LEIGH BRACKETT & EDMOND HAMILTON:

My Great Loves, My Great Teachers, My Great Friends

I was best man at their wedding January 1st, 1947. That almost says it all, yet it must be explained.

Edmond Hamilton truly came into my life on my 21st birthday, 1941. I was selling newspapers on a street corner, Norton and Olympic in Los Angeles one afternoon when Julius Schwartz, my temporary agent, showed up on the corner with Edmond Hamilton, carrying a copy of *Super Science Stories* in which appeared my short story "Pendulum," written with Henry Hasse, and sold after nine years of writing, starting when I was twelve.

Ed and Julie invited me back to their motel room, a block up the street by wondrous coincidence, where they drank whiskey and I drank a Coke, to celebrate my grand success. Leigh Brackett showed up. In the following weeks we motored down to the beach and lay out in the sun and talked writing and literature, literature and writing. Ed became my best new teacher and Leigh followed after. From that year on, every Sunday I ambled down to Muscle Beach near the Santa Monica pier and sat on the sand watching Leigh play volleyball. We then ate hotdogs while I read her incredibly fine science fiction and detective stories and she read my incredibly bad imitations and kicked me on to doing better.

There were five years of Sunday meetings until I finally discovered my own viscera, my own ganglion, my own secret self, and surged ahead. By 1946 Ed Hamilton has moved west and he and Leigh were courting, and I traveled out to Arcadia beyond L.A., to start drinking mint juleps and getting more advice from my tutors and chums. After their marriage, and mine which occurred in 1947, we lived within three hundred yards of each other on the beach in Venice and every Thursday night I trudged down the shore to try to learn to drink Scotch instead of the 89-cent muscatel I toted along. Ed taught us both. He loved to recite Yeats, or some of Shakespeare's Sonnets, or give me tips

on Shaw, and the years went on and Leigh became a first class screenwriter working for Howard Hawks, and Ed plunged back into Captain Future and comic strips, but still there were the grand evenings of damning editors and remembering Thomas Love Peacock and Frost. I never did learn to drink the hard stuff, but I drank in Ed's wondrous recitations and got Leigh to say, "Damn you, you bastard." when I sold my first story to Colliers magazine when I was 25. And one night a year before he died, Ed in a quiet moment when he and I were coming back from a walk to the liquor store turned to me and for the first time said, "Ray, I love you." Ed was not one to say that sort of thing often, probably never. I grabbed and hugged him and gave love back. Then, quite suddenly it seemed, the years were gone, and Ed with them. And Leigh came to stay overnight with Maggie and me and by this time I had almost learned the hard stuff and it was a grand last night. A few months later she called me from the hospital out in the upper desert and was in high spirits, the doctor was shooting her full of drugs, wise man, and she was on her way to follow Ed, we laughed together so as not to cry. I remember her laughter still and thank that doctor for his loving decision to make her high with a system full of injections so that feeling no pain and laughing, the next day, she was gone.

I hear the laughter now and near to remembering Dr. Johnson and Boswell and telling me about a wondrous bookstore in Long Beach, the Acres of Books, where he took me to wander through a city block of shadows and dust and time, and hand me his favorite Maugham or Mr. Salteena's Plan. I remember that January First Wedding Day and grieve at their going away. Teachers and friends shouldn't do that. But they did.

Ed and Leigh, Leigh and Ed, dearly beloved friends, I miss you still. It will never stop.

Ray Bradbury,
Los Angeles, California 1998

LEIGH BRACKETT

--THEY DON'T MAKE 'em like that any more."

You hear that a lot, especially from people over the age of, say, mumblety-five. People have no doubt been saying it for as long as there've been people. One of the earliest written texts we have is a Sumerian lament that the younger generation was going to hell in an ox cart and didn't do things the way folks did back in the Good Old Days. Trouble is, there are usually good and cogent reasons why they don't make 'em like that any more. My wife and three daughters and I went to the movies yesterday – drove over in our utterly boring, utterly mundane midsize Ford Taurus, which just about fits the lot of us: not real easy, not when two of us are over six feet and another is close.

When we came out, there parked next to our machine was an honest-to-God 1961 Chevy Impala. Good Lord, what a whale! Had to be four or five feet longer than what isn't at all a small car today. It would have fit the lot of us, plus, I doubt not, at least a fully equipped platoon of Marines (and the trunk would've swallowed all their gear with room to spare). So why don't they make 'em like that any more?

Well, let's see. The great white whale (yeah, it was – Moby Dick with tires) might've got fifteen miles a gallon when it was new, and it hasn't been new for a long, long time. No seat belts. No crumple zones in the frame. No impact-absorbing bumpers, just highly chromed ornaments at front and rear. Much less reliable engine and transmission than we make nowadays. Pollution? Who the devil worried about pollution in 1961?

They don't make science fiction like the kind Leigh Brackett used write any more, either.

And you know what? That's a damn shame.

It's all NASA's fault — well, NASA's and the Russians'. No, not because NASA managed to make space travel boring and bureaucratic, which was one of the few possibilities nobody imagined back in the days before the real thing happened. Because space probes have shown

the Solar System just isn't what we thought it was when Brackett and others were writing about it.

Once upon a time, billions and billions of years ago, Mars may have had liquid water on its surface. It may have developed life. It still may have a little water and microbes and things. By all the signs, life has been sizzling under a permanent super-San Fernando Valley-style inversion forever, or near enough as makes no difference. Even Mercury turns out not to be a sun-locked world with a narrow, possibly habitable twilight between eternal scorching day and endless I night; it rotates three times for every two times it revolves around the sun, so all of it gets alternately baked and frozen.

Maybe microbes on Mars, yeah. But no dead sea bottoms. No canals, No ancient, wise, wicked races hanging on by tooth and toenail and looking for brash, eager Earthmen to con. No Venus full of oceans and monsters and beautiful, dangerous women. No dancing girls on Ganymede — just a big chunk of cratered ice with a bit of rock thrown in.

To quote Robert E. Lee after Gettysburgh, "Too bad! Too bad! Oh, too bad!" Now

I know the Planet Stories romances that Brackett epitomizes weren't particularly probable even when they were written. But, by what we knew back in those days, they were at least possible, which is all a science fiction tale really requires. Now brute facts have shot them down. We'll never see their likes again. And if you want to know what I think, I think it's a crying shame.

Brackett always said she got the idea in her Martian adventures — which lie at the heart of her work in this vein - from Edgar Rice Burroughs. I can see that, after a fashion. Some of the basic assumptions both writers use are the same: dying, drying world; canals; assorted races and species of intelligent life, with strange powers and abilities and with endless possibilities for intrigue and betrayal. Burroughs was Old Foxy Grandpa (I think I'm stealing from S.J. Perelman) when it came to plotting. He'd keep two balls in the air at the same time, menace one protagonist so that death or a fate worse than seemed imminent, and then cut to the other. Made you want to kick him. Made you want to keep reading, too. But when it came to

values, you always knew where ERB stood. John Carter, or whoever his protagonist happened to be, was gonna whip the bad guys and rescue the pretty girl in the nick of time, because That Was How I lungs Were Supposed to Be. Not what you'd call subtle.

Leigh Brackett was different. It wasn't just that her Mars had dark spots and seamy corners, though she looked in places, and through the eyes of people, Edgar Rice Burroughs never would have imagined. It was that, a lot of the time, you weren't sure who was in the right or whether anybody was, even at and after the end of a story. One doesn't always think of ambiguity, complexity, and moral complications as being Planet Stories material, but in her hands they were. And she could write. Oh, boy, could she ever. Hers wasn't a ponderous prose like that of Burroughs. Anything but. It glistened like silk. Take this paragraph from "Terror out of Space":

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jeweled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescent glow with burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver. This silken facility, and the spot-on dialogue that accompanied it, were two of the keys that led to her second successful career, that of a screenwriter.

And, as if to prove she wasn't an author who could do only onething, she also wrote Westerns and mysteries and one utterly un-Planet Stories novel The Long Tomorrow, which I think is my favorite among all her work. Its low-key portrait of a religiously dominated United States recovering two generations after a war, and of two boys growing up there – two boys who want to know more about the world that blew itself to pieces – still stands as a not so minor classic in the field.

It's marvelous to see her fine stories come back into print, especially in such handsome editions. Those who cherished her work when it was new will enjoy it all over again. And, for those discovering her for the first time, you've got a treat in store for you. Hold on to your hats, and enjoy!

Harry Turtledove,

Chatsworth, California
2007

The Blue Behemoth

By Leigh Brackett

I

Bucky Shannon leaned forward across the little hexagonal table. He knocked over the pitcher of thil, but it didn't matter. The pitcher was empty. He jabbed me in the breastbone with his forefinger, not very hard. Not hard enough to jar the ribs clean loose, just enough to spring them.

"We," he said, "are broke. We are finished, through. Washed up and down the drain." He added, as an afterthought, "Destitute." I looked at him. I said sourly, "You're kidding!"

"Kidding." Shannon put his elbows on the table and peered at me through a curtain of very blond hair that was trying hard to be red. I He says I'm kidding! With Shannon's Imperial Circus, the Greatest Show in Space, plastered so thick with attachments..."

"It's no more plastered than you are." I was sore because he'd been a lot quicker grabbing the pitcher. "The Greatest Show in Space. Phooey! I've wetnnursed Shannon's Imperial Circus around the Triangle for eleven years, and I know. It's lousy, it's mangy, it's broken-down! Nothing works, from the ship to the roustabouts. In short, it

I must have had the pitcher oftener than I thought. obody in-

Buckhalter Shannon's Imperial Circus to Buckhalter Shannon's face unless he's tired and wants a long rest in a comfy fracture-frame.

Shannon got up. He got up slowly. I had plenty of time to see his grey green eyes get sleepy, and hear the quarter-Earthblood Marntian girl wailing about love over by the battered piano, and watch the cat-eyes of the little dark people at the tables swing round toward us, pleased and kind of hungry.

I had plenty of time to think how I only weigh one-thirty-seven to Shannon's one-seventy-five, and how I'm not as young as I used to be.

I said, "Bucky. Hold on, fella. I..."

Somebody said, "Excuse me, gentlemen. Is one of you Mister Buckhalter Shannon?"

Shannon put his hands down on his belt. He closed his eyes and smiled pleasantly and said, very gently:

"Would you be collecting for the feed bill, or the fuel?"

I shot a glance at the newcomer. He'd saved me from a beating, even if he was a lousy bill-collector; and I felt sorry for him. Bucky Shannon settled his shoulders and hips like a dancer.

The stranger was a little guy. He even made me look big. He was dressed in darkngreen synthesilk, very conservative. There was a powdering of grey in his hair and his skin was pink, soft, and shaved painfully clean. He had the kind of a face that nice maiden-ladies will trust with their last dime. I looked for his strong-arm squad.

There didn't seem to be any. The little guy looked at Shannon with pale blue eyes like a baby, and his voice was softer than Bucky's.

He said, "I don't think you understand."

I felt cold, suddenly, between the shoulders. Somebody scraped a chair back. It sounded like he'd ripped the floor open, it was so quiet. I got my brassies on, and my hands were sweating. Bucky Shannon sighed, and let his fist start traveling, a long, deceptive arc.

Then I saw what the little guy was holding in his hand.

I yelled and knocked the table over into Bucky. It made a lot of

It knocked him sideways and down, and the little dark men jumped up, quivering and showing their teeth. The Martian girl screamed.

Micky heaved the table off his lap and cursed me. "What's eating you, Jig? I'm not going to hurt him."

"Shut up," I said. "Look what he's got there. Money!"

The little guy looked at me. He hadn't turned a hair. "Yes," he said. "Money. Quite a lot of it. Would you gentlemen permit me to join you?"

Bucky Shannon got up.

"Delighted. I'm Shannon. This is Jig Bentley, my business manager." He looked down at the table. "I'm sorry about that. Mistaken

identity."

The little guy smiled. He did it with his lips. The rest of his face stayed placid and babyish, almost transparent. I realized with a start that it wasn't transparent at all. It was the most complete dead-pan I ever met, and you couldn't see into those innocent blue eyes any more than you could see through sheet metal.

I didn't like him. I didn't like him at all. But he had money. I said, "Howdy. Let's go find a booth. These Marshies make me nervous, looking like hungry cats at a mouse-hole."

The little guy nodded. "Excellent idea. My name is Beamish. Simon Beamish. I wish to – ah – charter your circus."

I looked at Bucky. He looked hungrier than the Marshies did. We didn't say anything until we got Beamish into a curtained booth with a fresh pitcher of thil on the table. Then I cleared my throat.

"What exactly did you have in mind, Mr. Beamish?"

Beamish sipped his drink, made a polite face, and put it down. "I have independent means, gentlemen. It has always been my desire to lighten the burden of life for those less fortunate..."

Bucky got red around the ears. "Just a minute," he murmured, and started to get up. I kicked him under the table.

"Shut up, you lug. Let Mister Beamish finish."

He sat down, looking like a mean dog waiting for the postman. Beamish ignored him. He went on, quietly,

"I have always held that entertainment, of the right sort, is the most valuable aid humanity can have in its search for the alleviation of toil and boredom..."

I said, "Sure, sure. But what was your idea?"

"There are many towns along the Venusian frontiers where no entertainment of the – proper sort has been available. I propose to remedy that. I propose to charter your circus, Mister Shannon, to make a tour of several settlements along the Tehara Belt."

Bucky had relaxed. His grey-green eyes began to gleam. He started to speak, and I kicked him again.

"That would be expensive, Mister Beamish," I said. "We'd have to cancel several engagements..."

He looked at me. I was lying, and he knew it. But he said, "I quite understand that. I would be prepared..."

The curtains were yanked back suddenly. Beamish shut up. Bucky and I glared at the head and shoulders poking in between the drapes.

It was Gow, our zoo-man – a big, ugly son-of-a-gun from a Terran colony on Mercury. I was there once. Gow looks a lot like the scenery – scowling, unapproachable, and tough. His hands, holding the curtains apart, had thick black hair on them and were not much larger than the hams of a Venusian swamp-rhino.

He said, "Boss, Gertrude's actin' up again."

"Gertrude be blowed," growled Bucky. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Gow's black eyes were unpleasant. "I'm tellin' you, Boss, Gertrude ain't happy. She ain't had the right food. If something..."

I said, "That'll be all taken care of, Gow. Run along now."

He looked at me like he was thinking it wouldn't take much timber to fit me for a coffin. "Okay! But Gertrude's unhappy. She's lonesome, see? And if she don't get happier pretty soon I ain't sure your tin-pot ship'll hold her."

He pulled the curtains to and departed. Bucky Shannon groaned. Beamish cleared his throat and said, rather stiffly.

"Gertrude?"

"Yeah. She's kind of temperamental." Bucky took a quick drink. I finished for him.

"She's the star attraction of our show, Mr. Beamish. A real blue-swamp Venusian cansin. The only other one on the Triangle belongs to Savitt Brothers, and she's much smaller than Gertrude."

She was also much younger, but I didn't go into that. Gertrude may be a little creaky, but she's still pretty impressive. I only hoped she wouldn't die on us, because without her we'd have a sicker-looking circus than even I could stand.

Beamish looked impressed. "A cansin. Well, well! The mystery surrounding the origin and species of the cansin is a fascinating subject. The extreme rarity of the animal..."

We were getting off the subject. I said tactfully, "We'd have to have at least a hundred U.C.'s."

It was twice what we had any right to ask. I was prepared to dicker. Beamish looked at me with that innocent dead pan. For a fraction of a second I thought I saw something back of his round blue eyes, and my stomach jumped like it was shot. Beamish smiled sweetly.

"I'm not much of a bargainer. One hundred Universal Credits will be agreeable to me." He dragged out a roll as big as my two fists, peeled off half a dozen credit slips, and laid them on the table.

"By way of a retainer, gentlemen. My attorney and I will call on you in the morning with a contract and itinerary. Good night."

We said good night, trying not to drool. Beamish went away. Bucky made a grab for the money, but I beat him to it.

"Scram," I said. "There are guys waiting for this. Big guys with clubs. Here." I gave him a small-denomination slip I'd been holding out. "We can get lushed enough on this."

Shannon has a good vocabulary. He used it. When he got his breath back he said suddenly, "Beamish is pulling some kind of game."

"Yeah."

"It may be crooked."

"Sure. And he may be a screwball and on the level. For Pete's sake!" I yelled. "You want to sit here till we all dry up and blow away?"

Shannon looked at me, kind of funny. He looked at the bulge in my tunic where the roll was. He raked back his thick light hair. "Yeah," he said. "I hope there'll be enough left to bribe the jury."

He poked his head outside. "Hey boy! More thildatum!"

was pretty late when we got back to the broken-down spaceport where Shannon's Imperial Circus was crouching beneath its attachments. Late as it was, they were waiting for us. About twenty of them, sitting around and smoking and looking very ugly.

It was awfully lonesome out there, with the desert cold and restless under the two moons. There's a smell to Mars, like something dead and dried long past decay, but still waiting. An unhappy smell. The blown red dust gritted in my teeth.

Bucky Shannon walked out into the glare of the light at the entrance to the roped-off space around the main lock. He was pretty

steady on his feet. He waved and said, "Hiya, boys."

They got up off the step, and the packing cases, and came toward us. I grinned and got into my brassies. We felt we owed those boys a lot more than money. It grates on a man's pride to have to sneak in and out of his own property through the sewage lock. This was the first time in weeks we'd come in at the front door.

I waved the money in their faces. That stopped them. Very solemnly, Bucky and I checked the bills, paid them, and pocketed the receipts. Bucky yawned and stretched sleepily.

"Now?" he said.

"Now," I said.

We had a lot of fun. Some of the boys inside the ship came out to join in. We raised a lot of dust and nobody got killed, quite. We all went home happy. They had their money, and we had their blood.

The news was all over the ship before we got inside. The freaks and the green girl from Tethys who could roll herself like a hoop, and Zurt the muscle man from Jupiter, and all the other assorted geeks and kinkers and joeys that make up the usual corny carnie were doing nip-ups in the passageways and drooling over the thought of steer and toppings.

Bucky Shannon regarded them possessively, wiping blood from his nose. "They're good guys, Jig. Swell people. They stuck by me, and I've rewarded them."

I said, "Sure," rather sourly. Bucky hiccupped.

"Let's go see Gertrude."

I didn't want to see Gertrude. I never got over feeling funny going into the brute tank, especially at night or out in space. I'm a city guy, myself. The smell and sound of wildness gives me goose bumps. But Bucky was looking stubborn, so I shrugged.

"Okay But just for a minute. The we go beddy-bye."

"You're a pal, Jif. Bes' li'l guy inna worl'..."

The fight had just put the topper on him, I was afraid he'd fall down the ladder and break his neck. That's why I went along. If I hadn't... Oh, well, what's a few nightmares among friends?

It was dark down there in the tank. Way off at the other end, there was a dim glow. Gow was evidently holding Gertrude's hand. We

started down the long passageway between the rows of cages and glassed-in tanks and compression units.

Our footsteps sounded loud and empty on the iron floor. I wasn't near as happy as Shannon, and my skin began to crawl a little. It's the smell, I think; rank and sour and wild. And the sound of them, breathing and rustling in the dark, with the patient hatred walled around them as strong as the cage bars.

Bucky Shannon lurched against me suddenly. I choked back a yell, and then wiped the sweat off my forehead and cursed. The scream came again. A high, ragged, whistling screech like nothing this side of hell, ripping through the musty darkness. Gertrude, on the wailing wall. It had been quiet. Not every brute in the place let go at the same time. My stomach turned clear over. I called Gertrude every name I mild think of, and I couldn't hear myself doing it. Presently a great metallic crash nearly burst my eardrums, and the beasts shut up. Gow had them nicely conditioned to that gong.

But they didn't quiet down. Not really. They were uneasy. You can feel them inside you when they're uneasy. I think that's why I'm scared of them. They make me feel like I'm not human as I thought – like I wanted to put my back-hair up and snarl. Yeah. They were uneasy that night, all of a sudden...

Gow glared at us as we came up into the lantern light. "She's gettin' worse," he said. "She's lonesome."

"That's tough," said Bucky Shannon. His grey-green eyes looked like an owl's. He swayed slightly. "That's sure tough." He sniffled.

I looked at Gertrude. Her cage is the biggest and strongest in the tank and even so she looked as though she could break it open just taking deep breath. I don't know if you've ever seen a cansin.

There's only two of them on the Triangle. If you haven't, nothing I can say will make much difference.

They're what the brain gang calls an "end of evolution." Seems old Dame Nature had as idea that didn't jell. The cansins were pretty successful for a while, it seems, but something gummed up the works and now there's only a few left, way in the deep-swamp country, where even the Venusians hardly ever go. Living fossils.

I wouldn't know, of course, but Gertrude looks to me like she got stuck some place between a dinosaur and a grizzly bear, with maybe a little bird blood thrown in. Anyway, she's big.

I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was crouched in the cage with her hands – yeah, hands – hanging over her knees and her snaky head sunk into her shoulders, looking out. Just looking. Not at anything. Her eyes were way back in deep horny pits, like cold green fire.

The lantern light was yellow on her blue-black skin, but it made the mane, or crest, of coarse wide scales that ran from between her eyes clear down to her flat, short tail, burn all colors. She looked like old Mother Misery herself, from way back before time began.

Gow said softly, "She wants a mate. And somebody better get her one."

Bucky Shannon sniffled again. I said irritably, "Be reasonable, Gow! Nobody's ever seen a male cansin. There may not even be any."

Gertrude screamed again. She didn't move, not even to raise her head. The sadness just built up inside her until it had to come out. I 'hat close, the screech was deafening, and it turned me all limp and cold inside. The loneliness, the sheer stark, simple pain...

Bucky Shannon began to cry. I snarled, "You'll have to snap her out of this, Gow. She's driving the rest of 'em nuts."

He hammered on his gong, and things quieted down again. Gow stood looking out over the tank, sniffing a little, like a hound. Then he turned to Gertrude.

"I saved her life," he said. "When we bought her out of Hanak's wreck and everybody thought she was too hurt to live, I saved her. I know her. I can do things with her. But this time..."

I He shrugged. I He was huge and tough and ugly, and his voice was

like a woman's about a sick child. "This time." he said, "I ain't sure."

"Well for Pete's sake, do what you can. We got a charter, and we need her." I took Shannon's arm. "Come to bed, Bucky darlin'."

He draped himself over my shoulder and we went off. Gow didn't look at us. Bucky sobbed.

"You were right, Jig," he mumbled. "Circus is no good. I know it. But it's all I got. I love it, Jig. Unnerstan' me? Like Gow there with Gertrude. She's ugly and no good, but he loves her. I love..."

"Sure, sure," I told him. "Stop crying down my neck."

We were a long way from the light, then. The cages and tanks loomed high and black over us. It was still. The secret, uneasy motion all around us and the scruffing of our feet only made it stiller.

Bucky was almost asleep on me. I started to slap him. And then the mist rose up out of the darkness in little lazy coils, sparkling faintly with cold, blue fire.

I yelled, "Gow! Gow, the Vapor snakes! Gow – for God's sake!"

I started to run, back along the passageway. Bucky weighed on me, limp and heavy. The noise burst suddenly in a deafening hell of moans and roars and shrieks, packed in tight by the metal walls, and above it all I could hear Gertrude's lonely, whistling scream.

I thought, "Somebody's down here. Somebody let 'em out. Somebody wants to kill us!" I tried to yell again. It strangled in my throat. I sobbed, and the sweat was thick and cold on me.

One of Bucky's dragging, stumbling feet got between mine. We III. I rolled on top of him, covering his face, and buried my own face in the hollow of his shoulder.

The first snake touched me. It was like a live wire, sliding along the back of my neck. I screamed. It came down along my cheek, hunting my mouth. There was more of them, burning me through Bucky

moaned and kicked under me. I remember hanging on and thinking, "This is it. This is it, and oh God, I'm scared!"

Then I went out.

II

Kanza the Martian croaker, was bending over me when I woke up. His little brown face was crinkled with laughter. He'd lost most of his

teeth, and he gummed thak-weed. It smelt.

"You pretty, Mis' Jig," he giggled. "You funny like hell."

He slapped some cold greasy stuff on my face. It hurt. I cursed him and said, "Where's Shannon? How is he?"

"Mis' Bucky okay. You save life. You big hero, Mis' Jig. Mis' Gow come nick-uhtime, get snakes. You hero. Haw! You funny like hell!"

I said, "Yeah," and pushed him away and got up. I almost fell down a couple of times, but presently I made it to the mirror over the washstand – I was in my own cell – and I saw what Kanza meant. The damned snakes had done a good job. I looked like I was upholstered in Scotch plaid. I felt sick.

Bucky Shannon opened the door. He looked white and grim, and there was a big burn across his neck. He said:

"Beamish is here with his lawyer."

I picked up my shirt. "Right with you."

Kanza went out, still giggling. Bucky closed the door.

"Jig," he said, "those vapor worms were all right when we went in. Somebody followed us down and let them out. On purpose."

I hurt all over. I growled. "With that brain, son, you should go far. obody saw anything, of course?" Bucky shook his head.

"Question is, Jig, who wants to kill us, and why?"

"Beamish. He realizes he's been gypped."

"One hundred U.C.'s," said Bucky softly, "for a few lousy swampedge mining camps. It stinks, Jig. You think we should back out?"

I shrugged. "You're the boss man. I'm only the guy that beats off the creditors."

"Yeah," Bucky said reflectively. "And I hear starvation isn't a comfortable death. Okay, Jig. Let's go sign." He put his hand on the latch and looked at my feet. "And - uh - Jig, I..."

I said, "Skip it. The next time, just don't trip me up, that's all!"

We had a nasty trip to Venus. Gertrude kept the brute tank on edge, and Gow, on the rare occasions he came up for air, went around looking like a disaster hoping to happen. To make it worse, Zurt the Jovian strong-man got hurt during the take-off, and the Mercurian cave-cat had kittens.

Nobody would have minded that, only one of 'em had only four legs. It lived just long enough to scare that bunch of superstitious dopes out of their pants. Circus people are funny that way.

Shannon and I did a little quiet sleuthing, but it was a waste of time. Anybody in the gang might have let those electric worms out on us. It didn't help any to know that somebody, maybe the guy next to you at dinner, was busy thinking ways to kill you. By the time we hit Venus, I was ready to do a Brodie out the refuse chute.

Shannon set the crate down on the edge of Nahru, the first stop on our itinerary. I stood beside him, looking out the ports at the scenery. It was Venus, all right. Blue mud and thick green jungle and rain, and a bunch of ratty-looking plastic shacks huddling together in the middle of it. Men in slickers were coming out for a look.

I saw Beamish's sleek yacht parked on a cradle over to the left, and our router's runabout beside it. Bucky Shannon groaned.

"A blue one, Jig. A morgue if I ever saw one!"

I snarled, "What do you want, with this lousy dog-and-pony show!" and went out. He followed. The gang was converging on the lock, but they weren't happy. You get so you can feel those things. The steamy Venus heat was already sneaking into the ship.

While we passed the hatchway to the brute tank, I could hear Gertrude, screaming.

The canvasmen were busy setting up the annex, slopping and cursing in the mud. The paste brigade was heading for the shacks. Shann-on and I stood with the hot rain running off our slickers, looking.

I heard a noise behind me and looked around. Ahra the Nahali woman was standing in the mud with her arms up and her head thrown back, and her triangular mouth open like a thirsty dog. She didn't have anything on but her blue-green, hard scaled hide, and she was chuckling. It didn't sound nice.

You find a lot of Nahali people in sideshows, doing tricks with the electric power they carry in their own bodies. They're Venusian middle-swampers, they're not human, and they never forget it.

Ahra opened her slitted red eyes and looked at me and laughed with white reptilian teeth.

"Death," she whispered. "Death and trouble. The jungle tells me. I can smell it in the swamp wind."

The hot rain sluiced over her. She shivered, and the pale skin under her jaw pulsed like a toad's, and her eyes were red.

"The deep swamps are angry," she whispered. "Something has been taken. They are angry, and I smell death in the wind!"

She turned away, laughing, and I cursed her, and my stomach was tight and cold. Bucky said,

"Let's eat if they have a bar in this dump."

We weren't half way across the mud puddle that passed as a landing field when a man came out of a shack on the edge of the settlement. We could see him plainly, because he was off to one side of the crowd.

He fell on his knees in the mud, making noises. It took him three or four tries to get our names out clear enough to understand. Bucky said, "Jig – it's Sam Kapper."

We started to run. The crowd, mostly big, unshaken miners, wheeled around to see what was happening. People began to close in on the man who crawled and whimpered in the mud.

Sam Kapper was a hunter, supplying animals to zoos and circuses and carnivals. He'd given us good deals a couple of times, when we weren't too broke, and we were pretty friendly.

I hadn't seen him for three seasons. I remembered him as a bronzed, hard-bitten guy, lean and tough as a twist of tung wire. I felt sick, looking down at him.

Bucky started to help him up. Kapper was crying, and he jerked all over like animals I've seen that were scared to death. Some guy leaned over and put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it for him.

I was thinking about Kapper, then, and I didn't pay much attention. I only caught a glimpse of the man's face as he straightened up. I didn't realize until later that he looked familiar.

We got Kapper inside the shack. It turned out to be a cheap bar, with a couple of curtained booths at the back. We got him into one and pulled the curtain in a lot of curious faces. Kapper dragged hard on the cigarette. The man that gave it to him was gone.

Bucky said gently, "Okay, Sam. Relax. What's the trouble?"

Kapper tried to straighten up. He hadn't shaved. The lean hard lines of his face had gone slack and his eyes were bloodshot. He was covered with mud, and his mouth twitched like a sick old man's.

He said thickly, "I found it. I said I'd do it, and I did. I found it and brought it out."

The cigarette stub fell out of his mouth. He didn't notice it. "Help me," he said simply. "I'm scared." His mouth drooled.

"I got it hidden. They want to find out, but I won't tell 'em. It's got to go back. Back where I found it. I tried to take it, but they wouldn't let me, and I was afraid they'd find it..."

He reached suddenly and grabbed the edge of the table. "I don't know how they found out about it, but they did. I've got to get back. I've got to..."

Bucky looked at me. Kapper was blue around the mouth. I was scared, suddenly. I said, "Get what back where?"

Bucky got up. "I'll get a doctor," he said. "Stick with him." Kapper grabbed his wrist. Kapper's nails were blue and the cords in his hands stood out like guy wires.

"Don't leave me. Got to tell you – where it is. Got to take it back. Promise you'll take it back." He gasped and struggled over his breathing.

"Sure," said Bucky. "Sure, we'll take it back. What is it?"

Kipper's face was horrible. I felt sick, listening to him fight for air. I wanted to go for a doctor anyway, but somehow I knew it was no use. Kapper whispered,

"Cansin. Male. Only one. You don't know...! Take him back."

"Where is it, Sam?"

I reached across Bucky suddenly and jerked the curtain back.

Beamish was standing there. Beamish, bent over, with his ear cocked. Kapper made a harsh strangling noise and fell across the table.

Beamish never changed expression. He didn't move while Bucky felt Kapper's pulse. Bucky didn't need to say anything. We knew.

"Heart?" said Beamish finally.

"Yeah," said Bucky. He looked as bad as I felt. "Poor Sam."

I looked at the cigarette stub smoldering on the table. I looked at Beamish with his round dead baby face. I climbed over Shannon and pushed Beamish suddenly down into his lap.

"Keep this guy here till I get back," I said.

Shannon stared at me. Beamish started to get indignant. "Shut up," I told him. "We got a contract." I yanked the curtains shut and walked over to the bar.

I began to notice something, then. There were quite a lot of men in the place. At first glance they looked okay – a hard-faced, muscular bunch of miners in dirty shirts and high boots.

Then I looked at their hands. They were dirty enough. But they never did any work in a mine, on Venus or anywhere else.

The place was awfully quiet, for that kind of place. The bartender was a big pot-bellied swampneger with pale eyes and thick white hair coiled up on top of his bullet head. He was not happy.

I leaned on the bar. "Lhak," I said. He poured it, sullenly, out of a green bottle. I reached for it, casually

"That guy we brought in," I said. "He sure has a skinful. Passed out cold. What's he been spiking his drinks with?"

"Selak," said a voice in my ear. "As if you didn't know."

I turned. The man who had given Kapper the cigarette was standing behind me. And I remembered him, then.

Circus people get around a lot, and the Law supplies us with Wanted sheets. I remembered this guy from the last batch they handed us on Mars. Melak Thompson was his name, and he had a reputation.

He had a face you wouldn't forget. Dark and kind of handsome, with the Drylander blood showing in the heavy bones and the tilted green eyes. His mouth was smiling and brutal. He nodded at the booth.

"Let's take a walk," he said.

We took a walk. The men sitting at the dirty tables were still silent, and still not miners. I began to sweat.

The booth was a little crowded with us all in there. I sat jammed up against Sam Kapper's body. Bucky Shannon's grey-green eyes were

sleepy, and there was a vein beating on his forehead.

Beamish said to Melak, "Kapper's dead. Dead, without talking."

"That's tough." Melak shook his dark head. "We was gentle with him."

"Yeah," I said. Kapper had been a good guy, and I was mad. "Feed anybody enough selak, and you can afford to be. It's a dirty death."

Selak's made from a Venusian half-cousin of henbane, which is what scopolamine comes from. It has a terrific effect on the heart. And Kapper had simply torn himself apart trying to keep from talking while he was under the influence.

Bucky Shannon made a slow, ugly move to get up. Beamish said, "Sit down."

There was something in his voice and his bland blue eyes. Shannon sat down. Melak was looking at Beamish, still grinning.

"Well," he said, "I guess your idea was pretty good after all."

I had a sudden inspiration. The burns were still sore on my body, and Kapper's tortured face was close to mine, and I took a wild shot at something I wasn't even sure I saw.

"Yeah," I said. "A swell idea. Why did you try so hard to butch it, Melak?"

He stopped grinning. Beamish looked forward a little. My tongue stuck in my mouth, but I managed to say.

"You get it, Bucky. A male cansin, Kapper said. The only one in captivity, maybe even on Venus. Worth its weight in credit slips. That's why Beamish was so happy to overpay us to get us out here – because he thought Gertrude could find her boyfriend fast, even if Kapper didn't talk."

I turned to Melak again. "A swell idea. Why did you have those vapor snakes turned loose on us? Did you think Kapper was enough?"

He struck me, pretty hard, across the mouth. My head banged against the booth wall and for a minute I couldn't see anything but spangles of fire shooting around. I heard Beamish say, from a great distance,

"How about it, Melak?"

It was awfully still in the booth. I swallowed some blood and blinked my eyes clear enough to see Bucky Shannon poised across the

table like a bow starting to unbend. And suddenly, somewhere far off over the drum of rain on the flimsy roof, there began to be noises.

I hadn't been comfortable up till then. I'm no Superman, nor one of those guys you read about who can stare Death in the eye and shatter him with a light laugh.

But all of a sudden I was afraid. Afraid so that all the fear I'd felt before was nothing. And it was funny, too. I didn't know what it was, then, but I knew what it wasn't. It wasn't Beamish or Melak or those hard guys beyond the curtains, or even Kapper's body pressed up against me.

I didn't know what it was. But I wanted to get down on the floor and hide myself in a crack, like a cockroach.

The others felt it, too. I remember the sweat standing out on Bucky Shannon's forehead, and the suddening tightening of Beamish's jaw, and the glitter in Melak's green eyes.

Beyond the curtains there was an uneasy stirring of feet. The confused, distant noise grew louder. Somewhere, not very far away, a woman began to scream.

Beamish said softly, "You dirty double-crossing rat." His face was still dead-pan, only now it was like something beaten out of iron. His hands were out of sight under the table.

Melak smiled. I could feel his body shift and tense beside me. "Sure," he said. "I double-crossed you. Why not? I planted a guy in the circus hammer gang and he crawled in the sewage lock and tried to get these punks. I'm glad now he bungled it. Kapper had guts."

Beamish whispered, "You're a fool. You don't know what you're playing with. I've done research, and I do."

"Too bad you wasted the time," said Melak. "Because you're through."

He threw himself suddenly aside, lifting the table hard into Beamish. The curtains ripped away and he rolled in them, twisting like a snake. I yelled to Bucky and dropped flat. Beamish had drawn a gun under the table. The blast of it seared my face.

The next second four heavy blasters spoke at once. Beamish's gun dropped on the floor. Then it was quiet again, and I could hear the woman screaming, outside in the beating rain.

Melak got up. "Sure I double-crossed you," he said softly. "Why should I split with anybody? obody knows about it but us. Kapper couldn't send word from the swamps when he caught it, and he couldn't send word from here because he wasn't let.

"That critter'll bring anything I ask for it. Why should I split with you?"

Beamish didn't answer. I don't think Melak thought he would.

The noise from outside was geting louder. Bucky groaned.

"It's coming from the pitch, Jig. Trouble. We've got to..."

The table was yanked from over us. We got up off our knees. Melak looked at us. He was shaking a little and his green eyes were mean.

"I don't think," he said, "I really need you guys around, either." He jerked his head suddenly. "Cripes, I wish that dame would shut up!"

It was getting on my nerves, too – that monotonous, sawing screech. Melak stepped aside. "Get 'em, boys. I don't want 'em dragging their outfit down on our necks."

Four blaster barrels came up. My insides came up with them. I was way beyond anything, then – even panic.

Gow burst in through the doorway.

He was soaked to the skin, tattered, bleeding, and wild-eyed. He yelled, "Boss! Gertrude..." Then he saw the guns and stopped.

It was very still in the place. Outside there was sound rising like a sullen tide against the walls. The woman's screaming became something not human then stopped, short.

Gow said, almost absently, "Gertrude went nuts. We'd brought her cage up from the tank for the show and she – broke out. There wasn't nothin' we could do. She busted a lot of cages and then disappeared."

Melak snarled something, I don't know what. The wall behind Gow jarred, buckled, and split open around the doorway. Bamboo fragments clattered on the floor. Somebody yelled, and a blaster went off.

Gertrude stood in the splintered opening. She looked at us with cold, mad green eyes, towering huge and blue against the low roof, her hands swinging and her crest erect.

She let go one wild, whistling screech and came straight toward the booth. Bucky Shannon touched my arm.

"Climb into your brassies, kid," he muttered. "Here's our chance!" I caught his shoulder. He followed the line of my pointing, and I felt him tremble.

Gertrude was coming at us like a rocket express. Behind her wet and glistening from the hot rain, came three more just like her.

III

We scattered, all of us, hunting for a way out. There was only one door leading to the back, and it was stoppered tight with men cursing and fighting to get through. Gow was crouched in a corner by the splintered wall.

I pulled Bucky along, thinking we might get in back of the cansins and sneak out. I wondered what they wanted. And I wondered where in heck you could hide a thing as big as Gertrude and keep anybody from finding out.

Somebody screamed briefly. I saw one of the strange cansins toss the bartender aside like a dry twig. Gow rose up in front of me with a queer staring look in his eyes.

"Somethin's wrong," he said. "All wrong. I..." His mouth twitched. He turned sharply and started to scramble through the wrecked hall. Bucky and I were right on his heels. I think Melak and some of his lobbygows were crowding us, but nobody was thinking about things like that any more.

I knew what was eating Gow. The fear that had looked out of Kapper's eyes. The fear that was riding me. Fear that had nothing to do with anything physical.

Bucky cursed and stumbled beside me. And suddenly the four cansins let go a tremendous thundering scream. The hair rose on my neck, and I turned to look. I just had to.

Gertrude had turned away from the booth. They stood, the four of them, their huge black shoulders touching, their crests like rows of petrified flame, staring at what Gertrude held in her arms.

It was Kapper's body.

Slowly, with infinite gentleness, she began to strip him. He hung loose in the cradle of one great arm, his flesh showing bluenwhite against her blueness. Her free hand ripped his clothes away like things made of paper.

I don't know why nobody tried to shoot the beasts after the first second. Sheer panic, I guess. We could have killed them all, then. But we just stood looking, fascinated by the slow, intent baring of Kapper's body.

And the strange fear. It was on us all.

Kapper lay naked in her black arms. She raised him slowly over her head, her eyes blind green fires deep under bony brows. The others drew closer, shivering, and I could hear them whimper.

Strangers from the deep swamps with no stink of man on them. I thought of the Nahali woman laughing in the hot rain. Death from the deep swamps, because something had been taken, and they were angry.

There was a little black box strapped to Kapper's thin white belly.

Gertrude shifted her hands a little. The blood hammered in my ears. I was sick. I didn't want to look any more. I couldn't help it. Bucky Shannon caught a hard, sobbing breath. Gertrude broke Sam Kapper's body in two. I can still hear the noise it made. The blood ran dark and sluggish down her arms. It worried me that Kapper's face didn't change expression. The little black box on his belly split with the rest of him.

Something rose out of it. Something no bigger than my forefinger that carried a cold green blaze around it like a ball of St. Elmo's fire.

Gertrude threw Kapper away. I heard the two flopping thuds of him hitting the floor. Some guy was down on his knees close to me. His lips moved. I don't know if he could remember his prayers. Somebody else was vomiting, hard. I wanted to, but my stomach felt frozen.

The cold green fire had a shape inside it. I couldn't make it out clearly, except that it looked horribly human. It put out four thin green filaments. Don't ask me if they were physical things like tentacles, or just beams of light, or maybe thought. I don't know. Whatever they were, they worked.

They connected with the four black, snaky heads of the female cousins. I felt the shock of them connecting with my own nerves. And it was like something had welded those four brutes together into one.

They had been four. Separate, with hard outlines. Now they were one. One single interlocking entity. I guess it was just my being so scared and sick, but I thought I saw their outlines blur a little.

Gow spoke suddenly. His voice was loud, and calm.

"That was it," he said, as though it was the only thing in the world that mattered. "They ain't complete by themselves. Like the zurats back home on Mercury. They got a community brain. No wonder Gertrude was lonesome."

His voice broke the spell. Somebody screamed, and everybody started to move at once, clawing in blind panic for the openings. And we all knew, then, what we were afraid of.

We were afraid of the little thing in the black box, the thing in a cloak of fire that had risen from the ruins of Kapper's body, and the power that lived in it.

I suppose we thought we were going to fight it, all right. But outside, where we could breathe. Not in here, with the hugeness of the females smothering us, penned in with the last male cansin in creation.

I knew then why Kapper had broken, and why he hadn't told, in spite of the selak. The thing hadn't let him. And it had called to its kind, from the deep swamps and Buckhalter Shannon's Imperial Circus.

The deep indigo night of Venus had settled down, in the smell of mud and jungle and the hot rain. Lights flared crazily here and there out of open doorways. People were yelling, the tight, animal mob-yell of fear.

There was no place to run in Nahru. The jungle held it. The thick green jungle built on quicksand and crawling with death. Behind us the four cansins raised a wild whistling screech.

It was answered, out of the hot night between the little shacks of Nahru. Brute voices, singing their hate. Suddenly I remembered what Gow had said. "She busted a lot of cages...."

God knew what was loose in that town.

Bucky Shannon spoke beside me. We were still running, slipping and floundering in the mud, making toward the ship from sheer instinct. He gasped,

"We got to get those babies rounded up. Gow! Gow, you hear hear me? We got to get 'em back!"

Gow's voice came sullenly. "I hear you, boss." We slowed down. It was suddenly important to hear what more Gow had to say.

"Don't you get it?" he asked slowly. "Gertrude let 'em out. She wanted 'em – to help her. They know it. They ain't going back."

Somewhere behind us a plastic shack cracked open like an egg-shell. Human cries were drowned in a whistling screech. Off to the right the Mercurian cavecat began to laugh like a crazy woman.

Slow, patient, animal hate, walled around them, waiting. The feel and smell of hate in the brute tank. I could feel and smell it now, only it wasn't patient and waiting any more.

The time it has waited for was here. Gertrude had set it free.

Shannou said, very softly, "Mother o' God, what are we going to do?"

"Get back to the ship. Get back and get out of here!"

I jumped. It was Melak's voice, sounding hard and ugly. Light spilling out of a sagging door made a faint silhouette of him in the rain. He held a blaster in his hand.

Shannon snarled, "Take off with half my gang stranded here? You go to hell!"

Rockets blasted suddenly out on the landing field. Somebody had made it to Beamish's yacht and gone. The runabout followed it. The circus ship was still there, and the only one in Nahru.

I said, "We can't go. Not with a couple hundred credits' worth of animals running loose in the town."

"Get on to the ship," said Malek. "Gripes, if I knew how to fly I'd leave you here! Now move!"

Shannon was almost crying. He started to rush Melak. I caught him and said, "Sure. Sure we'll move. All of us. Look behind you!" "I was weaned on that one. Move!"

Well, it was his funeral.

IT was almost ours, too. Ganymedian puffballs move fast. They had come out from between two shacks, skimming over the mud on their long white cilia. There were three of them, rolled up in balls about the size of my head. They didn't make any noise.

They came up behind Melak. Two of them unrolled suddenly, whipping out into lean, fuzzy ropes about five feet long. They went around the Martian 'breed. The third one came straight at me.

Melak made a noise that wasn't human and went down, The puffballs tightened around him, pulsing a little with the pleasure of digestion. Gow was on the other side of Melak, too far away, and unarmed.

I jumped, and the mud tripped me. Shannon fell the other way. The puffball, strung out now like a fuzzy snake, paused a moment, not three inches from my face. I lay still on my belly, choking on my heart.

Shannon moved, and it whipped down across his legs.

He screamed. I could feel the poison from the thing eating into him. I got to my knees and he cursed me and raised something out of the mud. It was Melak's blaster. He fired, between his Feet.

The puffball shrivelled to a little stinking wire and dropped away. Bucky said evenly,

"That pays me off. Now it's all your party, Jig."

He fainted. His legs were already swelling. Gow bent over him. "He's gotta have the croaker, quick."

"You take him to the ship, Gow. If you can get there."

"Me? I'm the zoo-man. I oughta...."

"Do I look like Superman, to carry that big lug?" I didn't know why it was so hard to talk. "Get him there. Then round up everybody left at the ship. Get guns and ropes and torches and come back, quick!"

He nodded and got Bucky across his shoulders. I gave him the blaster. Then I turned back. I knew where most of the circus gang would be – spread out among the bars.

It was a lot darker, because now all the doors were closed, except two or three where the people hadn't lived to close them. It was quieter, too, because there's a limit to the noise a human throat can make. There was just the hot rain, and the soft jungle undertone of things padding and slithering in the mud, hunting.

Up the street somewhere the cansins screamed, and another shack split open. Instantly the brute clamor went up from the dark alleys, answering. Animal legions from five different planets, led by a tiny creature in a cloak of green fire. And man was the common enemy.

A pair of Martian sand-tigers shot out into the street ahead of me. They were frolicking like kittens, playing with something dark and tattered. Then they saw me and dropped it, and came sliding on their bellies, their six powerful legs sucking in the mud.

There was no place to go. I don't remember being particularly scared, but that wasn't because I was brave. It was sheer exhaustion. A guy can only take so much. Now I was just walking around, seeing and hearing, but not feeling anything inside. Like a guy that's coked to the ears, or punchy from a beating.

I picked up a double handful of mud and slung it in their snarling pussies, and threw my head back and yelled.

"Ha-a-y Rubel!"

A door at my left opened three inches, daggering the rain with yellow light. A voice said,

"For gossakes get in here!"

I picked up another handful of mud. The Martian cats were pawing the last load out of their eyes. I gave them more to play with. I guess they weren't very hungry, just then. I said, "I'm going to get the cansins."

Just like that. I told you I was out on my feet. Clean nuts. The guy in the doorway thought so too.

"Will you come in before you're too dead?"

"And wait around for those big apes to crack the house open over my head? The hell with that." More mud splashed in the cat's faces. They were beginning to get sore. "The rest of the critters are just following the cansins. Sort of a mopping-up brigade. Stop the cansins, and we can round up the others easy."

"Oh, sure," said the man. "Any time before breakfast. Are you coming, pal, or do I shut this door again?"

I don't know how it would have turned out. Probably I'd have wound up inside the cats. But one of 'em let out a shrill, nasty wail, the kind they give the trainer when they're challenging him to a finish

fight, and somebody came shouldering out past the man in the doorway.

The door swung wide, so that there was plenty of light. The six-inch fangs on the Martian kitties were a beautiful, shining white. The newcomer said something to the cats in a level undertone and came to me.

It was Jarin, the Titan who works the cats. He's about half my height, metallic green in color, and faster on his feet than a rummy to the first drink. He looks like a walking barrel when he's folded up, and like nothing on earth when he isn't.

He was unfolded then. He went up to the cats, light and dainty in the mud. They were crouching uneasily, coughing and snarling, wanting to rush him and not quite daring to.

The male sprang.

IV

All I could see was a green blur in the rain. I heard the crisp, wicked smacks of Jarin's tentacles on the tiger. It flopped over in mid-air, buried its face in the mud and came up yowling, like your Aunt Minnie's cat when you stepped on its tail.

It went away from there, fast, with its mate right behind it.

Jarin chuckled softly. "About the cansins," he hissed. "You had an idea?"

Somewhere, quite close to us, there was the familiar sound of a plastic shack going to pieces. I remembered hearing blasters rip occasionally. But only Melak's hoods were armed with anything heavy enough to do any good, and I guessed most of them had beat it to Beamish's yacht. A cansin has a hell of a tough hide, and their vitality is something you wouldn't believe if you hadn't seen it.

The familiar whistling screech went up, and the babel of human screams and the brute chorus from the rainy alleys. I think, right then,

I began to get scared. The fear began to seep through my dopey calm, like pain in a new wound.

I shuddered and said, "No. No ideas."

There was a soft step in the mud behind me. I spun around, sweating. Ahra the Nahali woman stood there, redneyed and laughing.

"You are frightened," she whispered.

I didn't deny it.

"I can help you stop the cansins." Her eyes glittered like wet rubies and her teeth were white and sharp. "It may not work, and you may die. Will you try it?"

She was daring me. She was hardly more than human than the brutes themselves, and she belonged with the rain and the hot indigo

I said, "You don't want to help, Ahra. You want us to die."

I could see the pale skin throbbing under her bony jaw. She laughed, soft alien laughter that made my back hair stir and prickle.

"You humans," she whispered. "Trampling and spoiling. The middle swamps have suffered you, greedy after oil and plumes and ti. But you we can fight."

She jerked her round, glistening head toward the sound of destruction. "The death from the deep swamps, no. You deserve to die, you humans. You went meddling with something too big even for your pride. But because the cansins killed my mate and our first young...."

She hunched up. I thought she was going to flop on her belly like a cayman in the mud. Her teeth gleamed, sharp and savage.

"Legend says the cansins were once the wisest race on Venus. They were worshipped as gods by the little pre-human creatures of the swamp edges. They were going to be the reasoning lords of a planet.

"But nature made a mistake. Perhaps some mutation that couldn't be stopped. I don't know. Anyway, the females grew until their one thought was to find enough food. The males tried to balance this. Most of their strength was in their minds, anyway. But they couldn't.

"The cansins took to eating their worshippers. At the same time the number of eggs they laid grew smaller and smaller. Finally, the swamp-edgers drove them out, back into the deep swamps.

"They've been there ever since, going farther and farther on the path of evolution, dwindling in numbers, always hungry, and hating

the humans who robbed them of their future. Even us they hate, because we go erect and have speech. The females are not independent. The male controls the community mind – they must have unity to exist at all.

"If you could control the male...."

I thought of the little creature in the ball of green fire. I shivered, and the pit of my stomach pinched up. I said, "Yeah? How?"

She chuckled at me. "It may mean death. Will you risk it?"

I didn't have to. I could beat it back to the ship, maybe even rescue some of the gang, with Jarin's help. Then I thought about Bucky and the way he cried down my neck that night in the tank and what would happen to us if we didn't get the animals rounded up. I thought – oh, hell, why does a guy ever do anything? I don't know. Maybe I thought I'd never get across the field to the ship anyhow.

20I said, "Spill it, you she-snake. What do I do?"

"Get Quern," she said, and went off through the hot rain, back into the plastic shack. The door slammed shut. Jarin and I were alone in the dark.

I said, "Will you help me?"

"Of course."

I looked down the street toward the landing field. I felt tired, suddenly. Gone in the knees and weak, and sick to vomiting with fear.

"Here comes Gow," I said. "He's got seven or eight guys with guns. Just keep the critters off us until we get through with the cansins, and try not to kill any more than you can help."

Good old Jig, thinking about money even then. Gow came up. We talked a minute, just the things that had to be said, and then I asked, "Anybody have an idea where Quern might be?"

"Yeah," said Gow slowly. "He was in the ginmill next to the one we was in. Drunk. I heard him singin' when I went by. I think the big apes wrecked it."

WE started off up the muddy street, more as though we'd been wound up to go somewhere and couldn't stop than like men with a purpose. The cansins were close. Awful close. You could hear them sucking and slopping in the muck. The rain fell straight down, almost solid, and the air was thick and hot.

We did a lot of shouting. Some men came out of the shacks to join us, but nobody had seen Quern since the trouble started. We had trouble with the animals in the streets. The vapor snakes got one man, and an Ionian hru poisoned one guy so bad he died the next day. We had to kill a couple of big babies that wouldn't scare off.

And we found the ginmill. Gow was right. It was wrecked, and there were things scattered around amongst the splinters. I was glad it was dark.

"Well," I said, "that's that. We'll just have to do what we can with the blasters." It wouldn't be much. We didn't carry any heavy artillery, and a cansin is awfully hard to stop.

"Any you guys wanta scram, do it now. The rest of you come on."

I took a step. Something squirmed under my foot, squeaked, and began to curse in a voice like a katydid's.

"My God," I said. "It's Quern."

I picked him up. His rubbery little body was slick with mud. He spat and hiccoughed, and snarled.

"Of course it's Quern. Fine thing, leaving me in the mud like that. I might ha' drowned." He started cursing again in Low Martian, which is his native tongue. He's a Diran from the sea-bottom pits of Shun.

Somebody laughed. It sounded hysterical. "The little lush! He don't even know what's happened!"

And he didn't. The cansins hadn't even seen him. He'd just been tromped into the mud and left there, unharmed.

Gow caught his breath suddenly, and somebody whimpered. I looked up. I couldn't see much, in the rain and the indigo dark, but I didn't have to see. I knew what was coming.

A little vicious splotch of living green against the darkness, and underneath it four huge shadows, trampling knee-deep in mud, making toward a plastic hut filled with human beings.

I said softly, "Quern, I never thought you were such a hell of a wonderful hypnotist."

He twinged in my hands. His anger almost burned me. He started to speak, but I stopped him.

"Here's your chance to prove it, chum. See that little green light floating there? Well, go to it, Quern. And it had better be good, or it's

curtains – for Nahru and all of us."

I walked over toward the cansins, holding Quern in my hands.

The brutes must have sensed us. They stopped and wheeled around. Quern shivered. He was beginning to understand things. He snarled, "How do you expect me to do my act? No platform – nothing! You're crazy, Jig! Let's get out of here."

I shook him. "Put that baby to sleep. Make him and his harem go out of town, north. There's quicksand there. Go on, damn you!" He cursed me. You could smell the fear rising hot from us all. I heard feet running behind me, and then more, going away. Quern said, "All right, you crazy fool. Raise me up. Hold your hands flat."

I made a platform out of my palms. And the cansins started our way

Gow whispered, "Don't shoot. Don't anybody shoot." I don't think he knew then, that there wasn't anybody left to shoot but himself and Jarin.

The cansins were huge and solid, behemoths carved from the night. They towered over us, and the green light pulsed. My jaw hung open and I couldn't breathe, and I'd have run only my joints were all water.

Quern went into his act.

He began to show color. Out of nothing his body started to glow, from inside. You could see the round blurred shape of him, and the phosphorescence of his guts, showing through. First red, savage as a punch in the face, and then all the rest of the spectrum, sometimes one color, sometimes a swirl of them.

His body changed shape. I could feel the queer rubbery movement of it on my hands. I remembered the rubes I'd seen standing around Quern's platform, their eyes drawn half out of their heads by the shifting lines and colors. It worked with them. But not here. The cansins came on. The green light flared a little brighter, and that was all. Habit and control were so strong that not even the females paid much attention to Quern. I could see the rain smoking

Their huge black shoulders. They were right on top of us.

Quern gasped, "I can't do it!" His glow deadened. I shook him.

"I knew you were a phony! You two-bit yentzer! Jarin, slow 'em down, can't you?"

Quern began to shimmer again. Jarin faded in, hardly visible in the darkness. I heard his tentacles whiplashing across hard flesh.

One of the cansins screamed. The green light did a sharp dip and swirl. And I yelled, "Gow! Speak to Gertrude!"

The terrifying forward march slowed a little. Quern was churning colors out of his guts as though his life depended on it – which it did. Gow stepped forward a little.

"Gertrude," he said. "Gertrude, you ugly, slab-sided, leftn handed –"

He cursed her, affectionately. I never heard anything like his voice. I wanted to cry. In Quern's faint hypnotic glow I saw the green eyes of the nearest female watching, looking wide and queer.

The male was angry, now. Angry and scared. You could tell by the vicious brightness of him. We decided afterward that his light was the same kind a glowworm carries around, only stronger. He was fighting. Fighting to hold those four minds against the attraction of Quern's shifting glow.

He'd have done it, too, if it hadn't been for Gow. Gow, standing in the hot rain and cursing Gertrude with tears in his voice.

Gertrude screamed. Suddenly, for no reason, a strange uncertainty. She moved. A sort of shudder ran through the other three. It was a little like a wall cracking. The male burned savagely.

The females were watching Quern, now. Gertrude had made the breach. Now the community mind was fastened on the hypnotic little Martian. I could see their green eyes, wide and glassy, their snaky heads nodding a little, trying to follow the flowing outlines.

The male began to dim. He shivered, and lurched a couple of times, still trying to fight. Gow's voice went on, hoarsely, and Gertrude whimpered. The male floated a little closer. I could see, suddenly, what kept him up. Wings, like a hummingbird's, blurred with motion.

They slowed, and the green light dimmed. He began to bob a little in the hot rain, watching Quern.

Quern shivered. "They're under," he sighed. "They're under."

"Send them out. North, to the quicksands." My arms and shoulders ached and I was swaying on my feet. I hardly heard Quern's I dreamy voice. I did hear the slow, obedient noise of their great feet slogging away, the last male cansin a dull green mote above them.

And I heard Gow crying. We got the last of the animals back by noon of the next day. We did what we could for Nahru. Thank god our own beasts hadn't done

much damage. We left a lot of Beamish's credits to help out, and took the old tub off away from there.

Bucky Shannon recovered nicely. I'm still herding his Imperial Washout around the Triangle. We're not doing so hot without Gertrude, but what the hell – we're used to the sewage lock.

And if anyone has a cansin he wants to sell.... Thanks, chum, but we're not in the market. Now, or ever.

I sometimes wonder if there are any more of them in the deep swamps, waiting for their mate to come back.

Thralls of the Endless Night

By Leigh Brackett

Wes Kirk shut his teeth together, hard. He turned his back on Ma Kirk and the five younger ones huddled around the box of heat-stones and went to the doorway, padding soft and tight with the anger in him.

He shoved the curtain of little skins aside and crouched there with his thick shoulders fitted into the angle of the jamb, staring out, cold wind threading in across his splayed and naked feet.

The hackles rose golden and stiff across Kirk's back. He said carefully.

"I would like to kill the Captain and the First Officer and the Second Officer and all the little Officers, and the Engineers, and all their families."

His voice carried inside on the wind eddies. Ma Kirk yelled,

"Wes! You come here and let that curtain down! You want us all to freeze?" Her dark-furred shoulders moved rhythmically over the socking child. She added sharply, "Besides, that's fool's talk, Jakk Randl's talk, and only gets the sucking-plant."

"Who's to hear it?" Kirk raised his heavy over-lids and let his pupils widen, huge liquid drops spreading black across his eyeballs, slicking the dim grey light into themselves, forcing line and shape out of blurred nothingness. He made no move to drop the curtain.

The same sandscape he had stared at since he was able to crawl by away from the box of heat-stones. Flat grey plain running and left to the httle curve of the horizon. Rocks in it, and edible moss. Wind-made gullies with grey shrubs thick in their bottoms, guarding their sour white berries with thorns and sacs of poisoned dust that burst when touched.

Between the fields and the gullies there were huts like his own, sunk into the earth and sodded tight. A lot of huts, but not as many as

there had been, the old ones said. The Hans died, and the huts were empty, and the wind and the earth took them back again.

Kirk raised his shaggy head. The light of the yellow star they called Sun caught in the huge luminous blackness of his eyes.

Beyond the Hans quarter, just where the flat plain began to rise, were the Engineers. Not many of them any more. You could see the rusty lumps where the huts had been, the tumbled heaps of metal that might have meant something once, a longer time ago than anyone could remember. But there were still plenty of huts standing. Two hands and one hand and a thumb of them, full of Engineers who said how the furrows should be laid for the planting but did nothing about the tilling of them.

And beyond the Engineers – the Officers.

The baby cried. Ma Kirk shrilled at her son, and two of the younger ones fought over a bone with no meat on it, rolling and snapping on the dirt floor. Kirk shifted his head forward to shut out the sound of them and followed the line of the plain upward with sullen, glowing eyes.

The huts of the Engineers were larger than those in the Hansquarter. The huts of the Officers were not much larger than the Engineers', but there were more of them and they climbed higher up the grey slope. Five, nearly six hands of them, with the Captain's metal-roofed place highest of all.

Highest and nearest, right under the titanic shape lifting jagged against the icy stars from the crest of the ridge.

The Ship.

Kirk's voice was soft in his thick throat. "I would like to kill them," he said. "I would like to kill them all."

"Yah!" cried a shrill voice over his shoulder. "All but the Captain's yellow daughter!"

Kirk spun angrily around. Lil, next below himself, danced back out of reach, her kilt of little skins flying around her thin hips.

"Yah!" she said again, and wrinkled her flat nose. "I've seen you looking at her. All yellow from head to foot and beautiful pink lids to her eyes. You wouldn't kill her, I bet!"

"I bet I'll half kill you if you don't shut up!"

Lil had stuck out her tongue. Kirk aimed a cuff at her. She danced behind his arm and jerked the curtain down and shot away again, making two jumps over the brawling young ones and the box of heat-stones.

She squatted demurely beside Ma Kirk and said, as though nothing had happened, "Ma says will you please not let so much heat out.

Kirk didn't say anything. He started to walk around the heat box. Lil yelled, "Ma!"

The young ones stopped fighting, scuttling out of reach and watching with bright moist eyes, grinning. The baby had reached the coughing stage.

Ma Kirk said, "Sit down, or go pick on somebody your own size."

Kirk stopped. "Aw, I wasn't going to hurt her. She has to be so smart!" He leaned forward to glare at Lil. "And I would so kill the I Captain's daughter!" The baby was quiet. Ma Kirk laid it down in a nest of skins put close to the heat and said wearily:

"You men, always talking about killing! Haven't we enough trouble without that?"

Kirk looked at the little box of heat-stones, his pupils shrinking. "Maybe there'd be less trouble for us."

Lil poked her shock of black hair around Ma Kirk's knee. Her big eyes glowed in the feeble light.

She said, "You men! He's no man, Ma. He's just a little boy who has to stay behind and shoo the beetles out of the fields."

The young ones giggled, well out of reach. Lil's thin body was strung tight, quivering to move. "Besides," she demanded, "what have the Officers and the Engineers ever done to you that you should want to kill them all - all but the Captain's yellow daughter?"

Kirk's big heavy chest swelled. "Ma," he said, "You make that brat shut up or I'll whale her, anyhow."

Ma Kirk looked at him. "Your Pa's still big enough to whale you, young man! ow you stop it, both of you."

"All right," said Kirk sullenly. He squatted down, holding his hands over the heat. His back twitched with the cold, but it was nice to have his belly warm, even if it was empty. "Wish Pa'd hurry up. I'm hungry. Hope they killed meat:'

Ma Kirk sighed. "Seems like meat gets scarcer all the time, like the heat-stones ."

"Maybe," said Kirk heavily, "it all goes to the same place." Lil snorted. "And where's that, Smarty?"

His anger forced out the forbidden words.

"Where everybody says, stupid! Into the Ship."

There was suddenly a lot of silence in the room. The word "Ship" hung there, awesome and accusing. Ma Kirk's eyes flicked to the curtain over the door and back to her son.

"Don't you say things like that, Wes! You don't know."

"It's what everybody says. Why else would they guard the Ship the way they do? We can't even get near the outside of it." Lil tossed her head. "Well neither do they"

"Not when we can see 'em, no. Of course not. But how do we know they haven't got ways of getting into the Ship that don't show from the plain? Jakk says a lot goes on that we don't know about."

He got up, forcing his belief at them with his big square hands.

Mere must be something in the Ship that they don't want us to have. Something valuable, something they want to keep for themselves. What else could it be but heat-stones and maybe dried meat?"

"We don't know, Wes! The Ship is – well, we shouldn't talk about it. And the Officers wouldn't do that. If they wanted us killed off they'd let the Piruts in on us, or the shags, and let 'em finish us quick. Freezing and starving would take too long. There'd be too many of us it we found out, or got mad."

Kirk snorted. "You women know so much. If they let the shags the Piruts in on us, how could they stop 'em before they killed everybody, including the Officers? As for slow death - well, they think we're dumb. They've kept us away from the Ship ever since the Crash, and nobody knows how long ago that was. They think they go on doing it. They think we'd never suspect."

"Yah!" said Lil sharply "You just like to talk. Why should the Officers want us killed off anyhow?"

Kirk looked at the thin fuzzy baby curled tight in the skins. There aren't enough heat-stones to go around any more. Why should they let

their young ones cry with the cold?"

There was silence in the room again. Kirk felt it, thick and choky. His heart kicked against his ribs. He was scared, suddenly. He'd never talked that much before. It was the baby, crying in the cold, that set him off. Suppose someone had heard him. Suppose he was reported for a mutineer. That meant the sucking-plant...

"Listen!" said Ma Kirk.

Nerves crackled icily all over Kirk's skin. But there wasn't any need to listen. The noise rolled in over them. It hit rock faces polished by the wind, and the drifts of crystalline pebbles, and it split into a tangle of echoes that came from everywhere at once, but there was no mistaking it. No need even to use sensitive earcups to locate its source.

The great alarm gong by the Captain's hut.

Kirk began to move, very swiftly and quietly. Before the third gong stroke hit them he had his spear and his sling and was already lifting aside the door curtain.

Ma Kirk said stiffly, "Which way are they coming?"

Kirk's ears twitched. He sorted the gong sounds, and the wind, found a whisper underneath them, rushing up out of the gullied plan.

Kirk pointed. "From the west. Piruts, I think."

Ma Kirk sucked in her breath. Her voice had no tone in it. "Your Pa went hunting that way."

Said Kirk. "I'll watch out for him."

He glanced back just before he let the curtain drop. The pale glow of the heat-stones picked dots of luminous blackness out of the gloom, Where the the still breathless faces were, watching him. He saw the blurred shapes of clay cooking pots, of low bed frames, of huddled bodies. The baby began to whimper again.

Kirk shivered in the cold wind, "Lil," he said. "I would, too, kill the Captain's yellow daughter."

"Yah," said Lil. "Go chase the beetles away."

There was no conviction in her voice. The wind was freezing on Kirk's bare feet. He dropped the curtain and went across the plain.

Men and youths like himself, old enough to fight, were spilling out of low doorways and forming companies on the flat ground. Kirk spotted Jakk Randl and fell in beside him. They stood with their backs

to the wind, stamping and shivering, their head-hair and scant fur clouts blown straight out.

Randl nudged Kirk's elbow. "Look at 'em," he said, and coughed. He was always coughing, jerking his thin sharp face back and forth. Kirk could have broken his brittle light-furred body in two. All Randl's strength was in his eyes. The pupils were always spread, always hot with some bitter force, always probing. He wasn't much older than Kirk.

Kirk looked up the hill. Officers were running from the huts below the gaunt, dead Ship. They didn't look so different from the Hans, only they were built a little taller and lighter, less bowed and bunchy in the shoulders, quicker on their feet.

Kirk stepped behind Randl to shield him from the wind. His voice was only a whisper, but it had a hard edge. The baby's thin, terrible wail was still in his ears. "Is it true, Jakk? Do you know? Because if they are..."

Randl laughed and shuddered with a secret, ugly triumph. "I crawled up on the peak during the last darkness. The guards were cold and the wind made them blind and deaf. I lay in the rocks and watched. And I saw..."

He coughed. The Officers' voices rang sharp through the wind. Compact groups of men began to run, off toward the west. The whisper of sound had grown louder in Kirk's ears. He could hear men yelling and the ringing of metal on stone.

He started to run, holding Randl's dbow. Grey dust blew under their feet. The drifts of crystal stones sent their sound shivering back at them in splinters. Kirk said fiercely:

"What did you see?"

They were passing under the hill now. Randl jerked his head. "Up there, Wes."

Kirk looked up. Someone was standing at the doorway of the Captain's hut. Someone tall and slender and the color of the Sunstar from head to foot.

"I saw her," said Randl hoarsely "She was carrying heat-stones the Ship."

Kirk's pupils shrank to points no warmer nor softer than the tip of his knife. He smiled, almost gently, looking up the hill. The captain's yellow daughter, taking life into the Ship.

It was a big raid. Kirk saw that when he scrambled up out of the last 1,111V, half-carrying the wheezing Randl. The Piruts had come up the tongue of rock between two deep cuts and tackled the guards' pill-head on. They hadn't taken it, not yet. But they were still trying, piling up their dead on the swept grey stone. They were using shags again. They drove the lumbering beasts on into the hail of stones and thrown spears from the pillbox, keeping behind them, and then climbing on the round hairy bodies. It took courage, because sometimes the shags turned and clawed the men who drove them, and sometimes the dead ones weren't quite dead and it was too bad for the man who climbed on them.

It looked to Kirk as though the pillbox was pretty far gone.

He ran down the slope with the others, slipping in the crystal drifts. Randl was spent. Kirk kept him going, thinking of the huts back there on the plain, and Ma and Lil and the little ones, and the baby. You had to fight the Piruts, no matter what you thought about the Officers. You had to keep them from getting onto the plain.

He wondered about Pa. Hunting shags in the outer gullies was mean work any time, but when the Piruts were raiding...time to think about that later. Wite, the second son of the First Officer, was signalling for double time. Kirk ran faster, his ears twitching furiously as they sifted the flying echoes into some kind of order.

Pa hadn't been alone, of course. Frank and Russ went with him. The three of them would have sense enough to keep safe. Maybe they were in the pillbox.

A big raid. More Piruts than he'd ever seen before. He wondered why. He wondered how so many of them had been able to get so close to the pillbox all at once, walking two or three abreast on the narrow tongue of rock under the spears and sling-stones.

They poured in through the gates of the stone-walled building, scattering up onto the parapet. There were slits in the rooms below, and rusty metal things crouching behind them, but they weren't any good for fighting. A man needed shoulder room for spear and sling.

It was pretty hot up there. The wall of bodies had built up so high, mostly with shags, that the Piruts were coming right over the wall.

Kirk's nose wrinkled at the smell of blood. He avoided the biggest puddles and found a place to stand between the dead.

Randl went down on his knees. He was coughing horribly, but his hot black eyes saw everything. He tried three times to lift his sling and gave it up.

"I'll cover you," said Kirk. He began taking crystal pebbles out of big pile that was kept there and hurling them at the Piruts. They made a singing noise in the air, and they didn't stop going when they hit.

They were heavy for their size, very heavy, with sharp edges.

Randl said, "Something funny, Wes. Too many Piruts. They couldn't risk 'em on an ordinary raid."

Kirk grunted. A Pirut with red hair standing straight in the wind came over the wall. Kirk speared him left-handed in the belly, dodged the downstroke of his loaded sap, and kicked the body out of the way.

He said, "Wonder how they got so close, so fast?"

"Some trick." Randl laughed suddenly. "Funny their wanting the Ship as much as you and I do."

"Think they could know what's in it?" Randl's narrow shoulders twitched. "Near as we know, their legend is the same as ours. Something holy in the ship, sacred and tabu. Only difference is they want to get it for themselves, and we want to keep it." He coughed and spat in sudden angry disgust. "And we've swallowed that stuff. We've let the Officers hoard heat and food so they can live no matter what happens to us. We're fools, Wes! A lot of bloody fools!"

He got up and began jabbing with his spear at heads that poked up over the wall.

The Piruts began to slack off. Stones still whistled past Kirk's head – a couple of them had grazed him by now – and spears showered down, but they weren't climbing the walls any more.

Randl grounded his spear, gasping. "That's that. Pretty soon they'll break, and then we can start thinking about..."

He stopped. Kirk put a stone accurately through the back of a Pirut's head and said grimly:

"Yeah. About what we're going to do."

Randl didn't answer. He sat down suddenly, doubled over. Kirk grinned. "Take it easy," he said softly. "I'll cover you."

Randl whispered, "Wes. Wes!" He held up one thin hand. Kirk let his own drop, looking at it. There was blood on it, running clear to the elbow.

He went down beside Randl, putting his arms around him, trying to see. Randl shook him off.

"Don't move me, you fool! Just listen." His voice was harsh and rapid. He was holding both hands over the left side of his neck, where it joined the shoulder. Kirk could see the bright blood beating up through his fingers.

He said, "Jakk, I'll get the sawbones..."

Hot black eyes turned to his. Burnt-out fires in a face with the young beard hardly full on its sharp jaw.

"Sit down, Wes, quick, and listen. Sawbones is no good – and why would I want to go on living anyway?"

He smiled. Kirk had never seen him smile like that, without bitterness or pain. He sat down, crouched on the body of a man who lived only two huts away from him. The Hood made little red fountains between Randl's fingers.

"It's up to you, Wes. You're the only one that really knows about the Ship. You'll do better than I would, anyhow. You're a fighter. You carry it on, so the Hans can live. Promise."

Kirk nodded. He couldn't say anything. The heat was dying in Randl's eyes.

"Listen, Wes. I saw the secret way into Ship. Bend closer, and listen..."

Kirk bent. He didn't move for a long time. After a while Randl's voice stopped, and then the blood wasn't pumping any more, just oozing. Randl's hands slid away, so that Kirk could see the hole the stone had made. Everything seemed to be very quiet.

Kirk sat there, holding Randl in his arms.

Presently someone came up and shook Kirk's shoulder and said, "Hey, kid, are you deaf? We been yelling for you." He stopped, and then said more gently, "Oh. Jakk got it, did he?"

Kirk laid the body carefully on the stones and got up. "Yeah."

"Kind of a pal of yours, wasn't he?"

"He wasn't very strong. He needed someone to cover him."

"Too bad." The man shook his head, and then shrugged. "Maybe it's better, at that. He was headed for trouble, that one. Kinda leading you that way, too, I heard. Always talking."

He looked at Kirk's face and shut up suddenly. He turned away and grunted over his shoulders, "The O.D.'s looking for you."

Kirk followed. The wind was cold, howling up from the outer gullies.

The Officer of the Day was waiting at the north end of the wall. There was a ladder dropped over it now, and men were climbing up and down with bodies and sheaves of recovered spears. More were I busy down helow, rolling the dead Piruts and the shags down into the deep gullies for the scavenger rats and the living shags who didn't mind turning cannibal.

That ladder made Kirk think of Pa. It was the only way for a man to get into the outer gullies from the west escarpment of the colony. He shook some of the queer heavniess out of his head, touched his forelock and said and said:

"I'm Wes Kirk, sir. You wanted me?"

"Yes." The O.D. was also the Third Officer. Taller than Kirk, thinner, with the hair going grey on his body and exhausted eyes sunk under his horny overlids. He said quietly:

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this..."

Kirk knew. The knowledge leaped through him. It was strange, to feel a spear-stab where there was no spear.

He said, "Pa."

Officer nodded. He seemed very tired, and he didn't look at Kirk. He hadn't, after the first glance.

"Your father, and his two friends."

Kirk shivered. The horny lids dropped over his eyes. "I wish I'd known," he whispered. "I'd have killed more of them."

The Officer put his hands flat on the top of the wall and looked at them as if they were strange things and no part of him.

"Kirk," he said, "this is going to be hard to explain. I've never done anything as hard. The Piruts didn't kill them. They were responsible, but they didn't actually kill them."

Wes raised his head slowly. "I don't understand"

"We saw them coming up the tongue of rock. The Piruts were behind them, but not far. Not far enough. One of the three, it wasn't your father, called to us to put the ladder down. We waited..."

A muscle began to twitch under Kirk's eye. That, too, was something that had never happened before, like the stab of pain with nothing behind it. He licked his lips and repeated hoarsely:

"I don't understand." The Officer tightened suddenly and made one hand into a fist and heat it slowly on the wall, up and down.

"I didn't want to give the order. God knows I didn't want to! But there was nothing else to do."

A man came up over the top of the ladder. He was carrying a body over his shoulder, and breathing hard.

"Here's Kirk," he said. "Where'll I put him?"

There was a clear space off to the right. Kirk pointed to it. "Over there, Charley, I'll help."

It was hard to move. He'd never been tired like this before. He'd never been afraid like this, either. He didn't know what he was afraid of. Something in the Officer's voice.

He helped to lay his father down. He'd seen bodies before. He'd handled them, fighting on the pillbox walls. But never one he'd known so long, one he'd eaten and slept and wrestled with. The thick arm that hauled him out of bed this morning, the big hands that warmed the baby against the barrel chest. You saw it lying lax and cold, but you didn't believe it.

You saw it. You saw the spear shaft sticking out clean from the heart...

You saw it...

"That's one of our spears!" He screamed it, like a woman. "One of our own – from the front!"

"I let them get as close as I dared," said the Officer tonelessly. "I tried to find a way. But there wasn't any way but the ladder, and that was what the Piruts wanted. That's why they made them come."

Kirk's voice wasn't a voice at all. "You killed them. You killed my father."

"Three lives, against all those back on the plain. We held our fire too long as it was, hoping. The Piruts nearly broke through. Try to understand! I had to do it."

Kirk's spear made a flat clatter on the stone. He started forward. Men moved in and held him, without rancor, looking at their own feet.

"Please try to understand," whispered the Officer. "I had to do it."

The Officer, the bloody wall, the stars and the cold grey gullies all went away. There was nothing but darkness, and wind, a long way off. Kirk thought of Pa coming up under the wall, close to safety, close enough to touch it, and no way through. Pa and Frank and Russ, standing under the wall, looking up, and no way through.

Looking up, calling to the men they knew, asking for help and getting a spear through the heart.

After that, even the wind was gone, and the darkness had turned red.

There was a voice, a long, way off. hut said, "God, he's strong!" Over and over. It got louder. There were weights on his arms and legs, and he couldn't throw them off. He was pressed against something.

It was the wall. He saw that after a while. The wall where the Officer had been standing. There were six men holding him, three on each side. The Officer was gone.

Kirk relaxed. He was shivering and covered with grime from body-sweat. Somebody whistled.

"Six men! Didn't know the kid had it in him,"

The Officer's voice said dully, "No discipline. Better take him home."

Kirk tried to turn. The six men swung with him. Kirk said, "You better discipline me. You better kill me, because, if you don't, I'll kill you."

"I don't blame you, boy. Go and rest. You'll understand."

"I'll understand, all right." Kirk's voice was a hoarse, harsh whisper that came out by itself and wouldn't be stopped. "I'll understand about Pa, and the Ship with the heat-stones in it, and the Captain's yellow daughter getting fat and warm while my sisters freeze and go hungry. I'll understand, and I'll make everybody else understand, too!"

The Officer's eyes held a quick fire. "Boy! Do you know what you're saying?"

"You bet I know!"

"That's mutiny. For God's sake, don't make things worse!"

"Worse for us, or for you?" Kirk was shouting, holding his head up in the wind. "Listen, you men! Do you know what the Officers are doing up there in the Ship they won't let us touch?"

There was an uneasy stirring among the Hans, a slipping aside of luminous black eyes. The Officer shut his jaw tight. He stepped in close to Kirk.

"Shut up," he said urgently "Don't make me punish you, not now. You're talking rot, but it's dangerous."

His eyes were hot and not quite sane. He couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to.

"Rot is it? Jakk Randll knew. He saw with his own eyes and he told me while he was dying. The Captain's yellow daughter, sneaking heat-stones into..."

The Officer hit him on the jaw, carefully and without heat. Kirk sagged down. The Officer stepped back, looking as though he had a pain in him that he didn't want to show.

He said quietly, but so that everyone could hear him, "Discipline, for not longer than it takes to clear the rock below."

Two of the men nodded and took Kirk away down a flight of stone steps. One of the four who were left looked over the wall and spat.

"Rock's pretty near clean," he said, "but even so..." He shook he shook himself like a dog. "That Jakk Randl, he was always talking."

One of the others flicked a quick look around and whispered, "Yeah. And maybe he knew what he was talking about!"

The little stone room was cold and quiet. It was dark, too, but the sucking-plant carried its own light. Kirk lay on his back watching the cool green fire pulse on his chest and belly. It looked cool, but underneath the sprawling tentacles of it he was burning with the heat of little needles that bit and sucked.

He was spreadeagled with leather thongs. He made no sound. The sweat ran into his eyes and the blood went out of his body into the hungry plant, drop by drop.

Somebody came in, somebody too quick and light to be a fighting-man. Kirk let his pupils spread. First a slim tall shape moving, kilt of little skins swirling beneath the shimmering sinthi-mesh over-all suit. Small sharp breasts and a heavy mane of hair caught back.

Then color. Yellow. Yellow like the Sun-star, from head to foot. Kirk's jaw shut and knotted.

The sucking-plant was ripped away very deftly by its upper fronds and thrown into a corner. Kirk went rigid, but he didn't make a sound. The yellow girl took a knife from her belt sheath and slashed him free with four quick strokes.

Kirk didn't move.

"Well," she said. "Aren't you going to get up?"

He could see her eyes, great black shining things. "What did you come here for?"

"They told me about you. I said I thought it was criminal to discipline you when you didn't know what you were doing. So I came down to see what I could do about it."

She always came with the other women after a raid, to help the wounded. Kirk looked at her stonily.

"You must have just missed my speech."

"They told me about it. Whatever made you say things like that?"

"Aren't they true?"

"No!"

Kirk laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. "You could have saved yourself the trouble. This isn't going to make me believe you."

The girl tossed her thick hair back impatiently. "You're acting like a child." She was no older than Kirk. "We're all terribly sorry about your father," she went on gravely, "but that doesn't give you the right..""

"I have the right to tell the truth."

"But you're not telling the truth!" She was down on her knees now, beside him. "I don't know what this Jakk Randl saw, or whether he saw anything, but..."

Kirk said slowly, "Jakk's dead. He was my friend, and he didn't lie."
"Perhaps not. But he was mistaken."

"He saw you, taking heat-stones into the Ship."

"But only a very few! We're not hoarding them. We wouldn't!"
"Then what do you use them for?"

"I can't tell you that. And it doesn't matter anyway." Kirk laughed again. He got up, stiffly because of the raw places drawing across the front of him. His hair was gone in a sprawling pattern, eaten off by digestive acids. He said:

"You'll have to do better than that! "She was angry, now, and perhaps a little scared. He enjoyed making her angry and scared. He enjoyed the thick hot feeling of power it gave him.

She asked "Then you won't believe, and you won't stop talking?"

"I made a promise to go on talking. And I believe in what I'm doing."

"You know what that will mean." He could hear the quiver and the breathing of her. "People may be hurt, your own people. We don't want trouble. We can't afford trouble, with the Piruts getting stronger. It'll mean you'll be punished, maybe even – killed."

That gave him a cold twinge for a moment. Then he thought of Jakk and shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said, and started out.

The Third Officer came in. There were five men with him, and one of them was the Captain, wearing the gun of authority.

The Captain said, "I'm sorry, Kirk. I heard a lot of what you said; too much to dare turn you loose just now. Perhaps in solitary we can talk sense into you."

Kirk stood quite still, not moving anything but his eyes. The four Hans were big and they had knives. Kirk shrugged and fell in with them. The girl walked ahead, between the Captain and the Third.

Nobody said anything. They went together up the stone steps.

They had taken the wounded off the wall, out of the wind. The rock below was clean of bodies, and the last of the men were coming back up the ladder.

Kirk felt queer. He wasn't like himself at all. It was as though he had fragments of ice inside his head, all jumbled. Then suddenly they fell into place, clear and frozen and unalterable, without any help from him at all.

He moved very fast. Faster than ever before in his life, caught the Captain's gun.

His two hands, thrust out, one against the Captain, the other against the Third, and sent them staggering. He charged through between them, gathering the yellow girl in to his chest firing as he went. The antique gun went dead on the third shot, and he threw it away.

A knife slashed across his shoulders, but it was short. Men began to yell. He knocked one away from the ladder head and pushed the struggling, girl over and let her drop, so that she had to catch the rungs. He whirled, swinging, and sent two men sprawling back into the ones behind. Then he leaped over, dropping down the side of the ladder hand over hand.

He passed the girl, climbed onto the ladder behind her so that on one could sling stones at him, and began pulling her down by the foot. She tried kicking, but it was a long drop to the rock, and after she'd slipped a couple of times she stopped that and went on down.

Men were howling at him from above. They started to climb onto the ladder. Kirk yelled at them, threatening to throw the girl off. They stopped. Presently Kirk felt the cold rock underfoot.

The minute he was off the ladder a man climbed over the wall and started down. Kirk yelled at him to go back, then got hold of the bottom of the ladder and pushed out. The yellow girl got out her knife again and slashed at him. She hadn't opened her mouth once.

Kirk dropped. The knife bit his shoulder, not very deep. He straightened up suddenly, swinging his open palm. It caught the girl over the ear. She fell backward away from him, rolling over on the rock.

The knife flew out of her hand. Kirk heard it skitter along and then vanish over the gully edge.

He pushed hard on the ladder. It gave, and the man at the top began scrambling up again, fast. He only just made it, dangling half of him in the air, when the ladder fell. The light aluminum struts it was made of sent clashing echoes flying in the wind.

It was the only ladder they had. They'd have to bring one from one of the other pillboxes before they could climb down and get it. He looked up at the men lining the wall, yelling, waving things. Just about here Pa must have stood, looking up.

He turned and hauled the dazed girl to her feet and started off down the tongue of rock. He didn't hurry. There was no need to hurry. The young strength of the girl was pressed against him, thigh and hip and chest. It burned, in some queer way. He watched the yellow hairs rub and tangle with his golden ones. The muscle started twitching under his eye again. He had to cuff her twice more to keep her quiet, before they were safely off the naked rock. He got her down the length of two gullies, well out of the pillbox. She was still a little groggy, and very busy keeping her footing in the pebble drifts. They started down a third cut that angled off. Then, quite suddenly, she fell.

Kirk stopped. He put out a hand to help her up, and then took it back again. He looked at his feet and surlily, "Get up."

"I can't. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Just somewhere to think, and plan. I've got to figure this out." She thought about that. He could see her wide golden shoulders tremble. He wanted to touch them. After a while she said:

"Why did you take me? Why won't you let me go?"

"They'd have killed me on the rock if hadn't had you. And when I go back..."

She brought her head up. "You're going back?"

He laughed at her. "Did you think you could get rid of me that easy? I told you I'd made a promise. I'm going to keep it, and you're going to help me. I can buy a lot with you."

Her pupils were little hot pinpoints. "I see. You don't care how many people you hurt, do you, as long as you can be a big man and keep your promise."

He said roughly, "Get up."

"All right." She nodded, casually. "I'll get up."

She did. She got up fast, like a rocksnake uncoiling, and she had a big stone in her right hand. She let it go, straight for his head.

Kirk jerked himself aside, but he was too late. The rock grazed him above the ear. He staggered, trying to see through a curtain of hot and flashing lights.

His earcups, working instinctively by themselves, brought him the sound of naked feet scrambling away over the pebble drifts. Feet. And then something else...

Kirk yelled. He tried to shake the lights away, and yelled again. "Stop! Look out – shags!"

He heard her stop. He began to be able to see again. She was poised halfway up the head wall of them cut, her ears twitching. For a long time they stood that way, not moving, listening to the wind and the pebbles and the soft padding feet of things that were hungry and hunting them.

She began to move, almost without sound, back to him. Her lips formed the word "Two," and her yellow head jerked back the way she had been going. Kirk nodded. He pointed off to the left and held up three fingers. Then he turned and started down the gully. The girl stayed close beside him. She was breathing rapidly and her pupils swelled and shrank. They showed no fear.

Looking at them, Kirk thought of Lil. Lil was right. She did have pink lids to her eyes, and they were beautiful.

The shags followed them, two behind, three beside them beyond a thin wall of rock.

Kirk had never been in the outer gullies before. He was too young. But he'd heard Pa and the older men talk about them from time he was old enough to crouch beside the heat-stones and listen.

Out here there were shags and scavenger rats and once in a while rocksnake. Men of the settlement never hunted beyond the fringe. Beyond that was forbidden ground and Piruts. Nobody knew just where the Pirut colony was anymore. Nobody wanted to know.

Kirk's ears were stretched, sifting the tiny shattered echoes. His body pupils sucked in every bit of the dim grey light. His body hair hair

was erect so that even his skin acted as a sensory organ, feeling the bodies of the shags behind them.

They were getting close.

The gully ended. Beyond it was a little space of tumbled rock with other gullies opening into it, and then a cliff built of great tilted slabs of grey stone.

Kirk pointed to the cliff and started to run, with the yellow girl beside him. Wind slashed sharp and thin across them. The echoes whispered like many tongues and Kirk fought them and heard the shags come onto the plain behind them, running.

The other three came out of the parallel cut. They came fast, and of the curve of the plain they were a little ahead of the two humans.

The girl said between her teeth, "We can't make it."

She was right. Kirk picked out the biggest boulder he could see and dashed for it. The leading shag was breathing on the girl's heels as he hauled her up after him.

They were safe for a while, but it didn't do them any good. In this world even shags would wait forever at the prospect of a square meal. Presently they'd start climbing and when they did it was all over. Kirk didn't even have a weapon with which to fight.

He looked down at them. Five squat thick shapes with six legs; four powerful legs with claws and two slender ones held in against the chest, armed with sucker discs for climbing. Five pairs of black eyes watching, hungry and infinitely patient. Five tucked bellies hurning under pale, shaggy hair.

He was looking at death. A strange cold terror took him. He turned his head toward the yellow girl and saw the same thing in her eyes. They looked at each other, not moving nor breathing, thinking that they were young and going to die.

He shivered. The girl's yellow body burned in the grey light. He moved. He didn't know why, only that he had to. He took her in his arms and found her lips and kissed them, roughly, with an urgent, painful hunger. She fought him a little and then lay still against him.

One of the shags started to climb. Kirk saw it across the girl's shoulder. He let her go and walked to the boulder's edge and waited until the shaggy head was level with his feet. Then he crouched and

struck, in a way he had never struck before. Blood spurted across his fist. The shag roared and fell backward clumsily, shaking its head. Kirk stood up and sucked in his belly and yelled. He felt savage now, but not afraid. The echoes howled eerily.

The shag started up again, and two more came with him.

There was something queer about the echoes. They got louder and wilder. Men's voices, shouting. Kirk couldn't look, but he heard the yellow girl cry:

"Piruts!"

HE heard them coming closer, bare feet scrambling on rock. The shags came higher. He struck down, left and right. One beast lost hold with one sucker and fell into another, knocking it loose.

They fell, clawing each other. The third came on. Kirk hit it. It slid its head aside and caught his wrist.

The pain blinded him. He roared and beat at it, but the grip on his wrist pulled him to his knees and almost over the edge. The brute started back down the boulder, taking Kirk with him.

The yellow girl slid suddenly in under Kirk and reached over and took hold of the shag's snout and peeled it back. The beast snuffled and squealed and chewed on Kirk's arm. The girl twisted harder. Blood began to spill down over the shag's teeth.

It let go. Kirk began to hear slingstones whistle. The shag bellowed and took itself back down the rock, fast. The others were scattering away across the plain, driven by stones from expert slingers. Kirk and the girl crouched quietly, trembling and breathing hard.

Somebody called cheerfully, "You might as well come down now."

Kirk supposed they might as well. He climbed down, streaming Hood from his torn wrist, with the girl scrambling beside him. The hackles were raised across her yellow shoulders.

Piruts. Kirk thought about Pa and Russ and Frank being driven up that tongue of naked rock. Their own people had killed them, but the Piruts put them there in the first place. And there was Jakk. Besides...

They were Piruts. That was enough. Kirk felt numb inside. It might have been easier if the shags had got them, after all.

The man who had called them was waiting, lounging back against a rock. He was no taller than Kirk, but he was a lot thicker and his hair

was red. The bones of his face were heavy and brutal under his beard. His horny overlids were dropped so that only bright black slits showed of his eyes. He was smiling. It was a lazy, white-toothed, cheerful smile, but Kirk didn't like. It made his belly knot up.

"What," said the Pirut, "the hell are you two kids doing out here?"

"Hunting," said Kirk shortly. There were a lot of Piruts among the tumbled rocks. Four, five hands of them.

The red Pirut had stopped looking at Kirk. He was looking, at the Captain's yellow daughter. "Well," he said. "Well, well!" He took himself away from the rock and came toward them. He moved slowly, as though he might be sleepy. Kirk didn't like that, either. He said, "Let us go. We haven't anything to steal."

The Pirut chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that." He was still looking at the yellow girl. "No," he said. "I'm not sure about that at all."

He raised his hand and called the others in. Kirk knew he couldn't fight; he followed the leader.

It was a lot colder in the Pirut cave than it was back in the huts of the colony.

Everybody kept close together for warmth, crowded around the scanty heat-stones. There was a moaning draft from somewhere that kept Kirk's hair stirring, and there were babies crying. Babies that didn't sound any different from the one at home.

Kirk chewed up the last of his handful of pemmican, made of shag meat and sour berries, and was thankful for a full belly. The yellow girl crouched on the cold stone, not saying anything, her arms around her knees. The Pirut women watched her out of hostile eyes.

Samel, the red Pirut who had turned out to be some sort of an Officer, watched her too, but his eyes were not hostile.

"Close-mouthed piece, aren't you?" he said. He threw a scrap of bone at a wiry black girl huddled over the heat, and laughed. "Sada," he yelled, "get her to give you lessons, will you?"

Everybody enjoyed that. Sada called him a name and turned her back. Samel's black eyes came back to the yellow girl.

"You won't tell who you are. That means you're somebody. An Officer's daughter, likely. Maybe even the Captain's."

Some flicker in the girl's eyes must have told him he'd hit home. He jumped up and shouted, "Hey! All of you, look here! We've got somebody – we've got the Captain's daughter!"

The mob stirred and moved in. People began to shout, to curse and make animal noises of sheer hate. For a minute Kirk thought he and the girl were going to be torn apart. He shivered violently, and the hate was so strong in the air he could smell it.

Samel pulled out his sling lazily and loaded it. The sweep of his arm stopped part of the crowd, and the rest quieted down enough to hear him say:

"Hold it! Sit down, you fools! The girl's gold. We can buy things with her."

Kirk didn't get that word 'gold', but he understood the rest of it. It ears what he had told her, himself.

He wished the babies would stop crying. It was hard to hate these people so much when you knew they had kids just like the one at home, wailing in the cold.

The mob relaxed sullenly. The Captain's daughter spoke suddenly, very clear across the muttering quiet of the crowd.

"You can't buy your way into the colony with me. They'll kill me, they did the three Hans, only this time they won't wait as long." She was telling the truth. Samel didn't like it, and Kirk liked it even less, but she was. The muscle twitched under Kirk's eye. It was a hell of a world. You couldn't keep straight in it at all.

All right," said Samel. "But we can buy heat with you. And maybe before we do we can get some things out of you, free." He moved in close to her, staring down with sultry eyes. He said huskily, "And don't think we can't, baby. And don't think we wouldn't enjoy it." She shivered, but her eyes didn't flinch. She told him steadily, "If it' sabout the Ship, you can do what you want and go to hell with it." I watched you up there on that rock," said Samel slowly. "Both of

you have guts, all right. But I wonder..." He let his gaze slide down over ever her long, arrogant body. "It would be a pity to spoil that."

The girl Sada pushed her way out from the crowd.

You big ig red son of a she-shag! Look at us! Look at this lousy cave and those boxes of heat-stones that wouldn't keep a rat-pup warm, and

then think of these swine sitting up there on their plateau, warm and happy, toasting their feet! They drove us out here to starve and they're robbing the gullies of heat-stones. Listen to those kids crying!" They haven't been warm since they were born, and whose fault is it? And you worry about spoiling that yellow vixen!"

Samel said pleasantly, "Shut up that screeching." He shoved the girl aside hard enough to sit her down on the stones and then knelt beside the Captain's daughter. He pulled her head back by the yellow hair and looked down into her eyes and said:

"But she's right. Pretty soon there aren't going to be any more heat-stones at all. Pretty soon we're all going to die of the cold. But you won't, you up there on the plateau. You can watch us freeze on the rocks and feel pretty smart about it. And you'll have the Ship."

He drew his breath in, sharp, as though something hurt him. His horny lids dropped and his lips twisted like a child about to cry with pain. His hand tightened suddenly in the girl's hair, jerking her head back hard on the taut curve of her neck. He slapped her twice across the face and let her go and stood up, backing off and trembling.

"You'll have the Ship," he whispered, "for always."

Kirk got up. He felt sick, and there were red clouds across his eyes. The Captain's yellow daughter. He'd cuffed her himself. Why did this happen to him when somebody else did it? It was a hell of a world and he was lost in it. All he knew was that he wanted to hit Samel hard enough to kill him.

Instead somebody hit Kirk from behind with a sap, not very hard. He fell on his face. From a great distance he heard the girl Sada screaming:

"You and your silly Ship! What does the Ship matter when we're all going to die?"

"It matters." Samel's voice was husky and queer. "It's the beginning and the end. What it has in it belongs to us. It would make us fat and warm and strong, so that we could rule the whole world. My father died trying to reach it, and his father before him, and his father before that. The Ship matters. It's everything."

It was still in the cave. It was as though his voice had wiped it clean of sound. Kirk shivered. And in the silence the babies cried, a thin

wailing lamentation to the cold.

Kirk got up on his knees. "Wait a minute," he said thickly. "Wait, you're going at this wrong. We all are. Wait, and listen to me."

Samel looked at him as though he'd forgotten Kirk existed. Someone said, "Shall I fix him, Boss?" Samel started to nod, and then something in Kirk's face changed his mind.

"He put up a good fight out there. Let him talk."

Kirk got his feet under him. His head throbbed, and falling on his bandaged wrist hadn't done it any good, but at least he could see, and talk. He was scared, because what he was going to say was against everything he'd been taught since he was born, but he had to say it. There might be a lot of things wrong with it, but basically it was right, and he knew it. He knew Jakk Randl would have said it, too.

He did not look at the Captain's yellow daughter.

"Listen," he said, loud enough so that everyone could hear him.

You're wrong about one thing. We don't have heat-stones up there on the plateau. Not the people like me, the little guys, the Hans. We starve and freeze just like you do, and our babies cry just as loud. And we sit, like you do, looking at the Ship and wondering."

He took a deep breath. They were watching him, not believing not disbelieving. Just listening, feeling him, waiting for something he said to hit them so they'd know whether he was lying or not.

Some of us have wondered a lot lately, about that Ship. The Officers don't let us near it. They never have, no nearer than you out in the the gullies. But somebody did get close to it, one man who believed in what he was doing, and he saw..."

He told them what Jakk had seen, thinking about Jakk's blood running red through his fingers and the fire dying in his eyes. From a Ship's man. "I've been taught to hate and fear you. You killed my friend. But the Officers killed my father, without even trying to save him. And I think we're fools, we Hans and you Piruts.

We're just people, with empty stomachs and cold backs and kids that never get warm. Why should we kill each other at those walls?"

He had them. He could hear the mob suck its breath in like one Samel's eyes were hot enough to burn. Kirk cried out:

"It's the Officers we ought to hate! It's the Officers who hold the Ship and hide the heat-stones in it! It's the Officers we ought to kill, not each other!"

the mob screamed out of a single throat. Out of the tail of his eye Kirk saw the yellow girl spring up. Her hands were clenched and her face was a mask of horror, of hatred and a strange pleading. She was saying something, but the mob yell drowned her words, and when it died down somebody had the girl, holding her arms and her mouth.

"All right," said Samel hoarsely, and licked his lips. "All right. What are you going to do about it? What's your scheme?"

"I'm going to take you there, the secret way. I'm going to take you to the Ship, so that we can break the Officers and live, together."

He did not look at the Captain's yellow daughter.

The northern escarpment of the plateau fell sheer into a deep gorge. Kirk led them into it, Samel and six hands of Pirut men and the yellow girl with a strip of hide to gag her mouth. The darkness had come down, so thick and black that pupils at their widest spread could hardly make anything from the starshine. They went slowly, but almost without sound.

Kirk watched the dead Ship, thrusting high above them against the cold stars. Presently he stopped and whispered, "Here, I think."

They stopped. Kirk went alone to the cliff wall and felt along it. His hands slipped behind a curtain of moss, into a crack barely big enough for a man's shoulder. There seemed to be a blank wall beyond, but he felt sideways, and found that Jakk had been right. There was a way.

He went back to Samel. "It's there. Come on."

"No!" Samel caught his arm. He was looking up, at the broken Ship on the cliff-top, and he was trembling. "Wait," he whispered. "I want to know this, to keep it."

Kirk followed his rapt stare. The Ship, brooding over the plain, dominant even in death. The Ship that had brought them, Officers and

Hans, in some strange forgotten way from some forgotten place, and died in the bringing. The Ship, Untouchable...

Kirk shivered, violently. His heartbeats choked him. And then Samel was speaking, no louder than a whisper, to the night and the Ship.

"We came from the sky, following, hunting. It had power and gold in its belly, and they kept us from it. They kept us outside, away from the Ship, and we starved and froze and waned. And now we're going-" He caught his breath between his teeth and shuddered. "And now we're going in!"

Kirk whispered, "What are 'power' and 'gold'?"

"I don't know. Something in the legend. Something men live for, and die for. We'll know soon."

"We'll know soon. Samel, remember the bargain. No killing or plundering among the Hans."

Samel smiled, but the muscles ran hard along his jaw.

"If you're telling the truth, there won't be any reason for it. We'll let the Officers decide whether they die or not." Samel started forward. "The Ship," he said softly, and laughed. "The Ship!"

They went toward the cleft in the rock. Somebody said, "Hey, it's warm in this gorge!" Kirk realized then that he wasn't cold, and wondered why. Then he smiled bitterly. Sure. The Officers had found a vein of heat-stones, probably just under the soil where they were standing. The gorge had never been a source of the stones, the crystal rocks that looked just like the ones scattered all over except that they had a tiny light in them and burned you when you picked them up.

But the Officers must be getting them from here and taking them up to the Ship, to hoard.

Most of his superstitious chill went away when he thought about that.

Inside the cleft was a shaft leading up, tool-shaped here and there, with rusty metal bars set in the rock. Kirk led the way. There was no sound made loud enough to be heard over the wind that blew across tin plateau. Kirk and Samel came up out of the shaft and took the two guards from behind easily enough, and went on to the Ship.

Just for a moment, looking down across the plain, thinking about Ma Kirk and Lil and the little ones, Kirk was scared. He'd let the Piruts in. If Samel didn't keep his word, if anything...But nothing would go wrong. There was no reason for it to. He was the truth, and once the Ship was broken into there was no quarrels between the Piruts and the Hans. They were allies against the Officers. He remembered what he'd said to Lil, about the Captain's yellow daughter.

Samel left a guard behind and went into the Ship.

Darkness and cold and the smell of a place that hasn't been used or lived in for a long, long time, and the grit of rusty metal under bare feet. They went very slowly, and the yellow girl whimpered in her gag.

They couldn't really be silent, slipping and blundering in blackness too thick even for their eyes, over buckled deck plates and around broken walls. Somebody heard them and called out, and the yellow girl struggled like a speared shag.

Kirk shivered and the palms of his hands were wet. He could feel the Ship like a living presence in the dark.

The somebody called again, with fear in his voice. They stumbled down a long, tilted passageway and came into a little room with a great gash in it looking out over the gorge. There was a barred door in one wall, and a man sitting in front of it over a tiny box of heat-stones.

The Captain.

He got up, a lean grey man moving with dignity. He didn't drop his spear, but he didn't try to use it, either. He didn't say anything. His eyes took them in, in the dull glow of the heat-stones – Kirk and Samel and the Piruts, and then the yellow girl, gagged and held by the arms. His eyes blazed, then. Kirk's heart jolted. It was just the way Pa might have looked at Lil.

He said roughly, thinking of Pa, "Don't try anything, and you won't get hurt. I've made a pact with the Piruts. There's to be no more fighting and we take the Ship together, share and share alike. The Officers can obey, or take what's coming to them. Where are the heat-stones?"

The Captain stared at him. His face had no expression. He said, "Let my daughter go."

Samel started forward. The Captain raised his spear. "Let my daughter go!" The Piruts raised their weapons. Samel looked around the room, at the single door behind them, and grinned.

"Sure," he said. "Why not? Let her go."

They let her go. She tore off the gag and ran to her father and stood by him, glaring at the Piruts with hot black eyes. Neither one said anything.

"All right," said Samel lazily. "Now where are the stones?"

"There." The Captain pointed at the tiny box at his feet. "Those are all the heat-stones there are in the Ship."

Kirk cried, "That's a lie!"

The Captain looked at him. "Tell your friends to go and search."

"What about that door behind you?"

"There are no stones in there."

Kirk laughed. The laugh was not pleasant. He was thinking of the cold huts of the Hans and the thin babies that cried, and Jakk Randl dying on the pillbox wall, telling him what he'd seen.

"You lie. You bring the stones up out of the gorge and hide them here. Jakk Randl saw your daughter doing it."

"There was only a tiny pipe of stones in the gorge. This is almost the last of them. We used them rather than take from the community supply."

Samuel smiled his lazy smile and started toward the barred door. His eyes had a queer wild shine to them. The Captain cried out: "Wait! Wait, and let me speak!"

Samel looked at the door and his breath made a little sob in his throat," he said hoarsely "I can wait."

He wasn't thinking about the heat-stones so much then. He was thinking of the words of the legend, power and gold.

"The Captain said quietly, "You can kill me, and go on. But I ask you not to. I ask you to believe me. There are no heat-stones in that boom. The bar hasn't been lifted since the Crash. I ask you not to violate a sacred trust."

Kirk scowled and looked at the bar. It didn't look as though it had been lifted since the Crash. He began to be uneasy.

Samel spoke silkily. "Sacred trust, eh? Something that belongs to Piruts. Something we've waited for, longer than anyone knows."

The Captain nodded. He seemed very tired. "I should have remembred that. The Legend grows a little hazy...You Piruts caused the Crash. You followed our Ship and attacked it, and in the battle your own ship was destroyed.You made land somehow in little ships carried inside the big one. After we crashed you tried again to take what is in the Ship, and we drove you out into the gullies and kept you there."

"Ever since," answered Samel huskily. "Starving and freezing."

"We've starved and frozen, too, all of us — Officers and Hans alike. But we had a sacred trust in this Ship. We've guarded it. I think at first the Officers of that day thought that someone would come from — from wherever the Ship came from, and take them back. No one ever did. And in the struggle to live, everything has been lost. The only thing left is the knowledge that we Officers had a duty, a trust, and we've guarded this door night and day since the Crash."

"What's behind it?" asked Samel. "What's behind it?"

"Even that is lost."

Samel laughed and started forward. He caught the Captain's half-raised spear in his hands and broke it and pushed him away with the yellow girl. He took hold of the bar and lifted. Kirk and the packed mass of Piruts swayed forward like one man.

It fought him. He heaved on the bar, and sweat ran dark on his red body-hair and the veins stood like ropes on his forehead, but the rust held. Samel struggled, crying like a child.

Kirk thought: "He told the truth, the Captain did. No heat-stones, and I've let the Piruts in." He began to shiver. He started to shout

The bar screamed like a man in torment and swung back in Samel's hands, and the door was open.

The pale glow of the heat-stones filtered through the opening. Kirk saw a box with black marks on it — DANGER. ATOBLAST HIGH EXPLOSIVE — and above that a much smaller box made of metal, on a shelf. The black marks on the first box didn't mean anything to

anybody. The father of the Captain's great grandfather had remembered that there was such a thing as reading.

Samel reached out and took the smaller box, which was at eye level, and locked with a heavy lock, and sealed. He put it down and took the Captain's broken spear and tore the lock away.

The Captain and his yellow daughter stood watching. Kirk's heart was pounding in his throat. The secret of the Ship, the sacred thing, the gold and power that had caused the Crash -

Samel's big red hand pulled out a flat bundle of metal sheets, marked with marks like the first box.

Treaty of Alliance between the Sovereign Earth and the Union of Jovian Moons, providing for Earthly colonization and development of the said Moons, and mutual aid against Aggressor Worlds.

A single sheet fell out of the bundle. "...have taken the precaution of Halm, the treaty secretly in a ship of colonists, in care of the captain who

nothing of its nature. It has been rumored that our mutual enemy, the Martio-Venusian Alliance, may try to intercept it, possibly with the aid of hired pirates. This would, as you know, mean war. It is my prayer that the treaty will safely..."

Samel stared at the bundle. He shook it, his face looking dazed, like a man just hit in the stomach. Then he threw it down and shook the box. It was empty. In a black fury he turned on the larger box and tipped the cover back, and there was nothing under it but thick transparent bottles with heavy caps, holding a tiny bit of matter in oily liquid. There was silence in the room, thick with the breathing of stunned and angry men.

"Power," said Samel. "Power, and gold! Nothing! Nothing to make even a spear-head!"

He picked up the empty box and the bundle and hurled them out through the riven wall into the gorge. Then he caught up the larger and threw it after.

Kirk had time to see tears running out of Samel's eyes. After that was an agony of light and sound and motion, and then nothing.

The first thing he knew about was heat. More heat than he'd ever felt in his life, pouring over him. He opened his eyes.

Men were piled against the walls, beginning to struggle back to life. The Ship had changed position. Samel was crouched with his arms around his knees, motionless, staring at nothing. The yellow girl was helping her father out of a mound of Piruts. And it was hot.

There was light beating in through the broken wall. Kirk crawled over and peered out, his pupils contracted to little points.

The bottom of the gorge was split open, and it was burning. The father of the Captain's great-grand father had remembered vaguely something about radioactivity and crystalline rocks that harnessed it and made heat. The father of his great-grandfather had had great hopes for the unique form of radiation and what it could be made to do. But all his time was taken hunting meat and heat-stones, and growing moss.

The heavy heart of the little world was burning up through the crack, and for the first time, Kirk was really warm.

Kirk put his hand on Samel's shoulder. "You got heat," he said. "That's better than power and gold, whatever they are."

Samel shivered and closed his eyes. His hands went with blind speed to Kirk's throat and closed, hard. His mouth was twisted, like a child crying with pain.

Kirk clawed at his thumbs. "Don't be a fool!" he croaked. "There's heat now. Heat for everybody. The kids won't cry any more. Samel, bring your people in out of the gullies!"

"Heat," repeated Samel. "Yeah." He took his hands away slowly. "There's that, isn't there? Heat."

The Captain echoed, "Heat." He went to the broken wall and blinked at the light. "The heat-stones were almost gone. I thought we were going to die. And now...." He shook his shoulders, like a man freed of a burden. "Now there's no more need to guard the Ship. Perhaps that's what we've been guarding it for, to save us in time of need."

Kirk said humbly, "I'm sorry"

"You were honest. You believed you were right. But taking my daughter...."

"I deserve the sucking-plant."

"What's done is done, and it's turned out right."

People were clamoring outside the Ship. Kirk was sweating. He tasted it, and laughed, pulling in his belly, and spreading his chest.

"Heat," he said. "And no more fighting with the Piruts. Maybe there's some way we can roof the gorge and bring the heat up into the fields so the moss will grow better. And there's a lot of this world beyond the gullies. We've never been able to explore it because of the Piruts. Samel, do you know what lies beyond you?"

Samel shook his head. "We had to eat and hunt for heat-stones, too."

"A whole world," said Kirk, "just waiting for us. Maybe we'll find her gorges like this one. Maybe places with better soil. The kids grow up warm and fat, and have kids of their own...." I He turned around and looked at the Captain's yellow daughter. He said, "Do you still hate me?"

Her yellow shoulders twitched. She turned her back on him, and she was so beautiful he hurt with it. He went up behind her. "I said I was sorry."

She didn't answer. A close-mouthed piece.

Her head jerked a little and her earcups moved.

"I'm not sorry I took you with me. I'm not sorry I kissed you on rock. Are you sorry you saved my life?"

She tossed her head. "I didn't."

"You did so. You twisted that shag's nose half off. Why?"

She turned around, hot-eyed, and slapped him. He laughed. He took her in his arms and waited till she quit clawing and struggling. Then he kissed her. Presently she kissed him back.

You don't talk much," he said. "But who wants talk?"

The Jewel of Bas

By Leigh Brackett

I

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.

The Kalds started the line moving again, using the wands like oxgoads. 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.

III

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."

IV

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.

V

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 graved 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.

VI

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."

VII

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 Veil of Astellar

by Leigh Brackett

Foreword

A little over a year ago, Solar Arbitrary Time, a message rocket dropped into the receiving chute at the Interworld Space Authority headquarters on Mars.

In it was a manuscript, telling a story so strange and terrible that it was difficult to believe that any sane human being could have been guilty of such crimes.

However, through a year of careful investigation, the story has been authenticated beyond doubt, and now the ISA has authorized its release to the public, just exactly as it was taken from the battered rocket.

The Veil—the light that came from nowhere to swallow ships—has disappeared. Spacemen all over the solar system, tramp traders and captains of luxury liners alike, have welcomed this knowledge as only men can who have lived in constant peril. The Veil is gone, and with it some of the crushing terror of the Alien Beyond.

We know its full name now—the Veil of Astellar.

We know the place of its origin; a world outlawed from space and time. We know the reason for its being. Through this story, written in the agony of one man's soul, we know these things—and we know the manner of the Veil's destruction.

1: Corpse at the Canal

There had been a brawl at Madam Kan's, on the Jekkara Low-Canal. Some little Martian glory-holer had got too high on thil, and

pretty soon the spiked knuckle-dusters they use around there began to flash, and the little Martian had pulled his last feed-valve.

They threw what was left of him out onto the stones of the embankment almost at my feet. I suppose that was why I stopped—because I had to, or trip over him. And then I stared.

The thin red sunlight came down out of a clear green sky. Red sand whispered in the desert beyond the city walls, and red-brown water ran slow and sullen in the canal. The Martian lay twisted over on his back, with his torn throat spilling the reddest red of all across the dirty stones.

He was dead. He had green eyes, wide open, and he was dead.

I stood by him. I don't know how long. There wasn't any time. No sunlight shimmered now, no sense of people passing, no sound—nothing!

Nothing but his dead face looking up at me; green-eyed, with his lips pulled back off his white teeth.

I didn't know him. Alive, he was just another Martian snipe. Dead, he was just meat.

Dead, the Martian trash!

No time. Just a dead man's face, smiling.

And then something touched me. Thought, a sudden bursting flame of it, hit my mind, drawing it back like a magnet drawing heavy steel. Somebody's thought, directed at me. A raw, sick horror, a fear, and a compassion so deep it shook my heart— One clear, sharp thrust of word-images came to me now.

"He looks like Lucifer crying for Heaven," the message said. "His eyes. Oh, Dark Angel, his eyes!"

I shut those eyes. Sweat broke cold on me, I swayed, and then I made the world come back into focus again. Sunlight, sand, noise and stench and people crowding, the thunder of rockets from the spaceport two Mars miles away. All in focus. I looked up and saw the girl.

She was standing just beyond the dead man, almost touching him. There was a young fellow with her. I saw him vaguely, but he didn't matter then. Nothing mattered but the girl. She was wearing a blue dress, and she was staring at me with a smoke-gray gaze out of a face as white as stripped bone.

The sunlight and the noise and people went away again, leaving me alone with her. I felt the locket burn me under my spaceman's black, and my heart seemed to stop beating.

"Missy," I said. "Missy."

"Like Lucifer, but Lucifer turned saint," her mind was saying.

I laughed of a sudden, short and harsh. The world came back in place and stayed there, and so did I.

Missy. Missy, bosh! Missy's been dead a long, long time.

It was the red hair that fooled me. The same dark red hair, straight and heavy as a horse's tail, coiled on her white neck, and her smoke-gray eyes. Something, too, about her freckles and the way her mouth pulled up on one side as though it couldn't stop smiling.

Otherwise, she didn't look much like Missy. She was taller and bonier. Life had kicked her around some, and she showed it. Missy never had worn that tired, grim look. I don't know whether she had developed a tough, unbreakable character, such as the girl before me, either. I couldn't read minds, then.

This girl, looking at me, had a lot in her mind that she wouldn't want known. I didn't like the idea of her catching me in a rare off-moment.

"What do you babies think you're doing here?" I said.

The young man answered me. He was a lot like her—plain, simple, a lot tougher inside than he looked—a kid who had learned how to take punishment and go on fighting. He was sick now, and angry, and a little scared.

"We thought, in broad daylight it would be safe," he answered.

"Day or night, it's all the same to this hole. I'd get out."

Without moving, the girl was still looking at me, not even realizing that she was doing it. "White hair," she was thinking. "But he isn't old. Not much older than Brad, in spite of the lines. Suffering, not age."

"You're off the Queen of Jupiter, aren't you?" I asked them.

I knew they were. The Queen was the only passenger tub in Jekkara then. I was interested only because she looked like Missy. But Missy had been dead, a long time.

The young man she thought of as Brad spoke.

"Yes," he said. "We're going out to Jupiter, to the colonies." He pulled at the girl, gently. "Come on, Virgie. We'd better go back to the ship."

I was sweating, and cold. Colder than the corpse at my feet. I laughed, but not loud.

"Yes," I said. "Get back to the ship, where it's safe."

The girl hadn't stirred, hadn't taken her eyes off me.

Still afraid, not so compassionate now, but still with her mind on me.

"His eyes burn," she was thinking. "What color are they? No color, really. Just dark and cold and burning. They've looked into horror—and heaven. . ."

I let her look into them. She flushed after a while, and I smiled. She was angry, but she couldn't look away, and I held her, smiling, until the young man pulled her again, not so gently.

"Come on, Virgie."

She broke free from me then, turning with an angular, coltish grace. My stomach felt like somebody stabbed it, suddenly. The way she held her head. . .

She looked back at me, sullenly, not wanting to.

"You remind me of someone," she said. "Are you from the Queen of Jupiter, too?"

Her voice was like Missy's. Deeper, maybe. Throatier. But enough like it.

"Yeah. Spaceman, First Class."

"Then maybe that's where I noticed you." She turned the wedding ring on her finger, not thinking about it, and frowned. "What's your name?"

"Goat," I said. "J. Goat."

"Jay Goat," she repeated. "What an odd name. But it's not unusual. I wonder why it interests me so much."

"Come on, Virgie," Brad said crossly.

I didn't give her any help. I looked at her until she flushed crimson and turned away. I read her thoughts. They were worth reading.

She and Brad went off toward the spaceport, walking close together, back to the Queen of Jupiter, and I stumbled over the dead

Martian at my feet.

The pinched grayness had crawled in over his face. His green eyes were glazed and already sunken, and his blood was turning dark on the stones. Just another corpse.

I laughed. I put my black boot under the twist of his back and pushed him off into the sullen, red-brown water, and I laughed because my own blood was still hot and beating in me so hard it hurt.

He was dead, so I let him go.

I smiled at the splash and the fading ripples. "She was wrong," I thought. "It isn't Jay. It's just plain J. Goat. J for Judas."

There were about ten Mars hours to kill before the Queen blasted off. I had a good run at the getak tables in Madam Kan's. She found me some special desert-cactus brandy and a Venusian girl with a hide like polished emerald and golden eyes.

She danced for me, and she knew how. It wasn't a bad ten hours, for a Jekkara dive.

Missy, the dead Martian, and the girl named Virgie went down in my subconscious where they belonged, and didn't leave even a ripple. Things like that are like the pain of an old wound when you twist it. They get you for a minute, but they don't last. They aren't important any more.

Things can change. You planet-bound people build your four little walls of thought and roof them in with convention, and you think there's nothing else. But space is big, and there are other worlds, and other ways. You can learn them. Even you. Try it, and see.

I finished the fiery green brandy. I filled the hollow between the Venusian dancer's emerald breasts with Martian silver and kissed her, and went away with a faint taste of fish on my lips, back toward the spaceport.

I walked. It was night, with a thin, cold wind, rustling the sand and the low moons spilling silver and wild black shadows across the dunes. I could see my aura glowing, pale gold against the silver.

I felt swell. The only thing I thought about concerning the Queen of Jupiter was that pretty soon my job would be finished and I'd be paid.

I stretched with a pleasure you wouldn't know anything about, and it was a wonderful thing to be alive.

It was lonely out there on the moonswept desert a mile from the spaceport, when Gallery stepped out from behind a mined tower that might have been a lighthouse once, when the desert was a sea.

Gallery was king-snipe of the glory hole. He was Black Irish, and moderately drunk, and his extra-sensory perception was quivering in him like a sensitive diaphragm. I knew he could see my aura. Very faintly, and not with his eyes, but enough. I knew he had seen it the first time he met me, when I signed aboard the Queen of Jupiter on Venus.

You meet them like that occasionally. Celts especially, and Romanies, both Earth and Martian, and a couple of tribes of Venusians. Extra-sensory perception is born into them. Mostly it's crude, but it can get in your way.

It was in my way now. Gallery had four inches on me, and about thirty pounds, and the whisky he'd drunk was just enough to make him fast, mean, and dangerous. His fists were large.

"You ain't human," he said softly.

He was smiling. He might have been making love to me, with his smile and his beautiful soft voice. The sweat on his face made it look like polished wood in the moonlight.

"No, Gallery," I said. "Not any more. Not for a long time."

He swayed slightly, over his flexed knees. I could see his eyes. The blueness was washed out of them by the moonlight. There was only fear left, hard and shining.

His voice was still soft, still singing. "What are you, then? And what will you be wantin' with the ship?"

"Nothing with the ship, Gallery. Only with the people on her. And as to what I am, what difference does it make?"

"None," said Gallery. "None. Because I'm going to kill you, now."

I laughed, not making any sound.

He nodded his black head slowly. "Show me your teeth, if you will. You'll be showin' them to the desert sky soon, out of a picked skull."

He opened his hands. The racing moonlight showed me a silver crucifix in each of his palms.

"No, Gallery," I said softly. "Maybe you could call me a vampire, but I'm not that kind."

He closed his hands again over the crosses and started forward, one slow step at a time. I could hear his boots in the blowing sand. I didn't move.

"You can't kill me, Gallery."

He didn't stop. He didn't speak. The sweat was trickling down his skin. He was afraid, but he didn't stop.

"You'll die here, Gallery, without a priest."

He didn't stop.

"Go on to the town, Gallery. Hide there till the Queen's gone. You'll be safe. Do you love the others enough to die for them?"

He stopped, then. He frowned, like a puzzled kid. It was a new thought.

I got the answer before he said it.

"What does love have to do with it? They're people."

He came on again, and I opened my eyes, wide.

"Gallery," I said.

He was close. Close enough to smell the raw whisky on his breath. I looked up into his face. I caught his eyes and held them, and he stopped, slowly, dragging his feet as though all of a sudden there were weights on them.

I held his eyes. I could hear his thoughts. They were the same. They're always the same.

He raised his fists up, too slowly, as though he might be lifting a man's weight on each of them. His lips drew back. I could see the wet shine of his teeth and hear the labored breath go between them, hoarse and rough.

I smiled at him, and held his eyes with mine.

He went down to his knees. Inch by inch, fighting me, but down. A big man with sweat on his face and blue eyes that couldn't look away. His hands opened. The silver crosses fell out and lay there glittering on the sand.

His head went back. The cords roped out in his neck and jerked, and then suddenly he fell over on his side and lay still.

"My heart," he whispered. "You've stopped it."

That's the only way. What they feel about us is instinct, and even psycho-surgery won't touch that. Besides, there's never time.

He couldn't breathe, now. He couldn't speak, but I heard his thoughts. I picked the crucifixes out of the sand and folded his fingers over them.

He managed to turn his head a little and look at me. He tried to speak, but again it was his thought I answered.

"Into the Veil, Gallery," I whispered. "That's where I'm leading the Queen."

I saw his eyes widen and fix. The last thought he had was—well, never mind that. I dragged him back into the ruined tower where no one would be likely to find him for a long time, and started on again for the spaceport. And then I stopped.

He'd dropped the crosses again. They were lying in the path with the moonlight on them, and I picked them up, thinking I'd throw them out into the blowing sand where they wouldn't be seen.

I didn't. I stood holding them. They didn't burn my flesh. I laughed.

Yeah. I laughed. But I couldn't look at them.

I went back in the tower and stretched Gallery on his back with his hands crossed on his chest, and closed his eyes. I laid a crucifix on each of his eyelids and went out, this time for good.

Shirina said once that you could never understand a human mind completely no matter how well you knew it. That's where the suffering comes in. You feel fine, everything's beautiful, and then all of a sudden a trapdoor comes open somewhere in your brain, and you remember.

Not often, and you learn to kick them shut, fast. But even so, Flack is the only one of us that still has dark hair, and he never had a soul to begin with.

Well, I kicked the door shut on Gallery and his crosses, and half an hour later the Queen of Jupiter blasted off for the Jovian colonies, and a landing she was never going to make.

2: Voyage into Doom

Nothing happened until we hit the outer fringe of the Asteroid Belt. I'd kept watch on the minds of my crewmates, and I knew Gallery hadn't mentioned me to anyone else. You don't go around telling people that the guy in the next bunk gives off a yellow glow and isn't human, unless you want to wind up in a straitjacket. Especially when such things are something you sense but can't see, like electricity.

When we came into the danger zone inside the Belt, they set the precautionary watches at the emergency locks on the passenger decks, and I was assigned to one of them. I went up to take my station.

Just at the top of the companionway I felt the first faint reaction of my skin, and my aura began to pulse and brighten.

I went on to the Number Two lock and sat down.

I hadn't been on the passenger deck before. The Queen of Jupiter was an old tub from the Triangle trade, refitted for deep-space hauling. She held together, and that's all. She was carrying a heavy cargo of food, seed, clothing, and farm supplies, and about five hundred families trying for a fresh start in the Jovian colonies.

I remembered the first time I saw Jupiter. The first time any man from Earth ever saw Jupiter. That was long ago.

Now the deck was jammed. Men, women, kids, mattresses, bags, bundles, and what have you. Martians, Venusians, Terrans, all piled in together, making a howling racket and smelling very high in the combined heat of the sun and the press of bodies.

My skin was tingling and beginning to crawl. My aura was brighter.

I saw the girl. The girl named Virgie with her thick red hair and her colt's way of moving. She and her husband were minding a wiry, green-eyed Martian baby while its mother tried to sleep, and they were both thinking the same thing.

"Maybe, some day when things are better, we'll have one of our own."

I remember thinking that Missy would have looked like that holding our kid, if we'd ever had one.

My aura pulsed and glowed.

I watched the little worlds flash by, still far ahead of the ship, all sizes, from pebbles to habitable planetoids, glittering in the raw

sunlight and black as space on their shadow sides. People crowded up around the ports, and I got to looking at one old man standing almost beside me.

He had space stamped all over him, in the way he carried his lean frame and the lines in his leathery face, and the hungry-hound look of his eyes watching the Belt. An old rocket-hustler who had done plenty in his day, and remembered it all.

And then Virgie came up. Of all the women on deck it had to be Virgie. Brad was with her, and she was still holding the baby. She had her back to me, looking out.

"It's wonderful," she said softly. "Oh, Brad, just look at it!"

"Wonderful, and deadly," the old spaceman said to himself. He looked around and smiled at Virgie. "Your first trip out?"

"Yes, for both of us. I suppose we're very starry-eyed about it, but it's strange." She made a little helpless gesture.

"I know. There aren't any words for it." He turned back to the port. His voice and his face were blank, but I could read his mind.

"I used to kick the supply ships through to the first settlement, fifty years ago," he said. "There were ten of us, doing that. I'm the only one left."

"The Belt was dangerous then, before they got the Rosson deflectors," Brad said.

"The Belt," said the old man softly, "only got three of them."

Virgie lifted her red head. "Then what. . ."

The old man didn't hear her. His thoughts were way off.

"Six of the best men in space, and then, eleven years ago, my son," he said, to no one.

A woman standing beside him turned her head. I saw the wide, raw shine of terror in her eyes, and the sudden stiffness of her lips,

"The Veil?" she whispered. "That's what you mean, isn't it? The Veil?"

The old man tried to shut her up, but Virgie broke in.

"What about the Veil?" she asked. "I've heard of it, vaguely. What is it?"

The Martian baby was absorbed in a silver chain she wore around her neck. I remember thinking it looked familiar. Probably she'd had it

on the first time I saw her. My aura glowed, a hot bright gold.

The woman's voice, answering, had an eerie quality of distance in it, like an echo. She was staring out of the port now.

"Nobody knows," she said. "It can't be found, or traced, or tested at all. My brother is a spaceman. He saw it once from a great distance, reaching from nowhere to swallow a ship. A veil of light. It faded, and the ship was gone! My brother saw it out here, close to the Belt."

"There's no more reason to expect it here than anywhere," the old spaceman said roughly. "It's taken ships as far in as Earth's orbit. There's no reason to be afraid."

My aura burned around me like a cloud of golden light, and my skin was alive with a subtle current.

The green-eyed Martian baby yanked the silver chain suddenly and crowed, holding its hands high. The thing on the end of the chain, that had been hidden under Virgie's dress, spun slowly round and round, and drew my eyes, and held them.

I must have made some sound, because Virgie looked around and saw me. I don't know what she thought. I didn't know anything for a long time, except that I was cold, as though some of the dead, black space outside had come in through the port somehow and touched me.

The shiny thing spun on the end of the silver chain, and the green-eyed baby watched it, and I watched it.

After that there was darkness, with me standing in the middle of it quite still, and cold, cold, cold!

Virgie's voice came through the darkness, calm, casual, as though none of it mattered at all.

I've remembered who it is you made me think of, Mr. Goat," she said. "I'm afraid I was rather rude that day on Mars, but the resemblance puzzled me. Look."

A white object came into my shell of ice and blackness. It was a strong white hand, reddened across the knuckles with work, holding something in the palm. Something that burned with a clear, terrible light of its own. Her voice went on, so very quietly.

"This locket, Mr. Goat. It's ancient. Over three hundred years old. It belonged to an ancestor of mine, and the family has kept it ever since. It's rather a lovely story. She married a young spaceman. In those

days, of course, space flight was still new and dangerous, and this young man loved it as much as he did his wife. His name was Stephen Vance. That's his picture. That's why I thought I had seen you somewhere before, and why I asked your name. I think the resemblance is quite striking, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is."

"The girl is his wife, and of course, the original owner of the locket. He called her Missy. It's engraved on the back of the locket. Anyway, he had a chance to make the first flight from Mars to Jupiter, and Missy knew how much it meant to him. She knew that something of him would die if he didn't go, and so she let him. He didn't know how soon the baby they'd both wanted so much would arrive, for she didn't tell him that. Because she knew he wouldn't go if she did.

"So Stephen had two lockets made, this one and another just like it. He told her they'd make a link between them, he and Missy, that nothing could break. Sometime, somehow, he'd come back to her, no matter what happened. Then he went to Jupiter. He died there. His ship was never found.

"But Missy went on wearing the locket and praying. And when she died she gave it to her daughter. It grew into a sort of family tradition. That's why I have it now."

Her voice trailed off, drowsily, with a faint note of surprise. Her hand and the locket went away, and there was a great stillness all around me, a great peace,

I brought my arms up across my face. I stiffened, and I tried to say something, words I used to say a long, long time ago. They wouldn't come. They won't, when you go into the Beyond Place.

I took my hands away, and I could see again. I didn't touch the locket around my neck. I could feel it against my breast, like the cold of space, searing me.

Virgie lay at my feet. She still held the baby in the bend of one arm. Its round brown face was turned to hers, smiling a little. Brad lay beside them, with one arm flung across them both.

The locket lay on the gentle curve of Virgie's breast, face up, still open, rising and falling slowly to the lift of her breathing.

They don't suffer. Remember that. They don't suffer. They don't even know. They sleep, and their dreams are happy. Remember, please! Not one of them has suffered, or been afraid.

I stood alone in that silent ship. There were no stars beyond the port now, no little worlds riding the Belt. There was only a veil of light wrapped close around the ship, a soft web of green and purple and gold and blue spun on a shimmering gray woof that was not color at all, and held there with threads of scarlet.

There was the familiar dimming of the electrics inside the ship. The people slept on the broad deck. I could hear their breathing, soft and slow and peaceful. My aura burned like a golden cloud around me, and inside it my body beat and pulsed with life.

I looked down at the locket, at Missy's face. If you'd told me. Oh Missy, if you'd only told me, I could have saved you!

Virgie's red hair, dark and straight and heavy in her white neck. Virgie's smoke-gray eyes, half open and dreaming. Missy's hair. Missy's eyes.

Mine. Part of my flesh, part of my bone, part of my blood. Part of the life that still beat and pulsed inside me.

Three hundred years.

"Oh, if I could only pray!" I thought.

I knelt down beside her. I put out my hand. The golden light came out of the flesh and veiled her face. I took my hand away and got up, slowly. More slowly than Gallery fell when he died.

The shimmer of the Veil was all through the ship, now. In the air, in every atom of its wood and metal. I moved in it, a shining golden thing, alive and young, in a silent, sleeping world.

Three hundred years, and Missy was dead, and now the locket had brought her back.

Did Judas feel like this when the rope tore the life out of him?

But Judas died.

I walked in the silence, wrapped in my golden cloud, and my heartbeats shook me like the blows of a man's fist. A strong heart. A young, strong heart.

The ship swerved slowly, drawn out of its arc of free fall toward Jupiter. The auxiliaries had not been cut in yet for the Belt. The Veil just

closed around the hull and drew it, easily.

It's just an application of will-power. Teleportation, the strength of mind and thought amplified by the X-crystals and directed like a radio beam. The release of energy between the force of thought and the force of gravity causes the light, the visible thing that spacemen call the Veil. The hypnotic sleep-impulse is sent the same way, through the X-crystals on Astellar.

Shirina says it's a simple thing, a child's trick, in its own space-time matrix. All it requires is a focal point to guide it, a special vibration it can follow like a torch in the void, such as the aura around flesh, human or not, that has bathed in the Cloud.

A Judas goat, to lead the sheep to slaughter.

I walked in my golden light. The pleasure of subtle energies pricked and flared across my skin. I was going home.

And Missy was still alive. Three hundred years, and she was still alive. Her blood and mine, alive together in a girl named Virgie.

And I was taking her to Astellar, the world its own dimension didn't want.

I guess it was the stopping of the current across my skin that roused me, half an eternity later. My aura had paled to its normal faintness. I heard the faint grating ring of metal on stone, and I knew the Queen of Jupiter had made her last landing. I was home.

I was sitting on the edge of my own bunk. I didn't know how I got there. I was holding my head on my clenched fists, and when I opened them my own locket fell out. There was blood on my palms.

I got up and walked through the silence, through the hard impersonal glare of the electrics, to the nearest airlock, and went out.

The Queen of Jupiter lay in a rounded cradle of rock, worn smooth. Back at the top of the chute the space doors were closed, and the last echo of the air pumps was dying away against the low roof of the cavern. The rock is a pale translucent green, carved and polished into beauty that stabs you breathless, no matter how many times you see it.

Astellar is a little world, only about half the size of Vesta. Outside it's nothing but black slag, without even a trace of mineral to attract a tramp miner. When they want to they can bend the light around it so

that the finest spacescope can't find it, and the same thought-force that makes the Veil can move Astellar where they wish it to go.

Since traffic through the Belt has grown fairly heavy, they haven't moved it much. They haven't had to.

I went across the cavern in the pale green light. There's a wide ramp that goes up from the floor like the sweep of an angel's wing. Flack was waiting for me near the foot of it, outlined in the faint gold of his aura.

"Hi, Steve," he said, and looked at the Queen of Jupiter with his queer gray eyes. His hair was as black as mine used to be, his skin space-burned dark and leathery. His eyes looked out of the darkness like pale spots of moonlight, faintly luminous and without a soul.

I knew Flack before he became one of us, and I thought then that he was less human than the Astellarians.

"A good haul this time, Steve?" he asked.

"Yeah." I tried to get past him. He caught my arm.

"Hey—what's eating you?" he said.

"Nothing."

I shook him off. He smiled and stepped in front of me. A big man, as big as Gallery and a lot tougher, with a mind that could meet mine on an equal footing.

"Don't give me that, Stevie. Something's—he-ey!" He pushed my chin up suddenly, and his pale eyes glowed and narrowed.

"What's this?" he said. "Tears?"

He stared at me a minute, slack-jawed, and then he began to laugh. I hit him.

3: Wages of Evil

Flack went sprawling backward onto the lucent stone. I went by him up the curve of the ramp. I went fast, but it was already too late.

The airlocks of the Queen of Jupiter opened behind me.

I stopped. I stopped the way Gallery did in the blowing Martian sand, slowly, dragging weights on my feet. I didn't want to. I didn't

want to turn around, but there was nothing I could do about it. My body turned, by itself.

Flack was on his feet again, leaning up against the carved green wall, looking at me. Blood ran out over his lip and down his chin. He got out a handkerchief and held it over his mouth, and his eyes never left me, pale and still and glowing. The golden aura made a halo round his dark head, like the painting of a saint.

Beyond him the locks of the ship were open, and the people were coming out.

In their niche on the fourth level of Astellar the X-crystals were pulsing from pale gray to a black as endless and alien as the Coal Sack. Behind them was a mind, kindly and gentle, thinking, and the human cargo of the Queen heard its thoughts.

They came out of the locks, walking steadily but without haste. They formed into a loose column and came across the green translucent floor of the cavern and up the ramp. Walking easily, their breathing deep and quiet, their eyes half open and full of dreams.

Up the long sweeping ribbon of pale green stone, past Flack, past me, and into the hall beyond. They didn't see anything but their dreams. They smiled a little. They were happy, and not afraid.

Virgie still carried the baby, drowsing in her arms, and Brad was still beside her. The locket had turned with her movements, hiding the pictures, showing me only its silver back.

I watched them go. The hall beyond the ramp was gem-cut from milky crystal and inlaid with metals that came from another dimension, radioactive metals that filled the crystal walls and the air between them with softened, misty fire.

They went slowly into the veil of mist and fire, and were gone.

Flack spoke softly. "Steve."

I turned back toward the sound of his voice. There was a strange blur over everything, but I could see the yellow glow of his aura, the dark strength of him outlined against the pale green rock. He hadn't moved. He hadn't taken his cold light eyes away from me.

I had left my mind naked, unguarded, and I knew before he spoke that Flack had read it.

He spoke through his bruised lips.

"You're thinking you won't go into the Cloud again, because of that girl," he whispered. "You're thinking there must be some way to save her. But there isn't, and you wouldn't save her if you could. And you'll go into the Cloud again, Stevie. Twelve hours from now, when it's time, you'll walk into the Cloud with the rest of us. And do you know why?"

His voice grew soft as the touch of a dove, with a sound of laughter under it.

"Because you're afraid to die, Stevie, just like the rest of us. Even me, Flack, the guy that never had a soul. I never believed in any god but myself and I love life. But sometimes I look at a corpse lying in the street of some human sinkhole and curse it with all my heart because it didn't have to be afraid.

"You'll go into the Cloud, because the Cloud is all that keeps you alive. And you won't care about the red-haired girl, Stevie. You wouldn't care if it was Missy herself giving her life to you, because you're afraid. We're not human any longer, Steve. We're gone beyond. We've sinned—sins there aren't even any names for in this dimension. And no matter what we believe in, or deny, we're afraid.

"Afraid to die, Stevie. All of us. Afraid to die!"

His words frightened me. I couldn't forget them. I was remembering them even when I saw Shirina.

"I've found a new dimension, Stevie," Shirina said lazily. "A little one, between the Eighth and Ninth. It's so little we missed it before. We'll explore it, after the Cloud."

She led me in our favorite room. It was cut from a crystal so black and deep that it was like being in outer space, and if you looked long enough you could see strange nebulae, far off, and galaxies that never were except in dreams.

"How long before it's time?" I asked her.

"An hour, perhaps less. Poor Stevie. It'll be over soon, and you'll forget."

Her mind touched mine gently, with an intimate sweetness and comfort far beyond the touch of hands. She'd been doing that for hours, soothing the fever and the pain out of my thoughts. I lay without moving, sprawled on a couch so soft it was like a cloud. I could

see the glow and shimmer of Shirina against the darkness without turning my head.

I don't know how to describe Shirina. Physically she was close enough to humanity. The differences in structure were more subtle than mere shape. They were—well, they were right, and exotic, and beautiful in a way there aren't any words for.

She, and her race, had no need of clothing. Their lazy, sinuous bodies had a fleecy covering that wasn't fur or feathers or tendrils but something of all three. They had no true color. They changed according to light, in an endless spectrum of loveliness that went far beyond the range you humans know.

Now, in the dark, Shirina's aura glowed like warm pearl. I could see her face, faintly, the queer peaked triangular bones covered with skin softer than a humming-bird's breast, the dead-black, bottomless eyes, the crest of delicate antennae tipped with tiny balls of light like diamonds burning under gauze.

Her thoughts clung around me gently. "There's no need to worry, Stevie," she was thinking. "The girl will go last. It's all arranged. You will enter the Cloud first of all, and there won't be the smallest vibration of her to touch you."

"But she'll touch somebody, Shirina," I groaned. "And it makes it all different, somehow, even with the others. Time doesn't seem to mean much. She's—she's like my own kid."

Shirina answered aloud, patiently, "But she isn't. Your daughter was born three hundred years ago. Three hundred years, that is, for your body. For you there isn't any reckoning. Time is different in every dimension. We've spent a thousand years in some of them, and more than that."

Yes. I could remember those alien years. Dimensional walls are no barrier to thought. You lie under the X-crystals and watch them pulse from mist-gray to depthless black. Your mind is sucked out of you and projected along a tight beam of carefully planned vibration, and presently you're in another space, another time.

You can take over any body that pleases you, for as long as you want. You can go between planets, between suns, between galaxies, just by thinking about it. You can see things, do things, taste

experiences that all the languages of our space-time continuum put together have no words for.

Shirina and I had done a lot of wandering, a lot of seeing, and a lot of tasting. And the interlocking universes are infinite.

"I can't help worrying, Shirina," I told her. "I don't want to feel like this, but I can't help it. Right now I'm human. Just plain Steve Vance of Beverly Hills, California, on the planet Earth. I can't bear my memories."

My throat closed up. I was sick, and covered with cold sweat, and closer to going crazy than ever before in all my Satan-knows-how-many years.

Shirina's voice came through the darkness. It was like a bird-call, a flute, a ripple of water over stones, and like nothing that any of you ever heard or ever will hear.

"Stevie," she said. "Listen to me. You're not human any more. You haven't been human since the first time you walked in the Cloud. You have no more contact with those people than they have with the beasts they raise for slaughter."

"But I can't help remembering."

"All right. Remember, then. Remember how from birth you were different from other men. How you had to go on and out, to see things no man had ever seen before, to fight space itself with your heart and your ship and your two hands."

I could recall it. The first man to dare the Belt, the first man to see Jupiter blazing in his swarm of moons.

"That's why, when we caught you in the Veil and brought you to Astellar, we saved you from the Cloud. You had something rare—a strength, a sweep of vision and desire. You could give us something we wanted, an easier contact with human ships. And in return, we gave you life and freedom."

She paused, and added softly, "And myself, Stevie."

"Shirina!" A lot of things met and mingled in our thoughts. Emotions born of alien bodies we had shared. Memories of battle and beauty, of terror and love, under suns that never burned afterward, even in one's dreams, I can't explain it. There aren't any words.

"Shirina, help me!"

Shirina's mind cradled mine like a mother's arms.

"You weren't to blame in the beginning, Stevie. We did it to you under hypnosis, so that your brain could assimilate the change gradually, without shock. I led you myself into our world, like someone leading a child, and when you were finally freed, much time had passed. You had gone beyond humanity. Far beyond."

"I could have stopped. I could have refused to go into the Cloud again, when I knew what it was. I could have refused to be a Judas goat, leading the sheep to slaughter."

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because I had what I wanted," I said slowly. "What I'd always wanted and never had a name for. Power and freedom such as no man ever had. I liked having it. When I thought about you and the things we could do together, and the things I could do alone, I'd have led the whole solar system into the Veil, and be hanged to it."

I drew a harsh, tight breath and wiped the sweat from my palms.

"And besides, I didn't feel human any longer. I wouldn't hurt them any more than I'd have mistreated a dog when I was still a man. But I didn't belong to them anymore."

"Then why is it different now?"

"I don't know. It just is. When I think of Virgie going under the crystals, and me walking in the Cloud, it's too much."

"You've seen their bodies, afterward," Shirina said gently. "Not one atom is touched or changed, and they smile. There's no easier or kinder death in Creation."

"I know," I said. "I know. But Virgie is my own."

She'd walk under the X-crystals, smiling, with her red hair dark and shining and her smoke-gray eyes half open and full of dreams. She'd still have the baby in her arms, and Brad would walk beside her. And the X-crystals would pulse and burn with black strange fires, and she would lie down, still smiling, and that would be all.

All, forever, for Virgie and Brad and the green-eyed Martian baby.

But the life that had been in their bodies, the force that no man has a name for that makes the breath and blood and heat of living flesh, the ultimate vibration of the human soul—that life-force would rise up from the crystals, up into the chamber of the Cloud. And

Shirina, and Shirina's people, and the four other men like me that weren't human any longer, would walk in it so that we could live.

It hadn't really hit me before. It doesn't. You think of it at first, but it doesn't mean anything. There's no semantic referent for "soul" or "ego" or "life-force." You don't see anything, you don't have any contact with the dead. You don't even think much of death.

All you know is you walk into a radiant Cloud, and you feel like a god, and you don't think of the human side of it because you aren't human any longer.

"No wonder they threw you out of your own dimension!" I cried out.

Shirina sighed. "They called us vampires; parasites—sybaritic monsters who lived only for sensation and pleasure. And they cast us into darkness. Well, perhaps they were right. I don't know. But we never hurt or frightened anyone, and when I think of the things they did to their own people, in blood and fear and hate, I'm terrified."

She rose and came and stood over me, glowing like warm pearl against the space-deep crystal. The tiny tips of diamond fire burned on her antennae, and her eyes were like black stars.

I put out my hands to her. She took them, and her touch broke down my control. I was crying suddenly, not making any sound.

"Right or wrong, Stevie, you're one of us now," she said gently. I'm sorry this happened. I would have spared you, if you'd let me put your mind to sleep until it was over. But you've got to understand that. You left them, the humans, behind you, and you can never, never go back."

After a long time I spoke. "I know, I understand."

I felt her sigh and shiver, and then she drew back, still holding my hands.

"It's time now, Stevie."

I got up, slowly, and then I stopped. Shirina caught her breath suddenly.

"Steve, my hands! You're hurting me!"

I let them go. "Flack," I said, not talking to anybody. "He knew my weakness. At root and base, no matter how much I talk, I'm going into the Cloud again because I'm afraid. That's why I'll always go into the Cloud when it's time. Because I've sinned so deeply I'm afraid to die."

"What is sin?" Shirina whispered.

"God knows. God only knows."

I brought her bird-soft body into my arms and kissed her, brushing my lips across the shining down of her cheek to her little crimson mouth. There was the faint, bitter taste of my tears in the kiss, and then I laughed, softly.

I pulled the chain and locket from around my neck and dropped them on the floor, and we went out together, to the Cloud.

4: Curtain of Darkness

We walked through the halls of Astellar, like people in the heart of a many-colored jewel. Halls of amber and amethyst and cinnabar, of dragon-green and gray the color of morning mist, and colors there are no names for in this dimension.

The others joined us, coming from the crystal cells where they spent their time. Shirina's people, velvet-eyed and gentle, with their crowns of fire-tipped antennae. They were like a living rainbow in the jewel-light of the halls.

Flack and myself and the three others—only five men, in all the time Astellar had been in our dimension, with the kind of minds Shirina's people wanted—wore our spaceman's black, walking in our golden auras.

I saw Flack looking at me, but I didn't meet his eyes.

We came, finally, to the place of the Cloud, in the center of Astellar. The plain ebon-colored doors stood open. Beyond them there was a mist like curdled sunshine, motes of pure, bright, gilded radiance, coiling and dancing in a cloud of living light.

Shirina took my hand. I knew she wanted to keep me from thinking about the place below, where still through hypnotic command the men and women and children from the Queen of Jupiter were walking under the X-crystals to their last long sleep.

I held her, tightly, and we stepped through into the Cloud.

The light closed us in. We walked on something that was not rock, nor anything tangible, but a vibration of force from the X-crystals that

held us on a tingling, buoyant web. And the golden, living light clung to us, caressing, spilling over the skin in tiny rippling waves of fire.

I was hungry for it. My body stretched, lifting up. I walked on the vibrant web of power under my feet, my head up, the breath stopped in my throat, every separate atom of my flesh rejuvenated, throbbing and blazing and pulsing with life.

Life!

And then it hit me.

I didn't want it to. I thought I had it down, down for good where it couldn't bother me anymore. I thought I'd made my peace with whatever soul I'd had, or lost. I didn't want to think.

But I did. It struck me, suddenly. Like a meteor crashing a ship in space, like the first naked blaze of the sun when you clear the Darkside peaks of Mercury. Like death, the ultimate, final thing you can't dodge or get around.

I knew what that life was and where it came from, and how it had changed me.

It was Virgie. Virgie with her blasted red hair and her smoke-gray eyes, and Missy's life in her, and mine. Why did she have to be sent? Why did I have to meet her beside that dead Martian, on the Jekkara Low-Canal?

But I had met her. And suddenly I knew. I knew!

I don't remember what I did. I must have wrenched loose from Shirina's hand. I felt her startled thought touch my brain, and then it broke away and I was running through the golden Cloud, toward the exit beyond. Running without control, running at top speed.

I think I tried to scream. I don't know. I was clean crazy. But I can remember even then that I sensed somebody running beside me, pacing me through the brilliant blindness of the Cloud.

I plunged out into the hall beyond. It was blue like still deep water, and empty. I ran. I didn't want to run. Some sane corner of my mind cried out to Shirina for help, but she couldn't get through the shrieking chaos of the rest of it. I ran.

And somebody ran behind me. I didn't turn around. I didn't care.

I hardly knew it. But somebody ran behind me, on long fleet legs.

Down the blue hall, and into another one that was all flame-color shot with gray, and down that to a curving ramp cut from dark amber that dropped to the level below.

The level where the X-crystals were.

I rushed down the amber path, bounding like a stag with the hounds close behind, through a crystal silence that threw the sound of my breathing back at me, harsh and tearing. There was a circular place at the bottom of the ramp where four hallways met, a place jewel-carved in somber, depthless purple.

I came into it, and from three of the hall mouths men stepped out to meet me. Men with young faces and snow-white hair, and naked bodies burning gold against the purple.

I stopped in the center of the floor. I heard bare feet racing on the ramp behind me, and I knew without looking who it was.

Flack. He circled and fixed me with his cold strange eyes, like moonlight in his dark face. Somewhere he had found a blaster.

He held it on me. Not on my head or heart, but at my middle.

"I thought you might blow your top, Stevie," he said. "So we kind of stood by, in case you'd try something."

I stood still. I didn't have any feelings. I was beyond that. I was crazy—clean, stark crazy, thinking of time and the crystals pulsing just beyond my reach.

"Get out of my way," I warned him.

Flack smiled. There was no humor in it. The three men moved in a little behind him. They looked at Flack and they looked at me, and they didn't like any of it, but they were afraid.

Afraid to die, like all of us. Even Flack, who never had a soul.

Flack acted like someone being patient with a naughty child.

"Will you come back with us, Stevie, or do I blow your insides out, here and now?" he asked me.

I looked at his cold, queer eyes. "You'd like that."

"Yeah." He ran the red tip of his tongue over his swollen lips. "Yeah. But I'm letting you choose."

"All right," I said. "All right, I'll choose."

I was crazy. I jumped him.

I hit him first with my mind. Flack was strong, but I was fifty years older in the Cloud than he was, and Shirina had taught me things. I gathered all the force I had and let him have it, and he had to marshal his own thought-force to fight it off, so that for a second he couldn't manage the blaster with his conscious mind.

Instinctive reflex sent a crimson stream of deadly power smoking past me when I dived in low. It seared my skin, but that was all.

We fell, threshing, on the purple stone. Flack was strong. He was bigger than I, and heavier, and viciously mean. He beat most of the sense out of me, but I had caught his gun wrist and wouldn't let go. The three others took their golden auras back a little toward the hall mouths, afraid the blaster might let off and hit them.

They thought Flack could handle me, and they were afraid. So they drew back and used their minds on me, trying to hammer me down.

I don't know yet why they couldn't. I guess it was because of a lot of things, Shirina's teaching, my greater age, and the fact that I wasn't thinking consciously of anything. I was just a thing that had started some place and was going through.

Sometimes I wish they had broken me. Sometimes I wish Flack had burned me down on the purple stone.

I shook off their thought-blows, I took the pounding of Flack's big fist and the savaging of his feet and knees, and put all my strength into bending his arm. I yanked it away from me, and up and around where I wanted it.

I got it there. He made his last play. He broke his heart on it, and it didn't do him any good. I saw his eyes, stretched wide in his dark face. I can still see them.

I got my finger past his and pressed the firing stud.

I got up and walked across the floor, carrying the blaster. The three others spread out, warily, ringing me. Naked men glowing gold against the purple stone, their eyes hard, animal-bright with fear.

I blasted one through the head just as his muscles tensed for the leap. The others came in, fast. They knocked me down, and time was passing, and the people walking slowly under the crystals with dreams in their eyes.

I kicked one man under the jaw and broke his neck, and the other tried to take the gun away. I had just come from the Cloud, and he hadn't. I was strong with the life that pulsed up from the X-crystals. I forced his arms back and pressed the stud again, trying not to see his eyes.

And these were my friends. Men I drank and laughed with, and went with sometimes to worlds beyond this universe.

I went on, down a hall the color of a Martian dawn. I was empty. I didn't feel or think. There was a pain a long way off, and blood in my mouth, but such things didn't matter.

I came to the place where the crystals were and stopped.

A lot of them had walked under the crystals. Almost half of the five hundred families from the Queen of Jupiter. They lay still on the black floor, and there was plenty of room. They didn't crowd the others coming after them, a slow, quiet stream of human beings with dreams in their eyes.

The crystals hung in a wide circle, tilting slightly inward. They pulsed with a blackness that was beyond mere dark, a negative thing as blazing and tangible as sunlight. The angle of tilt and the tuning of the facets against one another made the difference in the result, whether projecting the Veil, or motive power, or hypnosis, or serving as a gateway to another time and space.

Or sucking the power of life from human bodies.

I could see the pale shimmer of force in the center, a sort of vortex between the limitless, burning, black facets that rose from the quiet bodies to the chamber of the Cloud above.

I could see the faces of the dead. They were still smiling.

The controls were on the other side. I ran. I was dead inside, as dead as the corpses on the floor, but I ran. I remember thinking it was funny to run when you were dead. I kept on the outside of the crystals and ran with all my strength to the controls.

I saw Virgie. She was way back in the procession, and she was just as I knew she'd be, with Brad beside her and the green-eyed baby still in her arms, asleep.

Virgie, with her gleaming red hair and Missy's eyes!

I grabbed the controls and wrenched them over, and the shimmering vortex disappeared. I spun the great hexagonal wheel and notched it for full-power hypnosis, and ran out onto the floor, among the dead.

I told the living what to do. I didn't waken them. They turned and went back the way they came, back toward the Queen of Jupiter, running hard and still smiling, still not afraid.

I went back to the wheel and turned it again, to a notch marked in their danger-color, and then I followed the last of the humans into the hall. At the doorway I turned and raised my blaster.

I saw Shirina standing under the radiant blackness of the crystals, halfway around the curving wall.

I felt her mind touch mine, and then draw back, slowly, the way you take your hand away from someone you loved that has just died. I looked at her eyes. I had to.

Why did I do what I did? What did I care about red hair and smoke-gray eyes, and the three-hundred-year diluted blood of a girl named Missy? I wasn't human any longer. What did I care?

We were apart, Shirina and I. We had gone away from each other and we couldn't touch, even to say goodbye. I caught a faint echo of her thought.

"Oh, Stevie, there were still so many things to do!"

Her great luminous black eyes shining with tears, her jewel-tipped antennae dulled and drooping. And yet I knew what she was going to do.

I couldn't see the crystals, suddenly. I couldn't see anything. I knew there was never going to be anything I wanted to see again. I raised the blaster and fired it full power into one of the hanging crystals, and then I ran.

I felt the bolt of Shirina's lethal thought strike my brain, and weaken, and shatter on something in her own mind, at its source. I ran, a dead thing going on leaden feet, in a halo of golden light.

Behind me the X-crystals, upset by the blaster in their fullest sympathy of power, began to split and crack and tear the world of Astellar to bits.

I don't know much about what happened. I ran and ran, on the heels of the humans who still lived, but I was beyond thinking or feeling. I have vague memories of hallways lined with cells of jewel-toned crystal, halls of amber and amethyst and cinnabar, of dragon-green and gray the color of morning mist, and colors there are no names for in this dimension.

Hallways that cracked and split behind me, falling in upon themselves, shards of broken rainbows. And above that the scream of power from the X-crystals, wrenching and tearing at Astellar.

Then something I heard with my mind, and not my ears. Shirina's people, dying in the wreckage.

My mind was stunned, but not stunned enough. I could still hear. I can still hear.

The Queen of Jupiter was safe. The outward-moving vibration hadn't reached her yet. We got aboard her, and I opened the space doors and blasted her off myself, because the skipper and the first and second officers were asleep for good on Astellar.

I didn't watch the death of Astellar. Only after a long time I looked back, and it was gone, and there was only a cloud of bright dust shimmering in the raw sunlight.

I set the Iron Mike for Space Authority headquarters on Mars and turned on the automatic AC warning beam. Then I left the Queen of Jupiter in the Number 4 lifeboat, B deck.

That's where I am now, writing this, somewhere between Mars and the Belt. I didn't see Virgie before I went. I didn't see any of them, but especially Virgie. They'll be awake now. I hope their lives are worth what they cost.

Astellar is gone. The Veil is gone. You don't have to be afraid any more. I'm going to put this manuscript in a message rocket and send it on, so you'll know you don't have to fear. I don't know why I care.

I don't know why I'm writing this at all, unless— Bosh, I know! Why lie? At this stage of the game, why lie?

I'm alive now. I'm a young man. But the Cloud that kept me that way is gone, and presently I shall grow old, too old, very quickly, and die. And I'm afraid to die.

Somewhere in the solar system there must be somebody willing to pray for me. They used to teach me, when I was a kid, that prayer helped. I want somebody to pray for my soul, because I can't do it for myself.

If I were glad of what I've done, if I had changed, perhaps then I could pray.

But I've gone beyond humanity, and I can't turn back.

Maybe prayer doesn't matter. Maybe there's nothing beyond death but oblivion. I hope so! If I could only stop being, stop thinking, stop remembering.

I hope to all the gods of all the universes that death is the end. But I don't know, and I'm afraid.

Afraid. Judas—Judas—Judas! I betrayed two worlds, and there couldn't be a hell deeper than the one I live in now. And still I'm afraid.

Why? Why should I care what happens to me? I destroyed Astellar. I destroyed Shirina, whom I loved better than anything in Creation. I destroyed my friends, my comrades—and I have destroyed myself.

And you're not worth it. Not all the human cattle that breed in the solar system were worth Astellar, and Shirina, and the things we did beyond space and time, together.

Why did I give Missy that locket?

Why did I have to meet Virgie, with her red hair?

Why did I remember? Why did I care? Why did I do what I did?

Why was I ever born?

Terror out of Space

by Leigh Brackett

I

Lundy was flying the aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the copilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of avertin Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun to wear thin. Fighting the straps and screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it. Screaming to be free, because of it.

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the rumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get It back to Special headquarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too. Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired—because It was sitting back there in its little strongbox in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anesthetic needle gun bolstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was—and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium. Screaming and fighting the straps, because It was locked up and calling for help.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget." Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white, small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the

tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists . . ." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oi! Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

Lundy still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hardworking guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect It. Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, wont he ever stop screaming?

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past. Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. Maybe he wasn't heading toward Vhia at all. Maybe It was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed. The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing. Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about It. The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at It. Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about. But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggish and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was—She. And her eyes were always veiled.

And She was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's why She, or It, hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scientific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his bloodshot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket." Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long." Lundy scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a pattycake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!" Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach. Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire. Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human. Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving. Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold and she wants to come out."

Lundy looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it. He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but—I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow. Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened." Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget." he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot." Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on. Smith hit the firing stud.

The anesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls. Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out. The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead. The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like She and folded up his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe. The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own. Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small seadragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them. Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

II

The first thing Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt, like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe. It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!" Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel. Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One—two. One—two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart. Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily. He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy." Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands. After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank. He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the Benzedrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters—his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience. Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened

the airlock door. Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock-chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord!" whispered Lundy. "Oh, Lord, what did he see before he drowned?" No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch. He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

He didn't hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast—unless It had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed, he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jeweled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of

sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescence glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road. It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked, with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth. But even a young planet has a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tale. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face. So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of vakhi from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slavegirls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under sultry green liha-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jeweled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of

them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He was glad of the road. It was wide, and if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him. It got darker outside, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them.

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet.

He was tired. The brandy and the Benzedrine began to die in him. He changed his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him—and It—had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers. More Benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleshy petals, hungry and alive. He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster. He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears. The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly, without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them. Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding a blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more. The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else. He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light. It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road. Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it. Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of the tunnel, straight across a narrow plain. Beyond that, the city rose.

Lundy couldn't see much of it, because of the weeds. But it seemed to be a big city. There was a wall around it, of green marble veined with dusky rose, the edges worn round by centuries of water. There were broad gates of pure untarnished gold, standing open on golden pintles. Beyond them was a vast square paved in cloud-grey quartz, and the buildings rose around it like the castles Lundy remembered from Earth and his childhood, when there were clouds of a certain kind at sunset.

That's what the whole place looked like, under the flaring golden light. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset. Remote, dreaming in beauty, with the black water drawn across it like a veil—something never destroyed because it never existed.

The creatures who came from between the golden gates and down the road were like tiny wisps of those clouds, torn free by some cold wandering breeze and driven away from the light.

They came drifting toward Lundy. They didn't seem to be moving fast, but they must have been because quite suddenly they were among the weeds. There were a lot of them; maybe forty or fifty. They seemed to be between three and four feet tall, and they were all the same sad, blue-grey, twilight color. Lundy couldn't see what they were. They were vaguely man-shaped, and vaguely finny, and something that was more than vaguely something else, only he couldn't place it.

He was suddenly beyond caring. The dull black curtain around his mind got a hole in it, and fear came shrieking through it. He could feel the working and pulling of his vac-suit where the flowers were chewing on it as though it were his own skin.

He could feel sweat running cold on his body. In a minute that would be sea water running, and then . . .

Lundy began to fight. His lips peeled back off his teeth, but he didn't make any noise except his heavy breathing. He fought the flowers, partly with the blaster, partly with brute strength. No science, no thought. Just the last blind struggle of an animal that didn't want to die. The flowers held him. They smothered him, crushed him down, wrapped him in lovely burning petals of destruction. He seared a lot of them, but there were always more. Lundy didn't fight long.

He lay on his back, knees drawn up a little toward a rigid, knotted belly, blind with sweat, his heart kicking him like a logger's boot. Cold, tense—waiting.

And then the flowers went away.

They didn't want to. They let go reluctantly, drawing back and snarling like cats robbed of a fat mouse, making small hungry feints at him. But they went. Lundy came nearer fanning off for keeps than he ever had. Reaction wrung him out like a wet bar-rag. His heart quit beating; his body jerked like something on a string.

Then, through a mist that might have been sweat, or tears, on the edge of the Hereafter, he saw the little blue-grey people looking down at him. They hovered in a cloud above him, holding place with membranes as fluttering and delicate as bird-calls on a windy day. The membranes ran between arm-and leg-members, both of which had thin flat swimming-webs. There were suckers on the legs, about where the heels would have been if they'd had feet. Their bodies were slender and supple, and definitely feminine without having any of the usual human characteristics. They were beautiful. They weren't like anything Lundy had even seen before, or even dreamed about, but they were beautiful.

They had faces. Queer little pixie things without noses. Their noses were round and tiny and rather sweet, but their eyes were their dominant feature. Huge round golden eyes with pupils of deep brown. Soft eyes, gentle, inquiring, it made Lundy feel like crying, and so scared it made him mad. The flowers kept weaving around hopefully. When one got too close to Lundy, one of the little people would slap it gently, the way you would a pet dog, and shoo it away.

"Do you live?"

III

Lundy wasn't surprised by the telepathic voice. Thought-communication was commoner than speech and a lot simpler in many places on the inhabited worlds. Special gave its men a thorough training in it.

"I live, thanks to you."

There was something in the quality of the brain he touched that puzzled him. It was like nothing he'd ever met before.

He got to his feet, not very steadily. "You came just in time. How did you know I was here?"

"Your fear-thoughts carried to us. We know what it is to be afraid. So we came."

"There's nothing I can say but 'Thank you!'"

"But of course we helped! Why not? You needn't thank us." Lundy looked at the flowers burning sullenly in the gloom. "How is it you can boss them around? Why don't they . . ."

"But they're not cannibals! Not like—The Others." There was pure cold dread in that last thought.

"Cannibals." Lundy looked up at the cloud of dainty blue-grey woman-things. His skin got cold and a size too small for him.

Their soft golden eyes smiled down at him. "We're different from you, yes. Just as we're different from the fish. What is your thought? Bright things growing—weed—yes, they're kin to us."

Kin, thought Lundy. Yeah. About like we are to the animals. Plants. Living plants were no novelty on Venus. Why not plants with thinking minds? Plants that carried their roots along with them, and watched you with sad soft eyes.

"Let's get out of here," said Lundy.

They went down along the dark tunnel and out onto the road, and the flowers yearned like hungry dogs after Lundy but didn't touch him. He started out across the narrow plain, with the plant-women drifting cloudlike around him. Seaweed. Little bits of kelp that could talk to you. It made Lundy feel queer. The city made him feel queer, too. It was dark when he first saw it from the plain, with only the moonlight glow of the sand to touch it. It was a big city, stretching away behind its barrier wall. Big and silent and very old, waiting there at the end of its road.

It was curiously more real in the dim light. Lundy lost trace of the water for a moment. It was like walking toward a sleeping city in the moonlight, feeling the secretive, faintly hostile strength of it laired and leashed, until dawn .

...

Only there would never be a dawn for this city. Never, any more. Lundy wanted suddenly to run away.

"Don't be afraid. We live there. It's safe." Lundy shook his head irritably. Quite suddenly the brilliant light flared out again, three regular flashes. It seemed to come from somewhere to the right, out of a range of undersea mountains. Lundy felt a faint trembling of the sand. A volcanic fissure, probably, opened when the sand sank. The golden light changed the city again. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset—a place where you could set your boots down on a dream.

When he went in through the gates he was awed, but not afraid. And then, while he stood in the square looking up at the great dim buildings, the thought came drifting down to him out of the cloud of little woman-things.

"It was safe. It was happy—before She came." After a long moment Lundy said, "She?"

"We haven't seen her. But our mates have. She came a little while ago and walked through the streets, and all our mates left us to follow her. They say she's beautiful beyond any of us, and . . ."

"And her eyes are hidden, and they have to see them. They have to look into her eyes or go crazy, so they follow her."

The sad little blue-grey cloud stirred in the dark water. Golden eyes looked down at him.

"How did you know? Do you follow her, too?" Lundy took a deep, slow breath. The palms of his hands were wet. "Yes. Yes, I followed her, too."

"We feel your thought" They came down close around him. Their delicate membranes fluttered like fairy wings. Their golden eyes were huge and soft and pleading.

"Can you help us? Can you bring our mates back safe? They've forgotten everything. If The Others should come . . ."

"The Others?"

Lundy's brain was drowned in stark and terrible fear. Pictures came through it. Vague gigantic dreams of nightmare . . .

"They come, riding the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy." The little

woman-things were shaken suddenly like leaves in a gust of wind.

"We hide from them in the buildings. We can keep them out, away from our seed and the little new ones. But our mates have forgotten. If The Others come while they follow Her, outside and away from safety, they'll all be killed. We'll be left alone, and there'll be no more seed for us, and no more little new ones."

They pressed in close around him, touching him with their small blue-grey forefins.

"Can you help us? Oh, can you help us?"

Lundy closed his eyes. His mouth twitched and set. When he opened his eyes again they were hard as agates.

"I'll help you," he said, "or die trying." It was dark in the great square, with only the pale sand-glow seeping through the gates. For a moment the little blue-grey woman-creatures clung around him, not moving, except as the whole mass of them swayed slightly with the slow rhythm of the sea.

Then they burst away from him, outward, in a wild surge of hope—and Lundy stood with his mouth open, staring.

They weren't blue-grey any longer. They glowed suddenly, their wings and their dainty, supple bodies, a warm soft green that had a vibrant pulse of life behind it. And they blossomed.

The long, slender, living petals must have been retracted, like the fronds of a touch-me-not, while they wore the sad blue-grey. Now they broke out like coronals of flame around their small heads.

Blue and scarlet and gold, poppy-red and violet and flame, silver-white and warm pink like a morning cloud, streaming in the black water. Streaming from small green bodies that rolled and rumbled high up against the dark, dreaming buildings like the butterflies that had danced there before the sunlight was lost forever.

Quite suddenly, then, they stopped. They drifted motionless in the water, and their colors dimmed. Lundy said, "Where are they?"

"Deep in the city, beyond our buildings here—in the streets where only the curious young ones ever go. Oh, bring them back! Please bring them back!" He left them hovering in the great dark square and went on into the city. He walked down broad paved streets channeled with wheel-ruts and hollowed by generations of sandaled feet. The great

water-worn buildings lifted up on either side, lighted by the erratic glare of the distant fissure. The window-openings, typical of most Venusian architecture, were covered by grilles of marble and semi-precious stone, intricately hand-pierced like bits of jewelry. The great golden doors stood open on their uncorroded hinges. Through them Lundy could watch the life of the little plant-people being lived.

In some of the buildings the lower floor had been covered with sand. Plant-women hovered protectively over them, brushing the sand smooth where the water disturbed it. Lundy guessed that these were seed beds. In other places there were whole colonies of tiny flower-things still rooted in the sand; a pale spring haze of green in the dimness. They sat in placid rows, nodding their pastel baby coronals and playing solemnly with bits of bright weed and colored stones. Here, too, the plant-women watched and guarded lovingly.

Several times Lundy saw groups of young plantlings, grown free of the sand, being taught to swim by the woman-creatures, tumbling in the black water like bright petals on a spring wind.

All the women were the same sad blue-grey, with their blossoms hidden. They'd stay that way, unless he, Lundy, could finish the job Special had sent him to do. The job he hadn't been quite big enough to handle up to now. Farrell, with the flesh flayed off his bones, and not feeling it because She was all he could think of. Jackie Smith, drowned in a flooded lock because She wanted to be free and he had helped her.

Was this Lundy guy so much bigger than Farrell and Smith, and all the other men who had gone crazy over Her? Big enough to catch The Vampire Lure in a net and keep it there, and not go nuts himself?

Lundy didn't feel that big. Not anywhere near that big. He was remembering things. The first time he'd had It in a net. The last few minutes before the wreck, when he'd heard Her crying for freedom from inside the safe. Jackie Smith's face when he walked in with the water from the flooded lock, and his, Lundy's, own question—Oh Lord, what did he see before he drowned?

The tight cold knot was back in Lundy's belly again, and this time it had spurs on.

He left the colony behind him, walking down empty streets lit by the rhythmic flaring of the volcanic fissure. There was damage here.

Pavements cracked and twisted with the settling, towers shaken down, the carved stone jalousies split out of the windows. Whole walls had fallen in, in some places, and most of the golden doors were wrecked, jammed wide open or gone entirely. A dead city. So dead and silent that you couldn't breathe with it, and so old it made you crawl inside.

A swell place to go mad in, following a dream.

After a long time Lundy saw them—the mates of the little seaweed women. A long, long trail of them like a flight of homing birds, winding between the dark and broken towers.

They looked like their women. A little bigger, a little coarser, with strong tough dark-green bodies and brilliant coronals. Their golden eyes were fixed on something Lundy couldn't see, and they looked like the eyes of Lucifer yearning at the gates of Heaven.

Lundy began to run against the water, cutting across a wide plaza to get under the head of the procession. He unhooked the net from his belt with hands that felt like a couple of dead fish.

Then he staggered suddenly, lost his footing, and went sprawling. It was as though somebody had pushed him with a strong hand. When he tried to get up it pushed him again, hard. The golden glare from the fissure was steadier now, and very bright.

The trail of little man-things bent suddenly in a long whipping bow, and Lundy knew what was the matter.

There was a current rising in the city. Rising like the hot white winds that used to howl in from the sea, carrying the rains.

"They ride the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy."

The Others. The Others, who were cannibals . . .

She led the bright trail of plant-men between the towers, and there was a current rising in the streets.

Lundy got up. He balanced himself against the thrust of the current and ran, following the procession. It was clumsy work, with the water and his leaded boots. He tried to gauge where It—or She—was from the focus of the plant-men's eyes.

The hot light flared up brighter. The water pulled and shoved at him. He looked back once, but he couldn't see anything in the shadows between the towers. He was scared.

He shook the net out, and he was scared.

Funny that It—or She—didn't see him. Funny It didn't sense his mind, even though he tried to keep it closed. But he wasn't a very big object down there in the shadows under the walls, and creating an illusion for that many minds would be a strain on anything, even creature from outer space. He'd had the breaks once before, when he caught up with Farrell. He prayed to have them again.

He got them, for what good it did him. The current caught the procession and pulled it down close to Lundy. He watched their eyes. She was still leading them. She had a physical body even if you couldn't see it, and the current would pull it, no matter how tiny it was. He cast his net out, fast. It bellied out in the black water and came swooping back to his pull, and there was something in it. Something tiny and cylindrical and vicious. Something alive.

He drew the net tight, shivering and sweating with nervous excitement. And the plant-men attacked.

They swooped on him in a brilliant cloud. Their golden eyes burned. There was no sense in them. Their minds shrieked and clamored at him, a formless howl of rage—and fear, for Her.

They beat at him with their little green fins. Their coronals blazed, hot angry splashes of colored flame against the dark water. They wrenched at the net, tore at it, beating their membranes like wings against the rising current.

Lundy was a solid, muscular little guy. He snarled and fought for the net like a wolf over a yearling lamb. He lost it anyway. He fell on his face under a small mountain of churning man-things and lay gasping for the breath they knocked out of him, thankful for the vac-suit that saved him from being crushed flat.

He watched them take the net. They clustered around it in a globe like a swarm of bees, rolling around in the moving water. Their golden eyes had a terrible stricken look.

They couldn't open the net. Lundy had drawn it tight and fastened it, and they didn't have fingers. They stroked and pawed it with their fins, but they couldn't let Her out.

Lundy got up on his hands and knees. The current quickened. It roared down between the broken towers like a black wind and took the

swarm of man-things with it, still clutching the net.
And then The Others came.

IV

Lundy saw them a long way off. For a moment he didn't believe it. He thought they must be shadows cast by the fitful glare of the fissure. He braced himself against a building and stood watching.

Stood watching, and then seeing as the rushing current brought them closer. He didn't move, except to lift his jaw a little trying to breathe. He simply stood, cold as a dead man's feet and just as numb. They looked something like the giant rays he'd seen back on Earth, only they were plants. Great sleek bulbs of kelp with their leaves spread like wings to the current. Their long teardrop bodies ended in a flange like a fishtail that served as a rudder and they had tentacles for arms. They were colored a deep red-brown like dried blood. The golden flare of the fissure made their cold eyes gleam. It showed their round mouth-holes full of sharp hairspines, and the stinging deadly cups on the undersides of their huge tentacles.

Those arms were long enough and tough enough to pierce even the fabric of a vac-suit. Lundy didn't know whether they ate flesh or not, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't care, after he'd been slapped with one of those tentacles. The net with Her in it was getting away from him, and The Others were coming down on top of him. Even if he'd wanted to quit his job right then there wasn't any place to hide in these ruined, doorless buildings. Lundy shot his suit full of precious oxygen and added himself to the creatures riding that black current to hell.

It swept him like a bubble between the dead towers, but not fast enough. He wasn't very far ahead of the kelp-things. He tried to swim, to make himself go faster, but it was like racing an oared dinghy against a fleet of sixteen-meter sloops with everything set.

He could see the cluster of plant-men ahead of him. They hadn't changed position. They rolled and tumbled in the water, using a lot of the forward push to go around with, so that Lundy was able to overhaul them. But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

The hell of it was he couldn't see anything to do if he got there. The net was way inside the globe. They weren't going to let him take it away. And if he did, what would it get anybody? They'd still follow Her, without sense enough to run away from the kelp-beasts.

Unless . . .

It hit Lundy all of a sudden. A hope, a solution. Hit him neatly as the leading kelp-thing climbed up on his heels and brought its leaf-wings in around him, hard.

Lundy let go an animal howl of fear and kicked wildly, shooting more air into his suit. He went up fast, and the wings grazed his boots but didn't quite catch him. Lundy rolled over and fed the thing a full charge out of his blaster, right through the eye.

It began to thrash and flounder like a shot bird. The ones coming right behind it got tangled up with it and then stopped to eat. Pretty soon there were a lot of them tumbling around it and fighting like a flock of gulls over a fish. Lundy swam furiously, cursing the clumsy suit.

There were a lot of the things that hadn't stopped, and the ones that had wouldn't stay long. Lundy kicked and strained and sweated. He was scared. He had the wind up so hard it was blowing his guts out, and it was like swimming in a nightmare, where you're tied.

The current seemed to move faster up where he was now. He gathered his thoughts into a tight beam and threw them into the heart of the cluster of plant-men, at the creature in the net.

I can free you. I'm the only one that can.

A voice answered him, inside his mind. The voice he had heard once before, back in the cabin of the wrecked flier. A voice as sweet and small as Pan-pipes calling on the Hills of Fay.

I know. My thought crossed yours . . . The elfin voice broke suddenly, almost on a gasp of pain. Very faintly, Lundy heard:

Heavy! Heavy! I am slow . . .

A longing for something beyond his experience stabbed Lundy like the cry of a frightened child. And then the globe of man-things burst apart as though a giant wind had struck them.

Lundy watched them wake up, out of their dream.

She had vanished, and now they didn't know why they were here or what they were doing. They had a heart-shaking memory of some beauty they couldn't touch, and that was all. They were lost, and frightened. Then they saw The Others.

It was as though someone had hit them a stunning blow with his fist. They hung motionless, swept along by the current, staring back with dazed golden eyes. Their brilliant petals curled inward and vanished, and the green of their bodies dulled almost to black.

The kelp-beasts spread their wings wide and rushed toward them like great dark birds. And up ahead, under the sullen golden glare, Lundy saw the distant buildings of the colony. Some of the doors were still open, with knots of tiny figures waiting beside them.

Lundy was still a little ahead of the kelp-things. He grabbed up the floating net and hooked it to his belt, and then steered himself clumsily toward a broken tower jutting up to his right.

He hurled a wild telepathic shout at the plant-men, trying to make them turn and run, telling them that he'd hold off The Others. They were too scared to hear him. He cursed them, almost crying. On the third try he got through and they came to life in a hurry, rushing away with all the speed they had. By that time Lundy was braced on his pinnacle of stone, and the kelp-beasts were right on top of him.

He got busy with both blasters. He burned down a lot of the things. Pretty soon the water all around him was full of thrashing bodies where the living had stopped to fight over the dead. But he couldn't get them all, and a few got by him.

Almost without turning his head he could see the huge red bird-shapes overhauling stragglers, wrapping them in broad wings, and then lying quiet in the rush of the current, feeding.

They kept the doors, open, those little woman-things. They waited until the last of their mates came home, and then slammed the golden panels on the blunt noses of the kelp-things. Not many of the little men were lost. Only a few small wives would hide their petals and wear their sad blue-grey. Lundy felt good about that.

It was nice he felt good about something, because Old Mr. Grim was climbing right up on Lundy's shoulders, showing his teeth. The kelp-beasts had finally found out who was hurting them. Also, now,

Lundy was the only food in sight. They were ganging up for a rush, wheeling and sideslipping in the spate of black water. Lundy got two more, and then one blaster charge fizzled out, and right after it the other one became dull.

Lundy stood alone on his broken tower and watched death sweep in around him. And the sweet elfin voice spoke out of the net:

Let me free. Let me free!

Lundy set his jaw tight and did the only thing he could think of. He deflated his vac-suit and jumped, plunging down into the black depths of the ruined building.

The kelp-things folded their leaves back like the wings of a diving bird and came down after him, using their tails for power.

Fitful flares of light came through broken walls and window openings. Lundy went down a long way. He didn't have to bother about stairs. The quakes had knocked most of the floors out.

The kelp-things followed him. Their long sinuous bodies were maneuverable as a shark's, and they were fast.

And all the time the little voice cried in his mind, asking for freedom. Lundy hit bottom.

The walls were fairly solid down here, and it was dark, and the place was choked with rubble. Things got a little confused. Lundy's helmet light was shot, and he wouldn't have used it anyway because it would have guided the hunters.

He felt them, swirling and darting around him. He ran, to no place in particular. The broken stones tripped him. Three times great sinewy bodies brushed him, knocking him spinning, but they couldn't quite find him in the darkness, chiefly because they got in each other's way. Lundy fell through suddenly into a great hall, lying beside whatever room he had been in and a little below it. It was hardly damaged. Golden doors stood open to the water, and there was plenty of light.

Plenty of light for Lundy to see some more of the kelp-beasts poking hopeful faces in, and plenty of light for them to see Lundy. The elfin voice called, Let me out! Let me out!

Lundy didn't have breath enough left to curse. He turned and ran, and the kelp-beasts gave a lazy flirt of their tails and caught up with him in the first thirty feet. They almost laughed in his face. The only

thing that saved Lundy was that when they opened their leaf-wings to take him they interfered with each other. It slowed them, just for a moment. Just long enough for Lundy to see the door.

A little door of black stone with no carving on it, standing half-open on a golden pivot, about ten feet away.

Lundy made for it. He dodged out from under one huge swooping wing, made a wild leap that almost tore him apart, and grabbed the edge of the door with his hands, doubling up and pulling.

A tentacle tip struck his feet. His lead boots hit the floor, and for a minute he thought his legs were broken. But the surge of water the blow made helped to carry him in through the narrow opening.

Half a dozen blunt red-brown heads tried to come through after him, and were stopped. Lundy was down on his hands and knees. He was trying to breathe, but somebody had put a heavy building on his chest. Also, it was getting hard to see anything.

He crawled over and put his shoulder against the door and pushed. It wouldn't budge. The building had settled and jammed the pivot for keeps. Even the butting kelp-things couldn't jar it.

But they kept on trying. Lundy crawled away. After a while some of the weight went off his chest and he could see better.

A shaft of fitful golden light shot in through a crack about ten feet above him. A small crack, not even big enough to let a baby in and out. It was the only opening other than the door.

The room was small, too. The stone walls were dead black, without ornament or carving, except on the rear wall.

There was a square block of jet there, about eight feet long by four wide, hollowed in a peculiar and unpleasantly suggestive fashion. Above it there was a single huge ruby set in the stone, burning red like a foretaste of hell fire.

Lundy had seen similar small chambers in old cities still on dry land. They were where men had gone to die for crimes against society and the gods. Lundy looked at the hungry monsters pushing at the immovable door and laughed. There was no particular humor in it. He fired his last shot, and sat down. The brutes might go away sometime, maybe. But unless they went within a very few minutes, it wasn't going

to matter. Lundy's oxygen was getting low, and it was still a long way to the coast.

The voice from the net cried out, Let me free!

"The hell with you," said Lundy. He was tired. He was so tired he didn't care much whether he lived or died.

He made sure the net was fast to his belt, and tightly closed.

"If I live, you go back to Vhia with me. If I die—well, you won't be able to hurt anybody again. There'll be one less devil loose on Venus." Free! Free! Free! I must be free! This heavy weight

"Sure. Free to lead guys like Farrell into going crazy, and leaving their wives and kids. Free to kill" He looked with sultry eyes at the net.

"Jackie Smith was my pal. You think I'd let you go? You think anything you could do would make me let you go?"

Then he saw her.

Right through the net, as though the metal mesh was cellophane. She crouched there in his lap, a tiny thing less than two feet high, doubled over her knees. The curve of her back was something an angel had carved out of a whisp of warm, pearl-pink cloud.

V

Lundy broke into a trembling sweat. He shut his eyes. It didn't matter. He saw her. He couldn't help seeing her. He tried to fight his mind, but he was tired

. . . .

Her hair hid most of her. It had black night in it, and moonbeams, and glints of fire like a humming-bird's breast. Hair you dream about. Hair you could smother yourself in, and die happy.

She raised her head slowly, letting the veil of warm darkness fall away from her. Her eyes were shadowed, hidden under thick lashes. She raised her hands to Lundy, like a child praying.

But she wasn't a child. She was a woman, naked as a pearl, and so lovely that Lundy sobbed with it, in shivering ecstasy.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No. No!" She held her arms up to be free, and didn't move.

Lundy tore the net loose from his belt and flung it on the altar block. He got up and went lurching to the door, but the kelp-things were still there, still hungry. He sat down again, in a corner as far away from both places as he could get, and took some Benzedrine.

It was the wrong thing to do. He'd about reached his limit. It made him lightheaded. He couldn't fight her, couldn't shut her out. She knelt on the altar with her hands stretched out to him, and a shaft of golden light falling on her like something in a church.

"Open your eyes!" he said. "Open your eyes and look at me." Let me free. Let me free!

Freedom Lundy didn't know anything about. The freedom of outer space, with the whole Milky Way to play in and nothing to hold you back. And with the longing, fear. A blind, stricken terror

"No!" Lundy said.

Things got dark for Lundy. Presently he found himself at the altar block, fumbling at the net.

He wrenched away and went stumbling back to his corner. He was twitching all over like a frightened dog.

"Why do you want to do it? Why do you have to torture me—drive them crazy for something they can't have—kill them?"

Torture? Crazy? Kill? I don't understand. They worship me. It is pleasant to be worshiped.

"Pleasant?" Lundy was yelling aloud, and didn't know it. "Pleasant, damn you!

So you kill a good guy like Farrell, and drown Jackie Smith"
Kill? Wait—give me the thought again

Something inside Lundy turned cold and still, holding its breath. He sent the thought again. Death. Cessation. Silence, and the dark. The tiny glowing figure on the black stone bent over its knees again, and it was sadder than a seabird's cry at sunset.

So will I be soon. So will all of us. Why did this planet take us out of space? The weight, the pressure breaks and crushes us, and we can't get free. In space there was no death, but now we die Lundy stood quite still. The blood beat like drums in his temples.

"You mean that all you creatures out of space are dying? That the—the madness will stop of itself?"

Soon. Very soon. There was no death in space! There was no pain! We didn't know about them. Everything here was new, to be tasted and played with. We didn't know

"Hell!" said Lundy, and looked at the creatures beating at the crack of the stone door. He sat down.

You, too, will die.

Lundy raised his head slowly. His eyes had a terrible brightness.

"You like to be worshiped," he whispered. "Would you like to be worshiped after you die? Would you like to be remembered always as something good and beautiful—a goddess?"

That would be better than to be forgotten.

"Will you do what I ask of you, then? You can save my life, if you will. You can save the lives of a lot of those little flower-people. I'll see to it that everyone knows your true story. Now you're hated and feared, but after that you'll be loved."

Will you let me free of this net?

"If you promise to do what I ask?"

I would rather die at least free of this net. The tiny figure trembled and shook back the veil of dark hair. Hurry. Tell me

"Lead these creatures away from the door. Lead all of them in the city away, to the fire in the mountain where they'll be destroyed." They will worship me. It is better than dying in a net. I promise. Lundy got up and went to the altar. His feet were not steady. His hands were not steady, either, untying the net. Sweat ran in his eyes. She didn't have to keep her promise. She didn't have to

The net fell away. She stood up on her tiny pink feet. Slowly, like a swirl of mist straightening in a little breeze. She threw her head back and smiled. Her mouth was red and sulky, her teeth whiter than new snow. Her lowered lids had faint blue shadows traced on them. She began to grow, in the golden shaft of light, like a pillar of cloud rising toward the sun. Lundy's heart stood still. The clear gleam of her skin, the line of her throat and her young breasts, the supple turn of her flank and thigh

You worship me too.

Lundy stepped back, two lurching steps. "I worship you," he whispered. "Let me see your eyes."

She smiled and turned her head away. She stepped off the altar block, floating past him through the black water. A dream-thing, without weight or substance, and more desirable than all the women Lundy had seen in his life or his dreams. He followed her, staggering. He tried to catch her. "Open your eyes!"

Please open your eyes!"

She floated on, through the crack of the stone door. The kelp-things didn't see her. All they saw was Lundy coming toward them.

"Open your eyes!"

She turned, then, just before Lundy had stepped out to death in the hall beyond. He stopped, and watched her raise her shadowed lids. He screamed, just once, and fell forward onto the black floor. He never knew how long he lay there. It couldn't have been long in time, because he still had barely enough oxygen to make it to the coast when he came to. The kelp-beasts were gone.

But the time to Lundy was an eternity—an eternity he came out of with whitened hair and bitter lines around his mouth, and a sadness that never left his eyes.

He'd only had his dream a little while. A few brief moments, already shadowed by death. His mind was drugged and tired, and didn't feel things as deeply and clearly as it might. That was all that saved him.

But he knew what Jackie Smith saw before he drowned. He knew why men had died or gone mad forever, when they looked into the eyes of their dream, and by looking, destroyed it.

Because, behind those shadowed, perfect lids, there was—Nothing.

The Vanishing Venusians

by Leigh Brackett

I

The breeze was steady enough, but it was not in a hurry. It filled the lug sail just hard enough to push the dirty weed-grown hull through the water, and no harder. Matt Harker lay alongside the tiller and counted the trickles of sweat crawling over his nakedness, and stared with sullen, opaque eyes into the indigo night. Anger, leashed and impotent, rose in his throat like bitter vomit.

The sea—Rory McLaren's Venusian wife called it the Sea of Morning Opals—lay unstirring, black, streaked with phosphorescence. The sky hung low over it, the thick cloud blanket of Venus that had made the Sun a half-remembered legend to the exiles from Earth. Riding lights burned in the blue gloom, strung out in line. Twelve ships, thirty-eight hundred people, going no place, trapped in the interval between birth and death and not knowing what to do about it.

Matt Harker glanced upward at the sail and then at the stern lantern of the ship ahead. His face, in the dim glow that lights Venus even at night, was a gaunt oblong of shadows and hard bone, seamed and scarred with living, with wanting and not having, with dying and not being dead. He was a lean man, wiry and not tall, with a snake-like surety of motion.

Somebody came scrambling quietly aft along the deck, avoiding the sleeping bodies crowded everywhere. Harker said, without emotion, "Hi, Rory."

Rory McLaren said, "Hi, Matt." He sat down. He was young, perhaps half Harker's age. There was still hope in his face, but it was growing tired. He sat for a while without speaking, looking at nothing, and then said, "Honest to God, Matt, how much longer can we last?"

"What's the matter, kid? Starting to crack?"

"I don't know. Maybe. When are we going to stop somewnere?"

"When we find a place to stop."

"Is there a place to stop? Seems like ever since I was born we've been hunting. There's always something wrong. Hostile natives, or fever, or bad soil, always something, and we go on again. It's not right. It's not any way to try to live."

Harker said, "I told you not to go having kids."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You start worrying. The kid isn't even here yet, and already you're worrying."

"Sure I am." McLaren put his head in his hands suddenly and swore. Harker knew he did that to keep from crying. "I'm worried," McLaren said, "that maybe the same thing'll happen to my wife and kid that happened to yours. We got fever aboard."

Harker's eyes were like blown coals for an instant. Then he glanced up at the sail and said, "They'd be better off if it didn't live."

"That's no kind of a thing to say."

"It's the truth. Like you asked me, when are we going to stop somewhere? Maybe never. You bellyache about it ever since you were born. Well, I've been at it longer than that. Before you were born I saw our first settlement burned by the Cloud People, and my mother and father crucified in their own vineyard. I was there when this trek to the Promised Land began, back on Earth, and I'm still waiting for the promise."

The sinews in Harker's face were drawn like knots of wire. His voice had a terrible quietness.

"Your wife and kid would be better off to die now, while Viki's still young and has hope, and before the child ever opens its eyes."

Sim, the big black man, relieved Harker before dawn. He started singing, softly—something mournful and slow as the breeze, and beautiful. Harker cursed him and went up into the bow to sleep, but the song stayed with him. Oh, I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for to carry me home...

Harker slept. Presently he began to moan and twitch, and then cry out. People around him woke up. They watched with interest. Harker was a lone wolf awake, ill-tempered and violent. When, at long intervals, he would have one of his spells, no one was anxious to help him out of it. They liked peeping inside of Harker when he wasn't looking.

Harker didn't care. He was playing in the snow again. He was seven years old, and the drifts were high and white, and above them the sky was so blue and clean that he wondered if God mopped it every few days like Mom did the kitchen floor. The sun was shining. It was like a great gold coin, and it made the snow burn like crushed diamonds. He put his arms up to the sun, and the cold air slapped him with clean hands, and he laughed. And then it was all gone...

"By gawd," somebody said. "Ain't them tears on his face?"

"Bawling. Bawling like a little kid. Listen at him."

"Hey," said the first one sheepishly. "Reckon we oughta wake him up?"

"Hell with him, the old sour-puss. Hey, listen to that...!"

"Dad," Harker whispered. "Dad, I want to go home."

The dawn came like a sifting of fire-opals through the layers of pearl-gray cloud. Harker heard the yelling dimly in his sleep. He felt dull and tired, and his eyelids stuck together. The yelling gradually took shape and became the word "Land!" repeated over and over. Harker kicked himself awake and got up.

The tideless sea glimmered with opaline colors under the mist. Flocks of little jewel-scaled sea-dragons rose up from the ever-present floating islands of weed, and the weed itself, part of it, writhed and stretched with sentient life.

Ahead there was a long low hummock of muddy ground fading into tangled swamp. Beyond it, rising sheer into the clouds, was a granite cliff, a sweeping escarpment that stood like a wall against the hopeful gaze of the exiles.

Harker found Rory McLaren standing beside him, his arm around Viki, his wife. Viki was one of several Venusians who had married into the Earth colony. Her skin was clear white, her hair a glowing silver, her

lips vividly red. Her eyes were like the sea, changeable, full of hidden life. Just now they had that special look that the eyes of women get when they're thinking about creation. Harker looked away.

McLaren said, "It's land."

Harker said, "It's mud. It's swamp. It's fever. It's like the rest."

Viki said, "Can we stop here, just a little while?"

Harker shrugged. "That's up to Gibbons." He wanted to ask what the hell difference it made where the kid was born, but for once he held his tongue. He turned away. Somewhere in the waist a woman was screaming in delirium. There were three shapes wrapped in ragged blankets and laid on planks by the port scuppers. Harker's mouth twitched in a crooked smile.

"Well probably stop long enough to bury them," he said. "Maybe that'll be time enough."

He caught a glimpse of McLaren's face. The hope in it was not tired any more. It was dead. Dead, like the rest of Venus.

Gibbons called the chief men together aboard his ship—the leaders, the fighters and hunters and seamen, the tough leathery men who were the armor around the soft body of the colony. Harker was there, and McLaren. McLaren was young, but up until lately he had had a quality of optimism that cheered his shipmates, a natural leadership.

Gibbons was an old man. He was the original guiding spirit of the five thousand colonists who had come out from Earth to a new start on a new world. Time and tragedy, disappointment and betrayal had marked him cruelly, but his head was still high. Harker admired his guts while cursing him for an idealistic fool.

The inevitable discussion started as to whether they should try a permanent settlement on this mud flat or go on wandering over the endless, chartless seas. Harker said impatiently:

"For cripesake, look at the place. Remember the last time. Remember the time before that, and stop bleating."

Sim, the big black, said quietly, "The people are getting awful tired. A man was meant to have roots some place. There's going to be trouble pretty soon if we don't find land."

Harker said, "You think you can find some, pal, go to it."

Gibbons said heavily, "But he's right. There's hysteria, fever, dysentery and boredom, and the boredom's worst of all."

McLaren said, "I vote to settle."

Harker laughed. He was leaning by the cabin port, looking out at the cliffs. The gray granite looked clean above the swamp. Harker tried to pierce the clouds that hid the top, but couldn't. His dark eyes narrowed. The heated voices behind him faded into distance. Suddenly he turned and said, "Sir, I'd like permission to see what's at the top of those cliffs."

There was complete silence. Then Gibbons said slowly, "We've lost too many men on journeys like that before, only to find the plateau uninhabitable."

"There's always the chance. Our first settlement was in the high plateaus, remember. Clean air; good soil, no fever."

"I remember," Gibbons said. "I remember." He was silent for a while, then he gave Harker a shrewd glance. "I know you, Matt. I might as well give permission."

Harker grinned. "You won't miss me much anyhow. I'm not a good influence any more." He started for the door. "Give me three weeks. You'll take that long to careen and scrape the bottoms anyhow. Maybe I'll come back with something."

McLaren said, "I'm going with you, Matt."

Harker gave him a level-eyed stare. "You better stay with Viki."

"If there's good land up there, and anything happens to you so you can't come back and tell us..."

"Like not bothering to come back, maybe?"

"I didn't say that. Like we both won't come back. But two is better than one."

Harker smiled. The smile was enigmatic and not very nice. Gibbons said, "He's right, Matt." Harker shrugged. Then Sim stood up.

"Two is good," he said, "but three is better." He turned to Gibbons. "There's nearly five hundred of us, sir. If there's new land up there, we ought to share the burden of finding it."

Gibbons nodded. Harker said, "You're crazy, Sim. Why you want to do all that climbing, maybe to no place?"

Sim smiled. His teeth were unbelievably white in the sweat-polished blackness of his face. "But that's what my people always done, Matt. A lot of climbing, to no place."

They made their preparations and had a last night's sleep. McLaren said goodbye to Viki. She didn't cry. She knew why he was going. She kissed him, and all she said was, "Be careful." All he said was, "I'll be back before he's born."

They started at dawn, carrying dried fish and sea-berries made into pemmican, and their long knives and ropes for climbing. They had long ago run out of ammunition for their few blasters, and they had no equipment for making more. All were adept at throwing spears, and carried three short ones barbed with bone across their backs.

It was raining when they crossed the mud flat, wading thigh-deep in heavy mist. Harker led the way through the belt of swamp. He was an old hand at it, with an uncanny quickness in spotting vegetation that was as independently alive and hungry as he was. Venus is one vast hothouse, and the plants have developed into species as varied and marvelous as the reptiles or the mammals, crawling out of the pre-Cambrian seas as primitive flagellates and growing wills of their own, with appetites and motive power to match. The children of the colony learned at an early age not to pick flowers. The blossoms too often bit back.

The swamp was narrow, and they came out of it safely. A great swamp-dragon, a leshen, screamed not far off, but they hunt by night, and it was too sleepy to chase them. Harker stood finally on firm ground and studied the cliff.

The rock was roughened by weather, hacked at by ages of erosion, savaged by earthquake. There were stretches of loose shale and great slabs that looked as though they would peel off at a touch, but Harker nodded.

"We can climb it," he said. "Question is, how high is up?"

Sim laughed. "High enough for the Golden City, maybe. Have we all got a clear conscience? Can't carry no load of sin that far!"

Rory McLaren looked at Harker.

Harker said, "All right, I confess. I don't care if there's land up there or not. All I wanted was to get the hell out of that damn boat

before I went clean nuts. So now you know."

McLaren nodded. He didn't seem surprised. "Let's climb."

By morning on the second day they were in the clouds. They crawled upward through opal-tinted steam, half liquid, hot and unbearable. They crawled for two more days. The first night or two Sim sang during his watch, while they rested on some ledge. After that he was too tired. McLaren began to give out, though he wouldn't say so. Matt Harker grew more taciturn and ill-tempered, if possible, but otherwise there was no change. The clouds continued to hide the top of the cliff.

During one rest break McLaren said hoarsely, "Don't these cliffs ever end?" His skin was yellowish, his eyes glazed with fever.

"Maybe," said Harker, "they go right up beyond the sky." The fever was on him again, too. It lived in the marrow of the exiles, coming out at intervals to shake and sear them, and then retreating. Sometimes it did not retreat, and after nine days there was no need.

McLaren said, "You wouldn't care if they did, would you?"

"I didn't ask you to come."

"But you wouldn't care."

"Ah, shut up."

McLaren went for Harker's throat.

Harker hit him, with great care and accuracy. McLaren sagged down and took his head in his hands and wept. Sim stayed out of it. He shook his head, and after a while he began to sing to himself, or someone beyond himself. "Oh, nobody knows the trouble I see..."

Harker pulled himself up. His ears rang and he shivered uncontrollably, but he could still take some of McLaren's weight on himself. They were climbing a steep ledge, fairly wide and not difficult.

"Let's get on," said Harker.

About two hundred feet beyond that point the ledge dipped and began to go down again in a series of broken steps. Overhead the cliff face bulged outward. Only a fly could have climbed it. They stopped. Harker cursed with vicious slowness. Sim closed his eyes and smiled. He was a little crazy with fever himself.

"Golden City's at the top. That's where I'm going."

He started off along the ledge, following its decline toward a jutting shoulder, around which it vanished. Harker laughed sardonically. McLaren pulled free of him and went doggedly after Sim. Harker shrugged and followed.

Around the shoulder the ledge washed out completely.

They stood still. The steaming clouds shut them in before, and behind was a granite wall hung with thick fleshy creepers. Dead end.

"Well?" said Harker.

McLaren sat down. He didn't cry, or say anything. He just sat. Sim stood with his arms hanging and his chin on his huge black chest. Harker said, "See what I meant, about the Promised Land? Venus is a fixed wheel, and you can't win."

It was then that he noticed the cool air. He had thought it was just a fever chill, but it lifted his hair, and it had a definite pattern on his body. It even had a cool, clean smell to it. It was blowing out through the creepers.

Harker began ripping with his knife. He broke through into a cave mouth, a jagged rip worn smooth at the bottom by what must once have been a river.

"That draft is coming from the top of the plateau," Harker said. "Wind must be blowing up there and pushing it down. There may be a way through."

McLaren and Sim both showed a slow, terrible growth of hope. The three of them went without speaking into the tunnel.

II

They made good time. The clean air acted as a tonic, and hope spurred them on. The tunnel sloped upward rather sharply, and presently Harker heard water, a low thunderous murmur as of an underground river up ahead. It was utterly dark, but the smooth channel of stone was easy to follow.

Sim said, "Isn't that light up ahead?"

"Yeah," said Harker. "Some kind of phosphorescence. I don't like that river. It may stop us."

They went on in silence. The glow grew stronger, the air more damp. Patches of phosphorescent lichen appeared on the walls, glimmering with dim jewels-tones like an unhealthy rainbow. The roar of the water was very loud.

They came upon it suddenly. It flowed across the course of their tunnel in a broad channel worn deep into the rock, so that its level had fallen below its old place and left the tunnel dry. It was a wide river, slow and majestic. Lichen spangled the roof and walls, reflecting in dull glints of color from the water.

Overhead there was a black chimney going up through the rock, and the cool draft came from there with almost hurricane force, much of which was dissipated in the main river tunnel. Harker judged there was a cliff formation on the surface that siphoned the wind downward. The chimney was completely inaccessible.

Harker said, "I'll guess we'll have to go upstream, along the side." The rock was eroded enough to make that possible, showing wide ledges at different levels.

McLaren said, "What if this river doesn't come from the surface? What if it starts from an underground source?"

"You stuck your neck out," Harker said. "Come on."

They started. After a while, tumbling like porpoises in the black water, the golden creatures swam by, and saw the men, and stopped, and swam back again.

They were not very large, the largest about the size of a twelve-year-old child. Their bodies were anthropoid, but adapted to swimming with shimmering webs. They glowed with a golden light, phosphorescent like the lichen, and their eyes were lidless and black, like one huge spreading pupil. Their faces were incredible. Harker could remember, faintly, the golden dandelions that grew on the lawn in summer. The heads and faces of the swimmers were like that, covered with streaming petals that seemed to have independent movements, as though they were sensory organs as well as decoration.

Harker said, "For cripesake, what are they?"

"They look like flowers," McLaren said.

"They look more like fish," the black man said.

Harker laughed. "I'll bet they're both. I'll bet they're plannies that grew where they had to be amphibious." The colonists had shortened plant-animal to planimal, and then just planny. "I've seen gimmicks in the swamps that weren't so far away from these. But jeez, get the eyes on 'em! They look human."

"The shape's human, too, almost." McLaren shivered. "I wish they wouldn't look at us that way."

Sim said, "As long as they just look. I'm not gonna worry..."

They didn't. They started to close in below the men, swimming effortlessly against the current. Some of them began to clamber out on the low ledge behind them. They were agile and graceful. There was something unpleasantly child-like about them. There were fifteen or twenty of them, and they reminded Harker of a gang of mischievous kids—only the mischief had a queer soulless quality of malevolence.

Harker led the way faster along the ledge. His knife was drawn and he carried a short spear in his right hand.

The tone of the river changed. The channel broadened, and up ahead Harker saw that the cavern ended in a vast shadowy place, the water spreading into a dark lake, spilling slowly out over a low wide lip of rock. More of the shining child-things were playing there. They joined their fellows, closing the ring tighter around the three men.

"I don't like this," McLaren said. "If they'd only make a noise!"

They did, suddenly—a shrill tittering like a blasphemy of childish laughter. Their eyes shone. They rushed in, running wetly along the ledge, reaching up out of the water to claw at ankles, laughing. Inside his tough flat belly Harker's guts turned over.

McLaren yelled and kicked. Claws raked his ankle, spiny needle-sharp things like thorns. Sim ran his spear clean through a golden breast. There were no bones in it. The body was light and membranous, and the blood that ran out was sticky and greenish, like sap. Harker kicked two of the things back in the river, swung his spear like a ball bat and knocked two more off the ledge—they were unbelievably light—and shouted,

"Up there, that high ledge. I don't think they can climb that."

He thrust McLaren bodily past him and helped Sim fight a rearguard action while they all climbed a rotten and difficult transit.

McLaren crouched at the top and hurled chunks of stone at the attackers. There was a great crack running up and clear across the cavern roof, scar of some ancient earthquake. Presently a small slide started.

"Okay," Harker panted. "Quit before you bring the roof down. They can't follow us." The plannies were equipped for swimming, not climbing. They clawed angrily and slipped back, and then retreated sullenly to the water. Abruptly they seized the body with Sim's spear through it and devoured it, quarreling fiercely over it. McLaren leaned over the edge and was sick.

Harker didn't feel so good himself. He got up and went on. Sim helped McLaren, whose ankle was bleeding badly.

This higher ledge angled up and around the wall of the great lake-cavern. It was cooler and drier here, and the lichens thinned out, and vanished, leaving total darkness. Harker yelled once. From the echo of his voice the place was enormous.

Down below in the black water golden bodies streaked like comets in an ebon universe, going somewhere, going fast. Harker felt his way carefully along. His skin twitched with a nervous impulse of danger, a sense of something unseen, unnatural, and wicked.

Sim said, "I hear something."

They stopped. The blind air lay heavy with a subtle fragrance, spicy and pleasant, yet somehow unclean. The water sighed lazily far below. Somewhere ahead was a smooth rushing noise which Harker guessed was the river inlet. But none of that was what Sim meant.

He meant the rippling, rustling sound that came from everywhere in the cavern. The black surface of the lake was dotted now with spots of burning phosphorescent color, trailing fiery wakes. The spots grew swiftly, coming nearer, and became carpets of flowers, scarlet and blue and gold and purple. Floating fields of them, and towed by shining swimmers.

"My God," said Harker softly. "How big are they?"

"Enough to make three of me." Sim was a big man. "Those little ones were children, all right. They went and got their papas. Oh, Lord!"

The swimmers were very like the smaller ones that attacked them by the river, except for their giant size. They were not cumbersome.

They were magnificent, supple-limbed and light. Their membranes had spread into great shining wings, each rib tipped with fire. Only the golden dandelion heads had changed.

They had shed their petals. Their adult heads were crowned with flat, coiled growths having the poisonous and filthy beauty of fungus. And their faces were the faces of men.

For the first time since childhood Harker was cold.

The fields of burning flowers were swirled together at the base of the cliff. The golden giants cried out suddenly, a sonorous belling note, and the water was churned to blazing foam as thousands of flower-like bodies broke away and started up the cliff on suckered, spidery legs.

It didn't look as though it was worth trying, but Harker said, "Let's get the hell on!" There was a faint light now, from the army below. He began to run along the ledge, the others close on his heels. The flower-hounds coursed swiftly upward, and their masters swam easily below, watching.

The ledge dropped. Harker shot along it like a deer. Beyond the lowest dip it plunged into the tunnel whence the river came. A short tunnel, and at the far end...

"Daylight!" Harker shouted. "Daylight!"

McLaren's bleeding leg gave out and he fell.

Harker caught him. They were at the lowest part of the dip. The flower-beasts were just below, rushing higher. McLaren's foot was swollen, the calf of his leg discolored. Some swift infection from the planny's claws. He fought Harker. "Go on," he said. "Go on!"

Harker slapped him hard across the temple. He started on, half carrying McLaren, but he saw it wasn't going to work. McLaren weighed more than he did. He thrust McLaren into Sim's powerful arms. The big black nodded and ran, carrying the half-conscious man like a child. Harker saw the first of the flower-things flow up onto the ledge in front of them.

Sim hurdled them. They were not large, and there were only three of them. They rushed to follow and Harker speared them, slashing and striking with the sharp bone tip. Behind him the full tide rushed up. He ran, but they were faster. He drove them back with spear and knife,

and ran again, and turned and fought again, and by the time they had reached the tunnel Harker was staggering with weariness.

Sim stopped. He said, "There's no way out."

Harker glanced over his shoulder. The river fell sheer down a high face of rock—too high and with too much force in the water even for the giant water-plannies to think of attempting. Daylight poured through overhead, warm and welcoming, and it might as well have been on Mars.

Dead end.

Then Harker saw the little eroded channel twisting up at the side. Little more than a drain-pipe, and long dry, leading to a passage beside the top of the falls—a crack barely large enough for a small man to crawl through. It was a hell of a ragged hope, but...

Harker pointed, between jabs at the swarming flowers. Sim yelled, "You first." Because Harker was the best climber, he obeyed, helping the gasping McLaren up behind him. Sim wielded his spear like a lightning brand, guarding the rear, creeping up inch by inch.

He reached a fairly secure perch, and stopped. His huge chest pumped like a bellows, his arm rose and fell like a polished bar of ebony. Harker shouted to him to come on. He and McLaren were almost at the top.

Sim laughed. "How you going to get me through that little bitty hole?"

"Come on, you fool!"

"You better hurry. I'm about finished."

"Sim! Sim, damn you!"

"Crawl out through that hole, runt, and pull that stringbean with you! I'm a man-sized man, and I got to stay." Then, furiously, "Hurry up or they'll drag you back before you're through."

He was right. Harker knew he was right. He went to work pushing and jamming McLaren through the narrow opening. McLaren was groggy and not much help, but he was thin and small-boned, and he made it. He rolled out on a slope covered with green grass, the first Harker had seen since he was a child. He began to struggle after McLaren. He did not look back at Sim.

The black man was singing, about the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Harker put his head back into the darkness of the creek. "Sim!"

"Yeah?" Faintly, hoarse, echoing.

"There's land here, Sim. Good land."

"Yeah."

"Sim, we'll find a way..."

Sim was singing again. The sound grew fainter, diminishing downward into distance. The words were lost, but not what lay behind them. Matt Harker buried his face in the green grass, and Sim's voice went with him into the dark.

The clouds were turning color with the sinking of the hidden sun. They hung like a canopy of hot gold washed in blood. It was utterly silent, except for the birds. Birds. You never heard birds like that down in the low places. Matt Harker rolled over and sat up slowly. He felt as though he had been beaten. There was a sickness in him, and a shame, and the old dark anger lying coiled and deadly above his heart.

Before him lay the long slope of grass to the river, which bent away to the left out of sight behind a spur of granite. Beyond the slope was a broad plain and then a forest of gigantic trees. They seemed to float in the coppery haze, their dark branches outspread like wings and starred with flowers. The air was cool, with no taint of mud or rot. The grass was rich, the soil beneath it clean and sweet.

Rory McLaren moaned softly and Harker turned. His leg looked bad. He was in a sort of stupor, his skin flushed and dry, Harker swore softly, wondering what he was going to do.

He looked back toward the plain, and he saw the girl.

He didn't know how she got there. Perhaps out of the bushes that grew in thick clumps on the slope. She could have been there a long time, watching. She was watching now, standing quite still about forty feet away. A great scarlet butterfly clung to her shoulder, moving its wings with lazy delight.

She seemed more like a child than a woman. She was naked, small and slender and exquisite. Her skin had a faint translucent hint of green under its whiteness. Her hair, curled short to her head, was deep blue, and her eyes were blue also, and very strange.

Harker stared at her, and she at him, neither of them moving. A bright bird swooped down and hovered by her lips for a moment, caressing her with its beak. She touched it and smiled, but she did not take her eyes from Harker.

Harker got to his feet, slowly, easily. He said, "Hello."

She did not move, nor make a sound, but quite suddenly a pair of enormous birds, beaked and clawed like eagles and black as sin, made a whistling rush down past Harker's head and returned, circling. Harker sat down again.

The girl's strange eyes moved from him, upward to the crack in the hillside whence he had come. Her lips didn't move, but her voice—or something—spoke clearly inside Harker's head.

"You came from—There." There had tremendous feeling in it, and none of it nice.

Harker said, "Yes. A telepath, huh?"

"But you're not..." A picture of the golden swimmers formed in Harker's mind. It was recognizable, but hatred and fear had washed out all the beauty, leaving only horror.

Harker said, "No." He explained about himself and McLaren. He told about Sim. He knew she was listening carefully to his mind, testing it for truth. He was not worried about what she would find. "My friend is hurt," he said. "We need food and shelter."

For some time there was no answer. The girl was looking at Harker again. His face, the shape and texture of his body, his hair, and then his eyes. He had never been looked at quite that way before. He began to grin. A provocative, be-damned-to-you grin that injected a surprising amount of light and charm into his sardonic personality.

"Honey," he said, "you are terrific. Animal, mineral, or vegetable?"

She tipped her small round head in surprise, and asked his own question right back. Harker laughed. She smiled, her mouth making a small inviting V, and her eyes had sparkles in them. Harker started toward her.

Instantly the birds warned him back. The girl laughed, a mischievous ripple of merriment. "Come," she said, and turned away.

Harker frowned. He leaned over and spoke to McLaren, with peculiar gentleness. He managed to get the boy erect, and then swung

him across his shoulders, staggering slightly under the weight. McLaren said distinctly, "I'll be back before he's born."

Harker waited until the girl had started, keeping his distance. The two black birds followed watchfully. They walked out across the thick grass of the plain, toward the trees. The sky was now the color of blood.

A light breeze caught the girl's hair and played with it. Matt Harker saw that the short curled strands were broad and flat, like blue petals.

III

It was a long walk to the forest. The top of the plateau seemed to be bowl-shaped, protected by encircling cliffs. Harker, thinking back to that first settlement long ago, decided that this place was infinitely better. It was like the visions he had seen in fever-dreams—the Promised Land. The coolness and cleanness of it were like having weights removed from your lungs and heart and body.

The rejuvenating air didn't make up for McLaren's weight, however. Presently Harker said, "Hold it," and sat down, tumbling McLaren gently onto the grass. The girl stopped. She came back a little way and watched Harker, who was blowing like a spent horse. He grinned up at her.

"I'm shot," he said. "I've been too busy for a man of my age. Can't you get hold of somebody to help me carry him?"

Again she studied him with puzzled fascination. Night was closing in, a clear indigo, less dark than at sea level. Her eyes had a curious luminosity in the gloom.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Carry it."

By "it" Harker guessed she meant McLaren. He was suddenly, coldly conscious of a chasm between them that no amount of explanation could bring. "He's my friend. He's...I have to."

She studied his thought and then shook her head. "I don't understand. It's spoiled—" her thought-image was a combination of

"broken," "finished," and "useless"—"Why carry it around?"

"McLaren's not an 'it.' He's a man like me, my friend. He's hurt, and I have to help him."

"I don't understand." Her shrug said it was his funeral, also that he was crazy. She started on again, paying no attention to Harker's call for her to wait. Perforce, Harker picked up McLaren and staggered on again. He wished Sim were here, and immediately wished he hadn't thought of Sim. He hoped Sim had died quickly before—before what? Oh God, it's dark and I'm scared and my belly's all gone to cold water, and that thing trotting ahead of me through the blue haze...

The thing was beautiful, though. Beautifully formed, fascinating, a curved slender gleam of moonlight, a chaliced flower holding the mystic, scented nectar of the unreal, the unknown, the undiscovered. Harker's blood began, in spite of himself, to throb with a deep excitement.

They came under the fragrant shadows of the trees. The forest was open, with broad mossy ridges and clearings. There were flowers underfoot, but no brush, and clumps of ferns. The girl stopped and stretched up her hand. A feathery branch, high out of her reach, bent and brushed her face, and she plucked a great pale blossom and set it in her hair.

She turned and smiled at Harker. He began to tremble, partly with weariness, partly with something else.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

She was puzzled. "The branch, you mean? Oh, that!" She laughed. It was the first sound he had heard her make, and it shot through him like warm silver. "I just think I would like a flower, and it comes."

Teleportation, telekinetic energy—what did the books call it? Back on Earth they knew something about that, but the colony hadn't had much time to study even its own meager library. There had been some religious sect that could make roses bend into their hands. Old wisdom, the force behind the Biblical miracles, just the infinite power of thought. Very simple. Yeah. Harker wondered uneasily whether she could work it on him, too. But then, he had a brain of his own. Or did he?

"What's your name?" he asked.

She gave a clear, trilled sound. Harker tried to whistle it and gave up. Some sort of tone-language, he guessed, without words as he knew them. It sounded as though they—her people, whatever they were—had copied the birds.

"I'll call you Button," he said. "Bachelor Button—but you wouldn't know."

She picked the image out of his mind and sent it back to him. Blue fringe-topped flowers nodding in his mother's china bowl. She laughed again and sent her black birds away and led on into the forest, calling out like an oriole. Other voices answered her, and presently, racing the light wind between the trees, her people came.

They were like her. There were males, slender little creatures like young boys, and girls like Button. There were several hundred of them, all naked, all laughing and curious, their lithe, pliant bodies flitting moth-fashion through the indigo shadows. They were topped with petals—Harker called them that, though he still wasn't sure—of all colors from blood-scarlet to pure white.

They trilled back and forth. Apparently Button was telling them all about how she found Harker and McLaren. The whole mob pushed on slowly through the forest and ended finally in a huge clearing where there were only scattered trees. A spring rose and made a little lake, and then a stream that wandered off among the ferns.

More of the little people came, and now he saw the young ones. All sizes, from tiny thin creatures on up, replicas of their elders. There were no old ones. There were none with imperfect or injured bodies. Harker, exhausted and on the thin edge of a fever-bout, was not encouraged.

He set McLaren down by the spring. He drank, gasping like an animal, and bathed his head and shoulders. The forest people stood in a circle, watching. They were silent now. Harker felt coarse and bestial, somehow, as though he had belched loudly in church.

He turned to McLaren. He bathed him, helped him drink, and set about fixing the leg. He needed light, and he needed flame.

There were dry leaves, and mats of dead moss in the rocks around the spring. He gathered a pile of these. The forest people watched. Their silent luminous stare got on Harker's nerves. His hands were

shaking so that he made four tries with his flint and steel before he got a spark.

The tiny flicker made the silent ranks stir sharply. He blew on it. The flames licked up, small and pale at first, then taking hold, growing, crackling. He saw their faces in the springing light, their eyes stretched with terror. A shrill crying broke from them and then they were gone, like rustling leaves before a wind.

Harker drew his knife. The forest was quiet now. Quiet but not at rest. The skin crawled on Harker's back, over his scalp, drew tight on his cheekbones. He passed the blade through the flame. McLaren looked up at him. Harker said, "It's okay, Rory," and hit him carefully on the point of the jaw. McLaren lay still. Harker stretched out the swollen leg and went to work.

It was dawn again. He lay by the spring in the cool grass, the ashes of his fire grey and dead beside the dark stains. He felt rested, relaxed, and the fever seemed to have gone out of him. The air was like wine.

He rolled over on his back. There was a wind blowing. It was a live, strong wind, with a certain smell to it. The trees were rollicking, almost shouting with pleasure. Harker breathed deeply. The smell, the pure clean edge...

Suddenly he realized that the clouds were high, higher than he had ever known them to be. The wind swept them up, and the daylight was bright, so bright that...

Harker sprang up. The blood rushed in him. There was a stinging blur in his eyes. He began to run, toward a tall tree, and he flung himself upward into the branches and climbed, recklessly, into the swaying top.

The bowl of the valley lay below him, green, rich, and lovely. The gray granite cliffs rose around it, grew higher in the direction from which the wind blew. Higher and higher, and beyond them, far beyond, were mountains, flung towering against the sky.

On the mountains, showing through the whipping veils of cloud, there was snow, white and cold and blindingly pure, and as Harker watched there was a gleam, so quick and fleeting that he saw it more with his heart than with his eyes...

Sunlight. Snowfields, and above them, the sun.

After a long time he clambered down again into the silence of the glade. He stood there, not moving, seeing what he had not had time to see before.

Rory McLaren was gone. Both packs, with food and climbing ropes and bandages and flint and steel were gone. The short spears were gone. Feeling on his hip, Harker found nothing but bare flesh. His knife and even his breech-clout had been taken.

A slender, exquisite body moved forward from the shadows of the trees. Huge white blossoms gleamed against the curly blue that crowned the head. Luminous eyes glanced up at Harker, full of mockery and a subtle animation. Button smiled.

Matt Harker walked toward Button, not hurrying, his hard sinewy face blank of expression. He tried to keep his mind that way, too. "Where is the other one; my friend?"

"In the finish-place." She nodded vaguely toward the cliffs near where Harker and McLaren had escaped from the caves. Her thought-image was somewhere between rubbish-heap and cemetery, as nearly as Harker could translate it. It was also completely casual, a little annoyed that time should be wasted on such trifles.

"Did you...is he still alive?"

"It was when we put it there. It will be all right, it will just wait until it—stops. Like all of them."

"Why was he moved? Why did you..."

"It was ugly." Button shrugged. "It was broken, anyway." She stretched her arms upward and lifted her head to the wind. A shiver of delight ran through her. She smiled again at Harker, sidelong.

He tried to keep his anger hidden. He started walking again, not as though he had any purpose in mind, bearing toward the cliffs. His way lay past a bush with yellow flowers and thorny, pliant branches. Suddenly it writhed and whipped him across the belly. He stopped short and doubled over, hearing Button's laughter.

When he straightened up she was in front of him. "It's red," she said, surprised, and laid little pointed fingers on the scratches left by the thorns. She seemed thrilled and fascinated by the color and feel of his blood. Her fingers moved, probing the shape of his muscles, the

texture of his skin and the dark hair on his chest. They drew small lines of fire along his neck, along the ridge of his jaw, touching his features one by one, his eyelids, his black brows.

"What are you?" whispered her mind to his.

"This." Harker put his arms around her, slowly. Her flesh slid cool and strange under his hands, sending an indescribable shudder through him, partly pleasure, partly revulsion. He bent his head. Her eyes deepened, lakes of blue fire, and then he found her lips. They were cool and strange like the rest of her, pliant, scented with spice, the same perfume that came with sudden overpowering sweetness from her curling petals.

Harker saw movement in the forest aisles, a clustering of bright flower-heads. Button drew back. She took his hand and led him away, off toward the river and the quiet ferny places along its banks. Glancing up, Harker saw that the two black birds were following overhead.

"You are really plants, then? Flowers, like those?" He touched the white blossoms on her head.

"You are really a beast, then? Like the furry, snarling things that climb up through the pass sometimes?"

They both laughed. The sky above them was the color of clean fleece. The warm earth and crushed ferns were sweet beneath them.

"What pass?" asked Harker.

"Over there." She pointed off toward the rim of the valley. "It goes down to the sea, I think. Long ago we used to go down there but there's no need, and the beasts make it dangerous."

"Do they," said Harker, and kissed her in the hollow below her chin. "What happens when the beasts come?"

Button laughed. Before he could stir Harker was trapped fast in a web of creepers and tough fern, and the black birds were screeching and clashing their sharp beaks in his face.

"That happens," Button said. She stroked the ferns. "Our cousins understand us, even better than the birds."

Harker lay sweating, even after he was free again. Finally he said, "Those creatures in the underground lake. Are they your cousins?"

Button's fear-thought thrust against his mind like hands pushing away. "No, don't...Long, long ago the legend is that this valley was a

huge lake, and the Swimmers lived in it. They were a different species from us, entirely. We came from the high gorges, where there are only barren cliffs now. This was long ago. As the lake receded, we grew more numerous and began to come down, and finally there was a battle and we drove the Swimmers over the falls into the black lake. They have tried and tried to get out, to get back to the light, but they can't. They send their thoughts through to us sometimes. They..." She broke off. "I don't want to talk about them any more."

"How would you fight them if they did get out?" asked Harker easily. "Just with the birds and the growing things?"

Button was slow in answering. Then she said, "I will show you one way." She laid her hand across his eyes. For a moment there was only darkness. Then a picture began to form—people, his own people, seen as reflections in a dim and distorted mirror but recognizable. They poured into the valley through a notch in the cliffs, and instantly every bush and tree and blade of grass was bent against them. They fought, slashing with their knives, making headway, but slowly. And then, across the plain, came a sort of fog, a thin drifting curtain of soft white.

It came closer, moving with force of its own, not heeding the wind. Harker saw that it was thistledown. Seeds, borne on silky wings. It settled over the people trapped in the brush. It was endless and unhurrying, covering them all with a fine fleece. They began to writhe and cry out with pain, with a terrible fear. They struggled, but they couldn't get away.

The white down dropped away from them. Their bodies were covered with countless tiny green shoots, sucking the chemicals from the living flesh and already beginning to grow.

Button's spoken thought cut across the image. "I have seen your thoughts, some of them, since the moment you came out of the caves. I can't understand them, but I can see our plains gashed to the raw earth and our trees cut down and everything made ugly. If your kind came here, we would have to go. And the valley belongs to us."

Matt Harker's brain lay still in the darkness of his skull, wary, drawn in upon itself. "It belonged to the Swimmers first."

"They couldn't hold it. We can."

"Why did you save me, Button? What do you want of me?"

"There was no danger from you. You were strange. I wanted to play with you."

"Do you love me, Button?" His fingers touched a large smooth stone among the fern roots.

"Love? What is that?"

"It's tomorrow and yesterday. It's hoping and happiness and pain, the complete self because it's selfless, the chain that binds you to life and makes living it worthwhile. Do you understand?"

"No. I grow, I take from the soil and the light, I play with the others, with the birds and the wind and the flowers. When the time comes I am ripe with seed, and after that I go to the finish-place and wait. That's all I understand. That's all there is."

He looked up into her eyes. A shudder crept over him. "You have no soul, Button. That's the difference between us. You live, but you have no soul."

After that it was not so hard to do what he had to do. To do quickly, very quickly, the thing that was his only faint chance of justifying Sim's death. The thing that Button may have glimpsed in his mind but could not guard against, because there was no understanding in her of the thought of murder.

IV

The black birds darted at Harker, but the compulsion that sent them flickered out too soon. The ferns and creepers shook, and then were still, and the birds flew heavily away. Matt Harker stood up.

He thought he might have a little time. The flower-people probably kept in pretty close touch mentally, but perhaps they wouldn't notice Button's absence for a while. Perhaps they weren't prying into his own thoughts, because he was Button's toy. Perhaps...

He began to run, toward the cliffs where the finish-place was. He kept as much as possible in the open, away from shrubs. He did not look again, before he left, at what lay by his feet.

He was close to his destination when he knew that he was spotted. The birds returned, rushing down at him on black whistling wings. He

picked up a dead branch to beat them off and it crumbled in his hands. Telekinesis, the power of mind over matter. Harker had read once that if you knew how you could always make your point by thinking the dice into position. He wished he could think himself up a blaster. Curved beaks ripped his arms. He covered his face and grabbed one of the birds by the neck and killed it. The other one screamed and this time Harker wasn't so lucky. By the time he had killed the second one he'd felt claws in him and his face was laid open along the cheekbones. He began to run again.

Bushes swayed toward him as he passed. Thorny branches stretched. Creepers rose like snakes from the grass, and every green blade was turned knife-like against his feet. But he had already reached the cliffs and there were open rocky spaces and the undergrowth was thin.

He knew he was near the finish-place because he could smell it. The gentle withered fragrance of flowers past their prime, and under that a dead, sour decay. He shouted McLaren's name, sick with dread that there might not be an answer, weak with relief when there was one. He raced over tumbled rocks toward the sound. A small creeper tangled his foot and brought him down. He wrenched it by the roots from its shallow crevice and went on. As he glanced back over his shoulder he saw a thin white veil, a tiny patch in the distant air, drifting toward him.

He came to the finish-place.

It was a box canyon, quite deep, with high sheer walls, so that it was almost like a wide well. In the bottom of it bodies were thrown in a dry, spongy heap. Colorless flower-bodies, withered and gray, an incredible compost pile.

Rory McLaren lay on top of it, apparently unhurt. The two packs were beside him, with the weapons. Strewn over the heap, sitting, lying, moving feebly about, were the ones who waited, as Button had put it, to stop. Here were the aged, the faded and worn out, the imperfect and injured, where their ugliness could not offend. They seemed already dead mentally. They paid no attention to the men, nor to each other. Sheer blind vitality kept them going a little longer, as a geranium will bloom long after its cut stalk is desiccated.

"Matt," McLaren said. "Oh, God, Matt, I'm glad to see you!"

"Are you all right?"

"Sure. My leg even feels pretty good. Can you get me out?"

"Throw those packs up here."

McLaren obeyed. He began to catch Harker's feverish mood, warned by Harker's bleeding, ugly face that something nasty was afoot. Harker explained rapidly while he got out one of the ropes and half hauled McLaren out of the pit. The white veil was close now. Very close.

"Can you walk?" Harker asked.

McLaren glanced at the fleecy cloud. Harker had told him about it "I can walk," he said. "I can run like hell."

Harker handed him the rope. "Get around the other side of the canyon. Clear across, see?" He helped McLaren on with his pack. "Stand by with the rope to pull me up. And keep to the bare rocks."

McLaren went off. He limped badly, his face twisted with pain. Harker swore. The cloud was so close that now he could see the millions of tiny seeds floating on their silken fibers, thistledown guided by the minds of the flower-people in the valley. He shrugged into his pack straps and began winding bandages and tufts of dead grass around the bone tip of a recovered spear. The edge of the cloud was almost on him when he got a spark into the improvised torch and sprang down onto the heap of dead flower-things in the pit.

He sank and floundered on the treacherous surface, struggling across it while he applied the torch. The dry, withered substance caught. He raced the flames to the far wall and glanced back. The dying creatures had not stirred, even when the fire engulfed them. Overhead, the edges of the seed-cloud flared and crisped. It moved on blindly over the fire. There was a pale flash of light and the cloud vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Rory!" Harker yelled. "Rory!"

For a long minute he stood there, coughing, strangling in thick smoke, feeling the rushing heat crisp his skin. Then, when it was almost too late, McLaren's sweating face appeared above him and the rope snaked down. Tongues of flame flicked his backside angrily as he ran monkey-fashion up the wall.

They got away from there, higher on the rocky ground, slashing occasionally with their knives at brush and creepers they could not avoid. McLaren shuddered.

"It's impossible," he said. "How do they do it?"

"They're blood cousins. Or should I say sap. Anyhow, I suppose it's like radio control—a matter of transmitting the right frequencies. Here, take it easy a minute."

McLaren sank down gratefully. Blood was seeping through the tight bandages where Harker had incised his wound. Harker looked back into the valley.

The flower-people were spread out in a long crescent, their bright multicolored heads clear against the green plain. Harker guessed that they would be guarding the pass. He guessed that they had known what was going on in his mind as well as Button had. New form of communism, one mind for all and all for one mind. He could see that even without McLaren's disability they couldn't make it to the pass. Not a mouse could have made it.

He wondered how soon the next seed-cloud would come.

"What are we going to do, Matt? Is there any way..." McLaren wasn't thinking about himself. He was looking at the valley like Lucifer yearning at Paradise, and he was thinking of Viki. Not just Viki alone, but Viki as a symbol of thirty-eight hundred wanderers on the face of Venus.

"I don't know," said Harker. "The pass is out, and the caves are out...hey! Remember when we were fighting off those critters by the river and you nearly started a cave-in throwing rocks? There was a fault there, right over the edge of the lake. An earthquake split. If we could get at it from the top and shake it down..."

It was a minute before McLaren caught on. His eyes widened. "A slide would dam up the lake..."

"If the level rose enough, the Swimmers could get out." Harker gazed with sultry eyes at the bobbing flower heads below.

"But if the valley's flooded, Matt, and those critters take over, where does that leave our people?"

"There wouldn't be too much of a slide, I don't think. The rock's solid on both sides of the fault And anyway, the weight of the water

backed up there would push through anything, even a concrete dam, in a couple of weeks." Harker studied the valley floor intently. "See the way that slopes there? Even if the slide didn't wash out, a little digging would drain the flood off down the pass. We'd just be making a new river."

"Maybe." McLaren nodded. "I guess so. But that still leaves the Swimmers. I don't think they'd be any nicer than these babies about giving up their land." His tone said he would rather fight Button's people any day.

Harker's mouth twisted in a slow grin. "The Swimmers are water creatures, Rory. Amphibious. Also, they've lived underground, in total darkness, for God knows how long. You know what happens to angleworms when you get 'em out in the light. You know what happens to fungus that grows in the dark." He ran his fingers over his skin, almost with reverence. "Noticed anything about yourself, Rory? Or have you been too busy."

McLaren stared. He rubbed his own skin, and winced, and rubbed again, watching his fingers leave streaks of livid white that faded instantly. "Sunburn," he said wonderingly. "My God. Sunburn!"

Harker stood up. "Let's go take a look." Down below the flower-heads were agitated. "They don't like that thought, Rory. Maybe it can be done, and they know it."

McLaren rose, leaning on a short spear like a cane. "Matt. They won't let us get away with it."

Harker frowned. "Button said there were other ways beside the seed..." He turned away. "No use standing here worrying about it."

They started climbing again, very slowly on account of McLaren. Harker tried to gauge where they were in relation to the cavern beneath. The river made a good guide. The rocks were almost barren of growth here, which was a godsend. He watched, but he couldn't see anything threatening approaching from the valley. The flower-people were mere dots now, perfectly motionless.

The rock formation changed abruptly. Ancient quakes had left scars in the shape of twisted strata, great leaning slabs of granite poised like dancers, and cracks that vanished into darkness.

Harker stopped. "This is it. Listen, Rory. I want you to go off up there, out of the danger area..."

"Matt, I..."

"Shut up. One of us has got to be alive to take word back to the ships as soon as he can get through the valley. There's no great rush and you'll be able to travel in three—four days. You..."

"But why me? You're a better mountain man..."

"You're married," said Harker curtly. "It'll only take one of us to shove a couple of those big slabs down. They're practically ready to fall of their own weight. Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe I'll get out all right. But it's a little silly if both of us take the risk, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But Matt..."

"Listen, kid." Harker's voice was oddly gentle. "I know what I'm doing. Give my regards to Viki and the..."

He broke off with a sharp cry of pain. Looking down incredulously, he saw his body covered with little tentative flames, feeble, flickering, gone, but leaving their red footprints behind them.

McLaren had the same thing.

They stared at each other. A helpless terror took Harker by the throat. Telekinesis again. The flower-people turning his own weapon against them. They had seen fire, and what it did, and they were copying the process in their own minds, concentrating, all of them together, the whole mental force of the colony centered on the two men. He could even understand why they focused on the skin. They had taken the sunburn-thought and applied it literally.

Fire. Spontaneous combustion. A simple, easy reaction, if you knew the trick. There was something about a burning bush...

The attack came again, stronger this time. The flower-people were getting the feel of it now. It hurt. Oh God, it hurt. McLaren screamed. His loincloth and bandages began to smoulder.

What to do, thought Harker, quick, tell me what to do...

The flower-people focus on us through our minds, our conscious minds. Maybe they can't get the subconscious so easily, because the thoughts are not directed, they're images, symbols, vague things. Maybe if Rory couldn't think consciously they couldn't find him...

Another flare of burning, agonizing pain. In a minute they'll have the feel of it. They can keep it going...

Without warning, Harker slugged McLaren heavily on the jaw and dragged him away to where the rock was firm. He did it all with astonishing strength and quickness. There was no need to save himself. He wasn't going to need himself much longer.

He went away a hundred feet or so, watching McLaren. A third attack struck him, sickened and dazed him so that he nearly fell. Rory McLaren was not touched.

Harker smiled. He turned and ran back toward the rotten place in the cliffs. A part of his conscious thought was so strongly formed that his body obeyed it automatically, not stopping even when the flames appeared again and again on his flesh, brightening, growing, strengthening as the thought-energies of Button's people meshed together. He flung down one teetering giant of stone, and the shock jarred another loose. Harker stumbled on to a third, based on a sliding bed of shale, and thrust with all his strength and beyond it, and it went too, with crashing thunder.

Harker fell. The universe dissolved into shuddering, roaring chaos beyond a bright veil of flame and a smell of burning flesh. By that time there was only one thing clear in Matt Harker's understanding—the second part of his conscious mind, linked to and even stronger than the first.

The image he carried with him into death was a tall mountain with snow on its shoulders, blazing in the sun.

It was night. Rory McLaren lay prone on a jutting shelf above the valley. Below him the valley was lost in indigo shadows, but there was a new sound in it—the swirl of water, angry and swift.

There was new life in it, too. It rode the crest of the flood waters, burning gold in the blue night, shining giants returning in vengeance to their own place. Great patches of blazing jewel-toned phosphorescence dotted the water—the flower-hounds, turned loose to hunt. And in between them, rolling and leaping in deadly play, the young of the Swimmers went.

McLaren watched them hunt the forest people. He watched all night, shivering with dread, while the golden titans exacted payment for the ages they had lived in darkness. By dawn it was all over. And then, through the day, he watched the Swimmers die.

The river, turned back on itself, barred them from the caves. The strong bright light beat down. The Swimmers turned at first to greet it with a pathetic joy. And then they realized...

McLaren turned away. He waited, resting, until, as Harker had predicted, the block washed away and the backed-up water could flow normally again. The valley was already draining when he found the pass. He looked up at the mountains and breathed the sweet wind, and felt a great shame and humility that he was here to do it.

He looked back toward the caves where Sim had died, and the cliffs above where he had buried what remained of Matt Harker. It seemed to him that he should say something, but no words came, only that his chest was so full he could hardly breathe. He turned mutely down the rocky pass, toward the Sea of Morning Opals and the thirty-eight hundred wanderers who had found a home.

Lorelei of the Red Mist

By leigh Brackett

I

The Company dicks were good. They were plenty good. Hugh Starke began to think maybe this time he wasn't going to get away with it.

His small stringy body hunched over the control bank, nursing the last ounce of power out of the Kallman. The hot night sky of Venus fled past the ports in tattered veils of indigo. Starke wasn't sure where he was any more. Venus was a frontier planet, and still mostly a big X, except to the Venusians—who weren't sending out any maps. He did know that he was getting dangerously close to the Mountains of White Cloud. The backbone of the planet, towering far into the stratosphere, magnetic trap, with God knew what beyond. Maybe even God wasn't sure.

But it looked like over the mountains or out. Death under the guns of the Terro-Venus Mines, Incorporated, Special Police, or back to the Luna cell blocks for life as an habitual felon.

Starke decided he would go over.

Whatever happened, he'd pulled off the biggest lone-wolf caper in history. The T-V Mines payroll ship, for close to a million credits. He cuddled the metal strongbox between his feet and grinned. It would be a long time before anybody equaled that.

His mass indicators began to jitter. Vaguely, a dim purple shadow in the sky ahead, the Mountains of White Cloud, stood like a wall against him. Starke checked the positions of the pursuing ships. There was no way through them. He said flatly, "All right, damn you," and sent the Kallman angling up into the thick blue sky.

He had no very clear memories after that. Crazy magnetic vagaries, always a hazard on Venus, made his instruments useless. He flew by the seat of his pants and he got over, and the T-V men didn't. He was free, with a million credits in his kick.

Far below in the virgin darkness he saw a sullen crimson smear on the night, as though someone had rubbed it with a bloody thumb. The Kallman dipped toward it. The control bank flickered with blue flame, the jet timers blew, and then there was just the screaming of air against the falling hull.

Hugh Starke sat still and waited ...

He knew, before he opened his eyes, that he was dying. He didn't feel any pain, he didn't feel anything, but he knew just the same. Part of him was cut loose. He was still there, but not attached anymore.

He raised his eyelids. There was a ceiling. It was a long way off. It was black stone veined with smoky reds and ambers. He had never seen it before.

His head was tilted toward the right. He let his gaze move down that way. There were dim tapestries, more of the black stone, and three tall archways giving onto a balcony. Beyond the balcony was a sky veiled and clouded with red mist. Under the mist, spreading away from a murky line of cliffs, was an ocean. It wasn't water and it didn't have any waves on it, but there was nothing else to call it. It burned, deep down inside itself, breathing up the red fog. Little angry bursts of flame coiled up under the flat surface, sending circles of sparks flaring out like ripples from a dropped stone.

He closed his eyes and frowned and moved his head restively. There was the texture of fur against his skin. Through the cracks of his eyelids he saw that he lay on a high bed piled with silks and soft tanned pelts. His body was covered. He was rather glad he couldn't see it. It didn't matter because he wouldn't be using it any more anyway, and it hadn't been such a hell of a body to begin with. But he was used to it, and he didn't want to see it now, the way he knew it would have to look.

He looked along over the foot of the bed, and he saw the woman.

She sat watching him from a massive carved chair softened with a single huge white pelt like a drift of snow. She smiled, and let him look.

A pulse began to beat under his jaw, very feebly.

She was tall and sleek and insolently curved. She wore a sort of tabard of pale grey spider-silk, held to her body by a jeweled girdle, but it was just a nice piece of ornamentation. Her face was narrow, finely cut, secret, faintly amused. Her lips, her eyes, and her flowing silken hair were all the same pale cool shade of aquamarine.

Her skin was white, with no hint of rose. Her shoulders, her forearms, the long flat curve of her thighs, the pale-green tips of her breasts, were dusted with tiny particles that glistened like powdered diamond. She sparkled softly like a fairy thing against the snowy fur, a creature of foam and moonlight and clear shallow water. Her eyes never left his, and they were not human, but he knew that they would have done things to him if he had had any feeling below the neck.

He started to speak. He had no strength to move his tongue. The woman leaned forward, and as though her movement were a signal four men rose from the tapestried shadows by the wall. They were like her. Their eyes were pale and strange like hers.

She said, in liquid High Venusian, "You're dying, in this body. But you will not die. You will sleep now, and wake in a strange body, in a strange place. Don't be afraid. My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you, don't be afraid. I can't explain now, there isn't time, but don't be afraid."

He drew back his thin lips baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. If it was, it was wolfish and bitter, like his face.

The woman's eyes began to pour coolness into his skull. They were like two little rivers running through the channels of his own eyes, spreading in silver-green quiet across the tortured surface of his brain. His brain relaxed. It lay floating on the water, and then the twin streams became one broad, flowing stream, and his mind, or ego, the thing that was intimately himself, vanished along it.

It took him a long, long time to regain consciousness. He felt as though he'd been shaken until pieces of him were scattered all over inside. Also, he had an instinctive premonition that the minute he woke up he would be sorry he had. He took it easy, putting himself together.

He remembered his name, Hugh Starke. He remembered the mining asteroid where he was born. He remembered the Luna cell blocks where he had once come near dying. There wasn't much to choose between them. He remembered his face decorating half the bulletin boards between Mercury and The Belt. He remembered hearing about himself over the telecasts, stuff to frighten babies with, and he thought of himself committing his first crime—a stunted scrawny kid of eighteen swinging a spanner on a grown man who was trying to steal his food.

The rest of it came fast, then. The T-V Mines job, the getaway that didn't get, the Mountains of White Cloud. The crash . . .

The woman.

That did it. His brain leaped shatteringly. Light, feeling, a naked sense of reality swept over him. He lay perfectly still with his eyes shut, and his mind clawed at the picture of the shining woman with sea green hair and the sound of her voice saying, You will not die, you will wake in a strange body, don't be afraid . . .

He was afraid. His skin pricked and ran cold with it. His stomach knotted with it. His skin, his stomach, and yet somehow they didn't feel just right, like a new coat that hasn't shaped to you . . . He opened his eyes, a cautious crack . . .

He saw a body sprawled on its side in dirty straw. The body belonged to him, because he could feel the straw pricking it, and the itch of little things that crawled and ate and crawled again.

It was a powerful body, rangy and flat-muscled, much bigger than his old one. It had obviously not been starved the first twenty-some years of its life. It was stark naked. Weather and violence had written history on it, wealed white marks on leathery bronze, but nothing seemed to be missing. There was black hair on its chest and thighs and forearms, and its hands were lean and sinewy for killing.

It was a human body. That was something. There were so many other things it might have been that his racial snobbery wouldn't call human. Like the nameless shimmering creature who smiled with strange pale lips.

Starke shut his eyes again.

He lay, the intangible self that was Hugh Starke, bellied down in the darkness of the alien shell, quiet, indrawn, waiting. Panic crept up on its soft black paws. It walked around the crouching ego and sniffed and patted and nuzzled, whining, and then struck with its raking claws. After a while it went away, empty.

The lips that were now Starke's lips twitched in a thin, cruel smile. He had done six months once in the Luna solitary crypts. If a man could do that, and come out sane and on his two feet, he could stand anything. Even this.

It came to him then, rather deflatingly, that the woman and her four companions had probably softened the shock by hypnotic suggestion. His subconscious understood and accepted the change. It was only his conscious mind that was superficially scared to death.

Hugh Starke cursed the woman with great thoroughness, in seven languages and some odd dialects. He became healthily enraged that any dame should play around with him like that. Then he thought, What the hell, I'm alive. And it looks like I got the best of the trade-in!

He opened his eyes again, secretly, on his new world.

He lay at one end of a square stone hall, good sized, with two straight lines of pillars cut from some dark Venusian wood. There were long crude benches and tables. Fires had been burning on round brick hearths spaced between the pillars. They were embers now. The smoke climbed up, tarnishing the gold and bronze of shields hung on the walls and pediments, dulling the blades of longswords, the spears, the tapestries and hides and trophies.

It was very quiet in the hall. Somewhere outside of it there was fighting going on. Heavy, vicious fighting. The noise of it didn't touch the silence, except to make it deeper.

There were two men besides Starke in the hall.

They were close to him, on a low dais. One of them sat in a carved high seat, not moving, his big scarred hands flat on the table in front of him. The other crouched on the floor by his feet. His head was bent forward so that his mop of lint-white hair hid his face and the harp between his thighs. He was a little man, a swamp-edger from his albino coloring. Starke looked back at the man in the chair.

The man spoke harshly. "Why doesn't she send word?"

The harp gave out a sudden bitter chord. That was all.

Starke hardly noticed. His whole attention was drawn to the speaker. His heart began to pound. His muscles coiled and lay ready. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He recognized it. It was hate.

He had never seen the man before, but his hands twitched with the urge to kill.

He was big, nearly seven feet, and muscled like a draft horse. But his body, naked above a gold-bossed leather kilt, was lithe and quick as a greyhound in spite of its weight. His face was square, strong-boned, weathered, and still young. It was a face that had laughed a lot once, and liked wine and pretty girls. It had forgotten those things now, except maybe the wine. It was drawn and cruel with pain, a look as of something in a cage. Starke had seen that look before, in the Luna blocks. There was a thick white scar across the man's forehead. Under it his blue eyes were sunken and dark behind half-closed lids. The man was blind.

Outside, in the distance, men screamed and died.

Starke had been increasingly aware of a soreness and stricture around his neck. He raised a hand, careful not to rustle the straw. His fingers found a long tangled beard, felt under it, and touched a band of metal.

Starke's new body wore a collar, like a vicious dog.

There was a chain attached to the collar. Starke couldn't find any fastening. The business had been welded on for keeps. His body didn't seem to have liked it much. The neck was galled and chafed.

The blood began to crawl up hot into Starke's head. He'd worn chains before. He didn't like them. Especially around the neck.

A door opened suddenly at the far end of the hall. Fog and red daylight spilled in across the black stone floor. A man came in. He was big, half naked, blond, and bloody. His long blade trailed harshly on the flags. His chest was laid open to the bone and he held the wound together with his free hand.

"Word from Beudag," he said. "They've driven us back into the city, but so far we're holding the Gate."

No one spoke. The little man nodded his white head. The man with the slashed chest turned and went out again, closing the door.

A peculiar change came over Starke at the mention of the name Beudag. He had never heard it before, but it hung in his mind like a spear point, barbed with strange emotion. He couldn't identify the feeling, but it brushed the blind man aside. The hot simple hatred cooled. Starke relaxed in a sort of icy quiet, deceptively calm as a sleeping cobra. He didn't question this. He waited, for Beudag.

The blind man struck his hands down suddenly on the table and stood up. "Romna," he said, "give me my sword."

The little man looked at him. He had milk-blue eyes and a face like a friendly bulldog. He said, "Don't be a fool, Faolan."

Faolan said softly, "Damn you. Give me my sword."

Men were dying outside the hall, and not dying silently. Faolan's skin was greasy with sweat. He made a sudden, darting grab toward Romna.

Romna dodged him. There were tears in his pale eyes. He said brutally, "You'd only be in the way. Sit down."

"I can find the point," Faolan said, "to fall on it."

Romna's voice went up to a harsh scream. "Shut up. Shut up and sit down."

Faolan caught the edge of the table and bent over it. He shivered and closed his eyes, and the tears ran out hot under the lids. The bard turned away, and his harp cried out like a woman.

Faolan drew a long sighing breath. He straightened slowly, came round the carved high seat, and walked steadily toward Starke.

"You're very quiet, Conan," he said. "What's the matter? You ought to be happy, Conan. You ought to laugh and rattle your chain. You're going to get what you wanted. Are you sad because you haven't a mind any more, to understand that with?"

He stopped and felt with one sandaled foot across the straw until he touched Starke's thigh. Starke lay motionless.

"Conan," said the blind man gently, pressing Starke's belly with his foot. "Conan the dog, the betrayer, the butcher, the knife in the back. Remember what you did at Falga, Conan? No, you don't remember now. I've been a little rough with you, and you don't remember any more. But I remember, Conan. As long as I live in darkness, I'll remember."

Romna stroked the harp strings and they wept, savage tears for strong men dead of treachery. Low music, distant but not soft. Faolan began to tremble, a shallow animal twitching of the muscles. The flesh of his face was drawn, iron shaping under the hammer. Quite suddenly he went down on his knees. His hands struck Starke's shoulders, slid inward to the throat, and locked there.

Outside, the sound of fighting had died away.

Starke moved, very quickly. As though he had seen it and knew it was there, his hand swept out and gathered in the slack of the heavy chain and swung it.

It started out to be a killing blow. Starke wanted with all his heart to beat Faolan's brains out. But at the last second he pulled it, slapping the big man with exquisite judgment across the back of the head. Faolan grunted and fell sideways, and by that time Romna had come up. He had dropped his harp and drawn a knife. His eyes were startled.

Starke sprang up. He backed off, swinging the slack of the chain warningly. His new body moved magnificently. Outside everything was fine, but inside his psycho-neural setup had exploded into civil war. He was furious with himself for not having killed Faolan. He was furious with himself for losing control enough to want to kill a man without reason. He hated Faolan. He did not hate Faolan because he didn't know him well enough. Starke's trained, calculating unemotional brain was at grips with a tidal wave to baseless emotion.

He hadn't realized it was baseless until his mental monitor, conditioned through years of bitter control, had stopped him from killing. Now he remembered the woman's voice saying, My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you

Catspaw, huh? Just a hired hand, paid off with a new body in return for two lives. Yeah, two. This Beudag, whoever he was. Starke knew now what that cold alien emotion had been leading up to.

"Hold it," said Starke hoarsely. "Hold everything. Catspaw! You green-eyed she-devil! You picked the wrong guy this time."

Just for a fleeting instant he saw her again, leaning forward with her hair like running water across the soft foam-sparkle of her shoulders. Her sea-pale eyes were full of mocking laughter, and a direct, provocative admiration. Starke heard her quite plainly:

"You may not have any choice, Hugh Starke. They know Conan, even if you don't. Besides, it's of no great importance. The end will be the same for them—it's just a matter of time. You can save your new body or not, as you wish." She smiled. "I'd like it if you did. It's a good body. I knew it, before Conan's mind broke and left it empty."

A sudden thought came to Starke. "My box, the million credits."

"Come and get them." She was gone. Starke's mind was clear, with no alien will tramping around in it. Faolan crouched on the floor, holding his head. He said:

"Who spoke?"

Romna the bard stood staring. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Starke said, "I spoke. Me, Hugh Starke. I'm not Conan, and I never heard of Falga, and I'll brain the first guy that comes near me."

Faolan stayed motionless, his face blank, his breath sobbing in his throat. Romna began to curse, very softly, not as though he were thinking about it. Starke watched them.

Down the hall the doors burst open. The heavy reddish mist coiled in with the daylight across the flags, and with them a press of bodies hot from battle, bringing a smell of blood.

Starke felt the heart contract in the hairy breast of the body named Conan, watching the single figure that led the pack.

Romna called out, "Beudag!"

She was tall. She was built and muscled like a lioness, and she walked with a flat-hipped arrogance, and her hair was like coiled flame. Her eyes were blue, hot and bright, as Faolan's might have been once. She looked like Faolan. She was dressed like him, in a leather kilt and sandals, her magnificent body bare above the waist. She carried a longsword slung across her back, the hilt standing above the left shoulder. She had been using it. Her skin was smeared with blood and grime. There was a long cut on her thigh and another across her flat belly, and bitter weariness lay on her like a burden in spite of her denial of it.

"We've stopped them, Faolan," she said. "They can't breach the Gate, and we can hold Crom Dhu as long as we have food. And the sea

feeds us." She laughed, but there was a hollow sound to it. "Gods, I'm tired!"

She halted then, below the dais. Her flame-blue gaze swept across Faolan, across Romna, and rose to meet Hugh Starke's, and stayed there.

The pulse began to beat under Starke's jaw again, and this time his body was strong, and the pulse was like a drum throbbing.

Romna said, "His mind has come back." There was a long, hard silence. No one in the hall moved. Then the men back of Beudag, big brawny kilted warriors, began to close in on the dais, talking in low snarling undertones that rose toward a mob howl. Faolan rose up and faced them, and bellowed them to quiet.

"He's mine to take! Let him alone." Beudag sprang up onto the dais, one beautiful flowing movement. "It isn't possible," she said. "His mind broke under torture. He's been a drooling idiot with barely the sense to feed himself. And now, suddenly, you say he's normal again?"

Starke said, "You know I'm normal. You can see it in my eyes."

"Yes."

He didn't like the way she said that. "Listen, my name is Hugh Starke. I'm an Earthman. This isn't Conan's brain come back. This is a new deal. I got shoved into his body. What it did before I got it I don't know, and I'm not responsible."

Faolan said, "He doesn't remember Falga. He doesn't remember the longships at the bottom of the sea." Faolan laughed.

Romna said quietly, "He didn't kill you, though. He could have, easily. Would Conan have spared you?"

Beudag said, "Yes, if he had a better plan. Conan's mind was like a snake. It crawled in the dark, and you never knew where it was going to strike."

Starke began to tell them how it happened, the chain swinging idly in his hand. While he was talking he saw a face reflected in a polished shield hung on a pillar. Mostly it was just a tangled black mass of hair, mounted on a frame of long, harsh, jutting bone. The mouth was sensuous, with a dark sort of laughter on it. The eyes were yellow. The cruel, brilliant yellow of a killer hawk.

Starke realized with a shock that the face belonged to him.

"A woman with pale green hair," said Beudag softly. "Rann," said Faolan, and Romna's harp made a sound like a high-priest's curse.

"Her people have that power," Romna said. "They can think a man's soul into a spider, and step on it."

"They have many powers. Maybe Rann followed Conan's mind, wherever it went, and told it what to say, and brought it back again."

"Listen," said Starke angrily. "I didn't ask . . ."

Suddenly, without warning, Romna drew Beudag's sword and threw it at Starke.

Starke dodged it. He looked at Romna with ugly yellow eyes. "That's fine. Chain me up so I can't fight and kill me from a distance." He did not pick up the sword. He'd never used one. The chain felt better, not being too different from a heavy belt or a length of cable, or the other chains he'd swung on occasion.

Romna said, "Is that Conan?"

Faolan snarled, "What happened?"

"Romna threw my sword at Conan. He dodged it, and left it on the ground." Beudag's eyes were narrowed. "Conan could catch a flying sword by the hilt, and he was the best fighter on the Red Sea, barring you, Faolan."

"He's trying to trick us. Rann guides him."

"The hell with Rann!" Starke clashed his chain. "She wants me to kill the both of you, I still don't know why. All right. I could have killed Faolan, easy. But I'm not a killer. I never put down anyone except to save my own neck. So I didn't kill him in spite of Rann. And I don't want any part of you, or Rann either. All I want is to get the hell out of here!"

Beudag said, "His accent isn't Conan's. And the look in his eyes is different, too." Her voice had an odd note in it. Romna glanced at her. He fingered a few rippling chords on his harp, and said:

"There's one way you could tell for sure."

A sullen flush began to burn on Beudag's cheekbones. Romna slid unobtrusively out of reach. His eyes danced with malicious laughter.

Beudag smiled, the smile of an angry cat, all teeth and no humor. Suddenly she walked toward Starke, her head erect, her hands

swinging loose and empty at her sides. Starke tensed warily, but the blood leaped pleasantly in his borrowed veins.

Beudag kissed him.

Starke dropped the chain. He had something better to do with his hands.

After a while he raised his head for breath, and she stepped back, and whispered wonderingly,

"It isn't Conan."

* * *

The hall had been cleared. Starke had washed and shaved himself. His new face wasn't bad. Not bad at all. In fact, it was pretty damn good. And it wasn't known around the System. It was a face that could own a million credits and no questions asked. It was a face that could have a lot of fun on a million credits.

All he had to figure out now was a way to save the neck the face was mounted on, and get his million credits back from that beautiful she-devil named Rann.

He was still chained, but the straw had been cleaned up and he wore a leather kilt and a pair of sandals. Faolan sat in his high seat nursing a flagon of wine. Beudag sprawled wearily on a fur rug beside him. Romna sat cross-legged, his eyes veiled sleepily, stroking soft wandering music out of his harp. He looked fey. Starke knew his swamp-edgers. He wasn't surprised.

"This man is telling the truth," Romna said. "But there's another mind touching his. Rann's, I think. Don't trust him."

Faolan growled, "I couldn't trust a god in Conan's body"

Starke said, "What's the setup? All the fighting out there, and this Rann dame trying to plant a killer on the inside. And what happened at Falga? I never heard of this whole damn ocean, let alone a place called Falga."

The bard swept his hand across the strings. "I'll tell you, Hugh Starke. And maybe you won't want to stay in that body any longer."

Starke grinned. He glanced at Beudag. She was watching him with a queer intensity from under lowered lids. Starke's grin changed. He began to sweat. Get rid of this body, hell! It was really a body. His own stringy little carcass had never felt like this.

The bard said, "In the beginning, in the Red Sea, was a race of people having still their fins and scales. They were amphibious, but after a while part of this race wanted to remain entirely on land. There was a quarrel, and a battle, and some of the people left the sea forever. They settled along the shore. They lost their fins and most of their scales. They had great mental powers and they loved ruling. They subjugated the human peoples and kept them almost in slavery. They hated their brothers who still lived in the sea, and their brothers hated them.

"After a time a third people came to the Red Sea. They were rovers from the North. They raided and reaved and wore no man's collar. They made a settlement on Crom Dhu, the Black Rock, and built longships, and took toll of the coastal towns.

"But the slave people didn't want to fight against the rovers. They wanted to fight with them and destroy the sea-folk. The rovers were human, and blood calls to blood. And the rovers liked to rule, too, and this is a rich country. Also, the time had come in their tribal development when they were ready to change from nomadic warriors to builders in their own country.

"So the rovers, and the sea-folk, and the slave-people who were caught between the two of them, began their struggle for the land."

The bard's fingers thrummed against the strings so that they beat like angry hearts. Starke saw that Beudag was still watching him, weighing every change of expression on his face. Romna went on:

"There was a woman named Rann, who had green hair and great beauty, and ruled the sea-folk. There was a man called Faolan of the Ships, and his sister Beudag, which means Dagger-in-the-Sheath, and they two ruled the outland rovers. And there was the man called Conan."

The harp crashed out like a sword-blade striking.

"Conan was a great fighter and a great lover. He was next under Faolan of the Ships, and Beudag loved him, and they were plighted.

Then Conan was taken prisoner by the sea-folk during a skirmish, and Rann saw him—and Conan saw Rann."

Hugh Starke had a fleeting memory of Rann's face smiling, and her low voice saying, It's a good body. I knew it, before . . .

Beudag's eyes were two stones of blue vitriol under her narrow lids.

"Conan stayed a long time at Falga with Rann of the Red Sea. Then he came back to Crom Dhu, and said that he had escaped, and had discovered a way to take the longships into the harbor of Falga, at the back of Rann's fleet; and from there it would be easy to take the city, and Rann with it. And Conan and Beudag were married."

Starke's yellow hawk eyes slid over Beudag, sprawled like a long lioness in power and beauty. A muscle began to twitch under his cheekbone. Beudag flushed, a slow deep color. Her gaze did not waver.

"So the longships went out from Crom Dhu, across the Red Sea. And Conan led them into a trap at Falga, and more than half of them were sunk. Conan thought his ship was free, that he had Rann and all she'd promised him, but Faolan saw what had happened and went after him. They fought, and Conan laid his sword across Faolan's brow and blinded him; but Conan lost the fight. Beudag brought them home.

"Conan was chained naked in the market place. The people were careful not to kill him. From time to time other things were done to him. After a while his mind broke, and Faolan had him chained here in the hall, where he could hear him babble and play with his chain. It made darkness easier to bear.

"But since Falga, things have gone badly from Crom Dhu. Too many men were lost, too many ships. Now Rann's people have us bottled up here. They can't break in, we can't break out. And so we stay, until . . ." The harp cried out a bitter question, and was still.

After a minute or two Starke said slowly, "Yeah, I get it. Stalemate for both of you. And Rann figured if I could kill off the leaders, your people might give up." He began to curse. "What a lousy, dirty, sneaking trick! And who told her she could use me . . ." He paused. After all, he'd be dead now. After all, a new body, and a cool million credits. Ah, the hell with Rann. He hadn't asked her to do it. And he was nobody's hired killer. Where did she get off, sneaking around his

mind, trying to make him do things he didn't even know about? Especially to someone like Beudag.

Still, Rann herself was nobody's crud.

And just where was Hugh Starke supposed to cut in on this deal? Cut was right. Probably with a longsword, right through the belly. Swell spot he was in, and a good three strikes on him already.

He was beginning to wish he'd never seen the T-V Mines payroll ship, because then he might never have seen the Mountains of White Cloud.

He said, because everybody seemed to be waiting for him to say something, "Usually when there's a deadlock like this, somebody calls in a third party. Isn't there somebody you can yell for?"

Faolan shook his rough red head. "The slave people might rise, but they haven't arms and they're not used to fighting. They'd only get massacred, and it wouldn't help us any."

"What about those other—uh—people that live in the sea? And just what is that sea, anyhow? Some radiation from it wrecked my ship and got me into this bloody mess."

Beudag said lazily, "I don't know what it is. The seas our forefathers sailed on were water, but this is different. It will float a ship, if you know how to build the hull—very thin of a white metal we mine from the foothills. But when you swim in it, it's like being in a cloud of bubbles. It tingles, and the farther down you go in it the stranger it gets, dark and full of fire. I stay down for hours sometimes, hunting the beasts that live there."

Starke said, "For hours? You have diving suits, then. What are they?"

She shook her head, laughing. "Why weigh yourself down that way? There's no trouble to breathe in this ocean."

"For cripesake," said Starke. "Well I'll be damned. Must be a heavy gas, then, radioactive, surface tension under atmospheric pressure, enough to float a light hull, and high oxygen content without any dangerous mixture. Well, well. Okay, why doesn't somebody go down and see if the sea-people will help? They don't like Rann's branch of the family, you said."

"They don't like us, either," said Faolan. "We stay out of the southern part of the sea. They wreck our ships, sometimes." His bitter mouth twisted in a smile. "Did you want to go to them for help?"

Starke didn't quite like the way Faolan sounded. "It was just a suggestion," he said.

Beudag rose, stretching, wincing as the stiffened wounds pulled her flesh. "Come on, Faolan. Let's sleep."

He rose and laid his hand on her shoulder. Romna's harpstrings breathed a subtle little mockery of sound. The bard's eyes were veiled and sleepy. Beudag did not look at Starke, called Conan.

Starke said, "What about me?"

"You stay chained," said Faolan. "There's plenty of time to think. As long as we have food—and the sea feeds us."

He followed Beudag, through a curtained entrance to the left. Romna got up, slowly, slinging the harp over one white shoulder. He stood looking steadily into Starke's eyes in the dying light of the fires.

"I don't know," he murmured.

Starke waited, not speaking. His face was without expression.

"Conan we knew. Starke we don't know. Perhaps it would have been better if Conan had come back." He ran his thumb absently over the hilt of the knife in his girdle. "I don't know. Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if I'd cut your throat before Beudag came in."

Starke's mouth twitched. It was not exactly a smile.

"You see," said the bard seriously, "to you, from outside, none of this is important, except as it touches you. But we live in this little world. We die in it. To us, it's important."

The knife was in his hand now. It leaped up glittering into the dregs of the firelight, and fell, and leaped again.

"You fight for yourself, Hugh Starke. Rann also fights through you. I don't know."

Starke's gaze did not waver.

Romna shrugged and put away the knife. "It is written of the gods," he said, sighing. "I hope they haven't done a bad job of the writing."

He went out. Starke began to shiver slightly. It was completely quiet in the hall. He examined his collar, the rivets, every separate link of the chain, the staple to which it was fixed. Then he sat down on the

fur rug provided for him in place of the straw. He put his face in his hands and cursed, steadily, for several minutes, and then struck his fists down hard on the floor. After that he lay down and was quiet. He thought Rann would speak to him. She did not.

The silent black hours that walked across his heart were worse than any he had spent in the Luna crypts.

She came soft-shod, bearing a candle. Beudag, the Dagger-in-the-Sheath. Starke was not asleep. He rose and stood waiting. She set the candle on the table and came, not quite to him, and stopped. She wore a length of thin white cloth twisted loosely at the waist and dropping to her ankles. Her body rose out of it straight and lovely, touched mystically with shadows in the little wavering light.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "What are you?"

"A man. Not Conan. Maybe not Hugh Starke any more. Just a man."

"I loved the man called Conan, until . . ." She caught her breath, and moved closer. She put her hand on Starke's arm. The touch went through him like white fire. The warm clean healthy fragrance of her tasted sweet in his throat. Her eyes searched his.

"If Rann has such great powers, couldn't it be that Conan was forced to do what he did? Couldn't it be that Rann took his mind and molded it her way, perhaps without his knowing it?"

"It could be."

"Conan was hot-tempered and quarrelsome, but he . . ."

Starke said slowly, "I don't think you could have loved him if he hadn't been straight."

Her hand lay still on his forearm. She stood looking at him, and then her hand began to tremble, and in a moment she was crying, making no noise about it. Starke drew her gently to him. His eyes blazed yellowly in the candlelight.

"Woman's tears," she said impatiently, after a bit. She tried to draw away. "I've been fighting too long, and losing, and I'm tired."

He let her step back, not far. "Do all the women of Crom Dhu fight like men?"

"If they want to. There have always been shield-maidens. And since Falga, I would have had to fight anyway, to keep from thinking." She

touched the collar on Starke's neck. "And from seeing."

He thought of Conan in the market square, and Conan shaking his chain and gibbering in Faolan's hall, and Beudag watching it. Starke's fingers tightened. He slid his palms upward along the smooth muscles of her arms, across the straight, broad planes of her shoulders, onto her neck, the proud strength of it pulsing under his hands. Her hair fell loose. He could feel the redness of it burning him.

She whispered, "You don't love me."

"No."

"You're an honest man, Hugh Starke."

"You want me to kiss you."

"Yes."

"You're an honest woman, Beudag."

Her lips were hungry, passionate, touched with the bitterness of tears. After a while Starke blew out the candle . . .

"I could love you, Beudag."

"Not the way I mean."

"The way you mean. I've never said that to any woman before. But you're not like any woman before. And—I'm a different man."

"Strange—so strange. Conan, and yet not Conan."

"I could love you, Beudag—if I lived."

Harpstrings gave a thrumming sigh in the darkness, the faintest whisper of sound. Beudag started, sighed, and rose from the fur rug. In a minute she had found flint and steel and got the candle lighted. Romna the bard stood in the curtained doorway, watching them.

Presently he said, "You're going to let him go."

Beudag said, "Yes."

Romna nodded. He did not seem surprised. He walked across the dais, laying his harp on the table, and went into another room. He came back almost at once with a hacksaw.

"Bend your neck," he said to Starke.

The metal of the collar was soft. When it was cut through Starke got his fingers under it and bent the ends outward, without trouble. His old body could never have done that. His old body could never have done a lot of things. He figured Rann hadn't cheated him. Not much.

He got up, looking at Beudag. Beudag's head was dropped forward, her face veiled behind shining hair.

"There's only one possible way out of Crom Dhu," she said. There was no emotion in her voice. "There's a passage leading down through the rock to a secret harbor, just large enough to moor a skiff or two. Perhaps, with the night and the fog, you can slip through Rann's blockade. Or you can go aboard one of her ships, for Falga." She picked up the candle. "I'll take you down."

"Wait," Starke said. "What about you?"

She glanced at him, surprised. "I'll stay, of course."

He looked into her eyes. "It's going to be hard to know each other that way."

"You can't stay here, Hugh Starke. The people would tear you to pieces the moment you went into the street. They may even storm the hall, to take you. Look here." She set the candle down and led him to a narrow window, drawing back the hide that covered it.

Starke saw narrow twisting streets dropping steeply toward the sullen sea. The longships were broken and sunk in the harbor. Out beyond, riding lights flickering in the red fog, were other ships. Rann's ships.

"Over there," said Beudag, "is the mainland. Crom Dhu is connected to it by a tongue of rock. The sea-folk hold the land beyond it, but we can hold the rock bridge as long as we live. We have enough water, enough food from the sea. But there's no soil nor game on Crom Dhu. We'll be naked after a while, without leather or flax, and we'll have scurvy without grain and fruit. We're beaten, unless the gods send us a miracle. And we're beaten because of what was done at Falga. You can see how the people feel."

Starke looked at the dark streets and the silent houses leaning on each other's shoulders, and the mocking lights out in the fog. "Yeah," he said. "I can see."

"Besides, there's Faolan. I don't know whether he believes your story. I don't know whether it would matter."

Starke nodded. "But you won't come with me?"

She turned away sharply and picked up the candle again. "Are you coming, Romna?"

The bard nodded. He slung his harp over his shoulder. Beudag held back the curtain of a small doorway far to the side. Starke went through it and Romna followed, and Beudag went ahead with the candle. No one spoke.

They went along a narrow passage, past store rooms and armories. They paused once while Starke chose a knife, and Romna whispered: "Wait!" He listened intently. Starke and Beudag strained their ears along with him. There was no sound. Romna shrugged. "I thought I heard sandals scraping stone," he said. They went on.

The passage lay behind a wooden door. It led downward steeply through the rock, a single narrow way without side galleries or branches. In some places there were winding steps. It ended, finally, in a flat ledge low to the surface of the cove, which was a small cavern closed in with the black rock. Beudag set the candle down.

There were two little skiffs built of some light metal moored to rings in the ledge. Two long sweeps leaned against the cave wall. They were of a different metal, oddly varned. Beudag laid one across the thwarts of the nearest boat. Then she turned to Starke. Romna hung back in the shadows by the tunnel mouth.

Beudag said quietly, "Goodbye, man without a name."

"It has to be goodbye?"

"I'm leader now, in Faolan's place. Besides, these are my people." Her fingers tightened on his wrists. "If you could . . ." Her eyes held a brief blaze of hope, Then she dropped her head and said, "I keep forgetting you're not one of us. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Beudag."

Starke put his arms around her. He found her mouth, almost cruelly. Her arms were tight about him, her eyes half closed and dreaming. Starke's hands slipped upward, toward her throat, and locked on it.

She bent back, her body like a steel bow. Her eyes got fire in them, looking into Starke's but only for a moment. His fingers pressed expertly on the nerve centers. Beudag's head fell forward limply, and then Romna was on Starke's back and his knife was pricking Starke's throat.

Starke caught his wrist and turned the blade away. Blood ran onto his chest, but the cut was not into the artery. He threw himself backward onto the stone. Romna couldn't get clear in time. The breath went out of him in a rushing gasp. He didn't let go of the knife. Starke rolled over. The little man didn't have a chance with him. He was tough and quick, but Starke's sheer size smothered him. Starke could remember when Romna would not have seemed small to him. He hit the bard's jaw with his fist. Romna's head cracked hard against the stone. He let go of the knife. He seemed to be through fighting. Starke got up. He was sweating, breathing heavily, not because of his exertion. His mouth was glistening and eager, like a dog's. His muscles twitched, his belly was hot and knotted with excitement. His yellow eyes had a strange look.

He went back to Beudag.

She lay on the black rock, on her back. Candlelight ran pale gold across her brown skin, skirting the sharp strong hollows between her breasts and under the arching rim of her rib-case. Starke knelt, across her body, his weight pressed down against her harsh breathing. He stared at her. Sweat stood out on his face. He took her throat between his hands again.

He watched the blood grow dark in her cheeks. He watched the veins coil on her forehead. He watched the redness blacken in her lips. She fought a little, very vaguely, like someone moving in a dream. Starke breathed hoarsely, animal-like through an open mouth.

Then, gradually his body became rigid. His hands froze, not releasing pressure, but not adding any. His yellow eyes widened. It was as though he were trying to see Beudag's face and it was hidden in dense clouds.

Back of him, back in the tunnel, was the soft, faint whisper of sandals on uneven rock. Sandals, walking slowly. Starke did not hear. Beudag's face glimmered deep in a heavy mist below him, a blasphemy of a face, distorted, blackened.

Starke's hands began to open.

They opened slowly. Muscles stood like coiled ropes in his arms and shoulders, as though he moved them against heavy weights. His

lips peeled back from his teeth. He bent his neck, and sweat dropped from his face and glittered on Beudag's breast.

Starke was now barely touching Beudag's neck. She began to breathe again, painfully.

Starke began to laugh. It was not nice laughter. "Rann," he whispered. "Rann, you she-devil." He half fell away from Beudag and stood up, holding himself against the wall. He was shaking violently. "I wouldn't use your hate for killing, so you tried to use my passion." He cursed her in a flat sibilant whisper. He had never in his profane life really cursed anyone before.

He heard an echo of laughter dancing in his brain.

Starke turned. Faolan of the Ships stood in the tunnel mouth. His head was bent, listening, his blind dark eyes fixed on Starke as though he saw him.

Faolan said softly "I hear you, Starke. I hear the others breathing, but they don't speak."

"They're all right. I didn't mean to do . . ."

Faolan smiled. He stepped out on the narrow ledge. He knew where he was going, and his smile was not pleasant.

"I heard your steps in the passage beyond my room. I knew Beudag was leading you, and where, and why. I would have been here sooner, but it's a slow way in the dark."

The candle lay in his path. He felt the heat of it close to his leg, and stopped and felt for it, and ground it out. It was dark, then. Very dark, except for a faint smudgy glow from the scrap of ocean that lay along the cave floor.

"It doesn't matter," Faolan said, "as long as I came in time."

Starke shifted his weight warily. "Faolan . . ."

"I wanted you alone. On this night of all nights I wanted you alone. Beudag fights in my place now, Conan. My manhood needs proving."

Starke strained his eyes in the gloom, measuring the ledge, measuring the place where the skiff was moored. He didn't want to fight Faolan. In Faolan's place he would have felt the same. Starke understood perfectly. He didn't hate Faolan, he didn't want to kill him, and he was afraid of Rann's power over him when his emotions got control. You couldn't keep a determined man from killing you and still

be uninvolved emotionally. Starke would be damned if he'd kill anyone to suit Rann.

He moved, silently, trying to slip past Faolan on the outside and get into the skiff. Faolan gave no sign of hearing him. Starke did not breathe. His sandals came down lighter than snowflakes. Faolan did not swerve. He would pass Starke with a foot to spare. They came abreast.

Faolan's hand shot out and caught in Starke's long black hair. The blind man laughed softly and closed in.

Starke swung one from the floor. Do it the quickest way and get clear. But Faolan was fast. He came in so swiftly that Starke's fist jarred harmlessly along his ribs. He was bigger than Starke, and heavier, and the darkness didn't bother him.

Starke bared his teeth. Do it quick, brother, and clear out! Or that green-eyed she-cat . . . Faolan's brute bulk weighed him down. Faolan's arm crushed his neck. Faolan's fist was knocking his guts loose. Starke got moving.

He'd fought in a lot of places. He'd learned from stokers and tramps, Martian Low-Canalers, red-eyed Nahali in the running gutters of Lhi. He didn't use his knife. He used his knees and feet and elbows and his hands, fist and flat. It was a good fight. Faolan was a good fighter, but Starke knew more tricks.

One more, Starke thought. One more and he's out. He drew back for it, and his heel struck Romna, lying on the rock. He staggered, and Faolan caught him with a clean swinging blow. Starke fell backward against the cave wall. His head cracked the rock. Light flooded crimson across his brain and then paled and grew cooler, a wash of clear silver-green like water. He sank under it . . .

He was tired, desperately tired. His head ached. He wanted to rest, but he could feel that he was sitting up; doing something that had to be done. He opened his eyes.

He sat in the stern of a skiff. The long sweep was laid into its crutch, held like a tiller bar against his body. The blade of the sweep trailed astern in the red sea, and where the metal touched there was a spurt of silver fire and a swirling of brilliant motes. The skiff moved

rapidly through the sullen fog, through a mist of blood in the hot Venusian night.

Beudag crouched in the bow, facing Starke. She was bound securely with strips of the white cloth she had worn. Bruises showed dark on her throat. She was watching Starke with the intent, unwinking, perfectly expressionless gaze of a tigress.

Starke looked away, down at himself. There was blood on his kilt, a brown smear of it across his chest. It was not his blood. He drew the knife slowly out of its sheath. The blade was dull and crusted, still a little wet.

Starke looked at Beudag. His lips were stiff, swollen. He moistened them and said hoarsely, "What happened?"

She shook her head, slowly, not speaking. Her eyes did not waver.

A black, cold rage took hold of Starke and shook him. Rann! He rose and went forward, letting the sweep go where it would. He began to untie Beudag's wrists.

A shape swam toward them out of the red mist. A long ship with two heavy sweeps bursting fire astern and a slender figurehead shaped like a woman. A woman with hair and eyes of aquamarine. It came alongside the skiff.

A rope ladder snaked down. Men lined the low rail. Slender men with skin that glistened white like powdered snow, and hair the color of distant shallows. One of them said, "Come aboard, Hugh Starke."

Starke went back to the sweep. It bit into the sea, sending the skiff in a swift arc away from Rann's ship.

Grapnels flew, hooking the skiff at thwart and gunwale. Bows appeared in the hands of the men, wicked curving things with barbed metal shafts on the string. The man said again, politely, "Come aboard."

Hugh Starke finished untying Beudag. He didn't speak. There seemed to be nothing to say. He stood back while she climbed the ladder and then followed. The skiff was cast loose. The long ship veered away, gathering speed.

Starke said, "Where are we going?"

The man smiled. "To Falga."

Starke nodded. He went below with Beudag into a cabin with soft couches covered with spider-silk and panels of dark wood beautifully painted, dim fantastic scenes from the past of Rann's people. They sat opposite each other. They still did not speak.

* * *

They raised Falga in the opal dawn—a citadel of basalt cliffs rising sheer from the burning sea, with a long arm holding a harbor full of ships. There were green fields inland, and beyond, cloaked in the eternal mists of Venus, the Mountains of White Clouds lifted spaceward. Starke wished that he had never seen the Mountains of White Cloud. Then, looking at his hands, lean and strong on his long thighs, he wasn't so sure. He thought of Rann waiting for him. Anger, excitement, a confused violence of emotion set him pacing nervously.

Beudag sat quietly, withdrawn, waiting.

The long ship threaded the crowded moorings and slid into place alongside a stone quay. Men rushed to make fast. They were human men, as Starke judged humans, like Beudag and himself. They had the shimmering silver hair and fair skin of the plateau peoples, the fine-cut faces and straight bodies. They wore leather collars with metal tags and they went naked like beasts, and they were gaunt and bowed with labor. Here and there a man with pale blue-green hair and resplendent harness stood godlike above the swarming masses.

Starke and Beudag went ashore. They might have been prisoners or honored guests, surrounded by their escort from the ship. Streets ran back from the harbor, twisting and climbing crazily up the cliffs. Houses climbed on each other's backs. It had begun to rain, the heavy steaming downpour of Venus, and the moist heat brought out the choking stench of people, too many people.

They climbed, ankle deep in water sweeping down the streets that were half stairway. Thin naked children peered out of the houses, out of narrow alleys. Twice they passed through market squares where women with the blank faces of defeat drew back from stalls of coarse food to let the party through.

There was something wrong. After a while Starke realized it was the silence. In all that horde of humanity no one laughed, or sang, or

shouted. Even the children never spoke above a whisper. Starke began to feel a little sick. Their eyes had a look in them . . .

He glanced at Beudag, and away again.

The waterfront streets ended in a sheer basalt face honeycombed with galleries. Starke's party entered them, still climbing. They passed level after level of huge caverns, open to the sea. There was the same crowding, the same stench, the same silence. Eyes glinted in the half-light, bare feet moved furtively on stone. Somewhere a baby cried thinly, and was hushed at once.

They came out on the cliff top, into the clean high air. There was a city here. Broad streets, lined with trees, low rambling villas of the black rock set in walled gardens, drowned in brilliant vines and giant ferns and flowers. Naked men and women worked in the gardens, or hauled carts of rubbish through the alleys, or hurried on errands, slipping furtively across the main streets where they intersected the mews.

The party turned away from the sea, heading toward an ebon palace that sat like a crown above the city. The steaming rain beat on Starke's bare body, and up here you could get the smell of the rain, even through the heavy perfume of the flowers. You could smell Venus in the rain—musky and primitive and savagely alive, a fecund giantess with passion flowers in her outstretched hands. Starke set his feet down like a panther and his eyes burned a smoky amber.

They entered the palace of Rann

She received them in the same apartment where Starke had come to after the crash. Through a broad archway he could see the high bed where his old body had lain before the life went out of it. The red sea steamed under the rain outside, the rusty fog coiling languidly through the open arches of the gallery. Rann watched them lazily from a raised couch set massively into the wall. Her long sparkling legs sprawled arrogantly across the black spider-silk draperies. This time her tabard was a pale yellow. Her eyes were still the color of shoal-water, still amused, still secret, still dangerous.

Starke said, "So you made me do it after all."

"And you're angry." She laughed, her teeth showing white and pointed as bone needles. Her gaze held Starke's. There was nothing

casual about it. Starke's hawk eyes turned molten yellow, like hot gold, and did not waver.

Beudag stood like a bronze spear, her forearms crossed beneath her bare sharp breasts. Two of Rann's palace guards stood behind her.

Starke began to walk toward Rann.

She watched him come. She let him get close enough to reach out and touch her, and then she said slyly, "It's a good body, isn't it?"

Starke looked at her for a moment. Then he laughed. He threw back his head and roared, and struck the great corded muscles of his belly with his fist. Presently he looked straight into Rann's eyes and said:

"I know you."

She nodded. "We know each other. Sit down, Hugh Starke." She swung her long legs over to make room, half erect now, looking at Beudag. Starke sat down. He did not look at Beudag.

Rann said, "Will your people surrender now?"

Beudag did not move, not even her eyelids. "If Faolan is dead—yes."

"And if he's not?"

Beudag stiffened. Starke did too.

"Then," said Beudag quietly, "They'll wait."

"Until he is?"

"Or until they must surrender."

Rann nodded. To the guards she said, "See that this woman is well fed and well treated."

Beudag and her escort had turned to go when Starke said, "Wait." The guards looked at Rann, who nodded, and glanced quizzically at Starke. Starke said:

"Is Faolan dead?"

Rann hesitated. Then she smiled. "No. You have the most damnably tough mind, Starke. You struck deep, but not deep enough. He may still die, but . . . No, he's not dead." She turned to Beudag and said with easy mockery, "You needn't hold anger against Starke. I'm the one who should be angry." Her eyes came back to Starke. They didn't look angry.

Starke said, "There's something else. Conan—the Conan that used to be, before Falga."

"Beudag's Conan."

"Yeah. Why did he betray his people?"

Rann studied him. Her strange pale lips curved, her sharp white teeth glistening wickedly with barbed humor. The she turned to Beudag. Beudag was still standing like a carved image, but her smooth muscles were ridged with tension, and her eyes were not the eyes of an image.

"Conan or Starke," said Rann, "she's still Beudag, isn't she? All right, I'll tell you. Conan betrayed his people because I put it into his mind to do it. He fought me. He made a good fight of it. But he wasn't quite as tough as you are, Starke."

There was a silence. For the first time since entering the room, Hugh Starke looked at Beudag. After a moment she sighed and lifted her chin, and smiled, a deep, faint smile. The guards walked out beside her, but she was more erect and lighter of step than either of them.

"Well," said Rann, when they were gone, "and what about you, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan."

"Have I any choice?"

"I always keep my bargains."

"Then give me my dough and let me clear the hell out of here."

"Sure that's what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"You could stay a while, you know."

"With you?"

Rann lifted her frosty-white shoulders. "I'm not promising half my kingdom, or even part of it. But you might be amused."

"I got no sense of humor."

"Don't you even want to see what happens to Crom Dhu?"

"And Beudag."

"And Beudag," He stopped, then fixed Rann with uncompromising yellow eyes. "No. Not Beudag. What are you going to do to her?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that."

"I say again, nothing. Whatever is done, her own people will do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that little Dagger-in-the-Sheath will be rested, cared for, and fattened, for a few days. Then I shall take her aboard my own ship and join the fleet before Crom Dhu. Beudag will be made quite comfortable at the masthead, where her people can see her plainly. She will stay there until the Rock surrenders. It depends on her own people how long she stays. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough."

Starke stared at her. He stared at her a long time. Then he spat deliberately on the floor and said in a perfectly flat voice: "How soon can I get out of here?"

Rann laughed, a small casual chuckle. "Humans," she said, "are so damned queer. I don't think I'll ever understand them." She reached out and struck a gong that stood in a carved frame beside the couch. The soft deep shimmering note had a sad quality of nostalgia. Rann lay back against the silken cushions and sighed.

"Goodbye, Hugh Starke."

A pause. Then, regretfully:

"Goodbye—Conan!"

* * *

They had made good time along the rim of the Red Sea. One of Rann's galleys had taken them to the edge of the Southern Ocean and left them on a narrow shingle beach under the cliffs. From there they had climbed to the rimrock and gone on foot—Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan and four of Rann's arrogant shining men. They were supposed to be guide and escort. They were courteous, and they kept pace uncomplainingly though Starke marched as though the devil were pricking his heels. But they were armed, and Starke was not.

Sometimes, very faintly, Starke was aware of Rann's mind touching his with the velvet delicacy of a cat's paw. Sometimes he started out of his sleep with her image sharp in his mind, her lips touched with the mocking, secret smile. He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all.

But he liked even less the picture that stayed with him waking or sleeping. The picture he wouldn't look at. The picture of a tall women

with hair like loose fire on her neck, walking on light proud feet between her guards.

She'll be given water, Rann said. Not much, but enough.

Starke gripped the solid squareness of the box that held his million credits and set the miles reeling backward from under his sandals.

On the fifth night one of Rann's men spoke quietly across the campfire. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll reach the pass."

Starke got up and went away by himself, to the edge of the rimrock that fell sheer to the burning sea. He sat down. The red fog wrapped him like a mist of blood. He thought of the blood on Beudag's breast the first time he saw her. He thought of the blood on his knife, crusted and dried. He thought of the blood poured rank and smoking into the gutters of Crom Dhu. The fog has to be red, he thought. Of all the goddam colors in the universe, it has to be red. Red like Beudag's hair.

He held out his hands and looked at them, because he could still feel the silken warmth of that hair against his skin. There was nothing there now but the old white scars of another man's battles.

He set his fists against his temples and wished for his old body back again—the little stunted abortion that had clawed and scratched its way to survival through sheer force of mind. A most damnably tough mind, Rann had said. Yeah. It had had to be tough. But a mind was a mind. It didn't have emotions. It just figured out something coldly and then went ahead and never questioned, and it controlled the body utterly, because the body was only the worthless machinery that carried the mind around. Worthless. Yeah. The few women he'd ever looked at had told him that—and he hadn't even minded much. The old body hadn't given him any trouble.

He was having trouble now.

Starke got up and walked.

Tomorrow we reach the pass.

Tomorrow we go away from the Red Sea. There are nine planets and the whole damn Belt. There are women on all of them. All shapes, colors, and sizes, human, semi-human, and God knows what. With a million credits a guy could buy half of them, and with Conan's body he could buy the rest. What's a woman, anyway? Only a . . .

Water. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough.

Conan reached out and took hold of a spire of rock, and his muscles stood out like knotted ropes. "Oh God," he whispered, "what's the matter with me?"

"Love."

It wasn't God who answered. It was Rann. He saw her plainly in his mind, heard her voice like a silver bell.

"Conan was a man, Hugh Starke. He was whole, body and heart and brain. He knew how to love, and with him it wasn't women, but one woman—and her name was Beudag. I broke him, but it wasn't easy. I can't break you."

Starke stood for a long, long time. He did not move, except that he trembled. Then he took from his belt the box containing his million credits and threw it out as far as he could over the cliff edge. The red mist swallowed it up. He did not hear it strike the surface of the sea. Perhaps in that sea there was no splashing. He did not wait to find out.

He turned back along the rimrock, toward a place where he remembered a cleft, or chimney, leading down. And the four shining men who wore Rann's harness came silently out of the heavy luminous night and ringed him in. Their sword-points caught sharp red glimmers from the sky.

Starke had nothing on him but a kilt and sandals, and a cloak of tight-woven spider-silk that shed the rain.

"Rann sent you?" he said.

The men nodded.

"To kill me?"

Again they nodded. The blood drained out of Starke's face, leaving it grey and stony under the bronze. His hand went to his throat, over the gold fastening of his cloak.

The four men closed in like dancers.

Starke loosed his cloak and swung it like a whip across their faces. It confused them for a second, for a heartbeat—no more, but long enough. Starke left two of them to tangle their blades in the heavy fabric and leaped aside. A sharp edge slipped and turned along his ribs, and then he had reached in low and caught a man around the ankles, and used the thrashing body for a flail.

The body was strangely light, as though the bones in it were no more than rigid membrane, like a fish.

If he had stayed to fight, they would have finished him in seconds. They were fighting men, and quick. But Starke didn't stay. He gained his moment's grace and used it. They were hard on his heels, their points all but pricking his back as he ran, but he made it. Along the rimrock, out along a narrow tongue that jutted over the sea, and then outward, far outward, into red fog and dim fire that rolled around his plummeting body.

Oh God, he thought, if I guessed wrong and there is a beach . . .

The breath tore out of his lungs. His ears cracked, went dead. He held his arms out beyond his head, the thumbs locked together, his neck braced forward against the terrific upward push. He struck the surface of the sea.

There was no splash.

Dim coiling fire that drifted with infinite laziness around him, caressing his body with slow, tingling sparks. A feeling of lightness, as though his flesh had become one with the drifting fire. A sense of suffocation that had no basis in fact and gave way gradually to a strange exhilaration. There was no shock of impact, no crushing pressure. Merely a cushioning softness, like dropping into a bed of compressed air. Starke felt himself turning end over end, pinwheel fashion, and then that stopped, so that he sank quietly and without haste to the bottom.

Or rather, into the crystalline upper reaches of what seemed to be a forest.

He could see it spreading away along the downward-sloping floor of the ocean, into the vague red shadows of distance. Slender fantastic trunks upholding a maze of delicate shining branches, without leaves or fruit. They were like trees exquisitely molded from ice, transparent, holding the lambent shifting fire of the strange sea. Starke didn't think they were, or ever had been, alive. More like coral, he thought, or some vagary of mineral deposit. Beautiful, though. Like something you'd see in a dream. Beautiful, silent, and somehow deadly.

He couldn't explain that feeling of deadliness. Nothing moved in the red drifts between the trunks. It was nothing about the trees

themselves. It was just something he sensed.

He began to move among the upper branches, following the downward drop of the slope.

He found that he could swim quite easily. Or perhaps it was more like flying. The dense gas buoyed him up, almost balancing the weight of his body, so that it was easy to swoop along, catching a crystal branch and using it as a lever to throw himself forward to the next one.

He went deeper and deeper into the heart of the forbidden Southern Ocean. Nothing stirred. The fairy forest stretched limitless ahead. And Starke was afraid.

Rann came into his mind abruptly. Her face, clearly outlined, was full of mockery.

"I'm going to watch you die, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan. But before you die, I'll show you something. Look."

Her face dimmed, and in its place was Crom Dhu rising bleak into the red fog, the longships broken and sunk in the harbor, and Rann's fleet around it in a shining circle.

One ship in particular. The flagship. The vision in Starke's mind rushed toward it, narrowed down to the masthead platform. To the woman who stood there, naked, erect, her body lashed tight with thin cruel cords.

A woman with red hair blowing in the slow wind, and blue eyes that looked straight ahead like a falcon's, at Crom Dhu.

Beudag.

Rann's laughter ran across the picture and blurred it like a ripple of ice-cold water.

"You'd have done better," she said, "to take the clean steel when I offered it to you."

She was gone, and Starke's mind was as empty and cold as the mind of a corpse. He found that he was standing still, clinging to a branch, his face upturned as though by some blind instinct, his sight blurred.

He had never cried before in all his life, nor prayed.

There was no such thing as time, down there in the smoky shadows of the sea bottom. It might have been minutes or hours later than Hugh Starke discovered he was being hunted.

There were three of them, slipping easily among the shining branches. They were pale golden, almost phosphorescent, about the size of large hounds. Their eyes were huge, jewel-like in their slim sharp faces. They possessed four members that might have been legs and arms, retracted now against their narrowing bodies. Golden membranes spread wing-like from head to flank, and they moved like wings, balancing expertly the thrust of the flat, powerful tails.

They could have closed in on him easily, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry. Starke had sense enough not to wear himself out trying to get away. He kept on going, watching them. He discovered that the crystal branches could be broken, and he selected himself one with a sharp forked tip, shoving it swordwise under his belt. He didn't suppose it would do much good, but it made him feel better.

He wondered why the things didn't jump him and get it over with. They looked hungry enough, the way they were showing him their teeth. But they kept about the same distance away, in a sort of crescent formation, and every so often the ones on the outside would make a tentative dart at him, then fall back as he swerved away. It wasn't like being hunted so much as . . .

Starke's eyes narrowed. He began suddenly to feel much more afraid than he had before, and he wouldn't have believed that possible.

The things weren't hunting him at all. They were herding him.

There was nothing he could do about it. He tried stopping, and they swooped in and snapped at him, working expertly together so that while he was trying to stab one of them with his clumsy weapon, the others were worrying his heels like sheepdogs at a recalcitrant weather.

Starke, like the weather, bowed to the inevitable and went where he was driven. The golden hounds showed their teeth in animal laughter and sniffed hungrily at the thread of blood he left behind him in the slow red coils of fire.

After a while he heard the music.

It seemed to be some sort of a harp, with a strange quality of vibration in the notes. It wasn't like anything he'd ever heard before. Perhaps the gas of which the sea was composed was an extraordinarily good conductor of sound, with a property of diffusion that made the music seem to come from everywhere at once—softly at first, like

something touched upon in a dream, and then, as he drew closer to the source, swelling into a racing, rippling flood of melody that wrapped itself around his nerves with a demoniac shiver of ecstasy.

The golden hounds began to fret with excitement, spreading their shining wings, driving him impatiently faster through the crystal branches.

Starke could feel the vibration growing in him—the very fibers of his muscles shuddering in sympathy with the unearthly harp. He guessed there was a lot of the music he couldn't hear. Too high, too low for his ears to register. But he could feel it.

He began to go faster, not because of the hounds, but because he wanted to. The deep quivering in his flesh excited him. He began to breathe harder, partly because of increased exertion, and some chemical quality of the mixture he breathed made him slightly drunk.

The thrumming harp-song stroked and stung him, waking a deeper, darker music, and suddenly he saw Beudag clearly—half-veiled and mystic in the candlelight at Faolan's dun; smooth curving bronze, her hair loose fire about her throat. A great stab of agony went through him. He called her name, once, and the harp-sound swept it up and away, and then suddenly there was no music any more, and no forest, and nothing but cold embers in Starke's heart.

He could see everything quite clearly in the time it took him to float from the top of the last tree to the floor of the plain. He had no idea how long a time that was. It didn't matter. It was one of those moments when time doesn't have any meaning.

The rim of the forest fell away in a long curve that melted glistening into the spark-shot sea. From it the plain stretched out, a level glassy floor of black obsidian, the spew of some long-dead volcano. Or was it dead? It seemed to Starke that the light here was redder, more vital, as though he were close to the source from which it sprang.

As he looked farther over the plain, the light seemed to coalesce into a shimmering curtain that wavered like the heat veils that dance along the Mercurian Twilight Belt at high noon. For one brief instant he glimpsed a picture on the curtain—a city, black, shining, fantastically turreted, the gigantic reflection of a Titan's dream. Then it

was gone, and the immediate menace of the foreground took all of Starke's attention.

He saw the flock, herded by more of the golden hounds. And he saw the shepherd, with the harp held silent between his hands.

The flock moved slightly, phosphorescently.

One hundred, two hundred silent, limply floating warriors drifting down the red dimness. In pairs, singly, or in pallid clusters they came. The golden hounds winged silently, leisurely around them, channeling them in tides that sluiced toward the fantastic ebon city.

The shepherd stood, a crop of obsidian, turning his shark-pale face. His sharp, aquamarine eyes found Starke. His silvery hand leapt beckoning over harp-threads, striking them a blow. Reverberations ran out, seized Starke, shook him. He dropped his crystal dagger.

Hot screens of fire exploded in his eyes, bubbles whirled and danced in his eardrums. He lost all muscular control. His dark head fell forward against the thick blackness of hair on his chest; his golden eyes dissolved into weak, inane yellow, and his mouth loosened. He wanted to fight, but it was useless. This shepherd was one of the sea-people he had come to see, and one way or another he would see him.

Dark blood filled his aching eyes. He felt himself led, nudged, forced first this way, then that. A golden hound slipped by, gave him a pressure which rolled him over into a current of sea-blood. It ran down past where the shepherd stood with only a harp for a weapon.

Starke wondered dimly whether these other warriors in the flock, drifting, were dead or alive like himself. He had another surprise coming.

They were all Rann's men. Men of Falga. Silver men with burning green hair. Rann's men. One of them, a huge warrior colored like powdered salt, wandered aimlessly by on another tide, his green eyes dull. He looked dead.

What business had the sea-people with the dead warriors of Falga? Why the hounds and the shepherd's harp? Questions eddied like lifted silt in Starke's tired, hanging head. Eddied and settled flat.

Starke joined the pilgrimage.

The hounds were deft flickering of wings ushered him into the midst of the flock. Bodies brushed against him. Cold bodies. He

wanted to cry out. The cords of his neck constricted. In his mind the cry went forward:

"Are you alive, men of Falga?"

No answer; but the drift of scarred, pale bodies. The eyes in them knew nothing. They had forgotten Falga. They had forgotten Rann for whom they had lifted blade. Their tongues lolling in mouths asked nothing but sleep. They were getting it.

A hundred, two hundred strong they made a strange human river slipping toward the gigantic city wall. Starke-called-Conan and his bitter enemies going together. From the corners of his eyes, Starke saw the shepherd move. The shepherd was like Rann and her people who had years ago abandoned the sea to live on land. The shepherd seemed colder, more fish-like, though. There were small translucent webs between the thin fingers and spanning the long-toed feet. Thin, scar-like gills in the shadow of his tapered chin, lifted and sealed in the current, eating, taking sustenance from the blood-colored sea.

The harp spoke and the golden hounds obeyed. The harp spoke and the bodies twisted uneasily, as in a troubled sleep. A triple chord of it came straight at Starke. His fingers clenched.

"—and the dead shall walk again—"

Another ironic ripple of music.

"—and Rann's men will rise again, this time against her—"

Starke had time to feel a brief, bewildered shivering, before the current hurled him forward. Clamoring drunkenly, witlessly, all about him, the dead, muscleless warriors of Falga tried to crush past him, all of them at once . . .

Long ago some vast sea Titan had dreamed of avenues struck from black stone. Each stone the size of three men tall. There had been a dream of walls going up and up until they dissolved into scarlet mist. There had been another dream of sea-gardens in which fish hung like erotic flowers, on tendrils of sensitive film-tissue. Whole beds of fish clung to garden base, like colonies of flowers aglow with sunlight. And on occasion a black amoebic presence filtered by, playing the gardener, weeding out an amber flower here, an amythystine bloom there.

And the sea Titan had dreamed of endless balustrades and battlements, of windowless turrets where creatures swayed like

radium-skinned phantoms, carrying their green plumes of hair in their lifted palms, and looked down with curious, insolent eyes from on high. Women with shimmering bodies like some incredible coral harvested and kept high over these black stone streets, each in its archway.

Starke was alone. Falga's warriors had gone off along a dim subterranean vent, vanished. Now the faint beckoning of harp and the golden hounds behind him turned him down a passage that opened out into a large circular stone room, one end of which opened out into a hall. Around the ebon ceiling, slender schools of fish swam. It was their bright effulgence that gave light to the room. They had been there, breeding, eating, dying, a thousand years, giving light to the place, and they would be there, breeding and dying, a thousand more.

The harp faded until it was only a murmur.

Starke found his feet. Strength returned to him. He was able to see the man in the center of the room well. Too well.

The man hung in the fire tide. Chains of wrought bronze held his thin fleshless ankles so he couldn't escape. His body desired it. It floated up.

It had been dead a long time. It was gaseous with decomposition and it wanted to rise to the surface of the Red Sea. The chains prevented this. Its arms weaved like white scarves before a sunken white face. Black hair trembled on end.

He was one of Faolan's men. One of the Rovers. One of those who had gone down at Falga because of Conan.

His name was Geil.

Starke remembered.

The part of him that was Conan remembered the name.

The dead lips moved.

"Conan. What luck is this! Conan. I make you welcome."

The words were cruel, the lips around them loose and dead. It seemed to Starke an anger and embittered wrath lay deep in those hollow eyes. The lips twitched again.

"I went down at Falga for you and Rann, Conan. Remember?"

Part of Starke remembered and twisted in agony.

"We're all here, Conan. All of us. Clev and Mannt and Bron and Aesur. Remember Aesur, who could shape metal over his spine, prying it with his fingers? Aesur is here, big as a sea-monster, waiting in a niche, cold and loose as string. The sea-shepherds collected us. Collected us for a purpose of irony. Look!"

The boneless fingers hung out, as in a wind, pointing.

Starke turned slowly, and his heart pounded an uneven, shattering drum beat. His jaw clinched and his eyes blurred. That part of him that was Conan cried out. Conan was so much of him and he so much of Conan it was impossible for a cleavage. They'd grown together like pearl material around sand-specule, layer on layer. Starke cried out.

In the hall which this circular room overlooked, stood a thousand men.

In lines of fifty across, shoulder to shoulder, the men of Crom Dhu stared unseeingly up at Starke. Here and there a face became shockingly familiar. Old memory cried their names.

"Bron! Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

The collected decomposition of their bodily fluids raised them, drifted them above the flaggings. Each of them was chained, like Geil.

Geil whispered. "We have made a union with the men of Falga!"

Starke pulled back.

"Falga!"

"In death, all men are equals." He took his time with it. He was in no hurry. Dead bodies under-sea are never in a hurry. They sort of bump and drift and bide their time. "The dead serve those who give them a semblance of life. Tomorrow we march against Crom Dhu."

"You're crazy! Crom Dhu is your home! It's the place of Beudag and Faolan—"

"And—" interrupted the hanging corpse, quietly, "Conan? Eh?" He laughed. A crystal dribble of bubbles ran up from the slack mouth. "Especially Conan. Conan who sank us at Falga . . ."

Starke moved swiftly. Nobody stopped him. He had the corpse's short blade in an instant. Geil's chest made a cold, silent sheath for it. The blade went like a fork through butter.

Coldly, without noticing this, Geil's voice spoke out:

"Stab me, cut me. You can't kill me any deader. Make sections of me. Play butcher. A flank, a hand, a heart! And while you're at it, I'll tell you the plan."

Snarling, Starke seized the blade out again. With blind violence he gave sharp blow after blow at the body, cursing bitterly, and the body took each blow, rocking in the red tide a little, and said with a matter-of-fact-tone:

"We'll march out of the sea to Crom Dhu's gates. Romna and the others, looking down, recognizing us, will have the gates thrown wide to welcome us." The head tilted lazily, the lips peeled wide and folded down languidly over the words. "Think of the elation, Conan! The moment when Bron and Mannt and Aesur and I and yourself, yes, even yourself, Conan, return to Crom Dhu!"

Starke saw it, vividly. Saw it like a tapestry woven for him. He stood back, gasping for breath, his nostrils flaring, seeing what his blade had done to Geil's body, and seeing the great stone gates of Crom Dhu crashing open. The deliberation. The happiness, the elation to Faolan and Romna to see old friends returned. Old Rovers, long thought dead. Alive again, come to help! It made a picture!

With great deliberation, Starke struck flat across before him.

Geil's head, severed from its lazy body, began, with infinite tiredness, to float toward the ceiling. As it traveled upward, now facing, now bobbling the back of its skull toward Starke, it finished its nightmare speaking:

"And then, once inside the gates, what then, Conan? Can you guess? Can you guess what we'll do, Conan?"

Starke stared at nothingness, the sword trembling in his fist. From far away he heard Geil's voice:

"—we will kill Faolan in his hall. He will die with surprised lips. Romna's harp will lie in his disemboweled stomach. His heart with its last pulsing will sound the strings. And as for Beudag—"

Starke tried to push the thoughts away, raging and helpless. Geil's body was no longer anything to look at. He had done all he could to it. Starke's face was bleached white and scraped down to the insane bone of it, "You'd kill your own people!"

Geil's separated head lingered at the ceiling, light-fish illuminating its ghastly features. "Our people? But we have no people! We're another race now. The dead. We do the biddings of the sea-shepherds."

Starke looked out into the hall, then he looked at circular wall.

"Okay," he said, without tone in his voice. "Come out. Wherever you're hiding and using this voice-throwing act. Come on out and talk straight."

In answer, an entire section of ebon stones fell back on silent hinge work. Starke saw a long slender black marble table. Six people sat behind it in carven midnight thrones.

They were all men. Naked except for film-like garments about their loins. They looked at Starke with no particular hatred or curiosity. One of them cradled a harp. It was the shepherd who'd drawn Starke through the gate. Amusedly, his webbed fingers lay on the strings, now and then bringing out a clear sound from one of the two hundred strands.

The shepherd stopped Starke's rush forward with a cry of that harp!

The blade in his hand was red hot. He dropped it.

The shepherd put a head on the story. "And then? And then we will march Rann's dead warriors all the way to Falga. There, Rann's people, seeing the warriors, will be overjoyed, hysterical to find their friends and relatives returned. They, too, will fling wide Falga's defenses. And death will walk in, disguised as resurrection."

Starke nodded, slowly, wiping his hand across his cheek. "Back on Earth we call that psychology. Good psychology. But will it fool Rann?"

"Rann will be with her ships at Crom Dhu. While she's gone, the innocent population will let in their lost warriors gladly." The shepherd had amused green eyes. He looked like a youth of some seventeen years. Deceptively young. If Starke guessed right, the youth was nearer to two centuries old. That's how you lived and looked when you were under the Red Sea. Something about the emanations of it kept part of you young.

Starke lidded his yellow hawk's eyes thoughtfully. "You've got all aces. You'll win. But what's Crom Dhu to you? Why not just Rann?"

She's one of you; you hate her more than you do the Rovers. Her ancestors came up on land; you never got over hating them for that—"

The shepherd shrugged. "Toward Crom Dhu we have little actual hatred. Except that they are by nature land-men, even if they do rove by boat, and pillagers. One day they might try their luck on the sunken devices of this city."

Starke put a hand out. "We're fighting Rann, too. Don't forget, we're on your side!"

"Whereas we are on no one's," retorted the green-haired youth, "Except our own. Welcome to the army which will attack Crom Dhu."

"Me! By the gods, over my dead body!"

"That," said the youth, amusedly, "is what we intend. We've worked many years, you see, to perfect the plan. We're not much good out on land. We needed bodies that could do the work for us. So, every time Faolan lost a ship or Rann lost a ship, we were there, with our golden hounds, waiting. Collecting. Saving. Waiting until we had enough of each side's warriors. They'll do the fighting for us. Oh, not for long, of course. The Source energy will give them a semblance of life, a momentary electrical ability to walk and combat, but once out of water they'll last only half an hour. But that should be time enough once the gates of Crom Dhu and Falga are open."

Starke said, "Rann will find some way around you. Get her first. Attack Crom Dhu the following day."

The youth deliberated. "You're stalling. But there's sense in it. Rann is most important. We'll get Falga first, then. You'll have a bit of time in which to raise false hopes."

Starke began to get sick again. The room swam.

Very quietly, very easily, Rann came into his mind again. He felt her glide in like the merest touch of a sea fern weaving in a tide pool.

He closed his mind down, but not before she snatched at a shred of thought. Her aquamarine eyes reflected desire and inquiry.

"Hugh Starke, you're with the sea people?"

Her voice was soft. He shook his head.

"Tell me, Hugh Starke. How are you plotting against Falga?"

He said nothing. He thought nothing. He shut his eyes.

Her fingernails glittered, raking at his mind. "Tell me!"

His thoughts rolled tightly into a metal sphere which nothing could dent.

Rann laughed unpleasantly and leaned forward until she filled every dark horizon of his skull with her shimmering body. "All right. I gave you Conan's body. Now I'll take it away."

She struck him a combined blow of her eyes, her writhing lips, her bone-sharp teeth. "Go back to your old body, go back to your old body, Hugh Starke," she hissed. "Go back! Leave Conan to his idiocy. Go back to your old body!"

Fear had him. He fell down upon his face, quivering and jerking. You could fight a man with a sword. But how could you fight this thing in your brain? He began to suck sobbing breaths through his lips. He was screaming. He could not hear himself. Her voice rushed in from the dim outer red universe, destroying him.

"Hugh Starke! Go back to your old body!"

His old body was—dead!

And she was sending him back into it.

Part of him shot endwise through red fog.

He lay on a mountain plateau overlooking the harbor of Falga.

Red fog coiled and snaked around him. Flame birds dived eerily down at his staring, blind eyes.

His old body held him.

Putrefaction stuffed his nostrils. The flesh sagged and slipped greasily on his loosened structure. He felt small again and ugly. Flame birds nibbled, picking, choosing between his ribs. Pain gorged him. Cold, blackness, nothingness filled him. Back in his old body. Forever.

He didn't want that.

The plateau, the red fog vanished. The flame birds, too.

He lay once more on the floor of the sea shepherds, struggling.

"That was just a start," Rann told him. "Next time, I'll leave you up there on the plateau in that body. Now, will you tell the plans of the sea people? And go on living in Conan? He's yours, if you tell." She smirked. "You don't want to be dead."

Starke tried to reason it out. Any way he turned was the wrong way. He grunted out a breath. "If I tell, you'll still kill Beudag."

"Her life in exchange for what you know, Hugh Starke."

Her answer was too swift. It had the sound of treachery. Starke did not believe. He would die. That would solve it. Then, at least, Rann would die when the sea people carried out their strategy. That much revenge, at least, damn it.

Then he got the idea.

He coughed out a laugh, raised his weak head to look at the startled sea shepherd. His little dialogue with Rann had taken about ten seconds, actually, but it had seemed a century. The sea shepherd stepped forward.

Starke tried to get to his feet. "Got—got a proposition for you. You with the harp. Rann's inside me. Now. Unless you guarantee Crom Dhu and Beudag's safety, I'll tell her some things she might want to be in on!"

The sea shepherd drew a knife.

Starke shook his head, coldly. "Put it away. Even if you get me I'll give the whole damned strategy to Rann."

The shepherd dropped his hand. He was no fool.

Rann tore at Starke's brain. "Tell me! Tell me their plan!"

He felt like a guy in a revolving door. Starke got the sea men in focus. He saw that they were afraid now, doubtful and nervous. "I'll be dead in a minute," said Starke. "Promise me the safety of Crom Dhu and I'll die without telling Rann a thing."

The sea shepherd hesitated, then raised his palm upward. "I promise," he said. "Crom Dhu will go untouched."

Starke sighed. He let his head fall forward until it hit the floor. Then he rolled over, put his hands over his eyes. "It's a deal. Go give Rann hell for me, will you, boys? Give her hell!"

As he drifted into mind darkness, Rann waited for him. Feebly, he told her, "Okay, duchess. You'd kill me even if I'd told you the idea. I'm ready. Try your god-awfullest to shove me back into that stinking body of mine. I'll fight you all the way there!"

Rann screamed. It was a pretty frustrated scream. Then the pains began. She did a lot of work on his mind in the next minute.

That part of him that was Conan held on like a clam holding to its precious contents.

The odor of putrid flesh returned. The blood mist returned. The flame birds fell down at him in spirals of sparks and blistering smoke, to winnow his naked ribs.

Starke spoke one last word before the blackness took him.

"Beudag."

* * *

He never expected to awaken again.

He awoke just the same.

There was red sea all around him. He lay on a kind of stone bed, and the young sea shepherd sat beside him, looking down at him, smiling delicately.

Starke did not dare move for a while. He was afraid his head might fall off and whirl away like a big fish, using its ears as propellers. "Lord," he muttered, barely turning his head.

The sea creature stirred. "You won. You fought Rann, and won."

Starke groaned. "I feel like something passed through a wild-cat's intestines. She's gone. Rann's gone." He laughed. "That makes me sad. Somebody cheer me up. Rann's gone." He felt of his big, flat-muscle body. "She was bluffing. Trying to decide to drive me batty. She knew she couldn't really tuck me back into that carcass, but she didn't want me to know. It was like a baby's nightmare before it's born. Or maybe you haven't got a memory like me." He rolled over, stretching. "She won't ever get in my head again. I've locked the gate and swallowed the key." His eyes dilated. "What's your name?"

"Linnl," said the man with the harp. "You didn't tell Rann our strategy?"

"What do you think?"

Linnl smiled sincerely. "I think I like you, man of Crom Dhu. I think I like your hatred for Rann. I think I like the way you handled the entire matter, wanted to kill Rann and save Crom Dhu, and being so willing to die to accomplish either."

"That's a lot of thinking. Yeah, and what about that promise you made?"

"It will be kept."

Starke gave him a hand. "Linnl, you're okay. If I ever get back to Earth, so help me, I'll never bait a hook again and drop it in the sea." It was lost to Linnl. Starke forgot it, and went on, laughing. There was an edge of hysteria to it. Relief. You got booted around for days, people milled in and out of your mind like it was a bargain basement counter, pawing over the treads and convolutions, yelling and fighting; the woman you loved was starved on a ship masthead, and as a climax a lady with green eyes tried to make you a filling for an accident-mangled body. And now you had an ally.

And you couldn't believe it.

He laughed in little starts and stops, his eyes shut.

"Will you let me take care of Rann when the time comes?"

His fingers groped hungrily upward, closed on an imaginary figure of her, pressed, tightened, choked.

Linnl said, "She's yours. I'd like the pleasure, but you have as much if not more of a revenge to take. Come along. We start now. You've been asleep for one entire period."

Starke let himself down gingerly. He didn't want to break a leg off. He felt if someone touched him he might disintegrate.

He managed to let the tide handle him, do all the work. He swam carefully after Linnl down three passageways where an occasional silver inhabitant of the city slid by.

Drifting below them in a vast square hall, each gravitating but imprisoned by leg-shackles, the warriors of Falga looked up with pale cold eyes at Starke and Linnl. Occasional discharges of light-fish from interstices in the walls passed luminous, fleeting glows over the warriors. The light-fish flirted briefly in a long shining rope that tied knots around the dead faces and as quickly untied them. Then the light-fish pulsed away and the red color of the sea took over.

Bathed in wine, thought Starke, without humor. He leaned forward.

"Men of Falga!"

Linnl plucked a series of harp-threads.

"Aye." A deep suggestion of sound issued from a thousand dead lips.

"We go to sack Rann's citadel!"

"Rann!" came the muffled thunder of voices.

At the sound of another tune, the golden hounds appeared. They touched the chains. The men of Falga, released, danced through the red sea substance.

Siphoned into a valve mouth, they were drawn out into a great volcanic courtyard. Starke went close after. He stared down into a black ravine, at the bottom of which was a blazing caldera.

This was the Source Life of the Red Sea. Here it had begun a millennium ago. Here the savage cyclones of sparks and fire energy belched up, shaking titanic black garden walls, causing currents and whirlpools that threatened to suck you forward and shoot you violently up to the surface, in cannulas of force, thrust, in capillaries of ignited mist, in chutes of color that threatened to cremate but only exhilarated you, gave you a seething rebirth!

He braced his legs and fought the suction. An unbelievable sinew of fire sprang up from out the ravine, crackling and roaring.

The men of Falga did not fight the attraction.

They moved forward in their silence and hung over the incandescence.

The vitality of the Source grew upward in them. It seemed to touch their sandaled toes first, and then by a process of shining osmosis, climb up the limbs, into the loins, into the vitals, delineating their strong bone structure as mercury delineates the glass thermometer with a rise of temperature. The bones flickered like carved polished ivory through the momentarily film-like flesh. The ribs of a thousand men expanded like silvered spider legs, clenched, then expanded again. Their spines straightened, their shoulders flattened back. Their eyes, the last to take the fire, now were ignited and glowed like candles in refurbished sepulchers. The chins snapped up, the entire outer skins of their bodies broke into silver brilliance.

Swimming through the storm of energy like nightmare figments, entering cold, they reached the far side of the ravine resembling smelted metal from blast furnaces. When they brushed into one another, purple sparks sizzled, jumped from head to head, from hand to hand.

Linnl touched Starke's arm. "You're next."

"No thank you."

"Afraid?" laughed the harp-shepherd. "You're tired. It will give you new life. You're next."

Starke hesitated only a moment. Then he let the tide drift him rapidly out. He was afraid. Damned afraid. A belch of fire caught him as he arrived in the core of the ravine. He was wrapped in layers of ecstasy. Beudag pressed against him. It was her consuming hair that netted him and branded him. It was her warmth that crept up his body into his chest and into his head. Somebody yelled somewhere in animal delight and unbearable passion. Somebody danced and threw out his hands and crushed that solar warmth deeper into his huge body. Somebody felt all tiredness, oldness flumed away, a whole new feeling of warmth and strength inserted.

That somebody was Starke.

Waiting on the other side of the ravine were a thousand men of Falga. What sounded like a thousand harps began playing now, and as Starke reached the other side, the harps began marching, and the warriors marched with them. They were still dead, but you would never know it. There were no minds inside those bodies. The bodies were being activated from outside. But you would never know it.

They left the city behind. In embering ranks, the soldier-fighters were led by golden hounds and distant harps to a place where a huge intra-coastal tide swept by.

They got on the tide for a free ride. Linnl beside him, using his harp, Starke felt himself sucked down through a deep where strange monsters sprawled. They looked at Starke with hungry eyes. But the harp wall swept them back.

Starke glanced about at the men. They don't know what they're doing, he thought. Going home to kill their parents and their children, to set the flame to Falga, and they don't know it. Their alive-but-dead faces tilted up, always upward, as though visions of Rann's citadel were there.

Rann. Starke let the wrath simmer in him. He let it cool. Then it was cold. Rann hadn't bothered him now for hours. Was there a chance

she'd read his thought in the midst of that fighting nightmare? Did she know this plan for Falga? Was that an explanation for her silence now?

He sent his mind ahead, subtly. Rann Rann. The only answer was the move of silver bodies through the fiery deeps.

Just before dawn they broke surface of the sea.

Falga drowsed in the red-smeared fog silence. Its slave streets were empty and dew-covered. High up, the first light was bathing Rann's gardens and setting her citadel aglow.

Linnl lay in the shallows beside Starke. They both were smiling half-cruel smiles. They had waited long for this.

Linnl nodded. "This is the day of the carnival. Fruit, wine and love will be offered the returned soldiers of Rann. In the streets there'll be dancing."

Far over to the right lay a rise of mountain. At its blunt peak—Starke stared at it intently—rested a body of a little, scrawny Earthman, with flame-birds clustered on it. He'd climb that mountain later. When it was over and there was time.

"What are you searching for?" asked Linnl.

Starke's voice was distant. "Someone I used to know."

Filing out on the stone quays, their rustling sandals eroded by time, the men stood clean and bright. Starke paced, a caged animal, at their center, so his dark body would pass unnoticed.

They were seen.

The cliff guard looked down over the dirty slave dwellings, from their arrow galleries, and set up a cry. Hands waved, pointed frosty white in the dawn. More guards loped down the ramps and galleries, meeting, joining others and coming on.

Linnl, in the sea by the quay, suggested a theme on the harp. The other harps took it up. The shuddering music lifted from the water and with a gentle firmness, set the dead feet marching down the quays, upward through the narrow, stifling alleys of the slaves, to meet the guard.

Slave people peered out at them tiredly from their choked quarters. The passing of warriors was old to them, of no significance.

These warriors carried no weapons. Starke didn't like that part of it. A length of chain even, he wanted. But this emptiness of the hands.

His teeth ached from too long a time of clenching his jaws tight. The muscles of his arms were feverish and nervous.

At the edge of the slave community, at the cliff base, the guard confronted them. Running down off the galleries, swords naked, they ran to intercept what they took to be an enemy.

The guards stopped in blank confusion.

A little laugh escaped Starke's lips. It was a dream. With fog over, under and in between its parts. It wasn't real to the guard, who couldn't believe it. It wasn't real to these dead men either, who were walking around. He felt alone. He was the only live one. He didn't like walking with dead men.

The captain of the guard came down warily, his green eyes suspicious. The suspicion faded. His face fell apart. He had lain on his fur pelts for months thinking of his son who had died to defend Falga.

Now his son stood before him. Alive.

The captain forgot he was captain. He forgot everything. His sandals scraped over stones. You could hear the air go out of his lungs and come back in a numbed prayer.

"My son! In Rann's name. They said you were slain by Faolan's men one hundred darknesses ago. My son!"

A harp tinkled somewhere.

The son stepped forward, smiling.

They embraced. The son said nothing. He couldn't speak.

This was the signal for the others. The whole guard, shocked and surprised, put away their swords and sought out old friends, brothers, fathers, uncles, sons!

They moved up the galleries, the guard and the returned warriors, Starke in their midst. Threading up the cliff, through passage after passage, all talking at once. Or so it seemed. The guards did the talking. None of the dead warriors replied. They only seemed to. Starke heard the music strong and clear everywhere.

They reached the green gardens atop the cliff. By this time the entire city was awake. Women came running, bare-breasted and sobbing, and throwing themselves forward into the ranks of their lovers. Flowers showered over them.

"So this is war," muttered Starke, uneasily.

They stopped in the center of the great gardens. The crowd milled happily, not yet aware of the strange silence from their men. They were too happy to notice.

"Now," cried Starke to himself. "Now's the time. Now!"

As if in answer, a wild skirling of harps out of the sky.

The crowd stopped laughing only when the returned warriors of Falga swept forward, their hands lifted and groping before them . . .

The crying in the streets was like a far siren wailing. Metal made a harsh clangor that was sheathed in silence at the same moment metal found flesh to lie in. A vicious pantomime was concluded in the green moist gardens.

Starke watched from Rann's empty citadel. Fog plumes strolled by the archways and a thick rain fell. It came like a blood squall and washed the garden below until you could not tell rain from blood.

The returned warriors had gotten their swords by now. First they killed those nearest them in the celebration. Then they took the weapons from the victims. It was very simple and very unpleasant.

The slaves had joined battle now. Swarming up from the slave town, plucking up fallen daggers and short swords, they circled the gardens, happening upon the arrogant shining warriors of Rann who had so far escaped the quiet, deadly killing of the alive-but-dead men.

Dead father killed startled, alive son. Dead brother garroted unbelieving brother. Carnival indeed in Falga.

An old man waited alone. Starke saw him. The old man had a weapon, but refused to use it. A young warrior of Falga, harped on by Linnl's harp, walked quietly up to the old man. The old man cried out. His mouth formed words. "Son! What is this?" He flung down his blade and made to plead with his boy.

The son stabbed him with silent efficiency, and without a glance at the body, walked onward to find another.

Starke turned away, sick and cold.

A thousand such scenes were being finished.

He set fire to the black spider-silk tapestries. They whispered and talked with flame. The stone echoed his feet as he searched room after room. Rann had gone, probably last night. That meant that Crom Dhu was on the verge of falling. Was Faolan dead? Had the people of Crom

Dhu, seeing Beudag's suffering, given in? Falga's harbor was completely devoid of ships, except for small fishing skiffs.

The fog waited him when he returned to the garden. Rain found his face.

The citadel of Rann was fire-encrusted and smoke-shrouded as he looked up at it.

A silence lay in the garden. The fight was over.

The men of Falga, still shining with Source-Life, hung their blades from uncomprehending fingers, the light beginning to leave their green eyes. Their skin looked dirty and dull.

Starke wasted no time getting down the galleries, through the slave quarter, and to the quays again.

Linnl awaited him, gently petting the obedient harp.

"It's over. The slaves will own what's left. They'll be our allies, since we've freed them."

Starke didn't hear. He was squinting off over the Red Sea.

Linnl understood. He plucked two tones from the harp, which pronounced the two words uppermost in Starke's thought.

"Crom Dhu."

"If we're not too late." Starke leaned forward. "If Faolan lives. If Beudag still stands at the masthead."

Like a blind man he walked straight ahead, until he fell into the sea.

* * *

It was not quite a million miles to Crom Dhu. It only seemed that far.

A sweep of tide picked them up just off shore from Falga and siphoned them rapidly, through deeps along coastal latitudes, through crystal forests. He cursed every mile of the way.

He cursed the time it took to pause at the Titan's city to gather fresh men. To gather Clev and Mannt and Aesur and Bron. Impatiently, Starke watched the whole drama of the Source-Fire and the bodies again. This time it was the bodies of Crom Dhu men, hung like beasts

on slow-turned spits, their limbs and vitals soaking through and through, their skins taking bronze color, their eyes holding flint-sparks. And then the harps wove a garment around each, and the garment moved the men instead of the men the garment.

In the tidal basilica now, Starke twisted. Coursing behind him were the new bodies of Clev and Aesur! The current elevated them, poked them through obsidian needle-eyes like spider-silk threads.

There was good irony in this. Crom Dhu's men, fallen at Falga under Conan's treachery, returned now under Conan to exonerate that treachery.

Suddenly they were in Crom Dhu's outer basin. Shadows swept over them. The long dark falling shadows of Falga's longboats lying in that harbor. Shadows like black culling-nets let down. The school of men cleaved the shadow nets. The tide ceased here, eddied and distilled them.

Starke glared up at the immense silver bottom of a Falgian ship. He felt his face stiffen and his throat tighten. Then, flexing knees, he rammed upward; night air broke dark red around his head.

The harbor held flare torches on the rims of long ships. On the neck of land that led from Crom Dhu to the mainland the continuing battle sounded. Faint cries and clashing made their way through the fog veils. They sounded like echoes of past dreams.

Linnl let Starke have the leash. Starke felt something pressed into his fist. A coil of slender green woven reeds, a rope with hooked weights on the end of it. He knew how to use it without asking. But he wished for a knife now, even though he realized carrying a knife in the sea was all but impossible if you wanted to move fast.

He saw the sleek naked figurehead of Rann's best ship a hundred yards away, a floating silhouette, and its torches hanging fire like Beudag's hair.

He swam toward it, breathing quietly. When at last the silvered figurehead with the mocking green eyes and the flag of shoal-shallow hair hung over him, he felt the cool white ship metal kiss his fingers.

The smell of torch-smoke lingered. A rise of faint shouts from the land told of another rush upon the Gate. Behind him—a ripple. Then—a thousand ripples.

The resurrected men of Crom Dhu rose in dents and stirrings of sparkling wine. They stared at Crom Dhu and maybe they knew what it was and maybe they didn't. For one moment, Starke felt apprehension. Suppose Linnl was playing a game. Suppose, once these men had won the battle, they went on into Crom Dhu to rupture Romna's harp and make Faolan the blinder? He shook the thought away. That would have to be handled in time. On either side of him Clev and Mannt appeared. They looked at Crom Dhu, their lips shut. Maybe they saw Faolan's eyrie and heard a harp that was more than these harps that sang them to blade and plunder—Romna's instrument telling bard-tales of the rovers and the coastal wars and the old, living days. Their eyes looked and looked at Crom Dhu, but saw nothing.

The sea shepherds appeared now, the followers of Linnl, each with his harp; and the harp music began, high. So high you couldn't hear it. It wove a tension on the air.

Silently, with a grim certainty, the dead-but-not-dead gathered in a bronze circle about Rann's ship. The very silence of their encirclement made your skin crawl and sweat break cold on your cheeks.

A dozen ropes went raveling, looping over the ship side. They caught, held, grapnelled, hooked.

Starke had thrown his, felt it bite and hold. Now he scrambled swiftly, cursing, up its length, kicking and slipping at the silver hull.

He reached the top.

Beudag was there.

Half over the low rail he hesitated, just looking at her.

Torchlight limned her, shadowed her. She was still erect; her head was tired and her eyes closed, her face thinned and less brown, but she was still alive. She was coming out of a deep stupor now, at the whistle of ropes and the grate of metal hooks on the deck.

She saw Starke and her lips parted. She did not look away from him. His breath came out of him, choking.

It almost cost him his life, his standing there, looking at her.

A guard, with flesh like new snow, shafted his bow from the turret and let it loose. A chain lay on deck. Thankfully, Starke took it.

Clev came over the rail beside Starke. His chest took the arrow. The shaft burst half through and stopped, held. Clev kept going after the

man who had shot it. He caught up with him.

Beudag cried out. "Behind you, Conan!"

Conan! In her excitement, she gave the old name.

Conan he was. Whirling, he confronted a wiry little fellow, chained him brutally across the face, seized the man's falling sword, used it on him. Then he walked in, got the man's jaw, unbalanced him over into the sea.

The ship was awake now. Most of the men had been down below, resting from the battles. Now they came pouring up, in a silver spate. Their yelling was in strange contrast to the calm silence of Crom Dhu's men. Starke found himself busy.

Conan had been a healthy animal, with great recuperative powers. Now his muscles responded to every trick asked of them. Starke leaped cleanly across the deck, watching for Rann, but she was nowhere to be seen. He engaged two blades, dispatched one of them. More ropes raveled high and snaked him. Every ship in the harbor was exploding with violence. More men swarmed over the rail behind Starke, silently.

Above the shouting, Beudag's voice came, at sight of the fighting men. "Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

Starke was a god; anything he wanted he could have. A man's head? He could have it. It meant acting the guillotine with knife and wrist and lunged body. Like—this! His eyes were smoking amber and there were deep lines of grim pleasure tugging at his lips. An enemy cannot fight without hands. One man, facing Starke, suddenly displayed violent stumps before his face, not believing them.

Are you watching, Faolan? cried Starke inside himself, delivering blows. Look here, Faolan! God, no, you're blind. Listen then! Hear the ring of steel on steel. Does the smell of hot blood and hot bodies reach you? Oh, if you could see this tonight, Faolan. Falga would be forgotten. This is Conan, out of idiocy, with a guy named Starke wearing him and telling him where to go!

It was not safe on deck. Starke hadn't particularly noticed before, but the warriors of Crom Dhu didn't care whom they attacked now. They were beginning to do surgery to one another. They excised one another's shoulders, severed limbs in blind instantaneous obedience. This was no place for Beudag and himself.

He cut her free of the masthead, drew her quickly to the rail.

Beudag was laughing. She could do nothing but laugh. Her eyes were shocked. She saw dead men alive again, lashing out with weapons; she had been starved and made to stand night and day, and now she could only laugh.

Starke shook her.

She did not stop laughing.

"Beudag! You're all right. You're free."

She stared at nothing. "I'll—I'll be all right in a minute."

He had to ward off a blow from one of his own men. He parried the thrust, then got in and pushed the man off the deck, over into the sea. That was the only thing to do. You couldn't kill them.

Beudag stared down at the tumbling body.

"Where's Rann?" Starke's yellow eyes narrowed, searching.

"She was here." Beudag trembled.

Rann looked out of her eyes. Out of the tired numbness of Beudag, an echo of Rann. Rann was nearby, and this was her doing.

Instinctively, Starke raised his eyes.

Rann appeared at the masthead, like a flurry of snow. Her green-tipped breasts were rising and falling with emotion. Pure hatred lay in her eyes. Starke licked his lips and readied his sword.

Rann snapped a glance at Beudag. Stooping, as in a dream, Beudag picked up a dagger and held it to her own breast.

Starke froze.

Rann nodded, with satisfaction. "Well, Starke? How will it be? Will you come at me and have Beudag die? Or will you let me go free?"

Starke's palms felt sweaty and greasy. "There's no place for you to go. Falga's taken. I can't guarantee your freedom. If you want to go over the side, into the sea, that's your chance. You might make shore and your own men."

"Swimming? With the sea-beasts waiting?" She accented the beasts heavily. She was one of the sea-people. They, Linnl and his men, were sea-beasts. "No, Hugh Starke. I'll take a skiff. Put Beudag at the rail where I can watch her all the way. Guarantee my passage to shore and my own men there, and Beudag lives."

Starke waved his sword. "Get going."

He didn't want to let her go. He had other plans, good plans for her. He shouted the deal down at Linnl. Linnl nodded back, with much reluctance.

Rann, in a small silver skiff, headed toward land. She handled the boat and looked back at Beudag all the while. She passed through the sea-beasts and touched the shore. She lifted her hand and brought it smashing down.

Whirling, Starke swung his fist against Beudag's jaw. Her hand was already striking the blade into her breast. Her head flopped back. His fist carried through. She fell. The blade clattered. He kicked it overboard. Then he lifted Beudag. She was warm and good to hold. The blade had only pricked her breast. A small rivulet of blood ran.

On the shore, Rann vanished upward on the rocks, hurrying to find her men.

In the harbor the harp music paused. The ships were taken. Their crews lay filling the decks. Crom Dhu's men stopped fighting as quickly as they'd started. Some of the bright shining had dulled from the bronze of their arms and bare torsos. The ships began to sink.

Linnl swam below, looking up at Starke. Starke looked back at him and nodded at the beach. "Swell. Now, let's go get that she-devil," he said.

* * *

Faolan waited on his great stone balcony, overlooking Crom Dhu. Behind him the fires blazed high and their eating sound of flame on wood filled the pillared gloom with sound and furious light.

Faolan leaned against the rim, his chest swathed in bandage and healing ointment, his blind eyes flickering, looking down again and again with a fixed intensity, his head tilted to listen.

Romna stood beside him, filled and refilled the cup that Faolan emptied into his thirsty mouth, and told him what happened. Told of the men pouring out of the sea, and Rann appearing on the rocky shore. Sometimes Faolan leaned to one side, weakly, toward Romna's

words. Sometimes he twisted to hear the thing itself, the thing that happened down beyond the Gate of besieged Crom Dhu.

Romna's harp lay untouched. He didn't play it. He didn't need to. From below, a great echoing of harps, more liquid than his, like a waterfall drenched the city, making the fog sob down red tears.

"Are those harps?" cried Faolan.

"Yes, harps!"

"What was that?" Faolan listened, breathing harshly, clutching for support.

"A skirmish," said Romna.

"Who won?"

"We won."

"And that?" Faolan's blind eyes tried to see until they watered.

"The enemy falling back from the Gate!"

"And that sound, and that sound?" Faolan went on and on, feverishly, turning this way and that, the lines of his face agonized and attentive to each eddy and current and change of tide. The rhythm of swords through fog and body was a complicated music whose themes he must recognize. "Another fell! I heard him cry. And another of Rann's men!"

"Yes," said Romna.

"But why do our warriors fight so quietly? I've heard nothing from their lips. So quiet."

Romna scowled. "Quiet. Yes—quiet."

"And where did they come from? All our men are in the city?"

"Aye." Romna shifted. He hesitated, squinting. He rubbed his bulldog jaw. "Except those that died at—Falga."

Faolan stood there a moment. Then he rapped his empty cup.

"More wine, bard. More wine."

He turned to the battle again.

"Oh, gods, if I could see it, if I could only see it!"

Below, a ringing crash. A silence. A shouting, a pouring of noise.

"The Gate!" Faolan was stricken with fear. "We've lost! My sword!"

"Stay, Faolan!" Romna laughed. Then he sighed. It was a sigh that did not believe. "In the name of ten thousand mighty gods. Would that I were blind now, or could see better."

Faolan's hand caught, held him. "What is it? Tell!"

"Clev! And Tlan! And Conan! And Bron! And Mannt! Standing in the gate, like wine visions! Swords in their hands!"

Faolan's hand relaxed, then tightened. "Speak their names again, and speak them slowly. And tell the truth." His skin shivered like that of a nervous animal. "You said—Clev? Mannt? Bron?"

"And Tlan! And Conan! Back from Falga. They've opened the Gate and the battle's won. It's over, Faolan. Crom Dhu will sleep tonight."

Faolan let him go. A sob broke from his lips. "I will get drunk. Drunker than ever in my life. Gloriously drunk. Gods, but if I could have seen it. Been in it. Tell me again of it, Romna . . ."

Faolan sat in the great hall, on his carved high-seat, waiting.

The pad of sandals on stone outside, the jangle of chains.

A door flung wide, red fog sluiced in, and in the sluice, people walking. Faolan started up. "Clev? Mannt? Aesur?"

Starke came forward into the firelight. He pressed his right hand to the open mouth of wound on his thigh. "No, Faolan. Myself and two others."

"Beudag?"

"Yes." And Beudag came wearily to him.

Faolan stared. "Who's the other? It walks light. It's a woman."

Starke nodded. "Rann."

Faolan rose carefully from his seat. He thought the name over. He took a short sword from a place beside the high seat. He stepped down. He walked toward Starke. "You brought Rann alive to me?"

Starke pulled the chain that bound Rann. She ran forward in little steps, her white face down, her eyes slitted with animal fury.

"Faolan's blind," said Starke. "I let you live for one damned good reason, Rann. Okay, go ahead."

Faolan stopped walking, curious. He waited.

Rann did nothing.

Starke took her hand and wrenched it behind her back. "I said 'go ahead.' Maybe you didn't hear me."

"I will," she gasped, in pain.

Starke released her. "Tell me what happens, Faolan."

Rann gazed steadily at Faolan's tall figure there in the light.

Faolan suddenly threw his hands to his eyes and choked.

Beudag cried out, seized his arm.

"I can see!" Faolan staggered, as if jolted. "I can see!" First he shouted it, and then he whispered it. "I can see."

Starke's eyes blurred. He whispered to Rann, tightly. "Make him see it, Rann, or you die now. Make him see it!" To Faolan: "What do you see?"

Faolan was bewildered; he swayed. He put out his hands to shape the vision. "I—I see Crom Dhu. It's a good sight. I see the ships of Rann. Sinking!" He laughed a broken laugh. "I—see the fight beyond the gate!"

Silence swam in the room, over their heads.

Faolan's voice went alone, and hypnotized, into that silence.

He put out his big fists, shook them, opened them. "I see Mannt, and Aesur and Clev! Fighting as they always fought. I see Conan as he was. I see Beudag wielding steel again, on the shore! I see the enemy killed! I see men pouring out of the sea with brown skins and dark hair. Men I knew a long darkness ago. Men that roved the sea with me. I see Rann captured!" He began to sob with it, his lungs filling and releasing it, sucking on it, blowing it out. Tears ran down from his vacant, blazing eyes. "I see Crom Dhu as it was and is and shall be! I see, I see, I see!"

Starke felt the chill on the back of his neck.

"I see Rann captured and held, and her men dead around her on the land before the Gate. I see the Gate thrown open—" Faolan halted. He looked at Starke. "Where are Clev and Mannt? Where is Bron and Aesur?"

Starke let the fires burn on the hearths a long moment. Then he replied.

"They went back into the sea, Faolan."

Faolan's fingers fell emptily. "Yes," he said, heavily. "They had to go back, didn't they? They couldn't stay, could they? Not even for one night of food on the table, and wine in the mouth, and women in the deep warm furs before the hearth. Not even for one toast." He turned. "A drink, Romna. A drink for everyone."

Romna gave him a full cup. He dropped it, fell down to his knees, clawed at his breast. "My heart!"

"Rann, you sea-devil!"

Starke held her instantly by the throat. He put pressure on the small raging pulses on either side of her snow-white neck. "Let him go, Rann!" More pressure. "Let him go!" Faolan grunted. Starke held her until her white face was dirty and strange with death.

It seemed like an hour later when he released her. She fell softly and did not move. She wouldn't move again.

Starke turned slowly to look at Faolan.

"You saw, didn't you, Faolan?" he said.

Faolan nodded blindly, weakly. He roused himself from the floor, groping. "I saw. For a moment, I saw everything. And Gods! but it made good seeing! Here, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan, gave this other side of me something to lean on."

* * *

Beudag and Starke climbed the mountain above Falga the next day. Starke went ahead a little way, and with his coming the flame birds scattered, glittering away.

He dug the shallow grave and did what had to be done with the body he found there, and then when the grave was covered with thick grey stones he went back for Beudag. They stood together over it. He had never expected to stand over a part of himself, but here he was, and Beudag's hand gripped his.

He looked suddenly a million years old standing there. He thought of Earth and the Belt and Jupiter, of the joy streets in the Jekkara Low Canals of Mars. He thought of space and the ships going through it, and himself inside them. He thought of the million credits he had taken in that last job. He laughed ironically . . .

"Tomorrow, I'll have the sea creatures hunt for a little metal box full of credits." He nodded solemnly at the grave. "He wanted that. Or at least he thought he did. He killed himself getting it. So if the sea-

people find it, I'll send it up here to the mountain and bury it down under the rocks in his fingers. I guess that's the best place."

Beudag drew him away. They walked down the mountain toward Falga's harbor where a ship waited them. Walking, Starke lifted his face. Beudag was with him, and the sails of the ship were rising to take the wind, and the Red Sea waited for them to travel it. What lay on its far side was something for Beudag and Faolan-of-the-Ships and Romna and Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan to discover. He felt damned good about it. He walked on steadily, holding Beudag near.

And on the mountain, as the ship sailed, the flame birds soared down fitfully and frustratedly to beat at the stone mound, ceased, and mourning shrilly, flew away.

The Moon that Vanished

By Leigh Brackett

1: Down to the Darkling Sea

The stranger was talking about him—the tall stranger who was a long way from his native uplands, who wore plain leather and did not belong in this swamp-coast village. He was asking questions, talking, watching.

David Heath knew that, in the same detached way in which he realized that he was in Kalruna's dingy Palace of All Possible Delights, that he was very drunk but not nearly drunk enough, that he would never be drunk enough and that presently, when he passed out, he would be tossed over the back railing into the mud, where he might drown or sleep it off as he pleased.

Heath did not care. The dead and the mad do not care. He lay without moving on the native hide-frame cot, the leather mask covering the lower part of his face, and breathed the warm golden vapor that bubbled in a narghile-like bowl beside him. Breathed, and tried to sleep, and could not. He did not close his eyes. Only when he became unconscious would he do that.

There would be a moment he could not avoid, just before his drugged brain slipped over the edge into oblivion, when he would no longer be able to see anything but the haunted darkness of his own mind, and that moment would seem like all eternity. But afterward, for a few hours, he would find peace.

Until then he would watch, from his dark corner, the life that went on in the Palace of All Possible Delights.

Heath rolled his head slightly. By his shoulder, clinging with its hooked claws to the cot frame, a little bright-scaled dragon crouched and met his glance with jewel-red eyes in which there were peculiar

sympathy and intelligence. Heath smiled and settled back. A nervous spasm shook him but the drug had relaxed him so that it was not severe and passed off quickly.

No one came near him except the emerald-skinned girl from the deep swamps who replenished his bowl. She was not human and therefore did not mind that he was David Heath. It was as though there were a wall around him beyond which no man stepped or looked.

Except, of course, the stranger.

Heath let his gaze wander. Past the long low bar where the common seamen lay on cushions of moss and skins, drinking the cheap fiery thul. Past the tables, where the captains and the mates sat, playing their endless and complicated dice games. Past the Nahali girl who danced naked in the torchlight, her body glimmering with tiny scales and as sinuous and silent in motion as the body of a snake.

The single huge room was open on three sides to the steaming night. It was there that Heath's gaze went at last. Outside, to the darkness and the sea, because they had been his life and he loved them.

Darkness on Venus is not like the darkness of Earth or Mars. The planet is hungry for light and will not let it go. The face of Venus never sees the sun but even at night the hope and the memory of it are there, trapped in the eternal clouds.

The air is the color of indigo and it carries its own pale glow. Heath lay watching how the slow hot wind made drifts of light among the liha-trees, touched the muddy harbor beaches with a wavering gleam and blended into the restless phosphorescence of the Sea of Morning Opals. Half a mile south the river Omaz flowed silently down, still tainted with the reek of the Deep Swamps.

Sea and sky—the life of David Heath and his destruction.

The heavy vapor swirled in Heath's brain. His breathing slowed and deepened. His lids grew heavy.

Heath closed his eyes.

An expression of excitement, of yearning, crossed his face, mingled with a vague unease. His muscles tensed. He began to whimper, very softly, the sound muffled by the leather mask.

The little dragon cocked its head and watched, still as a carved image.

Heath's body, half naked in a native kilt, began to twitch, then to move in spasmodic jerks. The expression of unease deepened, changed gradually to one of pure horror. The cords in his throat stood out like wires as he tried to cry out and could not. Sweat gathered in great beads on his skin.

Suddenly the little dragon raised its wings and voiced a hissing scream.

Heath's nightmare world rocked around him, riven with loud sounds. He was mad with fear, he was dying, vast striding shapes thronged toward him out of a shining mist. His body was shaken, cracking, frail bones bursting into powder, his heart tearing out of him, his brain a part of the mist, shining, burning. He tore the mask from his face and cried out a name, Ethne!, and sat up—and his eyes were wide open, blind and deep.

Somewhere, far off, he heard thunder. The thunder spoke. It called his name. A new face pushed in past the phantoms of his dream. It swelled and blotted out the others. The face of the stranger from the High Plateaus. He saw every line of it, painted in fire upon his brain.

The square jaw, hard mouth, nose curved like a falcon's beak, the scars wealed, white against white skin, eyes like moonstones, only hot, bright—the long silver hair piled high in the intricate tribal knot and secured with a warrior's golden chains.

Hands shook him, slapped his face. The little dragon went on screaming and flapping, tethered by a short thong to the head of Heath's cot so that it could not tear out the eyes of the stranger.

Heath caught his breath in a long shuddering sob and sprang.

He would have killed the man who had robbed him of his little time of peace. He tried, in deadly silence, while the seamen and the masters and the mates and the dancing girls watched, not moving, sidelong out of their frightened, hateful eyes. But the Uplander was a big man, bigger than Heath in his best days had ever been. And presently Heath lay panting on the cot, a sick man, a man who was slowly dying and had no strength left.

The stranger spoke. "It is said that you found the Moonfire."

Heath stared at him with his dazed, drugged eyes and did not answer.

"It is said that you are David Heath the Earthman, captain of the Ethne."

Still Heath did not answer. The rusty torchlight flickered over him, painting highlight and shadow. He had always been a lean, wiry man. Now he was emaciated, the bones of his face showing terribly ridged and curved under the drawn skin. His black hair and unkempt beard were shot through with white.

The Uplander studied Heath deliberately, contemptuously. He said, "I think they lie."

Heath laughed. It was not a nice laugh.

"Few men have ever reached the Moonfire," the Venusian said. "They were the strong ones, the men without fear."

After a long while Heath whispered, "They were fools."

He was not speaking to the Uplander. He had forgotten him. His dark mad gaze was fixed on something only he could see.

"Their ships are rotting in the weed beds of the Upper Seas. The little dragons have picked their bones." Heath's voice was slow, harsh and toneless, wandering. "Beyond the Sea of Morning Opals, beyond the weeds and the Guardians, through the Dragon's Throat and still beyond—I've seen it, rising out of the mists, out of the Ocean-That-Is-Not-Water."

A tremor shook him, twisting the gaunt bones of his body. He lifted his head, like a man straining to breathe, and the running torchlight brought his face clear of the shadows. In all the huge room there was not a sound, not a rustle, except for a small sharp gasp that ran through every mouth and then was silent.

"The gods know where they are now, the strong brave men who went through the Moonfire. The gods know what they are now. Not human if they live at all."

He stopped. A deep slow shudder went through him. He dropped his head. "I was only in the fringe of it. Only a little way."

In the utter quiet the Uplander laughed. He said, "I think you lie."

Heath did not raise his head nor move.

The Venusian leaned over him, speaking loudly, so that even across the distance of drugs and madness the Earthman should hear.

"You're like the others, the few who have come back. But they never lived a season out. They died or killed themselves. How long have you lived?"

Presently he grasped the Earthman's shoulder and shook it roughly. "How long have you lived?" he shouted and the little dragon screamed, struggling against its thong.

Heath moaned. "Through all hell," he whispered. "Forever."

"Three seasons," said the Venusian. "Three seasons, and part of a fourth." He took his hand away from Heath and stepped back. "You never saw the Moonfire. You knew the custom, how the men who break the taboo must be treated until the punishment of the gods is finished."

He kicked the bowl, breaking it, and the bubbling golden fluid spilled out across the floor in a pool of heady fragrance. "You wanted that, and you knew how to get it, for the rest of your sodden life."

A low growl of anger rose in the Palace of All Possible Delights.

Heath's blurred vision made out the squat fat bulk of Kalruna approaching. Even in the depths of his agony he laughed, weakly. For more than three seasons Kalruna had obeyed the traditional law. He had fed and made drunk the pariah who was sacred to the anger of the gods—the gods who guarded so jealously the secret of the Moonfire. Now Kalruna was full of doubt and very angry.

Heath began to laugh aloud. The effects of his uncompleted jag were making him reckless and hysterical. He sat up on the cot and laughed in their faces.

"I was only in the fringe," he said. "I'm not a god. I'm not even a man any more. But I can show you if you want to be shown."

He pulled himself to his feet, and as he did so, in a motion as automatic as breathing, he loosed the little dragon and set it on his naked shoulder. He stood swaying a moment and then began to walk out across the room, slowly, uncertainly, but with his head stubbornly erect. The crowd drew apart to make a path for him and he walked along it in the silence, clothed in his few sad rags of dignity, until he came to the railing and stopped.

"Put out the torches," he said. "All but one."

Kalruna said hesitantly, "There's no need. I believe you."

There was fear in the place now—fear, and fascination. Every man glanced sideways, looking for escape, but no one went away.

Heath said again, "Put out the torches."

The tall stranger reached out and doused the nearest one in its bucket, and presently in all that vast room there was darkness, except for one torch far in the back.

Heath stood braced against the rail, staring out into the hot indigo night.

The mists rose thick from the Sea of Morning Opals. They crept up out of the mud, and breathed in clouds from the swamps. The slow wind pushed them in long rolling drifts, blue-white and glimmering against the darker night.

Heath looked hungrily into the mists. His head was thrown back, his whole body strained upward and presently he raised his arms in a gesture of terrible longing.

"Ethne," he whispered. "Ethne."

Almost imperceptibly, a change came over him. The weakness, the look of the sodden wreck, left him. He stood firm and straight, and the muscles rose coiled and beautiful on the long lean frame of his bones, alive with the tension of strength.

His face had altered even more. There was a look of power on it. The dark eyes burned with deep fires, glowing with a light that was more than human, until it seemed that his whole head was crowned with a strange nimbus.

For one short moment, the face of David Heath was the face of a god.

"Ethne," he said.

And she came.

Out of the blue darkness, out of the mist, drifting tenuous and lovely toward the Earthman. Her body was made from the glowing air, the soft drops of the mist, shaped and colored by the force that was in Heath. She was young, not more than nineteen, with the rosy tint of Earth's sun still in her cheeks, her eyes wide and bright as a child's, her body slim with the sweet angularity of youth.

The first time I saw her, when she stepped down the loading ramp for her first look at Venus and the wind took her hair and played with it and she walked light and eager as a colt on a spring morning. Light and merry always, even walking to her death.

The shadowy figure smiled and held out her arms. Her face was the face of a woman who has found love and all the world along with it.

Closer and closer she drifted to Heath and the Earthman stretched out his hands to touch her.

And in one swift instant, she was gone.

Heath fell forward against the rail. He stayed there a long time. There was no god in him now, no strength. He was like a flame suddenly burned out and dead, the ashes collapsing upon themselves. His eyes were closed and tears ran out from under the lashes.

In the steaming darkness of the room no one moved.

Heath spoke once. "I couldn't go far enough," he said, "into the Moonfire."

He dragged himself upright after a while and went toward the steps, supporting himself against the rail, feeling his way like a blind man. He went down the four steps of hewn logs and the mud of the path rose warm around his ankles. He passed between the rows of mud-and-wattle huts, a broken scarecrow of a man plodding through the night of an alien world.

He turned, down the side path that led to the anchorage. His feet slipped into the deeper mud at the side and he fell, face down. He tried once to get up, then lay still, already sinking into the black, rich ooze. The little dragon rode on his shoulder, pecking at him, screaming, but he did not hear.

He did not know it when the tall stranger from the High Plateaus picked him out of the mud a few seconds later, dragon and all, and carried him away, down to the darkling sea.

2: The Emerald Sail

A woman's voice said, "Give me the cup."

Heath felt his head being lifted, and then the black, stinging taste of Venusian coffee slid like liquid fire down his throat. He made his usual waking fight against fear and reality, gasped and opened his eyes.

He lay in his own bunk, in his own cabin, aboard the Ethne. Across from him, crouched on a carved chest, the tall Venusian sat, his head bowed under the low scarlet arch of the deck above. Beside Heath, looking down at him, was a woman.

It was still night. The mud that clung to Heath's body was still wet. They must have worked hard, he thought, to bring him to.

The little dragon flopped down to its perch on Heath's shoulder. He stroked its scaly neck and lay watching his visitors.

The man said, "Can you talk now?"

Heath shrugged. His eyes were on the woman. She was tall but not too tall, young but not too young. Her body was everything a woman's body ought to be, of its type, which was wide-shouldered and leggy, and she had a fine free way of moving it. She wore a short tunic of undyed spider silk, which exactly matched the soft curling hair that fell down her back—a bright, true silver with little peacock glints of color in it.

Her face was one that no man would forget in a hurry. It was a face shaped warmly and generously for all the womanly things—passion and laughter and tenderness. But something had happened to it. Something had given it a bitter sulky look. There was resentment in it and deep anger and hardness—and yet, with all that, it was somehow a pathetically eager face with lost and frightened eyes.

Heath remembered vaguely a day when he would have liked to solve the riddle of that contradictory face. A day long ago, before Ethne came.

He said, speaking to both of them, "Who are you and what do you want with me?"

He looked now directly at the man and it was a look of sheer black hatred. "Didn't you have enough fun with me at Kalruna's?"

"I had to be sure of you," the stranger said. "Sure that you had not lied about the Moonfire."

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowed and piercing. He did not sit easily. His body was curved like a bent bow. In the light of the hanging

lantern his scarred, handsome face showed a ripple of little muscles under the skin. A man in a hurry, Heath thought, a man with a sharp goad pricking his flanks.

"And what was that to you?" said Heath.

It was a foolish question. Already Heath knew what was coming. His whole being drew in upon itself, retreated.

The stranger did not answer directly. Instead he said, "You know the cult that calls itself guardian of the Mysteries of the Moon."

"The oldest cult on Venus and one of the strongest. One of the strangest, too, on a moonless planet," Heath said slowly to no one in particular. "The Moonfire is their symbol of godhead."

The woman laughed without mirth. "Although," she said, "they've never seen it."

The stranger went on, "All Venus knows about you, David Heath. The word travels. The priests know too—the Children of the Moon. They have a special interest in you."

Heath waited. He did not speak.

"You belong to the gods for their own vengeance," the stranger said. "But the vengeance hasn't come. Perhaps because you're an Earthman and therefore less obedient to the gods of Venus. Anyway, the Children of the Moon are tired of waiting. The longer you live the more men may be tempted to blasphemy, the less faith there will be in the ability of the gods to punish men for their sins." His voice had a biting edge of sarcasm. "So," he finished, "the Children of the Moon are coming to see to it that you die."

Heath smiled. "Do the priests tell you their secrets?"

The man turned his head and said, "Alor."

The woman stepped in front of Heath and loosed her tunic at the shoulder. "There," she said furiously. "Look!"

Her anger was not with Heath. It was with what he saw. The tattoo branded between her white breasts—the round rayed symbol of the Moon.

Heath caught his breath and let it out in a long sigh. "A handmaiden of the temple," he said and looked again at her face. Her eyes met his, silvery-cold, level, daring him to say more.

"We are sold out of our cradles," she said. "We have no choice. And our families are very proud to have a daughter chosen for the temple."

Bitterness and pride and the smoldering anger of the slave.

She said, "Broca tells the truth."

Heath's body seemed to tighten in upon itself. He glanced from one to the other and back again, not saying anything, and his heart beat fast and hard, knocking against his ribs.

Alor said, "They will kill you and it won't be easy dying. I know. I've heard men screaming sometimes for many nights and their sin was less than yours."

Heath said out of a dry mouth, "A runaway girl from the temple gardens and a thrower of spears. Their sin is great too. They didn't come halfway across Venus just to warn me. I think they lie. I think the priests are after them."

"We're all three proscribed," said Broca, "but Alor and I could get away. You they'll hunt down no matter where you go—except one place."

And Heath said, "Where is that?"

"The Moonfire."

After a long while Heath uttered a harsh grating sound that might have been a laugh.

"Get out," he said. "Get away from me."

He got to his feet, shaking with weakness and fury. "You lie, both of you—because I'm the only living man who has seen the Moonfire and you want me to take you there. You believe the legends. You think the Moonfire will change you into gods. You're mad, like all the other fools, for the power and the glory you think you'll have. Well, I can tell you this—the Moonfire will give you nothing but suffering and death."

His voice rose. "Go lie to someone else. Frighten the Guardians of the Upper Seas. Bribe the gods themselves to take you there. But get away from me!"

The Venusian rose slowly. The cabin was small for him, the deck beams riding his shoulders. He swept the little dragon aside. He took Heath in his two hands and he said, "I will reach the Moonfire, and you will take me there."

Heath struck him across the face.

Sheer astonishment held Broca still for a moment and Heath said, "You're not a god yet."

The Venusian opened his mouth in a snarling grin. His hands shifted and tightened.

The woman said sharply, "Broca!" She stepped in close, wrenching at Broca's wrists. "Don't kill him, you fool!"

Broca let his breath out hard between his teeth. Gradually his hands relaxed. Heath's face was suffused with dark blood. He would have fallen if the woman had not caught him.

She said to Broca, "Strike him—but not too hard."

Broca raised his fist and struck Heath carefully on the point of the jaw.

It could not have been more than two of the long Venusian hours before Heath came to. He did that slowly as always—progressing from a vast vague wretchedness to an acute awareness of everything that was the matter with him. His head felt as though it had been cleft in two with an axe from the jaw upward.

He could not understand why he should have wakened. The drug alone should have been good for hours of heavy sleep. The sky beyond the cabin port had changed. The night was almost over. He lay for a moment, wondering whether or not he was going to be sick, and then suddenly he realized what had wakened him in spite of everything.

The Ethne was under way.

His anger choked him so that he could not even swear. He dragged himself to his feet and crossed the cabin, feeling even then that she was not going right, that the dawn wind was strong and she was rolling to it, yawing.

He kicked open the door and came out on deck.

The great lateen sail of golden spider silk, ghostly in the blue air, slatted and spilled wind, shaking against loose yards. Heath turned and made for the raised poop, finding strength in his fear for the ship. Broca was up there, braced against the loom of the stern sweep. The wake lay white on the black water, twisting like a snake.

The woman Alor stood at the rail, staring at the low land that lay behind them.

Broca made no protest as Heath knocked him aside and took the sweep. Alor turned and watched but did not speak.

The Ethne was small and the simple rig was such that one man could handle it. Heath trimmed the sail and in a few seconds she was stepping light and dainty as her namesake, her wake straight as a ruled line.

When that was done Heath turned upon them and cursed them in a fury greater than that of a woman whose child has been stolen.

Broca ignored him. He stood watching the land and the lightening sky. When Heath was all through the woman said, "We had to go. It may already be too late. And you weren't going to help."

Heath didn't say anything more. There weren't any words. He swung the helm hard over.

Broca was beside him in one step, his hand raised and then suddenly Alor cried out, "Wait!"

Something in her voice brought both men around to look at her. She stood at the rail, facing into the wind, her hair flying, the short skirt of her tunic whipped back against her thighs. Her arm was raised in a pointing gesture.

It was dawn now.

For a moment Heath lost all sense of time. The deck lifting lightly under his feet, the low mist and dawn over the Sea of Morning Opals, the dawn that gave the sea its name. It seemed that there had never been a Moonfire, never been a past or a future, but only David Heath and his ship and the light coming over the water.

It came slowly, sifting down like a rain of jewels through the miles of pearl-gray cloud. Cool and slow at first, then warming and spreading, turning the misty air to drops of rosy fire, opaline, glowing, low to the water, so that the little ship seemed to be drifting through the heart of a fire-opal as vast as the universe.

The sea turned color, from black to indigo streaked with milky bands. Flights of the small bright dragons rose flashing from the weed-beds that lay scattered on the surface in careless patterns of purple and ochre and cinnabar and the weed itself stirred with dim sentient life, lifting its tendrils to the light.

For one short moment David Heath was completely happy.

Then he saw that Broca had caught up a bow from under the taffrail. Heath realized that they must have fetched all their traps coolly aboard while he was in Kalruna's. It was one of the great longbows of the Upland barbarians and Broca bent its massive arc as though it had been a twig and laid across it a bone-barbed shaft.

A ship was coming toward them, a slender shape of pearl flying through the softly burning veils of mist. Her sail was emerald green. She was a long way off but she had the wind behind her and she was coming down with it like a swooping dragon.

"That's the Lahal," said Heath. "What does Johor think he's doing?"

Then he saw, with a start of incredulous horror, that on the prow of the oncoming ship the great spiked ram had been lowered into place.

During the moment when Heath's brain struggled to understand why Johor, ordinary trading skipper of an ordinary ship, should wish to sink him, Alor said five words.

"The Children of the Moon."

Now, on the Lahal's foredeck, Heath could distinguish four tiny figures dressed in black.

The long shining ram dipped and glittered in the dawn.

Heath flung himself against the stern sweep. The Ethne's golden sail cracked taut. She headed up into the wind. Heath measured his distance grimly and settled down.

Broca turned on him furiously. "Are you mad? They'll run us down! Go the other way."

Heath said, "There is no other way. They've got me pinned on a lee shore." He was suddenly full of a blind rage against Johor and the four black-clad priests.

There was nothing to do but wait—wait and sail the heart out of his ship and hope that enough of David Heath still lived to get them through. And if not, Heath thought, I'll take the Lahal down with me!

Broca and Alor stood by the rail together, watching the racing green sail. They did not speak. There was nothing to say. Heath saw that now and again the woman turned to study him.

The wakes of the two ships lay white on the water, two legs of a triangle rushing toward their apex.

Heath could see Johor now, manning the sweep. He could see the crew crouching in the waist, frightened sailors rounded up to do the bidding of the priests. They were armed and standing by with grapnels.

Now, on the foredeck, he could see the Children of the Moon.

They were tall men. They wore tunics of black link mail with the rayed symbol of the Moon blazed in jewels on their breasts. They rode the pitching deck, their silver hair flying loose in the wind, and their bodies were as the bodies of wolves that run down their prey and devour it.

Heath fought the stern sweep, fought the straining ship, fought with wind and distance to cheat them of their will.

And the woman Alor kept watching David Heath with her bitter challenging eyes and Heath hated her as he did the priests, with a deadly hatred, because he knew what he must look like with his beaked bony face and wasted body, swaying and shivering over the loom of the sweep.

Closer and closer swept the emerald sail, rounded and gleaming like a peacock's breast in the light. Pearl white and emerald, purple and gold, on a dark blue sea, the spiked ram glittering—two bright dragons racing toward marriage, toward death.

Close, very close. The rayed symbols blazed fire on the breasts of the Children of the Moon.

The woman Alor lifted her head high into the wind and cried out—a long harsh ringing cry like the scream of an eagle. It ended in a name, and she spoke it like a curse.

"Vakor!"

One of the priests wore the jeweled fillet that marked him leader. He flung up his arms, and the words of his malediction came hot and bitter down the wind.

Broca's bowstring thrummed like a great harp. The shaft fell short and Vakor laughed.

The priests went aft to be safe from buckling timbers and the faces of the seamen were full of fear.

Heath cried out a warning. He saw Alor and Broca drop flat to the deck. He saw their faces. They were the faces of a man and a woman who were on the point of death and did not like it but were not afraid. Broca reached out and braced the woman's body with his own.

Heath shoved Ethne's nose fair into the wind and let her jibe.

The Lahal went thundering by not three yards away, helpless to do anything about it.

The kicking sweep had knocked Heath into the scuppers, half dazed. He heard the booming sail slat over, felt the wrenching shudder that shook the Ethne down to her last spike and prayed that the mast would stay in her. As he dragged himself back he saw that the priest Vakor had leaped onto the Lahal's high stern. He was close enough for Heath to see his face.

They looked into each other's eyes and the eyes of Vakor were brilliant and wild, the eyes of a fanatic. He was not old. His body was virile and strong, his face cut in fine sweeping lines, the mouth full and sensuous and proud. He was tense with cheated fury and his voice rang against the wind like the howling of a beast.

"We will follow! We will follow, and the gods will slay!"

As the rush of the Lahal carried him away, Heath heard the last echo of his cry.

"Alor!"

With all the strength he had left Heath quieted his outraged ship and let her fall away on the starboard tack. Broca and Alor got slowly to their feet. Broca said, "I thought you'd wrecked her."

"They had the wind of me," Heath said. "I couldn't come about like a Christian."

Alor walked to the stern and watched where the Lahal wallowed and staggered as she tried to stop her headlong rush. "Vakor!" she whispered, and spat into the sea.

Broca said, "They will follow us. Alor told me—they have a chart, the only one that shows the way to the Moonfire."

Heath shrugged. He was too weary now to care. He pointed off to the right.

"There's a strong ocean current runs there, like a river in the sea. Most skippers are afraid of it but their ships aren't like the Ethne. We'll

ride it. After that we'll have to trust to luck."

Alor swung around sharply. "Then you will go to the Moonfire."

"I didn't say that. Broca, get me the bottle out of my cabin locker."

But it was the woman who fetched it to him and watched him drink, then said, "Are you all right?"

"I'm dying, and she asks me that," said Heath.

She looked a moment steadily into his eyes and oddly enough there was no mockery in her voice when she spoke, only respect.

"You won't die," she said and went away.

In a few moments the current took the Ethne and swept her away northward. The Lahal vanished into the mists behind them. She was cranky in close handling and Heath knew that Johor would not dare the swirling current.

For nearly three hours he stayed at his post and took the ship through. When the ocean stream curved east he rode out of it into still water. Then he fell down on the deck and slept.

Once again the tall barbarian lifted him like a child and laid him in his bunk.

All through the rest of that day and the long Venusian night, while Broca steered, Heath lay in bitter sleep. Alor sat beside him, watching the nightmare shadows that crossed his face, listening as he moaned and talked, soothing his worst tremors.

He repeated the name of Ethne over and over again and a puzzled strangely wistful look came in the eyes of Alor.

When it was dawn again Heath awoke and went on deck. Broca said with barbarian bluntness, "Have you decided?"

Heath did not answer and Alor said, "Vakor will hunt you down. The word has gone out all over Venus, wherever there are men. There'll be no refuge for you—except one."

Heath smiled, a mirthless baring of the teeth. "And that's the Moonfire. You make it all so simple."

And yet he knew she spoke the truth. The Children of the Moon would never leave his track. He was a rat in a maze and every passage led to death.

But there were different deaths. If he had to die it would not be as Vakor willed but with Ethne—an Ethne more real than a shadow—in

his arms again.

He realized now that deep in his mind he had always known, all these three seasons and more that he had clung to a life not worth the living. He had known that someday he must go back again.

"We'll go to the Moonfire," he said, "and perhaps we shall all be gods."

Broca said, "You are weak, Earthman. You didn't have the courage."

Heath said one word.

"Wait."

3: Over the Bar

The days and the nights went by, and the Ethne fled north across the Sea of Morning Opals, north toward the equator. They were far out of the trade lanes. All these vast upper reaches were wilderness. There were not even fishing villages along the coast. The great cliffs rose sheer from the water and nothing could find a foothold there. And beyond, past the Dragon's Throat, lay only the barren death-trap of the Upper Seas.

The Ethne ran as sweetly as though she joyed to be free again, free of the muddy harbor and the chains. And a change came over Heath. He was a man again. He stood shaved and clean and erect on his own deck and there was no decision to be made anymore, no doubt. The long dread, the long delay, were over and he too, in his own bitter way, was happy.

They had seen nothing more of the Lahal but Heath knew quite well that she was there somewhere, following. She was not as fleet as the Ethne but she was sound and Johor was a good sailor. Moreover, the priest Vakor was there and he would drive the Lahal over the Mountains of White Cloud if he had to—to catch them.

He said once to Alor, "Vakor seems to have a special hatred for you."

Her face twisted with revulsion and remembered shame. "He is a beast," she said. "He is a serpent, a lizard that walks like a king." She added, "We've made it easy for him, the three of us together like this."

From where he sat steering Heath looked at her with a remote curiosity. She stood, long legged, bold-mouthed, looking back with somber smoky eyes at the white wake unrolling behind them.

He said, "You must have loved Broca to break your vows for him. Considering what it means if they catch you."

Alor looked at him, then laughed, a brief sound that had no humor in it.

"I'd have gone with any man strong enough to take me out of the temple," she said. "And Broca is strong and he worships me."

Heath was genuinely astonished. "You don't love him?"

She shrugged. "He is good to look at. He is a chief of warriors and he is a man and not a priest. But love—"

She asked suddenly, "What is it like—to love as you loved your Ethne?"

Heath started. "What do you know about Ethne?" he asked harshly.

"You have talked of her in sleep. And Broca told me how you called her shadow in Kalruna's place. You dared the Moonfire to gain her back."

She glanced at the ivory figurehead on the high curving bow, the image of a woman, young and slim and smiling.

"I think you are a fool," she said abruptly. "I think only a fool would love a shadow."

She had left him and gone down into the cabin before he could gather words, before he could take her white neck between his hands and break it.

Ethne—Ethne!

He cursed the woman of the temple gardens.

He was still in a brooding fury when Broca came up out of the cabin to relieve him at the sweep.

"I'll steer a while yet," Heath told him curtly. "I think the weather's going to break."

Clouds were boiling up in the south as the night closed down. The sea was running in long easy swells as it had done for all these days but there was a difference, a pulse and a stir that quivered all through the ship's keel.

Broca, stretching huge shoulders, looked away to the south and then down at Heath.

"I think you talk too much to my woman," he said.

Before Heath could answer the other laid his hand lightly on the Earthman's shoulder. A light grip but with strength enough behind it to crack Heath's bones.

He said, "Do not talk so much to Alor."

"I haven't sought her out," Heath snapped savagely. "She's your woman—you worry about her."

"I am not worried about her," Broca answered calmly. "Not about her and you."

He was looking down at Heath as he spoke and Heath knew the contrast they made—his own lean body and gaunt face against the big barbarian's magnificent strength.

"But she is always with you on the deck, listening to your stories of the sea," said Broca. "Do not talk to her so much," he repeated and this time there was an edge to his voice.

"For heaven's sake!" said Heath jeeringly. "If I'm a fool what are you? A man mad enough to look for power in the Moonfire and faithfulness in a temple wench! And now you're jealous."

He hated both Broca and Alor bitterly in this moment and out of his hate he spoke.

"Wait until the Moonfire touches you. It will break your strength and your pride. After that you won't care who your woman talks to or where."

Broca gave him a stare of unmoved contempt. Then he turned his back and settled down to look out across the darkening sea.

After a while, the amusing side of the whole thing struck Heath, and he began to laugh.

They were, all three of them, going to die. Somewhere out there to the south, Vakor came like a black shepherd, driving them toward death. Dreams of empire, dreams of glory and a voyage that tempted the vengeance of the gods—and at such a time the barbarian chief could be jealous.

With sudden shock he realized just how much time Alor had spent with him. Out of habit and custom as old as the sea he had

helped to while away the long hard hours with a sailor's yarns. Looking back he could see Alor's face, strangely young and eager as she listened, could remember how she asked questions and wanted to learn the ways and the working of the ship.

He could remember now how beautiful she looked with the wind in her hair, her firm strong body holding the Ethne steady in a quartering sea.

The storm brewed over the hours and at last it broke. Heath had known that the Sea of Morning Opals would not let him go without a struggle. It had tried him with shallows, with shifting reefs, with dead calms and booming solar tides and all the devices of current, fog and drifting weed. He had beaten all of them. Now he was almost within sight of the Dragon's Throat, the gateway to the Upper Seas and it was a murderous moment for a storm out of the south.

The night had turned black. The sea burned with white phosphorescence, a boiling cauldron of witch-fire. The wind was frightening. The Ethne plunged and staggered, driving under a bare pole, and for once Heath was glad of Broca's strength as they fought the sweep together.

He became aware that someone was beside him and knew that it was Alor.

"Go below!" he yelled and caught only the echo of her answer. She did not go but threw her weight too against the sweep.

Lightning bolts as broad as comet's tails came streaking down with a rush and a fury as though they had started their run from another star and gathered speed across half the galaxy. They lit the Sea of Morning Opals with a purple glare until the thunder brought the darkness crashing down again. Then the rain fell like a river rolling down the belts of cloud.

Heath groaned inwardly. The wind and the following sea had taken the little ship between them and were hurling her forward. At the speed she was making now she would hit the Dragon's Throat at dawn. She would hit it full tilt and helpless as a drifting chip.

The lightning showed him the barbarian's great straining body, gleaming wet, his long hair torn loose from its knots and chains,

streaming with wind and water. It showed him Alor too. Their hands and their shoulders touched, straining together.

It seemed that they struggled on that way for centuries and then, abruptly, the rain stopped, the wind slackened, and there was a period of eerie silence. Alor's voice sounded loud in Heath's ears, crying, "Is it over?"

"No," he answered. "Listen!"

They heard a deep and steady booming, distant in the north—the boom of surf.

The storm began again.

Dawn came, hardly lighter than the night. Through the flying wrack Heath could see cliffs on either side where the mountain ranges narrowed in, funneling the Sea of Morning Opals into the strait of the Dragon's Throat. The driven sea ran high between them, bursting white against the black rock.

The Ethne was carried headlong, a leaf in a millrace.

The cliffs drew in and in until there was a gap of no more than a mile between them. Black brooding titans and the space below a fury of white water, torn and shredded by fang-like rocks.

The Dragon's Throat.

When he had made the passage before Heath had had fair weather and men for the oars. Even then it had not been easy. Now he tried to remember where the channel lay, tried to force the ship toward what seemed to be an open lane among the rocks.

The Ethne gathered speed and shot forward into the Dragon's Throat.

She fled through a blind insanity of spray and wind and sound. Time and again Heath saw the loom of a towering rock before him and wrenched the ship aside or fought to keep away from death that was hidden just under the boiling surface. Twice, three times, the Ethne gave a grating shudder and he thought she was gone.

Once, toward the last, when it seemed that there was no hope, he felt Alor's hand close over his.

The high water saved them, catching them in its own rush down the channel, carrying them over the rocks and finally over the bar at the end of the gut. The Ethne came staggering out into the relative

quiet of the Upper Seas, where the pounding waves seemed gentle and it was all done so quickly, over so soon. For a long time the three of them stood sagging over the sweep, not able to realize that it was over and they still lived.

The storm spent itself. The wind settled to a steady blow. Heath got a rag of sail up. Then he sat down by the tiller and bowed his head over his knees and thought about how Alor had caught his hand when she believed she was going to die.

4: "I Will Wait!"

Even this early it was hot. The Upper Seas sprawled along the equator, shallow landlocked waters choked with weed and fouled with shifting reefs of mud, cut into a maze of lakes and blind channels by the jutting headlands of the mountains.

The wind dropped to a flat calm. They left the open water behind them, where it was swept clean by the tides from the Sea of Morning Opals. The floating weed thickened around them, a blotched ochre plain that stirred with its own dim mindless life. The air smelled rotten.

Under Heath's direction they swung the weed-knife into place, the great braced blade that fitted over the prow. Then, using the heavy sweep as a sculling oar, they began to push the Ethne forward by the strength of their sweating backs.

Clouds of the little bright-scaled dragons rose with hissing screams, disturbed by the ship. This was their breeding ground. They fought and nested in the weed and the steaming air was full of the sound of their wings. They perched on the rail and in the rigging, watching with their red eyes. The creature that rode Heath's shoulder emitted harsh cries of excitement. Heath tossed him into the air and he flew away to join his mates.

There was life under the weed, spawning in the hot stagnant waters, multiform and formless, swarming, endlessly hungry. Small reptilian creatures flopped and slithered through the weed, eating the dragon's eggs, and here and there a flat dark head would break through with a snap and a crunch, and it would watch the Ethne with incurious eyes while it chewed and swallowed.

Constantly Heath kept watch.

The sun rose high above the eternal clouds. The heat seeped down and gathered. The scull moved back and forth, the knife bit, the weed dragged against the hull and behind them the cut closed slowly as the stuff wrapped and coiled upon itself.

Heath's eyes kept turning to Alor.

He did not want to look at her. He did not wish to remember the touch of her hand on his. He wished only to remember Ethne, to remember the agony of the Moonfire and to think of the reward that lay beyond it if he could endure. What could a temple wench mean to him beside that?

But he kept looking at her covertly. Her white limbs glistened with sweat and her red mouth was sullen with weariness and even so there was a strange wild beauty about her. Time and again her gaze would meet his, a quick hungry glance from under her lashes, and her eyes were not the eyes of a temple wench. Heath cursed Broca in his heart for making him think of Alor and he cursed himself because now he could not stop thinking of her.

They toiled until they could not stand. Then they sprawled on the deck in the breathless heat to rest. Broca pulled Alor to him.

"Soon this will all be over," he said. "Soon we will reach the Moonfire. You will like that, Alor—to be mated to a god!"

She lay unresponsive in the circle of his arm, her head turned away. She did not answer.

Broca laughed. "God and goddess. Two of a kind as we are now. We'll build our thrones so high the sun can see them." He rolled her head on his shoulder, looking down intently into her face. "Power, Alor. Strength. We will have them together." He covered her mouth with his, and his free hand caressed her, deliberate, possessive.

She thrust him away. "Don't," she said angrily. "It's too hot and I'm too tired." She got up and walked to the side, standing with her back to Broca.

Broca looked at her. Then he turned and looked at Heath. A dark flush reddened his skin. He said slowly, "Too hot and too tired—and besides, the Earthman is watching."

He sprang up and caught Alor and swung her around, one huge hand tangled in her hair, holding her. As soon as he touched her Heath

also sprang up and said harshly, "Let her alone!"

Broca said, "She is my mate but I may not touch her." He glared down into Alor's blazing eyes and said, "She is my mate—or isn't she?"

He flung her away. He turned his head from side to side, half blind with rage.

"Do you think I didn't see you?" he asked thickly. "All day, looking at each other."

Heath said, "You're crazy."

"Yes," answered Broca, "I am." He took two steps toward Heath and added, "Crazy enough to kill you."

Alor said, "If you do you'll never reach the Moonfire."

Broca paused, trapped for one moment between his passion and his dream. He was facing the stern. Something caused his gaze to waver from Heath and then, gradually, his expression changed. Heath swung around and Alor gave a smothered cry.

Far behind them, vague in the steaming air, was an emerald sail.

The Lahal must have come through the Dragon's Throat as soon as the storm was over. With men to man the rowing benches she had gained on the Ethne during the calm. Now she too was in the weed, and the oars were useless but there were men to scull her. She would move faster than the Ethne and without pause.

There would be little rest for Heath and Broca and the woman.

They swayed at the sculling oar all the stifling afternoon and all the breathless night, falling into the dull, half-hypnotized rhythm of beasts who walk forever around a water-wheel. Two of them working always, while the third slept, and Broca never took his eyes from Alor. With his tremendous vitality it seemed that he never slept and during the periods when Heath and Alor were alone at the oar together they exchanged neither words nor glances.

At dawn they saw that the Lahal was closer.

Broca crouched on the deck. He lifted his head and looked at the green sail. Heath saw that his eyes were very bright and that he shivered in spite of the brooding heat.

Heath's heart sank. The Upper Seas were rank with fever, and it looked as though the big barbarian was in for a bad go of it. Heath

himself was pretty well immune to it but Broca was used to the clean air of the High Plateaus and the poison was working in his blood.

He measured the speed of the two ships and said, "It's no use. We must stand and fight."

Heath said savagely, "I thought you wanted to find the Moonfire. I thought you were the strong man who could win through it where everybody else has failed. I thought you were going to be a god."

Broca got to his feet. "With fever or without it I'm a better man than you."

"Then work! If we can just keep ahead of them until we clear the weed—"

Broca said, "The Moonfire?"

"Yes."

"We will keep ahead."

He bent his back to the scull and the Ethne crept forward through the weed. Her golden sail hung from the yard with a terrible stillness. The heat pressed down upon the Upper Seas as though the sun itself were falling through the haze. Astern the Lahal moved steadily on.

Broca's fever mounted. He turned from time to time to curse Vakor, shouting at the emerald sail.

"You'll never catch us, priest!" he would cry. "I am Broca of the tribe of Sarn and I will beat you—and I will beat the Moonfire. You will lie on your belly, priest, and lick my sandals before you die." Then he would turn to Alor, his eyes shining. "You know the legends, Alor! The man who can bathe in the heart of the Moonfire has the power of the High Ones. He can build a world to suit himself, he can be king and lord and master. He can give his woman-god a palace of diamonds with a floor of gold. That is true, Alor. You have heard the priests say it in the temple."

Alor answered, "It is true."

"A new world, Alor. A world of our own."

He made the great sweep swing in a frenzy of strength and once again the mystery of the Moonfire swept over Heath. Why, since the priests knew the way there, did they not themselves become gods. Why had no man ever come out of it with godhead—only a few, a handful like himself, who had not had the valor to go all the way in.

And yet there was godhead there. He knew because within himself there was the shadow of it.

The endless day wore on. The emerald sail came closer.

Toward mid-afternoon there was a sudden clattering flight of the little dragons and all life stopped still in the weed. The reptilian creatures lay motionless with dragon's eggs unbroken in their jaws. No head broke the surface to feed. The dragons flew away in a hissing cloud. There was utter silence.

Heath flung himself against the sweep and stopped it.

"Be quiet," he said. "Look. Out there."

They followed his gesture. Far away over the port bow, flowing toward them, was a ripple in the weed. A ripple as though the very bed of the Upper Seas was in motion.

"What is it?" whispered Alor, and saw Heath's face, and was silent.

Sluggishly, yet with frightening speed, the ripple came toward them. Heath got a harpoon out of the stern locker. He watched the motion of the weed, saw it gradually slow and stop in a puzzled way. Then he threw the harpoon as far away from the ship as he could with all his strength and more.

The ripple began again. It swerved and sped toward where the harpoon had fallen.

"They'll attack anything that moves," said Heath. "It lost us because we stopped. Watch."

The weed heaved and burst open, its meshes snapping across a scaled and titanic back. There seemed to be no shape to the creature, no distinguishable head. It was simply a vast and hungry blackness that spread upward and outward and the luckless brutes that cowered near it hissed and thrashed in their efforts to escape, and were engulfed and vanished.

Again Alor whispered, "What is it?"

"One of the Guardians," Heath answered. "The Guardians of the Upper Seas. They will crush a moving ship to splinters and eat the crew."

He glanced back at the Lahal. She, too, had come to a dead stop. The canny Vakor had scented the danger also.

"We'll have to wait," said Heath, "until it goes away."

They waited. The huge shape of darkness sucked and floundered in the weed and was in no hurry to go.

Broca sat staring at Heath. He was deep in fever and his eyes were not sane. He began to mutter to himself, incoherent ramblings in which only the name Alor and the word Moonfire were distinguishable.

Suddenly, with startling clarity, he said, "The Moonfire is nothing without Alor."

He repeated "Nothing!" several times, beating his huge fists on his knees each time he said it. Then he turned his head blindly from side to side as though looking for something. "She's gone. Alor's gone. She's gone to the Earthman."

Alor spoke to him, touched him, but he shook her off. In his fever-mad brain there was only one truth. He rose and went toward David Heath.

Heath got up. "Broca!" he said. "Alor is there beside you. She hasn't gone!"

Broca did not hear. He did not stop.

Alor cried out, "Broca!"

"No," said Broca. "You love him. You're not mine anymore. When you look at me I am nothing. Your lips have no warmth in them." He reached out toward David Heath and he was blind and deaf to everything but the life that was in him to be torn out and trampled upon and destroyed.

In the cramped space of the afterdeck there was not much room to move. Heath did not want to fight. He tried to dodge the sick giant but Broca pinned him against the rail. Fever or no fever, Heath had to fight him and it was not much use. Broca was beyond feeling pain.

His sheer weight crushed Heath against the rail, bent his spine almost to breaking and his hands found Heath's throat. Heath struck and struck again and wondered if he had come all this way to die in a senseless quarrel over a woman.

Abruptly he realized that Broca was letting go, was sliding down against him to the deck. Through a swimming haze he saw Alor standing there with a belaying pin in her hand. He began to tremble, partly with reaction but mostly with fury that he should have needed a woman's help to save his life. Broca lay still, breathing heavily.

"Thanks," said Heath curtly. "Too bad you had to hit him. He didn't know what he was doing."

Alor said levelly, "Didn't he?"

Heath did not answer. He started to turn away and she caught him, forcing him to look at her.

"Very likely I will die in the Moonfire," she said. "I haven't the faith in my strength that Broca has. So I'm going to say this now—I love you, David Heath. I don't care what you think or what you do about it but I love you."

Her eyes searched his face, as though she wanted to remember every line and plane of it. Then she kissed him and her mouth was tender and very sweet.

She stepped back and said quietly, "I think the Guardian has gone. The Lahal is under way again."

Heath followed her without a word to the sweep. Her kiss burned in him like sweet fire. He was shaken and utterly confused.

They toiled together while Broca slept. They dared not pause. Heath could distinguish the men now aboard the Lahal, little bent figures sculling, sculling, and there were always fresh ones. He could see the black tunics of the Children of the Moon who stood upon the foredeck and waited.

The Ethne moved more and more slowly as the hours passed and the gap between the two ships grew steadily smaller. Night came and through the darkness they could hear the voice of Vakor howling after them.

Toward midnight Broca roused. The fever had left him but he was morose and silent. He thrust Alor roughly aside and took the sweep and the Ethne gathered speed.

"How much farther?" he asked. And Heath panted, "Not far now."

Dawn came and still they were not clear of the weed. The Lahal was so near them now that Heath could see the jeweled fillet on Vakor's brow. He stood alone, high on the upper brace of the weed-knife, and he watched them, laughing.

"Work!" he shouted at them. "Toil and sweat! You, Alor—woman of the gardens! This is better than the Temple. Broca—thief and breaker of the Law—strain your muscles there! And you, Earthman.

For the second time you defy the gods!" He leaned out over the weed as though he would reach ahead and grasp the Ethne in his bare hands and drag her back.

"Sweat and strain, you dogs! You can't escape!"

And they did sweat and strain and fresh relays of men worked at the sweep of the Lahal, breaking their hearts to go faster and ever faster. Vakor laughed from his high perch and it seemed futile for the Ethne to go on any longer with this lost race.

But Heath looked ahead with burning sunken eyes. He saw how the mists rose and gathered to the north, how the color of the weed changed, and he urged the others on. There was a fury in him now. It blazed brighter and harder than Broca's, this iron fury that would not, by the gods themselves, be balked of the Moonfire.

They kept ahead—so little ahead that the Lahal was almost within arrow-shot of them. Then the weed thinned and the Ethne began to gain a little and suddenly, before they realized it, they were in open water.

Like mad creatures they worked the scull and Heath steered the Ethne where he remembered the northern current ran, drawn by the Ocean-That-Is-Not-Water. After the terrible labor of the weed it seemed that they were flying. But as the mists began to wreath about them the Lahal too had freed herself and was racing toward them with every man on the rowing benches.

The mists thickened around them. The black water began to have a rare occasional hint of gold, like shooting sparks beneath the surface. There began to be islands, low and small, rank with queer vegetation. The flying dragons did not come here nor the Guardians nor the little reptiles. It was very hot and very still.

Through the stillness the voice of Vakor rose in a harsh wild screaming as he cursed the rowers on.

The current grew more swift and the dancing flecks of gold brightened in the water. Heath's face bore a strange unhuman look. The oars of the Lahal beat and churned and bowmen stood now on the foredeck, ready to shoot when they came within range.

Then, incredibly, Vakor gave one long high scream and flung up his hand and the oars stopped. Vakor stretched both arms above his

head, his fists clenched, and he hurled after them one terrible word of malediction.

"I will wait, blasphemers! If so be you live I will be here—waiting!"

The emerald sail dwindled in the Ethne's wake, faded and was lost in the mist.

Broca said, "They had us. Why did they stop?"

Heath pointed. Up ahead the whole misty north was touched with a breath of burning gold.

"The Moonfire!"

5: Into the Moonfire

This was the dream that had driven Heath to madness, the nightmare that had haunted him, the memory that had drawn him back in spite of terror and the certainty of destruction. Now it was reality and he could not separate it from the dream.

Once again he watched the sea change until the Ethne drifted not on water but on a golden liquid that lapped her hull with soft rippling fire. Once again the mist enwrapped him, shining, glowing.

The first faint tingling thrill moved in his blood and he knew how it would be—the lying pleasure that mounted through ecstasy to unendurable pain. He saw the dim islands, low and black, a maze through which a ship might wander forever without finding the source that poured out this wonder of living light.

He saw the bones of ships that had died searching. They lay on the island beaches and the mist made them a bright shroud. There were not many of them. Some were so old that the race that built them had vanished out of the memory of Venus.

The hushed unearthly beauty wrenched Heath's heart and he was afraid unto dying and yet filled with lust, with a terrible hunger.

Broca drew the air deep into his lungs as though he would suck the power out of the Moonfire.

"Can you find it again?" he asked. "The heart of it."

"I can find it."

Alor stood silent and unmoving. She was all silver in this light, dusted with golden motes.

Heath said, "Are you afraid, breaking the taboo?"

"Habit is hard to break." She turned to him and asked, "What is the Moonfire?"

"Haven't the priests told you?"

"They say that Venus once had a moon. It rode in the clouds like a disc of fire and the god who dwelt within it was supreme over all the other gods. He watched the surface of the planet and all that was done upon it. But the lesser gods were jealous, and one day they were able to destroy the palace of the Moon-god.

"All the sky of Venus was lighted by that destruction. Mountains fell and seas poured out of their beds and whole nations died. The Moon-god was slain and his shining body fell like a meteor through the clouds.

"But a god cannot really die. He only sleeps and waits. The golden mist is the cloud of his breathing, and the shining of his body is the Moonfire. A man may gain divinity from the heart of the sleeping god but all the gods of Venus will curse him if he tries because man has no right to steal their powers."

"And you don't believe that story," said Heath.

Alor shrugged. "You have seen the Moonfire. The priests have not."

"I didn't get to the heart of it," Heath said. "I only saw the edge of the crater and the light that comes up out of it, the lovely hellish light."

He stopped, shuddering, and brooded as he had so many times before on the truth behind the mystery of the Moonfire. Presently he said slowly, "There was a moon, of course, or there could be no conception of one in folklore. I believe it was radioactive, some element that hasn't been found yet or doesn't exist at all on Earth or Mars."

"I don't understand," said Alor. "What is 'radioactive'?" She used the Terran word, as Heath had, because there was no term for it in Venusian.

"It's a strange sort of fire that burns in certain elements. It eats them away, feeding on its own atoms, and the radiation from this fire is very powerful." He was silent for a moment, his eyes half closed. "Can't

you feel it?" he asked. "The first little fire that burns in your own blood?"

"Yes," Alor whispered. "I feel it."

And Broca said, "It is like wine."

Heath went on, putting the old, old thoughts into words. "The moon was destroyed. Not by jealous gods but by collision with another body, perhaps an asteroid. Or maybe it was burst apart by its own blazing energy. I think that a fragment of it survived and fell here and that its radiation permeated and changed the sea and the air around it.

"It changes men in the same way. It seems to alter the whole electrical set-up of the brain, to amplify its power far beyond anything human. It gives the mind a force of will strong enough to control the free electrons in the air—to create . . ."

He paused, then finished quietly, "In my case, only shadows. And when that mutation occurs a man doesn't need the gods of Venus to curse him. I got only a little of it but that was enough."

Broca said, "It is worth bearing pain to become a god. You had no strength."

Heath smiled crookedly. "How many gods have come out of the Moonfire?"

Broca answered, "There will be one soon." Then he caught Alor by the shoulders and pulled her to him, looking down into her face. "No," he said. "Not one. Two."

"Perhaps," said Heath, "there will be three."

Broca turned and gave him a chill and level look. "I do not think," he said, "that your strength is any greater now."

After that, for a long while, they did not speak. The Ethne drifted on, gliding on the slow currents that moved between the islands. Sometimes they sculled, the great blade of the sweep hidden in a froth of flame. The golden glow brightened and grew and with it grew the singing fire in their blood.

Heath stood erect and strong at the helm, the old Heath who had sailed the Straits of Lhiva in the teeth of a summer gale and laughed about it. All weariness, all pain, all weakness, were swept away. It was the same with the others. Alor's head was high and Broca leaped up

beside the figurehead and gave a great ringing shout, a challenge to all the gods there were to stop him.

Heath found himself looking into Alor's eyes. She smiled, an aching thing of tears and tenderness and farewell.

"I think none of us will live," she whispered. "May you find your shadow, David, before you die."

Then Broca had turned toward them once more and the moment was gone.

Within the veil of the Moonfire there was no day nor night nor time. Heath had no idea how long the Ethne's purple hull rode the golden current. The tingling force spread through his whole body and pulsed and strengthened until he was drunk with the pleasure of it and the islands slipped by, and there was no sound or movement but their own in all that solemn sea.

And at last he saw ahead of him the supernal brightness that poured from the heart of the Moonfire, the living core of all the brightness of the mist. He saw the land, lifting dark and vague, drowned in the burning haze, and he steered toward it along the remembered way. There was no fear in him now. He was beyond fear.

Broca cried out suddenly, "A ship!"

Heath nodded. "It was there before. It will be there when the next man finds his way here."

Two long arms of the island reached out to form a ragged bay. The Ethne entered it. They passed the derelict, floating patiently, untouched here by wind or tide or ocean rot. Her blue sail was furled, her rigging all neat and ready. She waited to begin the voyage home. She would wait a long, long time.

As they neared the land they sighted other ships. They had not moved nor changed since Heath had seen them last, three years ago.

A scant few they were, that had lived to find the Dragon's Throat and pass it, that had survived the Upper Seas and the island maze of the Moonfire and had found their goal at last. Some of them floated still where their crews had left them, their sad sails drooping from the yards.

Others lay on their sides on the beach, as though in sleep. There were strange old keels that had not been seen on the seas of Venus for a

thousand years. The golden mist preserved them and they waited like a pack of faithful dogs for their masters to return.

Heath brought the Ethne in to shore at the same spot where he had beached her before. She grounded gently and he led the way over the side. He remembered the queer crumbling texture of the dark earth under his feet. He was shaken with the force that throbbed in his flesh. As before it hovered now on the edge of pain.

He led the way inland and no one spoke.

The mist thickened around them, filled with dancing sparks of light. The bay was lost behind its wreathing curtain. They walked forward and the ground began to rise under their feet slowly. They moved as in a dream and the light and the silence crushed them with a great awe.

They came upon a dead man.

He lay upon his face, his arms stretched out toward the mystery that lay beyond, his hands still yearning toward the glory he had never reached. They did not disturb him.

Mist, heavier, the glow brightening, the golden motes whirling and flickering in a madder dance. Heath listened to the voice of pain that spoke within him, rising with every step he took toward a soundless scream.

I remember, I remember! The bones, the flesh, the brain, each atom of them a separate flame, bursting, tearing to be free. I cannot go on, I cannot bear it! Soon I shall waken, safe in the mud behind Kalruna's.

But he did not wake and the ground rose steadily under his feet and there was a madness on him, a passion and a suffering that were beyond man's strength to endure. Yet he endured.

The swirling motes began to shape themselves into vague figures, formless giants that towered and strode around them. Heath heard Alor's moan of terror and forced himself to say, "They're nothing. Shadows out of our own minds. The beginning of the power."

Farther they went and farther still, and then at last Heath stopped and flung up his arm to point, looking at Broca.

"Your godhead lies there. Go and take it!"

The eyes of the barbarian were dazed and wild, fixed on the dark dim line of the crater that showed in the distance, fixed on the incredible glory that shone there.

"It beats," he whispered, "like the beating of a heart."

Alor drew back, away from him, staring at the light. "I am afraid," she said. "I will not go." Heath saw that her face was agonized, her body shaken like his own. Her voice rose in a wail. "I can't go! I can't stand it. I'm dying!" Suddenly she caught Heath's hands. "David, take me back. Take me back!"

Before he could think or speak Broca had torn Alor away from him and struck him a great swinging blow. Heath fell to the ground and the last thing he heard was Alor's voice crying his name.

6: End of the Dream

Heath was not unconscious long, for when he lifted his head again he could still see the others in the distance. Broca was running like a madman up the slope of the crater, carrying Alor in his arms. Ghostly and indistinct, he stood for an instant on the edge. Then he leaped over and was gone.

Heath was alone.

He lay still, fighting to keep his mind steady, struggling against the torture of his flesh.

"Ethne, Ethne," he whispered. "This is the end of the dream."

He began to crawl, inch by bitter inch, toward the heart of the Moonfire.

He was closer to it now than he had been before. The strange rough earth cut his hands and his bare knees. The blood ran but the pain of it was less than a pinprick against the cosmic agony of the Moonfire. Broca must have suffered too, yet he had gone running to his fate. Perhaps his nervous system was duller, more resistant to shock. Or perhaps it was simply that his lust for power carried him on.

Heath had no wish for power. He did not wish to be a god. He wished only to die and he knew that he was going to very soon. But before he died he would do what he had failed to do before. He would

bring Ethne back. He would hear her voice again and look into her eyes and they would wait together for the final dark.

Her image would vanish with his death, for then mind and memory would be gone. But he would not see the life go out of her as he had all those years ago by the Sea of Morning Opals. She would be with him until the end, sweet and loving and merry, as she had always been.

He said her name over and over again as he crawled. He tried to think of nothing else, so that he might forget the terrible unhuman things that were happening within him.

"Ethne, Ethne," he whispered. His hands clawed the earth and his knees scraped it and the brilliance of the Moonfire wrapped him in golden banners of mist. Yet he would not stop, though the soul was shaken out of him.

He reached the edge of the crater and looked down upon the heart of the Moonfire.

The whole vast crater was a sea of glowing vapor, so dense that it moved in little rippling waves, tipped with a sparkling froth. There was an island in that sea, a shape like a fallen mountain that burned with a blinding intensity, so great that only the eyes of a god could bear to look at it.

It rode in the clouds like a disc of fire.

Heath knew that his guess was right. It did not matter. Body of a sleeping god or scrap of a fallen moon—it would bring Ethne back to him and for that was all he cared.

He dragged himself over the edge and let himself go, down the farther slope. He screamed once when the vapor closed over him.

After that there was a period of utter strangeness.

It seemed that some force separated the atoms that composed the organism called David Heath and reshuffled them into a different pattern. There was a wrench, an agony beyond anything he had known before and then, abruptly, the pain was gone. His body felt well and whole, his mind was awake, alert and clear with a dawning awareness of new power.

He looked down at himself, ran his hands over his face. He had not changed. And yet he knew that he was different. He had taken the

full force of the radiation this time and apparently it had completed the change begun three years ago. He was not the same David Heath, perhaps, but he was no longer trapped in the no-man's-land between the old and the new.

He no longer felt that he was going to die and he no longer wished to. He was filled with a great strength and a great joy. He could bring his Ethne back now and they could live on together here in the golden garden of the Moonfire.

It would have to be here. He was sure of that. He had only been into the fringe of the Moonfire before, but he did not believe that that was the whole reason why he could create nothing but shadows. There was not a sufficient concentration of the raw energy upon which the mind's telekinetic power worked.

Probably, even in the outer mists of the Moonfire, there were not enough free electrons. But here, close to the source, the air was raging with them. Raw stuff of matter, to be shaped and formed.

David Heath rose to his feet. He lifted his head and his arms reached out longingly. Straight and shining and strong he stood in the living light and his dark face was the face of a happy god.

"Ethne," he whispered. "Ethne. This is not the end of the dream, but the beginning!"

And she came.

By the power, the exultant strength that was in him, Heath brought her out of the Moonfire. Ethne, slim and smiling, indistinct at first, a shadow in the mist, but growing clearer, coming toward him. He could see her white limbs, the pale flame of her hair, her red mouth bold and sweet, her wistful eyes.

Heath recoiled with a cry. It was not Ethne who stood before him. It was Alor.

For a time he could not move but stared at what he had created. The apparition smiled at him and her face was the face of a woman who has found love and with it the whole world.

"No," he said. "It isn't you I want. It's Ethne!" He struck the thought of Alor from his mind and the image faded and once again he called Ethne to him.

And when she came it was not Ethne but Alor.

He destroyed the vision. Rage and disappointment almost too great to bear drove him to wander in the fog. Alor, Alor! Why did that wench of the temple gardens haunt him now?

He hated her, yet her name sang in his heart and would not be silenced. He could not forget how she had kissed him and how her eyes had looked then and how her last desperate cry had been for him.

He could not forget that his own heart had shaped her image while only his mind, his conscious mind, had said the name of Ethne.

He sat down and bent his head over his knees and wept, because he knew now that this was the end of the dream. He had lost the old love forever without knowing it. It was a cruel thing, but it was true. He had to make his peace with it.

And already Alor might be dead.

That thought cut short his grieving for what was gone. He leaped up, filled with dread. He stood for a moment, looking wildly about, and the vapor was like golden water so that he could see only a few feet away. Then he began to run, shouting her name.

For what might have been centuries in that timeless place he ran, searching for her. There was no answer to his cries. Sometimes he would see a dim figure crouching in the mist, and he would think that he had found her but each time it was the body of a man, dead for God knew how long. They were all alike. They were emaciated, as though they had died of starvation and they were all smiling. There seemed to be lost visions still in their open eyes.

These were the gods of the Moonfire—the handful of men through all the ages who had fought their way through to the ultimate goal.

Heath saw the cruelty of the jest. A man could find godhead in the golden lake. He could create his own world within it. But he could never leave it unless he was willing to leave also the world in which he was king. They would have learned that, these men, as they started back toward the harbor, away from the source.

Or perhaps there was more to it. Perhaps they never tried to leave.

Heath went on through the beautiful unchanging mist, calling Alor's name, and there was no answer. He realized that it was becoming more difficult for him to keep his mind on his quest. Half-

formed images flickered vaguely around him. He grew excited and there was an urgency in him to stop and bring the visions clear, to build and create.

He fought off the temptation but there came a time when he had to stop because he was too tired to go on. He sank down and the hopelessness of his search came over him. Alor was gone and he could never find her. In utter dejection he crouched there, his face buried in his hands, thinking of her, and all at once he heard her voice speaking his name. He started up and she was there, holding out her hands to him.

He caught her to him and stroked her hair and kissed her, half sobbing with joy at having found her. Then a sudden thought came to him. He drew back and said, "Are you really Alor or only the shadow of my mind?"

She did not answer but only held up her mouth to be kissed again.

Heath turned away, too weary and hopeless even to destroy the vision. And then he thought, "Why should I destroy it? If the woman is lost to me why shouldn't I keep the dream?"

He looked at her again and she was Alor, clothed in warm flesh, eager-eyed.

The temptation swept over him again and this time he did not fight it. He was a god, whether he wished it or not. He would create.

He threw the whole force of his mind against the golden mist, and the intoxication of sheer power made him drunk and mad with joy.

The glowing cloud drew back to become a horizon and a sky. Under Heath's feet an island grew, warm sweet earth, rich with grass and rioting with flowers, a paradise lost in a dreaming sea. Wavelets whispered on the wide beaches, the drooping fronds of the liha-trees stirred lazily in the wind and bright birds darted, singing. Snug in the little cove a ship floated, a lovely thing that angels might have built.

Perfection, the unattainable wish of the soul. And Alor was with him to share it.

He knew now why no one had ever come out of the Moonfire.

He took the vision of Alor by the hand. He wandered with it along the beaches and presently he was aware of something missing. He smiled, and once again the little dragon rode his shoulder and he

stroked it and there was no least flaw in this Elysium. David Heath had found his godhead.

But some stubborn corner of his heart betrayed him. It said, This is all a lie and Alor waits for you. If you tarry you and she will be as those others, who are dead and smiling in the Moonfire.

He did not want to listen. He was happy. But something made him listen and he knew that as long as the real Alor lived he could not really be content with a dream. He knew that he must destroy this paradise before it destroyed him. He knew that the Moonfire was a deadly thing and that men could not be given the power of gods and continue sane.

And yet he could not destroy the island. He could not!

Horror overcame him that he had so far succumbed, that he could no longer control his own will. And he destroyed the island and the sea and the lovely ship and it was harder than if he had torn his own flesh from the bones.

And he destroyed the vision of Alor.

He knew that if he wished to escape the madness and the death of the Moonfire he must not again create so much as a blade of grass. Nothing. Because he would never again have the strength to resist the unholy joy of creation.

7: To Walk Divine

Once more he ran shouting through the golden fog. And it might have been a year or only a moment later that he heard Alor's voice very faintly in the distance, calling his name.

He followed the sound, crying out more loudly, but he did not hear her again. Then, looming in shadowy grandeur through the mist, he saw a castle. It was a typical Upland stronghold but it was larger than the castle of any barbarian king and it was built out of one huge crimson jewel of the sort called Dragon's Blood.

Heath knew that he was seeing part of Broca's dream.

Steps of beaten gold led up to a greater door. Two tall warriors, harness blazing with gems, stood guard. Heath went between them

and they caught and held him fast. Broca's hatred for the Earthman was implicit in the beings his mind created.

Heath tried to tear himself free but their strength was more than human. They took him down fantastic corridors, over floors of pearl and crystal and precious metals. The walls were lined with open chests, full of every sort of treasure the barbarian mind could conceive. Slaves went silent footed on their errands and the air was heavy with perfume and spices. Heath thought how strange it was to walk through the halls of another man's dream.

He was brought into a vast room where many people feasted. There were harpists and singers and dancing girls and throngs of slaves, men who wrestled and men who fought and danced with swords. The men and women at the long tables looked like chieftains and their wives but they wore plain leather and tunics without decoration, so that Broca's guardsmen and even his slaves were more resplendent than they.

Above the shouting and the revelry Broca sat, high on a throne-chair that was made like a silver dragon with its jeweled wings spread wide. He wore magnificent harness and a carved diamond that only a high king may wear hung between his eyebrows. He drank wine out of a golden cup and watched the feasting with eyes that had in them no smallest flicker of humanity. God or demon, Broca was no longer a man.

Alor sat beside him. She wore the robes of a queen but her face was hidden in her hands and her body was still as death.

Heath's cry carried across all the noise of the feast. Broca leaped to his feet and an abrupt silence fell. Everyone, guards, chieftains and slaves, turned to watch as Heath was led toward the throne—and they all hated him as Broca hated.

Alor raised her head and looked into his eyes. And she asked, in his own words, "Are you really David or only the shadow of my mind?"

"I am David," he told her and was glad he had destroyed his paradise.

Broca's mad gaze fixed on Heath. "I didn't think you had the strength," he said, and then he laughed. "But you're not a god! You stand there captive and you have no power."

Heath knew that he could fight Broca on his own grounds but he did not dare. One taste of that ecstasy had almost destroyed him. If he tried it again he knew that he and the barbarian would hurl their shadow-armies against each other as long as they lived and he would be as mad as Broca.

He looked about him at the hostile creatures who were solid and real enough to kill him at Broca's word. Then he said to Alor, "Do you wish to stay here now?"

"I wish to go out of the Moonfire with you, David, if I can. If not I wish to die."

The poison had not touched her yet. She had come without desire. Though she had bathed in the Moonfire she was still sane.

Heath turned to Broca. "You see, she isn't worthy of you."

Broca's face was dark with fury. He took Alor between his great hands and said, "You will stay with me. You're part of me. Listen, Alor. There's nothing I can't give you. I'll build other castles, other tribes, and I'll subdue them and put them in your lap. God and goddess together, Alor! We'll reign in glory."

"I'm no goddess," Alor said. "Let me go."

And Broca said, "I'll kill you, first." His gaze lowered on Heath. "I'll kill you both."

Heath said, "Do the high gods stoop to tread on ants and worms? We don't deserve such honor, she and I. We're weak and even the Moonfire can't give us strength."

He saw the flicker of thought in Broca's face and went on. "You're all-powerful, there's nothing you can't do. Why burden yourself with a mate too weak to worship you? Create another Alor, Broca! Create a goddess worthy of you!"

After a moment Alor said, "Create a woman who can love you, Broca, and let us go."

For a time there was silence in the place. The feasters and the dancers and the slaves stood without moving and their eyes glittered in the eerie light. And then Broca nodded.

"It is well," he said. "Stand up, Alor."

She stood. The look of power came into the face of the tall barbarian, the wild joy of molding heart's desire out of nothingness.

Out of the golden air he shaped another Alor. She was not a woman but a thing of snow and flame and wonder, so that beside her the reality appeared drab and beautiful. She mounted the throne and sat beside her creator and put her hand in his and smiled.

Broca willed the guardsmen to let Heath free. He went to Alor and Broca said contemptuously, "Get out of my sight."

They went together across the crowded place, toward the archway through which Heath had entered. Still there was silence and no one moved.

As they reached the archway it vanished, becoming solid wall. Behind them Broca laughed and suddenly the company burst also into wild jeering laughter.

Heath caught Alor tighter by the hand and led her toward another door. It, too, disappeared and the mocking laughter screamed and echoed from the vault.

Broca shouted, "Did you think that I would let you go—you two who betrayed me when I was a man? Even a god can remember!"

Heath saw that the guardsmen and the others were closing in, and he saw how their eyes gleamed. He was filled with a black fear and he put Alor behind him.

Broca cried, "Weakling! Even to save your life, you can't create!"

It was true. He dared not. The shadow-people drew in upon him with their soulless eyes and their faces that were mirrors of the urge to kill.

And then, suddenly, the answer came. Heath's answer rang back. "I will not create—but I will destroy!"

Once again he threw the strength of his mind against the Moonfire but this time there was no unhealthy lure to what he did. There was no desire in him but his love for Alor and the need to keep her safe.

The hands of the shadow-people reached out and dragged him away from Alor. He heard her scream and he knew that if he failed them would both be torn to pieces. He summoned all the force that was in him, all the love.

He saw the faces of the shadow-people grow distorted and blurred. He felt their grip weaken and suddenly they were only shadows, a dim

multitude in a crumbling castle of dreams.

Broca's goddess faded with the dragon throne and Broca's kingly harness was only a web of memories half seen above the plain leather.

Broca leaped to his feet with a wild, hoarse cry.

Heath could feel how their two minds locked and swayed on that strange battleground. And as Broca fought to hold his vision, willing the particles of energy into the semblance of matter, so Heath fought to tear them down, to disperse them. For a time the shadows held in that half-world between existence and nothingness.

Then the walls of the castle wavered and ran like red water and were gone. The goddess Alor, the dancers and the slaves and the chieftains, all were gone, and there were only the golden fog and a tall barbarian, stripped of his dreams, and the man Heath and the woman Alor.

Heath looked at Broca and said, "I am stronger than you, because I threw away my godhead."

Broca panted. "I will build again!"

Heath said, "Build."

And he did, his eyes blazing, his massive body shaken with the force of his will.

It was all there again, the castle and the multitude of feasters and the jewels.

Broca screamed to his shadow-people. "Kill!"

But again, as their hands reached out to destroy, they began to weaken and fade.

Heath cried, "If you want your kingdom, Broca, let us go!"

The castle was now no more than a ghostly outline. Broca's face was beaded with sweat. His hands clawed the air. He swayed with his terrible effort but Heath's dark eyes were bleak and stern. If he had now the look of a god it was a god as ruthless and unshakeable as fate.

The vision crumbled and vanished.

Broca's head dropped. He would not look at them from the bitterness of his defeat. "Get out," he whispered. "Go and let Vakor greet you."

Heath said, "It will be a cleaner death than this."

Alor took his hand and they walked away together through the golden mist. They turned once to look back and already the castle walls were built again, towering magnificent.

"He'll be happy," Heath said, "until he dies."

Alor shuddered. "Let us go."

They went together, away from the pulsing heart of the Moonfire, past the slopes of the crater and down the long way to the harbor. Finally they were aboard the Ethne once again.

As they found their slow way out through the island maze Heath held Alor in his arms. They did not speak. Their lips met often with the poignancy of kisses that will not be for long. The golden mists thinned and the fire faded in their blood and the heady sense of power was gone but they did not know nor care.

They came at last out of the veil of the Moonfire and saw ahead the green sail of the Lahal, where Vakor waited.

Alor whispered, "Goodbye, my love, my David!" and left the bitterness of her tears upon his mouth.

The two ships lay side by side in the still water. Vakor was waiting as Heath and Alor came aboard with the other Children of the Moon beside him. He motioned to the seamen who stood there also and said, "Seize them."

But the men were afraid and would not touch them.

Heath saw their faces and wondered. Then, as he looked at Alor, he realized that she was not as she had been before. There was something clean and shining about her now, a new depth and a new calm strength, and in her eyes a strange new beauty. He knew that he himself had changed. They were no longer gods, he and Alor, but they had bathed in the Moonfire and they would never again be quite the same.

He met Vakor's gaze and was not afraid.

The cruel, wolfish face of the priest lost some of its assurance. A queer look of doubt crossed over it.

He said, "Where is Broca?"

"We left him there, building empires in the mist."

"At the heart of the Moonfire?"

"Yes."

"You lie!" cried Vakor. "You could not have come back yourselves, from the heart of the sleeping god. No one ever has." But still the doubt was there.

Heath shrugged. "It doesn't really matter," he said, "whether you believe or not."

There was a long, strange silence. Then the four tall priests in their black tunics said to Vakor, "We must believe. Look into their eyes."

With a solemn ritual gesture they stepped back and left Vakor alone.

Vakor whispered, "It can't be true. The law, the taboo is built on that rock. Men will come out of the fringe as you did, Heath, wrecked and cursed by their blasphemy. But not from the Moonfire itself. Never! That is why the law was made, lest all of Venus die in dreams."

Alor said quietly, "All those others wanted power. We wanted only love. We needed nothing else."

Again there was silence while Vakor stared at them and struggled with himself. Then, very slowly, he said, "You are beyond my power. The sleeping god received you and has chosen to let you go unscathed. I am only a Child of the Moon. I may not judge."

He covered his face and turned away.

One of the lesser priests spoke to Johor. "Let them be given men for their oars."

And Heath and Alor understood that they were free.

Weeks later, Heath and Alor stood at dawn on the shore of the Sea of Morning Opals. The breeze was strong off the land. It filled the golden sail of the Ethne, so that she strained at her mooring lines, eager to be free.

Heath bent and cast them off.

They stood together silently and watched as the little ship gathered speed, going lightly, sweetly and alone into the glory of the morning. The ivory image that was her figurehead lifted its arms to the dawn and smiled and Heath waited there until the last bright gleam of the sail was lost and with it the last of his old life, his memories and his dreams.

Alor touched him gently. He turned and took her in his arms, and they walked away under the liha-trees, while the young day brightened

in the sky. And they thought how the light of the sun they never saw was more beautiful and full of promise than all the naked wonder of the Moonfire that they had held within their hands.

The Beast-Jewel of Mars

By Leigh Brackett

I

Burk Winters remained in the passenger section while the Starflight made her landing at Kahora Port. He did not think that he could bear to see another man, not even one he liked as much as he did Johnny Niles, handle the controls of the ship that had been his for so long.

He did not wish even to say goodbye to Johnny, but there was no avoiding it. The young officer was waiting for him as he came down the ramp, and the deep concern he felt was not hidden in the least by his casually hearty grin.

Johnny held out his hand. "So long, Burk. You've earned this leave. Have fun with it."

Burk Winters looked out over the vast tarmac that spread for miles across the ochre desert. An orderly, roaring confusion of trucks and flatcars and men and ships—ore ships, freighters, tramps, sleek liners like the Starflight, bearing the colors of three planets and a dozen colonies, but still arrogantly and predominantly Terran.

Johnny followed his gaze and said softly, "It always gives you a thrill, doesn't it?"

Winters did not answer. Miles away, safe from the thundering rocket blasts, the glassite dome of Kahora, Trade City for Mars, rose jewel-like out of the red sand. The little sun stared wearily down and the ancient hills considered it, and the old, old wandering wind passed over it, and it seemed as though the planet bore Kahora and its spaceport with patience, as though it were a small local infection that would soon be gone.

He had forgotten Johnny Niles. He had forgotten everything but his own dark thoughts. The young officer studied him with covert pity, and he did not know it.

Burk Winters was a big man, and a tough man, tempered by years of deep-space flying. The same glare of naked light that had burned his skin so dark had bleached his hair until it was almost white, and just in the last few months his gray eyes seemed to have caught and held a spark of that pitiless radiance. The easy good nature was gone out of them, and the lines that laughter had shaped around his mouth had deepened now into bitter scars.

A big man, a hard man, but a man who was no longer in control of himself. All during the voyage out from Earth he had chain-smoked the little Venusian cigarettes that have a sedative effect. He was smoking one now, and even so he could not keep his hands steady nor stop the everlasting tic in his right cheek.

"Burk." Johnny's voice came to him from a great distance; "Burk, it's none of my business, but . . ." He hesitated, then blurted out, "Do you think Mars is good for you, now?"

Quite abruptly, Winters said, "Take good care of the Starflight, Johnny. Goodbye."

He went away, down the ramp. The pilot stared after him.

The Second Officer came up to Johnny. "That guy has sure gone to pieces," he said.

Johnny nodded. He was angry, because he had come up under Winters and he loved him.

"The damn fool." he said. "He shouldn't have come here." He looked out over the mocking immensity of Mars and added, "His girl was lost out there, somewhere. They never found her body."

* * *

A spaceport taxi took Burk Winters into Kahora, and Mars vanished. He was back in the world of the Trade Cities, which belong to all planets, and none.

Vhia on Venus, N'York on Earth, Sun City in Mercury's Twilight Belt, the glassite refuges of the Outer Worlds, they were all alike. They were dedicated to the coddling of wealth and greed, little paradises

where millions were made and lost in comfort, where men and women from all over the Solar System could expend their feverish energies without regard for such annoyances as weather and gravitation.

Other things than the making of money were done in the Trade Cities. The lovely plastic buildings, the terraces and gardens and the glowing web of moving walks that spun them together, offered every pleasure and civilized vice of the known worlds.

Winters hated the Trade Cities. He was used to the elemental honesty of space. Here the speech, the dress, even the air one breathed, were artificial.

And he had a deeper reason than that for his hatred.

Yet he had left N'York in feverish haste to reach Kahora, and now that he was here he felt that he could not endure even the delay caused by the necessity of crossing the city. He sat tensely on the edge of the seat, and his nervous twitching grew worse by the minute.

When finally he reached his destination, he could not hold the money for his fare. He dropped the plastic tokens on the floor and left the driver to scramble for them.

He stood for a moment, looking up at the ivory facade before him. It was perfectly plain, the epitome of expensive unpretentiousness. Above the door, in small letters of greenish silver, was the one Martian word: Shanga.

"The return," he translated. "The going-back." A strange and rather terrible smile crossed his face, very briefly. Then he opened the door and went inside.

Subdued lighting, comfortable lounges, soft music, the perfect waiting room. There were half a dozen men and women there, all Terrans. They wore the fashionably simple white tunic of the Trade Cities, which set off the magnificent blaze of their jewelry and the exotic styles in which they dressed their hair.

Their faces were pallid and effeminate, scored with the haggard marks of life lived under the driving tension of a super-modern age.

A Martian woman sat in an alcove, behind a glassite desk. She was dark, sophisticatedly lovely. Her costume was the artfully adapted short robe of ancient Mars, and she wore no ornament. Her slanting topaz eyes regarded Burk Winters with professional pleasantness, but deep

in them he could see the scorn and the pride of a race so old that the Terran exquisites of the Trade Cities were only crude children beside it.

"Captain Winters," she said. "How nice to see you again."

He was in no mood for conventional pleasantries. "I want to see Kor Hal," he said. "Now."

"I'm afraid . . ." she began. Then she took another look at Winters' face and turned to the intercom. Presently she said, "You may go in."

He pushed open the door that led into the interior of the building, which consisted almost entirely of a huge solarium. Glassite walls enclosed it. Around the sides were many small cells, containing only a padded table. The roofs of the cells were quartz, and acted as mammoth lenses.

Skirting the solarium on the way to Kor Hal's office, Winters' mouth twisted with contempt as he looked through the transparent wall.

An exotic forest blossomed there. Trees, ferns, brilliant flowers, soft green sward, a myriad of birds. And through this mock-primitive playground wandered the men and women who were devotees of Shanga.

They lay first on the padded tables and let the radiation play with them. Winters knew. Neuro-psychic therapy, the doctors called it. Heritage of the lost wisdom of old Mars. Specific for the jangled nerves and overwrought emotions of modern man, who lived too fast in too complex an environment.

You lie there and the radiation tingles through you. Your glandular balance tips a little. Your brain slows down. All sorts of strange and pleasant things happen inside of you, while the radiation tinkers with nerves and reflexes and metabolism. And pretty soon you're a child again, in an evolutionary sort of way.

Shanga, the going-back. Mentally, and just a tiny bit physically, back to the primitive, until the effect wore off and the normal balance restored itself. And even then, for a while, you felt better and happier, because you'd had one hell of a rest, from everything.

Their pampered white bodies incongruously clad in skins and bits of colored cloth, the Earthlings of Kahora played and fought among

the trees, and their worries were simple ones concerning food and love and strings of gaudy beads.

Hidden away out of sight were watchful men with shock guns. Sometimes someone went a little bit too far down the road. Winters knew. He had been knocked cold himself, on his last visit here. He remembered that he had tried to kill a man.

Or rather, he had been told that he had tried to kill a man. One did not remember much of the interludes of Shanga. That was one reason people liked it. One was free of inhibitions.

Fashionable vice, made respectable by the cloak of science. It was a new kind of excitement, a new kind of escape from the glittering complexities of life. The Terrans were mad for it.

But only the Terrans. The barbaric Venusians were still too close to the savage to have any need for it, and the Martians were too old and wise in sin to use it. Besides, thought Winters, they made Shanga. They know.

A deep shudder ran through him as he thrust his way into the office of Kor Hal, the director.

Kor Hal was lean and dark and of no particular age. His national origin was lost in the anonymity of the conventional white tunic. He was Martian, and his courtesy was only a velvet sheath over chilled steel, but beyond that he was quantity X.

"Captain Winters," he said. "Please sit down."

Winters sat.

Kor Hal studied him. "You're nervous, Captain Winters. But I am afraid to treat you anymore. Atavism lies too close to the surface in you." He shrugged. "You remember the last time."

Winters nodded. "The same thing happened in N'York." He leaned forward. "I don't want you to treat me anymore. What you have here isn't enough now. Sar Kree told me that, in N'York. He told me to come to Mars."

Kor Hal said quietly, "He communicated with me."

"Then you will . . ." Winters broke off, because there were no words with which to finish his question.

Kor Hal did not answer. He reclined at ease against the cushions of his lounge chair, handsome, unconcerned. Only his eyes, which were

green and feral, held a buried spark of amusement. The cruel amusement of a cat which has a crippled mouse under its paw.

"Are you sure," he asked finally, "that you know what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"People differ, Captain Winters. Those mannikins out there"—he indicated the solarium—"have neither blood nor heart. They are artificial products of an artificial environment. But men like you, Winters, are playing with fire when they play with Shanga."

"Listen," said Winters. "The girl I was going to marry took her flier out over the desert one day and never came back. God only knows what happened to her. You know better than I do the things that can happen to people in the dead sea bottoms. I hunted for her. I found her flier, where it had crashed. I never found her. After that nothing mattered much to me. Nothing but forgetting."

Kor Hal inclined his dark, narrow head. "I remember. A tragedy, Captain Winters. I knew Miss Leland, a lovely young woman. She used to come here."

"I know," said Winters. "She wasn't Trade City, really, but she had too much money and too much time. Anyway, I'm not worried about playing with your fire, Kor Hal. I've been burned too deep with it already. Like you say, people differ. Those lily-whites in their toy jungle, they have no desire to go back any farther. They haven't the guts or the passions to want to. I have."

Winters' eyes blazed with a peculiarly animal light. "I want to go back, Kor Hal. Back as far as Shanga will take me."

"Sometimes," said the Martian, "that's a long way."

"I don't care."

Kor Hal gave him an intent look. "For some, there is no return."

"I have nothing to return to."

"It is not easy, Winters. Shanga—the real Shanga, of which these solariums and quartz lenses are only a weak copy, was forbidden centuries ago by the City-States of Mars. There are risks, and discomforts, which means that the process is expensive."

"I have money." Winters leaped up suddenly, his control breaking. "Be damned to your arguments! They're all hypocrisy, anyway. You

know perfectly well which ones are going to take to Shanga. You keep them coming until they're addicts, half crazy to feel the real thing, and you know damn well you're going to give them what they want as soon as they cross your dirty palm with silver."

He tossed a checkbook on Kor Hal's desk. The top one was blank, but signed.

"There," he said. "Anything up to a hundred-thousand Universal Credits."

"I would prefer," said Kor Hal, "that you draw your own check, to cash." He handed the checkbook back to Winters. "The full amount, in advance."

Burk Winters said one word. "When?"

"Tonight, if you wish. Where are you staying?"

"The Tri-Planet."

"Have dinner there as usual. Then remain in the bar. Sometime during the evening your guide will join you."

"I'll be waiting," Winters said, and went out.

Kor Hal smiled. His teeth were very white, very sharp. They had the hungry look of fangs.

II

Burk Winters got his bearings finally when Phobos rose, and he could guess where they were heading.

They had slipped quietly out of Kahora, he and the slender young Martian who had joined him unobtrusively in the Tri-Planet bar. A flier waited for them on a private field. Kor Hal waited also. They took off, with a fourth man, who looked to be one of the big barbarians from the northern hills of Kesh. Kor Hal took the controls.

Winters was sure now that they were bound for the Low Canals, the ancient waterways and the ancient wicked towns—Jekkara, Valkis, Barrakesh—outside the laws of the scattered City-States. Thieves' market, slave market, vice market of a world. Earthmen were warned to keep away from them.

Miles reeled behind them. The utter desolation of the landscape below got on Winters' nerves. The silence in the flier became unendurable. There was something menacing about it. Kor Hal and the big Keshi and the slim young man seemed to be nursing some common inner thought that gave them a peculiarly vicious pleasure. Its shadow showed on their faces.

Winters spoke finally, "Are your headquarters out here?"

No answer.

Winters said rather petulantly, "There's no need to be so secretive. After all, I'm one of you now."

The slim young man said sharply, "Do the beasts lie down with the masters?"

Winters started to bristle, and the barbarian put his hand on the wicked little sap he carried at his belt. Then Kor Hal spoke coolly.

"You wished to practice Shanga in its true form, Captain Winters. That is what you have paid for. That is what you will receive. All else is irrelevant."

Winters shrugged sulkily. He sat smoking his sedative tobacco, and he did not speak again.

After a long, long time the seemingly endless desert began to change. Low ridges rose naked from the sand and grew into a mountain range, of which nothing was left now but the barren rock.

Beyond the mountains lay a dead sea bottom. It stretched away under the moonlight, dropping, always dropping, until at last it became only a vast pit of darkness. Ribs of chalk and coral gleamed here and there, pushing through the lichens like bones through the dried skin of a man long dead.

Winters saw that there was a city between the foothills and the sea.

It had followed the receding water down the slopes. From this height, Winters could see the outlines of five harbors, abandoned one by one as the sea drew back, the great stone docks still standing. Houses had been built to fill their emptiness, and then abandoned in their turn for a lower level.

Now the straggling town had coalesced along the bank of the canal that drew what feeble life was left from the buried springs of the

bottom. There was something infinitely sad about that thin dark line—all that was left of a blue and rolling ocean.

The flier circled and came down. The Keshi said something rapidly in his own dialect, from which Winters caught the one word, Valkis. Kor Hal answered him. Then he turned to Winters and said:

"We have not far to go. Stay close by me."

The four men left the flier. Winters knew that he was under guard, and felt that it was not entirely for the sake of protecting him.

The wind blew thin and dry. Dust rose in clouds around their feet. Valkis lay ahead, a stony darkness sprawling upward toward the cliffs, cold in the eerie light of the twin moons. Winters saw, high up on the crest, the broken towers of a palace.

They walked beside still black water, on paving stones worn hollow by the sandaled feet of countless generations. Even at this late hour, Valkis did not sleep. Torches burned yellow against the night. Somewhere a double-banked harp made strange music. The streets, the alley mouths, the doorways and the flat roofs of the houses rustled with life.

Lithe lean men and catlike women watched the strangers, hot-eyed and silent. And over all, Winters heard the particular sound of the Low Canal towns—the whispering and chiming of the wanton little bells that the women wear, braided into their dark hair, hanging from their ears, chained around their ankles.

Evil, that town. Ancient, and very evil, but not tired. Winters could feel the pulse of life that beat there, strong and hot. He was afraid. His own civilian garb and the white tunics of his companions were terribly conspicuous in this place of bare breasts and bright kilts and jeweled girdles.

No one molested them. Kor Hal led the way into a large house and shut the door of beaten bronze behind them, and Winters felt a great relief. He turned to Kor Hal.

"How soon?" he asked, and tried to conceal the trembling of his hands.

"Everything is ready, Winters. Halk, show him the way."

The Keshi nodded and went off, with Winters at his heels.

This was very different from the Hall of Shanga in Kahora. Within these walls of quarried stone, men and women had lived and loved and died in violence. The blood and tears of centuries had dried in the cracks between the flags. The rugs, the tapestries, and the furnishings were worth a fortune as antiques. Their beauty was worn, but still bright.

At the end of a corridor was a bronze door, pierced by a narrow grille.

Halk stopped. He said to Winters, "Strip."

Winters hesitated. He carried a gun, and he did not like to leave it behind. "Why out here? I'd rather have my clothes with me."

Halk said, "Strip here. It is the rule."

Winters obeyed.

He walked naked into the narrow cell. There was no comfortable table here, only a few skins thrown on the bare floor. A barred opening showed darkly in the opposite wall.

The bronze door rang shut behind him and he heard the great bar drop into place. It was completely dark. He was really afraid, now. Terribly afraid. But it was too late for that. It had been too late, for a long time.

Ever since Jill Leland was lost.

He lay down on the hides. High above, in the vault of the roof, he could make out a faint, vague shimmering. It grew brighter. Presently he saw that it was a prism set into the stone, rather large and cut from a crystalline substance that was the color of fire.

Kor Hal's voice reached him through the grille. "Earthman!"

"Yes?"

"That prism is one of the Jewels of Shanga. The wise men of Caer Dhu carved them half a million years ago. Only they knew the secret of the substance, and the shaping of the facets. There are only three of the jewels left."

Sparks that were more energy than light flickered on the stone walls of the cell. Gold and orange and greenish blue. Little flames, the fire of Shanga, to burn the heart.

Because he was afraid, Winters said, "But the radiation, the ray that comes through the prism. Is it the same as that in Kahora?"

"Yes. The secret of the projectors was lost also with Caer Dhu. Presumably they use cosmic rays. By substituting ordinary quartz for the prisms, we could make the radiation weak enough for our purpose in the Trade Cities."

"Who is 'we,' Kor Hal?"

Laughter, soft and wicked. "Earthman—we are Mars!"

Dancing fire, growing, growing, glinting on his flesh, darting through his blood, his brain. It was not like this in the solariums, with their pretty trees. It was pleasure there, tantalizing, heady pleasure. It was exciting, and strange. But this . . .

His body began to move, to arch itself into strong writhing curves. He thought he could not endure the lovely, lovely pain.

Kor Hal's voice boomed down some huge fateful distance. "The wise men of Caer Dhu were not so wise. They found the secret of Shanga, and they escaped their wars and their troubles by fleeing backward along the path of evolution. Do you know what happened to them? They perished, Earthman! In one generation, Caer Dhu vanished from the face of Mars." It was getting hard to answer, hard to think. Winters said hoarsely, "Did it matter? They were happy, while they lived."

"Are you happy, Earthman?"

"Yes!" he panted. "Yes!"

The words were only half articulate. Twisting, rolling on the hide rugs, in the grip of such magnificent, unholy sensation as he had never dreamed of before, Burk Winters was happy. The fire of Shanga blazed down upon him like a melting away, and there was nothing left but joy.

Again, Kor Hal laughed.

* * *

After that, Winters was not sure of anything. His mind rocked, and there were periods of darkness. When he was conscious, he knew only a feeling of strangeness. But he carried one memory with him, at least part way down that eerie road.

During a lucid period, a space of only a minute or two, he thought that one of the stones had rolled back to reveal a quartzite screen, and

that through the screen a face looked at him, watching as he bathed naked in the beautiful flame.

A woman's face. Martian, highbred, with strong delicate bones and arrogant brows, and a red mouth that would be like a bittersweet fruit to kiss. Her eyes were golden as the fire, and as hot, and proud, and scornful.

There must have been a microphone in the wall, for she spoke and he heard her voice, full of a sweet cruel magic. She called his name. He could not rise, but he managed to crawl toward her, and to his reeling brain she was part of the unearthly force that played with him. A destruction and a fascination, as irresistible as death.

To his alien eyes, she was not as lovely as Jill. But there was a power in her. And her red mouth taunted him, and the curve of her bare shoulders drove him to madness.

"You're strong," she said. "You will live, until the end. And that is well, Burk Winters."

He tried to speak, but he could no longer form the words.

She smiled. "You have challenged me, Earthman. I know. You've challenged Shanga. You're brave, and I like brave men. You're also a fool, and I like fools, because they give me sport. I'm looking forward, Earthman, to the moment when you reach the end of your search!"

He tried again to speak, and failed, and then the night and the silence came to stay. He took the sound of her mocking laughter with him into the dark.

* * *

He did not think of himself now as Captain Burk Winters, but only by the short personal name of Burk. The stones upon which he lay were cold and hard. It was pitch-dark, but his eyes and ears were very keen. He could tell by the sound of his breathing that he was in a closed space, and he did not like it.

A low growl rumbled in his throat. The hairs stiffened at the back of his neck. He tried to remember how he had come here. Something had happened, something to do with fire, but he did not know what, or why.

Only one thing he knew. He was searching for something. It was gone, and he wanted it back. The wanting was a pain in him. He could not remember what the object was that he wanted, but the need for it was greater than any obstacle short of death.

He rose and began to explore his prison.

Almost at once he found an opening. Cautious testing told him that there was a passage beyond. He could see nothing, but the air that blew in to him was very heavy with strange smells. Instinct told him that it was a trap. He crouched resolute, his hands opening and closing in desire for a weapon. There was no weapon. Presently he went into the passage, moving without sound.

He went a long way, his shoulders brushing stone on either side. Then he saw light ahead, red and flickering, and the air brought him the taint of smoke, and the smell of man.

Very, very slowly, the creature called Burk padded toward the light.

He came close to the end of the tunnel, and suddenly a barred gate dropped behind him with a ringing clash. He could not go back.

He did not wish to go back. Enemies were in front of him, and he wished to fight. He knew now that he could not come upon them secretly. Flexing his great chest, he leaped out boldly from the tunnel mouth.

The tossing glare of torches dazzled his eyes, and a wild mob howl deafened him. He stood alone on a great block—the old slave block of Valkis, though he did not know that. They stared up, jeering at the Earthman who had tasted the forbidden fruit that even the soulless men of the Low Canals would not touch.

The creature called Burk was still a man, but a man already shadowed by the ape. During the hours he had bathed in the light of Shanga, he had changed physically. Bone and flesh had altered under the accelerated urging of glands and increased metabolism.

Already a big, powerful man, he had thickened and coarsened along the lines of brutish strength. His jaw and brow ridges jutted. Thick hair covered his chest and limbs and extended in a rudimentary mane down the back of his neck. His deep-set eyes had a hard and cunning gleam of intelligence, but it was the intelligence of the

primitive mind that had learned to speak and make fire and weapons, and no more than that.

Half crouching, he glared down at the crowd. He did not know who these men were; he hated them. They were of another tribe, and their very smell was alien. They hated him, too. The air bristled with their enmity.

His gaze fell on a man who stepped out lightly and proudly into the empty space. He did not remember that this man's name was Kor Hal. He did not notice that Kor Hal had shed the white tunic of the Trade Cities for the kilt and girdle of the Low Canals, nor that he wore in his ears the pierced gold rings of Barrakesh, and was now honestly himself—a bandit, born and bred among a race of bandits who had been civilized for so long that they could afford to forget it.

Burk knew only that this man was his particular enemy.

"Captain Burk Winters," said Kor Hal. "Man of the tribe of Terra—Lords of the spaceways, builders of the Trade Cities, masters of greed and rapine."

His voice carried over the packed square, though he did not shout. Burk watched him, his eyes like blinking red sparks in the torchlight, weaving slightly on his feet, his hands swinging loose and hungry. He did not understand the words, but they were threat and insult.

"Look at him, Oh men of Valkis!" cried Kor Hal. "He is our master now. His government kings it over the City-States of Mars. Our pride is stripped, our wealth is gone. What have we left, oh children of a dying world?"

The answer that rang the walls of Valkis was soft and wordless, the opening chord of a hymn written in hell.

Someone threw a stone.

Burk came down off the slave block in a great effortless sprig and sped across the square, straight for Kor Hal's throat.

A laugh went up, mirth that was half a cat-scream of sheer savagery. Like one supple creature, the crowd moved. Torchlight flashed from knife-blade and jewels and eyes of glittering green and topaz, and the small chiming bells, and the points of the deadly spiked knuckle-dusters. Long black tongues of whips licked out with a hiss and a crack.

Kor Hal waited until Burk almost reached him. Then he bent and pivoted in the graceful Martian savatte. His foot caught Burk under the chin and sent him sprawling.

As he rolled half stunned, Kor Hal caught a whip from a man's hand.

"That's it, Earthman!" he cried out. "Grovel! Belly down, and lick the stones that were here before the apes of Earth had learned to walk!"

The long lash sang and bit, lacing the hairy body with red weals, and the harsh mob scream went up—Drive him! Drive the beast of Shanga, as the invading beasts of old were driven by our forefathers!

And they drove him, with whip and knife and spike, through the streets of Valkis under the racing moons. Jeering they drove him.

He fought them. Mad with fury, he fought them, but he could not come to grips with them. When he lunged they melted before him, and each way he turned he was met by the lash and the blade and the crippling lick. Blood ran, but it was all his own, and the high shrill laughter of women pursued him as he went.

At last there was only fear and the desire to escape.

They let him run. Along the crumbling ways of Valkis, up and down the twisting alleys that reeked of ancient crime, they let him run. But not too far. They blocked him off from the canal and the freedom of the sea bottom beyond. Again and again they headed the panting, shambling creature that had been Burk Winters, captain of the Starflight, and drove it higher up the slope.

Burk moved slowly now. He snarled and his head wove blindly from side to side in a pathetic attempt at defiance. His blood dripped hot on the stones. And always the insolent stinging lashes drove him on.

Up and up. Past the great looming docks, with the bollards and the scars of moored ships still on them, and the dust of their own decay lapping dry around their feet. Four levels above the canal. Four harbors, four cities, four epochs written in fading characters of stone. Even the dawn-man Burk was oppressed and frightened.

There was no life here. There been no life for a long time, even in the lowest level. The wind had scoured and polished the empty houses, smoothing the corners to roundness, hollowing the doors and

windows, until the work of man was almost erased. Only strange things were left, that looked as though the wind had made them by itself out of little mountain tops.

The people of Valkis were silent now. They drove the beast, and their hate had not abated, but was intensified.

They walked here upon the very bones of their world. Earth was a green star, young and rich. Here the Martians passed the marble pier where the Kings of Valkis had moored their galleys, and the very marble was shattered under the heel of time.

High on the ridge above the oldest city the palace of the kings looked down at the scourging of the interloper. And in all of Valkis now there was no sound but the whispering of little bells that was like the sigh of wind on another world, where the women ran on their small bare feet, ankle deep in dust.

Burk climbed apeline up the history of Mars. His belly was cold with a terror of these dark places that smelled of nothing, not even of death.

He passed a place where houses had been built within the curve of a coral reef. He clambered over the reef, and saw above him a sloping face of rock with gaping holes that the sea had made. He climbed that, not knowing or caring what it was.

On the level space above he passed the broken quays that had once made safe mooring in the bay, and stopped to look back.

They were still hunting him. His flanks heaved and his eyes were desperate. He went on, scrambling up steep narrow streets where the paving blocks had fallen out and the houses had come down in shapeless heaps, and his hands and feet left red prints where he put them down.

Then, at last, he was at the top of the ridge.

The great bulk of the palace loomed above him against the sky. Primitive wisdom told him the place was dangerous. He skirted the high wall of marble that ringed it, and suddenly his twitching nostrils caught the scent of water.

His tongue was swollen in his mouth, his throat choked with dust. His need was so great, with the salt bleeding and the fever of his wounds, that he forgot his enemies and the menace of the mountain-

thing behind the wall. Breaking into a ragged lope, he went forward along the cliff top until he came to a gateway, and plunged through it, and suddenly there was turf under his feet, soft and cool. There were shrubs, and flowers pale in the moonlight, heavily sweet, and dark branches against the sky.

The gate closed silently behind him. He did not see it. He ran down a grassy ride between rows of trees trimmed into fantastic shapes, guided by the smell of water. Here and there were strange gleams and glints of statuary, wrought in marble and semiprecious stones. Burk's skin crawled with an awareness of danger, but he was too weary and too mad with thirst to care.

The ride ended. Beyond was an open space, and in the center of it was a great sunken tank, carved and ornamented. The water in it was like polished jet.

Nothing stirred in the open. A wing of the palace rose beyond the tank like a black wall, and it seemed that nothing lived there, but Burk's hair-trigger nerves told him otherwise. He stopped in the shelter of the trees, sniffing the air and listening.

Nothing. Darkness and silence. Burk looked at the waiting water. It filled all his senses. Suddenly he ran toward it.

He flung himself belly down on the slabs of turquoise that paved the brink and buried his face in the icy water and drank. Then he lay there panting, utterly spent.

Still nothing moved.

Then, all at once, a long howl rose on the night, from somewhere beyond the palace wing. Burk stiffened. He got to his hands and knees, every hair on his body bristling with fear.

The howl was answered by a strange reptilian scream.

Now that he had satisfied his thirst, the night wind brought him many odors. They were too numerous and tangled to be identified, except for a strong musky taint that made his flesh crawl with instinctive loathing. He did not know what sort of creature gave off that taint, but it filled him with horror, because it seemed that he almost knew—and did not want to.

He wanted only to get away from that place, that was so full of secret life and hidden menace and silence.

He began to move toward the trees, back the way he had come. Slowly, because he was wounded and very weak. And then, quite suddenly, he saw her.

She had come without sound into the open space, out of the shelter of huge flowering shrubs. She stood not far away, in the shifting glow of the little racing moons, watching him. She was shy and large-eyed, poised for flight. The hair that hung down her back and the shining down that covered her body were the color of the moonlight.

Burk stopped. A tremor went through him. All his sense of loss and his desperate searching came back to him, and with them a desire to be closer to this slender she.

A name spoke itself from some dim chamber of his soul "Jill?"

She started. He thought she was going to run away, and he cried out again, "Jill!" Then, step by step, uncertainly, she came nearer, lovely as a fawn in spring.

She made a questioning sound, and he answered. "Burk." She stood still for a moment, repeating the word, and then she whimpered and began to run toward him, and he was filled with a great joy. He laughed and mouthed her name over and over, and there were tears in his eyes. He reached out toward her.

A spear flashed and fell quivering between them.

She gave him a cry of warning and fled, vanishing into the shrubbery. Burk tried to follow, but his knees gave under him. He turned, snarling.

Tall Keshi guards in resplendent harness had come out of the trees, circling behind him. They carried spears and a net of heavy ropes. In a moment he was surrounded! The spear-points pricked him back until the net was thrown and he went down helpless.

As they carried him away, he heard two things. The wail of the silver she, and from somewhere nearby, a woman's mocking laughter.

He had heard that laughter before. He could not remember where, or how, but it filled him with such fury that he was finally knocked over the head with a spear-butt, to keep him quiet.

III

He came to himself—the self that was Captain Burk Winters—in a room that was much like the one he last remembered, in Valkis, except that the walls were of a dark green rock and there was no prism.

Winters could not remember anything of what had happened since that last room, except that he knew he had had a strong emotional shock. Jill's name was uppermost in his mind. He began to tremble with a deep excitement. He got to his feet, and it was then that he realized he was shackled. Chains ran from cuffs on his wrists to similar cuffs on his ankles, passing through rings on a metal belt around his waist. These constituted his entire clothing. He saw also that there were freshly healed scars on his body. The heavy door was opened for him before he could begin to pound on it. Four tall barbarians, their harness magnificent with jewels and wrought metal, formed up a guard around him, and an officer led the way. They did not speak to Winters, and he knew the uselessness of trying to get anything out of them.

He had not the faintest idea where he was, or how he had come there, beyond a vague memory of pain and flight that was like something he had dreamed.

And somewhere, during that dream, he had seen Jill, spoken to her. He was as certain of that as he was of the weight of his chains.

He stumbled, because his sight was blurred with tears. Up to then, he had not been sure. He had seen the twisted wreck of her flier, and while he did not believe it, there was always the chance that she might really be dead, and lost to him beyond all hope.

Now he knew. She was alive, and if Winters had been alone he would have wept like a child.

Instead, he studied the corridors and the great halls through which the guard took him. From the size and the splendor of them he knew that he was in a palace, and guessed that it might be the one he had seen on the cliffs above Valkis. This was confirmed when he caught a glimpse of the town through a window embrasure.

The palace was older than anything he had seen on Mars, except for the buried ruins of Lhak in the northern deserts. But this was no ruin. It had grown old in somber beauty. The patterns of the mosaic floors were blurred, the precious stones worn thin as porcelain. The tapestries, preserved by the wonderful Martian formula that had been lost for centuries, like everything else on Mars, had grown frail and brittle, their colors all softened to faint glows, infinitely sad and lovely.

Here and there, on the walls or the soaring vault of a roof, were murals—magnificent pageants of lost glory, dim as an old man's memory. The seas they pictured were deep and blue, and the ships were tall, and the mail of the warriors was set with gems, and the captive queens were beautiful as dusky pearls.

Proud architecture, mating beauty with strength, and showing that strange blend of culture and barbarism that is so typically Martian. Winters reflected on how long ago these stones had been quarried, and went on to reflect that at that time civilization had already destroyed itself in a series of atomic wars, and the proud Kings of Valkis were only bandit chieftains in a world that was slipping downward toward the night.

They came at length to doors of beaten gold that were more than twice Burk's six-foot height. The Keshi guards who stood there pushed them wide, and Burk saw the throne room.

Westering sunlight slanted in from the high embrasures, falling across the pillars and the tessellated floor. The pale light touched vagrant glints from the shields and the weapons of dead kings, warmed the old banners to brief life. Everywhere else in that vast place was a brooding darkness, full of whispers and small faint echoing.

A shaft of cool gold fell directly upon the throne at the far end of the room.

The high seat itself was cut from a single block of black basalt, and as Winters approached it, his swinging chains making a loud sound in the silence, he saw that the stone had been already half shaped by the sea. It was very worn and smooth with the patient sanding of the tides, and where hands had lain on the armpieces there were deep hollows, and on the basalt step below.

An old woman sat upon the throne. She was wrapped in a black cloak, and her hair wound into a sort of white crown on her head, braided with jewels. She stared with half-blind eyes at the Earthman, and suddenly she spoke, in sonorous High Martian, a tongue as antique on Mars as Sanskrit is on Earth. Winters could not understand one word of it, but he knew from her tone and expression that she was quite mad.

Someone sat in the heavy shadows by her feet, outside the shaft of sunlight, and veiled by it from Winters' sight. He could catch only a vague pallor of ivory-tinted flesh, but for some reason his nerves tingled with premonition.

As he neared the high seat, the old woman rose and stretched out her arm toward him, a wrinkled Cassandra crying doom upon his head. The wild echoes of her voice rolled from the vaulted roof, and her eyes were full of a blazing hate.

The guards set the butts of their spears into his back so that he was thrown face down before the basalt step. A low, sweet, mocking laugh came out of the shadows, and he felt the pressure of a little sandaled foot on his neck.

He knew the voice that said, "Greeting, Captain Winters! The throne of Valkis welcomes you."

The foot was withdrawn from his neck. He rose. The old woman had fallen back onto the throne. She was intoning what sounded like a church litany, and her upturned face had an exalted look.

The remembered voice said out of the dimness, "My mother is repeating the coronation rites. Presently she will demand the year's tribute from the Outer Islands and the coastal tribes. Time and reality do not bother her, and it pleases her to play at being queen. Therefore, as you see, I, Fand, rule Valkis from the shadow of the throne."

"Sometimes," Winters said, "you must come into the light."

"Yes."

A soft, quick rustle and she was standing there in the shaft of sunlight. Her hair was the color of night after moonset, intricately coiled. She was dressed in the old, arrogant fashion of the bandit kingdoms—the long full skirt slit to the waist at the sides, so that her thighs showed when she moved, the wide jeweled girdle, collar of

golden plaques. Her small, high breasts were bare and lovely, her body slender, with a catlike grace.

Her face was as he remembered it. Proud and fine, golden-eyed, a mouth like a red fruit that mingled honey and poison, a lazy, slumberous power behind the beauty, the fascination of all things that are at once beautiful and deadly.

She looked at Winters and smiled. "So at last you have reached the end of your search."

He looked down at his chains and his nakedness. "A strange way to reach it. I paid Kor Hal well for this privilege." He gave her a searching glance. "Do you rule Shanga, as well as Valkis? If so you're not very courteous to your guests."

"On the contrary, I treat them very well—as you shall see." Her golden eyes taunted him. "But you didn't come here to practice Shanga, Captain Winters."

"Why else would I have come?"

"To find Jill Leland."

He was not really surprised. Subconsciously he had known that she knew. But he managed a look of blank amazement.

"Jill Leland is dead."

"Was she, when you saw her in the garden, and spoke to her?" Fand laughed. "Do you think we're such fools? Everyone who comes to the Hall of Shanga in the Trade Cities is carefully checked and examined. We were particularly careful with you, Captain Winters, because psychologically you were the wrong type to be drawn to Shanga. Men like you are too strong to need escape.

"You knew, of course, that your fiancée had taken up the practice. You didn't like it, and tried to make her stop. Kor Hal said that she was terribly upset about it on several occasions. But Jill had gone too far to stop. She begged to be allowed the full power, the real Shanga. She helped us plan her supposed death in the sea bottom. We would have done that anyway, for our own protection, since the girl has influential connections and we can't afford to have people hunting for our clients. But she wanted you to believe that she was dead, so that you would forget her. She felt she had no right to marry you, that she would ruin

your life. Doesn't that touch you, Captain Winters? Doesn't that bring tears to your eyes?"

It brought more than that to Winters. It brought an overpowering urge to take this lovely she-devil between his hands and break her and then stamp the pieces into the earth.

His chains made one harsh jangling sound, and then the spears came up and touched his flesh with sharp red kisses. He stood still and said, "Why have you done this? Is it for money, or for hate?"

"For both, Earthman! And for something more important than either of them." Her lips curved in brief amusement. "Besides, I've done nothing to your people. I built the Halls of Shanga, yes. But the men and women of Earth degrade themselves of their own free will. Come here."

She motioned him to follow her to the window. As she crossed the vast room, she said, "You have seen part of the palace. Earth credits have rebuilt and restored the house of my fathers. The credits of apelings who wish to return to their normal state because the civilization they have forced themselves is too much for them. Look out there. Earth money has done that, too."

Winters looked out upon a sight that had almost vanished from the face of Mars. A garden, the varied and jewel-bright garden that would have belonged with a palace like this. Broad lawns of bronze green turf, formal plantings, statuary . . .

For some reason he could not quite remember, that garden gave Burk Winters a cold shuddering chill.

But the garden itself was only a part of what he saw. A small part. Beneath the window the ground sloped away into a vast bowl-shaped depression, perhaps a quarter-mile away, and Winters looked down into an amphitheater. Ruined as it was, it was still magnificent, with tiers of seats rising like steps of hewn stone from the inner walls. He thought of how it must have looked when the games were held in the old days, with all of those thousands of places filled.

Now, in the arena, there was another garden. A wild and tangled garden, closed in by the high protective walls that had kept the beasts from the spectators. There were trees in it, and open spaces, and he could make out moving forms among the shadows, strange forms. He

could not see them clearly for the distance and the slanting light, but a chill pang struck through him, a cold breath of foreboding.

In the center of the arena was a lake. Not a large one, and probably not deep, but there were creatures splashing in it, and he caught the faint echo of a reptilian scream. An echo he had heard before. . . .

Fand was looking outward to the amphitheater, with an odd, slow smile. Winters saw that there were people already in the lower tiers of the seats, and more of them gathering.

"What is this thing," he asked her, "that is more important than money or your hatred for the men of Earth?"

All the ancient pride of her race and house flashed out in her eyes as she answered him. He forgot his loathing of her for a moment, in his respect for her deep sincerity.

She said only one word. "Mars."

The old woman heard her and cried out from the throne. Then she flung the corner of her black mantle over her head and was silent.

"Mars," said Fand quietly. "The world that could not even die in decency and honor, because the carrion birds came flying to pick its bones, and the greedy rats suck away the last of its blood and pride."

Winters said, "I don't understand. What has Shanga to do with Mars?"

"You'll see." She turned on him suddenly. "You challenged Shanga, Earthman, just as your people have challenged Mars. We'll find out which is the stronger!"

She motioned to the officer of the guard, who went away. Then she said to Winters, "You wanted your girl back. You were willing to go through the fire of Shanga for her, though you abhorred it. You were willing to risk your identity through the changes of the ray—which after a while, Earthman, never go away. And all for Jill Leland. Do you still want her back?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of that."

"Yes."

"Very well." Fand glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "There she is."

For a long moment, Burk Winters did not turn around. Fand moved away a little, watching with a cruel, amused interest. Winters' back stiffened. He turned.

She was there, standing in the sunlight, bewildered, frightened, a wild and shining creature out of the dawn of the world, with a rope around her neck. The guards were laughing.

Winters thought desperately, She has not changed too much. Back to the primitive, but not yet to the ape. There is a soul still in her eyes, and the light of reason.

Jill, Jill! How could you have done this thing?

But he understood now how she could have done it. He remembered how bitterly he had quarreled with her over Shanga. He had thought it a stupid and childish thing, far beneath her intelligence and as degrading as any other drug. But he had not understood.

He did now. And he was filled with a deadly fear, because he understood so well.

Because he himself was now numbered among the beasts of Shanga. And beneath his horror as he looked at the creature that was Jill and yet not Jill, he was aware that in some unholy way he found her more beautiful and more alluring than he ever had before. Stripped of all the shams and the studied unconvensions of society, freed of all complexity, her body strong and fleet as a doe's quivering with sensitive life . . .

It would take two of a kind. Dawn-woman, dawn-man. Strong sinew, strong passion, the guts that cities stole away . . .

Fand said, "She can still be saved, if you can find a way to do it." Then she added shrewdly, "Unless you now need someone to save you, Captain Winters!"

A strong shock of revulsion rocked him, but his eyes still held a strange light.

The silver she was coming toward him. Her gaze was fixed upon him. He saw that she was drawn to him, and struggling to understand why. She did not speak, and somehow Winters' throat closed on an aching lump, so that he too was dumb.

The guard who held her rope let her move as she would. She came close to Winters, hesitantly, as an animal does. Then she stopped and

looked up into his face. Tears gathered in her wide dark eyes. Presently she whimpered, very softly, and went down on her knees at his feet.

The old woman let out a shrill cackling. Fand's eyes were like cups of molten gold.

Winters bent over and caught Jill in his arms. He lifted her to her feet and stood holding her to him, in a fury of protective possessive love. He said very softly to Fand, "You've seen it all now. Can we go?"

She nodded. "Take them to the garden of Shanga," she said, and added, "It is almost time."

The guards took them, Burk Winters and the woman he had lost and found again, out through the great echoing halls of the palace and down the long slope of lawn to the amphitheater.

A barred gate of heavy metal covered the mouth of a tunnel. The guards unlocked it and took off Winters' chains and thrust him inside with Jill. The gate was locked again behind them.

Holding Jill tightly by the hand, Winters went down the tunnel and came presently into the arena—into the garden of Shanga.

He stopped, blinking in the sudden light. Jill's hand tightened on his. She quivered with a tense expectancy, and her head was tilted in an attitude of listening.

He had only a moment before the gong sounded, the mellow sonorous notes that might have been calling some evil priesthood to its dark prayers. Only a moment to glimpse the trees and the shambling anthropoid forms that moved among them, to catch the rank beast taint in the air, to hear the splashing and the hissing screams from the hidden pool.

Only a moment to be filled with horror and a sick fear, to deny to himself the reality of this nightmare garden, to wish that he were blind and deaf, or better than that, dead.

In the seats above the protecting wall, rows of Martian faces looked down. They were the faces of men and women who watch the antics of creatures in a zoo—destructive creatures for which they have a personal hatred.

Then the gong called out, and Jill leaped away, pulling him by the hand. All over the garden there was a moment of intense silence, and then there rose a devil's chorus of roaring and screaming in voices that

were horribly human and even more horribly not, and close to him Jill's voice chimed in, saying over and over, "Shanga! Shanga!"

It came to Winters in a flash, then, what Fand had meant about Mars. As Jill pulled him headlong between the trees and across the open grassy spaces, he realized that this garden of Shanga was in fact a zoo, an exhibit, where the people of Mars might come to see what manner of beast their economic conquerors were. A hot and dire shame rose in him. Apeling, running naked through the trees, a slave to the fire of Shanga!

He yelled at Jill to stop!

She only plunged on the harder, so that he had to fight her, setting his heels in the earth. And she turned on him snarling, saying, "Shanga!"

A great anthropoid male came rushing toward them. He had slipped back beyond speech, but ecstatic noises came out of his throat. Behind him were others, males, females, and young on the same evolutionary level. Winters and the silver she that was Jill were caught up and carried on in their tribal rush. Winters fought to get away, but it was hopeless. The wild hairy bodies walled him in.

As they approached the center of the garden they were joined by more and more, all apparently summoned by the sound of the gong. Looking at them, Winters' stomach turned over. This was Walpurgis Night, a festival of blasphemies. And he was trapped in it, inextricably joined to destruction.

The ones like Jill, who had only gone a little way as yet, were not so bad. They were human. Winters knew that he himself had been like that, and he felt no particular horror of them. But there were others. Back through all the stages of the primitive, beyond the Neanderthal, beyond Pithecanthropus Erectus, beyond the missing link, back to the common ancestor.

Shapeless, shambling, hairy brutes, deformed skulls and little red cunning eyes, bared teeth grinning yellow. Things that even the anthropologist had never seen or dreamed of. Things that were not human, or ape, nor any form of life that had ever been classified.

All the dark secrets of Terran evolution were laid bare in this garden, for the Martians to see. It made even Winters, the Earthman,

flinch to think that bodies like that had given ultimate birth to him. What respect could the Martians have for such a race, that was still so close to its beginnings?

But he was to see more, much more, of those beginnings. . . .

The gong struck a last booming summons. The tide of bowed hairy shoulders and flat brows and ugly things that went on all fours swept Winters and Jill out into the clearing at the center, where from the palace window he had seen the lake. A strong musky reek hung in the air. It had the same sickly taint that a snake-house does. And Winters saw that the lake was agitated by the creatures who lived there, and who were swarming out to answer the gong.

Back to the common ancestor, and beyond. Beyond the mammal, back to the gill and the scale, to the egg laid in the warm mud, to the hissing, squirming, utterly loathly ultimate!

Jill panted, "Shanga! Shanga!" looking up, and Winters felt a darkness swimming in his brain. A cold wet thing slithered between his legs, and he swayed, retching. The surface of the lake rippled, but he could not look. He could not.

Grasping Jill, he tried to batter his way through the crowd, but it was hopeless. He was caught, trapped.

Looking up, he saw the prisms that were set high overhead on long booms. He saw them start to glow, with the remembered flame.

He had reached the end, now. The end of his search for Jill Leland, the end of everything. The first sweet deadly thrill of the ray touched his flesh. He felt the waking hunger in him, the deep lust, the stirring of the beast that lay so close under his own skin. He thought of the lake, and wondered how it would be to lie in its wetness, breathing through the gill slits that had once opened in his own flesh when he was an embryo in his mother's womb.

Because that is where I shall be, he thought. In the lake. Jill and I. And beyond the lake, what? The amoeba, and then . . . ?

He saw the royal box, whence the Kings of Valkis had watched the gladiators and the flowing blood. Fand sat there now. She leaned her slender elbows on the stone and watched, and it seemed to Winters that even at this distance he could see the smile and the scorn in her

golden eyes. Kor Hal sat beside her, and the old woman, a muffled shape of black.

The fires of Shanga burned and brightened. There was a silence on the clearing now. The sounds that came, the moanings and the little whimpers, did not touch the silence. They only made it deeper. The warm glints danced on the upturned faces, glowed in the staring eyes. Each scaled or shaggy body bore a nimbus of beauty. He saw Jill standing there, reaching up toward the twin suns, a slim shaft of silver flame.

The madness already in his blood. Muscle and sinew taut with it, arching, curving. Brain clouding with a bright soft veil, forgetfulness, release. Jill and Burk, dawn-man, dawn-woman, happy while they lived, done with everything but their own love, their own satisfaction. Why not? They were both in it now, both marked with the same stamp.

Then he heard the laughter and the jeering of the Martians who were gathered to watch the shame of his world. He tore his gaze away from the wicked light and looked again into the face of Fand of Valkis, and then at Kor Hal and the thousand other faces, and a bleak and terrible expression came into his eyes.

The ranks of the crowd had broken. The beast-shapes lay upon the turf, writhing in the ecstasy of Shanga. Jill was on her hands and knees. Winters felt the strength going out of him. The lovely pain, the beautiful, wild, exultant pain . . .

He grasped Jill and began to drag her, back toward the trees, out of the circle of light.

She did not want to go. She screamed and tore his face with her nails and kicked him, and he struck her. After that she lay limp in his arms. He kept on, stumbling over the twitching bodies, falling, crawling at last on his hands and knees. Only one thing kept him going on. Only one thing made him undergo the tortures of the damned, fighting Shanga.

That thing was the scornful, smiling face of Fand.

The touch of the ray weakened and was gone. He was safe, beyond the circle. He dragged the girl farther into the shrubbery and turned his back on the clearing because he wanted more than any drug addict

could conceive of wanting to go back into the light, and he dared not look at it.

Instead, he pulled himself erect and faced the royal box. It was only pride that kept him standing. He looked straight into the distant eyes of Fand, and her clear silvery voice carried to him.

"You will go back into the fire of Shanga, Earthman. Tomorrow, or the day after—you will go."

Complete assurance there, as one is sure of the rising of the sun.

Burk Winters did not answer. He stood a moment longer, his gaze level with Fand's. Then, even pride failed. He fell and lay still.

The last conscious thought of his mind was that Fand and Mars together had challenged Earth, and that it was no longer merely a matter of saving a girl from destruction.

IV

When he came to, it was night. Jill sat patiently beside him. She had brought him food, and while he wolfed it down she went away to fetch water in a broad cupped leaf.

He tried to talk to her, but there was a gulf between them too wide to be bridged. She seemed subdued and brooding, and would not come close to him. He had robbed her of the fire of Shanga, and she had not forgotten it.

The futility of trying to escape with her was obvious. After a while he rose and left her, and she did not try to follow.

The garden was still under the light of the low moons. Apparently the beasts of Shanga, true to their ape heritage, were sleeping. Moving with infinite caution, Winters prowled the arena in search of a way out. A plan had taken shape in his mind. It was not much of a plan, and he knew that very probably he would be dead before morning, but he had nothing to lose. He did not even particularly care. He was a man, an Earthman, and there was an anger in him that was deeper than any fear.

The walls of the arena were smooth and high. Even an ape could not have climbed them. All the tunnels were blocked off except the one

by which they had entered. He crept down it and found the barred gate impenetrable. Beyond it was a little guard fire, and two sentries. Winters went back to the arena.

He could see no sign of a guard in the empty tiers of seats. There was no reason for one. In itself, the amphitheater was a perfect prison, and the creatures of the garden had no wish to escape from the besotting joys of Shanga.

Whipped before he started, Winters stood glaring bitterly at the walls that held him fast. Then he caught sight of the booms from which the Shanga prisms were suspended.

Going to the nearest one, he studied it. It was high out of reach, a long metal pole that stretched from the side of the arena above the wall and, with the other one, centered the Shanga-rays over the clearing.

High out of reach. But if a man had a rope . . . Winters went in among the trees. He found vines and creepers, and tore them away, and knotted them together. He found a small log in a deadfall, big enough to weight one end but light enough for throwing. Then he returned to the boom.

On the third cast the log went over. He drew his flimsy rope down, making a double strand. Hand over hand, praying that the vines would hold, he began to climb.

It seemed like a long way up. He felt very naked and exposed in the moonlight.

The vines held, and no challenging voice shouted at him. He clung to the boom and worked his way along it, first dropping the telltale rope. Presently he was safe among the tiered seats.

Avoiding the guard by the tunnel, he made his way out of the amphitheater and circled out across the slope, keeping to cover where there was cover, crawling on his belly where there was none. The shifting moon-shadows helped him, because they made visibility a treacherous thing. The palace loomed above him, huge and dark, crushed under the weight of time.

Only two lights showed. One, on the ground floor, he guessed would be the guard room. The other, on the third level, was dim as though made by a single torch. That, he hoped, would be the apartment of Fand.

Up the slope and into the shelter of the palace garden, and then into the palace itself. The great half-ruined pile could not have been guarded, even if there had been reason to guard it. Padding silently on naked feet, Winters glided through the vast empty halls, trying to keep a plan of the place straight in his mind.

His eyes were accustomed to the dark, and enough moonlight fell through the embrasures to let him see where he was going. Room and hall and corridor, smelling of dust and death, dreaming over their faded flags and broken trophies, remembering glory. Winters shivered. Something of the cold breath of eternity lived in this place.

He found a ramp, and then another, and at last on the third level he saw light, the weak flicker of it from the crack of a door.

There was no guard. That was a break. Not only because it was a difficulty eliminated, but because it confirmed his guess that Fand was a person who would want no check on her comings and goings. From the standpoint of safety in this place, a guard would be only a useless adornment. Fand was on her own ground here. There were no enemies.

Save one.

Winters opened the door without sound. A maid slept on a low couch. She did not stir as he passed. Beyond an open arch hung with heavy curtains he found the lady Fand.

She slept in a huge carved bed, the bed of the Kings of Valkis. She looked like a child lost in its hugeness. She was very beautiful. Very wicked, and most damnably beautiful.

Winters struck her, quite ruthlessly. Sleep became unconsciousness. There was no outcry. With silks and girdles he found in the room he bound and gagged her, and flung her light weight over his shoulder. Then he went back the way he had come, silently out of the palace.

It was as easy as that. He had not thought it would be easy, but it was. After all, he thought, men seldom guard against the impossible.

Phobos had gone on its careening flight around Mars, and Deimos was too low to give much light. Now carrying the unconscious Fand, now dragging her across the open spaces, Winters made his way back to the amphitheater. In and across the tiered seats to the wall. It was a twenty-foot drop, but he made it as easy as he could on her. He didn't

want her dead. Then he slid over, himself, hung briefly by his fingertips, and fell into cushioning brush.

When he got his breath back he made sure that Fand was not hurt. Then he carried her swiftly into the shelter of the unholy garden. Remembering a particularly dense patch of shrubbery near the central clearing, he made for it and crept thankfully into concealment with the heir of all the Kings of Valkis.

Then he waited.

* * *

Her eyes were looking up at him in the dim light, bitter gold above the gag of scarlet silk.

"Yes," he said, "you're here, in the garden of Shanga. I brought you here. We have a bargain to talk about, Fand."

He undid the gag, keeping his hand close over her mouth lest she should cry out.

She said, "There will be no bargain between us, Earthman."

"Your life, Fand. Your life for mine, and Jill's and the others here who can still be saved. Destroy the prisms, stop this madness, and you can live to be as old and crazy as your mother."

There was no fear in her. Unbending pride, and hatred, but no fear. She laughed.

He put his hand on her throat, his fingers reaching iron-strong around her neck. "Slim," he said. "Soft, and tender. It would snap so easily."

"Break it, then. Shanga will go on without me. Kor Hal will take over. And you, Burk Winters—you can't escape." Her teeth showed white in a taunting smile. "You'll run with the beasts. No man can break free from Shanga."

Winters nodded. "I know that," he said quietly. "Therefore I must destroy Shanga before it destroys me."

She looked at him, naked and unarmed, crouching in the brush. Once more, she laughed.

He shrugged. "Perhaps it is impossible. I won't know that until it's too late, anyway. It isn't really me I'm worried about, Fand. I could be perfectly happy running on all fours through your garden. Probably I

would be perfectly happy hissing and wallowing in the lake. Now the idea sickens me, but after a touch of Shanga it would be all right. No. It isn't me that matters, nor even Jill."

"What, then?"

"Earth has its pride, too," he told her gravely, "It's a younger and cruder pride than yours. It can become pretty ruthless and obnoxious at times, I'll admit. But on the whole, Earth is a good planet, and her people are good people, and she's done more to advance the Solar System than all the other worlds put together. As an Earthman, I don't like to see my world disgraced."

He glanced up and around the amphitheater. "I think," he went on, "that Earth and Mars can learn a lot from each other, if the fanatics on both sides will stop making trouble. You're the worst one I've ever heard of, Fand. You go even beyond fanaticism." He looked at her speculatively. "I think you're as mad right now as your mother."

She did not flare up at that, which convinced him that she was not mad at all, only twisted by the way she lived and the things she had been taught.

She said, "What do you plan to do about all this?"

"Wait. Until dawn, or perhaps later. Anyway, until you've had time to think. Then I shall give you a last chance. After that, I shall kill you."

She was smiling when he replaced the gag, and her eyes did not waver.

The hours passed. Darkness into dawn, and then into full daylight. Winters sat unmoving, his head bowed over his knees. Fand's eyes were closed, and it seemed that she slept.

The garden woke to life with the sun, and all around the dense thicket Winters heard the padding footsteps and the growling of the beasts of Shanga. The things in the shallow lake cried out, and their musky taint soured the wind. Winters shivered like a man with fever and his brooding eyes were haunted.

After a while Jill came. Animal-like she had found him, animal-like she came slipping without sound through the brush. She would have cried out at the sight of Fand, but he silenced her. She crouched beside him, watching him. She was afraid of him and yet she could not stay away. He stroked her shoulder. It was soft and strong and

trembling under his hand. Her gaze was doe-like, full of sadness and a bewildered yearning.

Winters' face became as bleak and pitiless as the barren stars that watch from outer space.

The time grew very short. Jill began to look upward toward the prisms. Winters sensed in her a growing nervousness.

He shook Fand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, and he knew what her answer would be before he asked the question.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

For the first time, Winters smiled. "I have decided," he said, "not to kill you, after all."

What he did after that was done quickly and efficiently, and there was no one to see but Jill and Fand. Jill did not understand; the heiress of the Kings of Valkis understood too well.

People began to drift into the amphitheater. Martians, coming to see a show, coming to learn contempt and loathing for the men of Earth. Winters watched them. He was still smiling.

Suddenly he turned to Jill. When he rose a few minutes later, scratched and panting, she was securely bound with strips torn from bonds of Fand. This time she would not bathe so helplessly in the fire of Shanga.

The Martians gathered. Kor Hal came into the royal box, bringing the old woman, who leaned on his arm.

The gong sounded.

V

Once again, Winters watched the gathering of the beasts of Shanga. Hidden in the thicket, beyond the reach of the rays, he saw the hairy bodies rush and jostle toward the central clearing. He saw the shining of their drugged eyes. He heard them moan and whimper, and all over the garden the mouthing whisper went—"Shanga! Shanga!"

Jill writhed and thrashed in the agony of her desire, her cries muffled by the wad of silk he had thrust into her mouth. Winters could

not bear to look at her. He knew how she was suffering. He was suffering too.

He saw that Kor Hal was leaning forward over the edge of the wall, searching the garden. He knew what the Martian was looking for.

The last notes of the gong rang out. A silence fell on the clearing. Hairy anthropoid, shambling brutes that ran on all fours, nameless creatures beyond the ape, crawling things with wet and shining scales—all silent, all waiting.

The prisms began to glow. The beautiful wicked fire of Shanga filled the air. Burk Winters set his hand between his teeth and bit until the blood ran.

It seemed to him that he could hear a faint thin screaming, rising out of the flowering shrubs by the lake. Low, tough-stemmed shrubs that lay under the full rays of the prisms.

Shanga! Shanga!

He had to go, into the clearing, into the fiery light. He could not stand it. He must feel again the burning touch on his flesh, the madness and the joy. He could not stay away.

In desperation he flung himself down beside Jill and clung to her, shuddering in torment.

He heard Kor Hal's voice, calling his name.

He steadied himself and rose, stepping out into the full sight of the royal box. The Martians ranged on either side watched him with interest, turning their attention momentarily from the orgy of the beasts of Shanga.

Winters said, "I'm here, Kor Hal."

The man of Barrakesh looked at him and laughed. "Why fight it, Winters? You can't keep away from Shanga."

Winters asked, "Where is your high priestess? Has she wearied of the sport?"

Kor Hal shrugged. "Who knows the mind of the Lady Fand? She comes and goes as she will." He leaned forward, "Go on, Winters! The fire of Shanga is waiting. Look how he sweats there, trying to be a man! Go on, apeling—join your brothers!"

The shrill jeering laughter of the Martians fell upon Winters with the sharpness of spears.

He stood there, naked in the sunlight, his head held stubbornly erect, and he did not move. He could not control the trembling of his limbs nor the harshness of his breathing. The sweat ran in his eyes and blinded him, and the fire of Shanga danced on the writhing bodies, and he thought he would go mad with torment, but he stood there and would not move. He thought he was going to die, but he would not move.

And the Martians watched.

Kor Hal said, "Tomorrow, then. Perhaps the next day—but you'll go, Earthman."

Winters knew that he would. He could not go through this again. If he were still alive in the garden of Shanga the next time the gong sounded, he would go with his brothers.

The fire of Shanga died at last from the prisms, and the creatures of its making lay still on the ground. The Martians sighed. The first stir of departure ran through them. Burk Winters cried out, "Wait!"

His voice rang back from the empty upper tiers, and it brought every eye upon him. There was desperation in it, and triumph, and the anger of a man driven beyond the bounds of reason.

"Wait, you men of Mars! You came to see a show. Very well, I'll give you one. You, Kor Hal! You told me something, down there in Valkis. You told me of the men of Caer Dhu who first made Shanga, and how in one generation they were destroyed by it. One generation."

He stepped forward, finding release for his tortured nerves in this denunciation.

"We of Earth are a young race. We're still close to our beginnings, and for that you hate and mock us, calling us apes. Very well. But that youth gives us strength. We go very slowly down the road of Shanga.

"But you of Mars are old. You have followed the circle of time a long way around, and the end is always close to the beginning. In one generation the men of Caer Dhu were gone. Our fibers are iron, but theirs were only straw.

"That's why no Martian will practice Shanga—why it was forbidden by the City-States. You don't dare to practice it, because it hurls you headlong down that road—toward your end or your

beginning, who knows? But you haven't the strength to take it, and you're afraid."

A jeering, angry howl rose from the crowd.

Kor Hal shouted, "Listen to the ape. Listen to the beast we drove through the streets of Valkis!"

"Yes, listen to him!" Winters cried. "Because the Lady Fand is gone, and only the ape knows where she is!"

That silenced them, and in the quiet Winters laughed.

"Perhaps you don't believe me. Shall I tell you how I did it?" He told them, and when he was through telling he listened, while they called him liar, and he jeered in Kor Hal's face.

"Wait," he shouted. "Wait, and I'll bring her to you."

He turned and went toward the clearing. He went fast, because the beasts were already beginning to stir and rouse from their temporary stupor. He remembered from his own experience with Shanga that before consciousness returned there was a period of delirium, so that even in the Trade City solariums the people were not turned loose until it had passed.

Threading his way between the brutish bodies, leaping over them, avoiding the touch of the scaly things, he came to the clump of flowering shrubs by the lake and crawled in among them.

He had not known. He had guessed from Kor Hal's statement that the metamorphosis was swift, but he had not known. There were some things that a man could not even guess at.

In spite of himself, he cried out. He did not want to look at the thing that lay there, did not even want to know that such a form of life had existed, or could exist. But he had to look at it. He had to go close to it, so that he might undo the silken bonds that held it to the roots of the shrubs. He had to touch it. He had to lay his hands upon its softness, lift its flaccid weight, hold its slippery squirming against his own body.

It had eyes. That was the worst of it. It had eyes, and it looked at him.

He went away from the thicket, carrying his burden. Back across the clearing, where two great males were already fighting over a she,

out into the open space before the royal box, where all could plainly see.

He lifted the thing over his head, high into the sunlight.

"Here!" he shouted. "Don't you recognize her? Last of the royal house of Valkis—the Lady Fand!"

Around a portion of the wriggling anatomy that might once have been a neck, the collar of golden plaques swung, shining.

For a moment he held her so, while the faces of the Martians stared like the masks of dead men and Kor Hal rose and gripped the edges of the stone. Then he laid his burden down and stepped back from it where it moved horribly across the turf.

"Look there, you Martians," he said. "That is your own beginning."

In the utter, stricken silence the old woman rose. She stood for a moment, looking down, and it seemed that she was about to speak or cry out, but no sound came. Then she fell, out over the wall and down the sheer drop into the arena. She did not move again.

As though she had led them, the Martians rose with one low terrible cry and followed her. Not to death, as they dropped over the wall, but to vengeance.

Winters ran. He had Jill free in a minute, dragging her away into denser cover. The mouth of the tunnel was not far distant.

The Martians swarmed in upon the clearing, and then the beasts of Shanga saw them. With roars and screams, they surged out to meet their attackers.

Knife and short sword and spiked brass knuckles against fang and claw and the powerful muscles of the brute. The scaly creatures darted here and there, hissing, slashing with their rows of needle-sharp reptilian teeth. Great hands ripped and tore, snapping bones like matchsticks, cracking skulls. And the slim blades flickered in the sunlight, bright tongues speaking death.

Vengeance was done that day in the garden of Shanga. The vengeance of Earth on Mars, and the vengeance of men upon the shame of their heritage.

Winters saw Kor Hal run his sword through the creeping horror that had been Fand, through and through again until all motion stopped. Then he shouted Winters' name.

Winters went to him.

Neither spoke. There was nothing more to say. Bare-handed, Winters went against the Martian's sword. With the nightmare carnage of the battle going on around them, they two were alone. They two had a special score to settle.

Winters took one long gash above the heart before he caught Kor Hal's arm and broke it. The Martian never whimpered. With his left hand he reached for the knife at his girdle, but it never left the sheath. Winters laid Kor Hal backward across his knee and placed one thigh across his loins and an elbow across his throat. After a moment he dropped the broken body and went away, taking the sword.

The guards came running into the arena through the tunnel.

The fight was spreading outward from the lake. Locked in struggling, swaying knots, the beasts of Shanga slew the Martians and were slain. The waters of the lake were stained red, and the corpse of a Martian was being dragged stealthily into it from the mud of the bank. There was something hidden below the surface, something that could no longer fight on land, but only lay quietly in wait, and fed.

Now the guards had come with their long spears, and Winters knew that in the end there would not be one creature left alive in the garden. And it was well.

He took Jill's hand and led her toward the tunnel, running in the shelter of the trees. The fight was occupying everyone's attention. The brute males were hard to kill, and they fought for the love of it. The tunnel was empty, the gate open, the guards inside the arena, hard at work. Winters and the girl fled through it, taking cover outside the amphitheater just before another group of guards came down from the palace.

From there, with infinite haste and caution, they made their way down the cliffs through the dead ruins of Valkis, and then out across the desert, skirting the living town by the canal. Kor Hal's flier was on the field where Winters remembered it.

He thrust Jill inside, and as he followed her he saw the angry mob start to pour out of Valkis, where word of his crime and his escape had been brought, a little too late.

He took the flier up, setting a course for Kahora. And now that it was all over, he felt a great weariness and an overwhelming desire to forget the very name of Shanga.

But he knew that he could never forget. The golden fire had burned too deep. He knew that he would always be haunted by the beautiful face of Fand as it had looked when he shackled her in the clearing, and by the memory of the high thin screaming as the light poured down from the prisms. Even the psychos could never make him forget.

The governments of Earth and Mars would see to it now that Shanga was stamped out forever. He was glad, and a little proud, because it had been his doing. But even so . . .

He looked over at Jill. Someday, he prayed, she would be herself again. The taint of Shanga would pass her, and she would once more be the Jill Leland he had given his heart to.

But will it pass entirely? For a moment it seemed that he heard the mocking voice of Fand, speaking in his soul. Will it pass from you, Burk Winters? Can one who has run with the beasts of Shanga ever be the same again?

He did not know. Looking back, he saw the smoke rising from the unholy garden—and he did not know.

Quest of the Starhope

By Leigh Brackett

Bert Quintal was not particularly surprised when he saw the city. There were a number of them in those vast wastes of northern Mars, drowned in the desert sand, lifeless and forgotten for ages.

He was not even particularly interested. Far to the south, on the edge of the polar barrens, his assistant Larkin was going through the routine motions of digging and classifying in just such a place, to give the Quintal expedition the semblance of a respectable scientific investigation. Quintal was fed up with drowned cities.

Sheer boredom had driven him out in the little one-man scout Starhope, to prowl the dreary wastes in the faint hope of finding something worth taking. Quintal was concerned with life, not death. Life that could be trapped, shipped back to Earth, and exhibited for profit, a procedure that had brought him most of his popular fame and money.

He had found nothing. Looking down at the utter desolation of the landscape, he hated it with a bitter hatred. And then, quite suddenly, Bert Quintal was face to face with the only terror he had ever felt.

It was not really sudden, that terror. It had grown slowly out of the long dull days, and now it stood before him where he had to look.

He had stripped Venus and Mars of all they had. Jupiter was denied him, barred off by the gulf of deep space that no rocket ship could cross. There was no more place to go, nothing to do.

He had never had a friend, nor anyone to love. Nothing but the driving restlessness that sent him from the Chicago slums into the rusty tramp ships as a boy of thirteen, that had made him claw and trample his way to the top, hungry for glory and money, and yet dissatisfied with them, because no matter how much he got there was always something new beyond.

Now there was nothing.

In a kind of desperation, he looked at the dead city below the ship and said, "Well, Butch? Do you see anything?"

He did not speak aloud. There was no need to speak aloud to Butch. Butch answered, also silently, "Those low hills to the west — there's some life there. I think it is the only animal."

Butch was very small, less than the size of Quintal's hand. He clung with his four sucker paws to the back of the Earthman's neck, so that their thoughts should meet easily. Butch came from Venus. He had a wife, and the two were the last of their race.

Evolution had given them bodies that had no worries about food and water. Their transparent fur took from air and sun, and root-like fibres concealed in pouches on their undersides could strike down into the soil to draw nourishment from the earth. They were mostly mind — mind of a power and sensitivity beyond Quintal's understanding.

He had snatched them up for exhibition on Earth. And then he realized that Butch could give him more another way.

He left the female where she was, knowing with cynical shrewdness that Butch would give his soul to get back to her. In seven years Butch had saved Quintal's life a score of times and brought him more wealth and more fame than Quintal alone could have won in ten lifetimes.

Now, apparently, even Butch could not help him. "Animal life," he repeated. "Nothing much in that."

"No," said Butch. "You might as well go back to Larkin." The little body stirred against the Earthman's flesh.

"Take me home, Quintal! You haven't any more need of me Please - take me home!"

The man swore, in sudden fury. His hand rose, to slam down on the firing keys.

Then he saw the flicker of movement among the towers of the city below.

iving he shouted. And then ominously, "You saw Butch. You always see. Why did you fire?"

Butch hesitated, and Quintal laughed, shaken out of his black mood by the unheard-of surprise of life in a drowned city.

"Sentimental fool!" he said. "Watch out, shrimp, or you'll never see Venus and that animated powder-puff again."

His body was tense now with excitement. He took the Starhope down, and watched his rocket flares score the white top of the great building where he landed.

The city stood in a sea of sand that rolled in desolate ochre waves under the whip of a thin, sad wind. It was submerged in sand, the dry spray chafing at the towers that were all that showed above the restless breakers.

"Life, here!" whispered Quintal, still not believing it. He grabbed for his warm coverall.

Outside in the cold wind, with Butch hidden as usual under the coverall's hood — Butch saw without eyes and heard without ears— Quintal waited. The mental voice of Butch was sad with his knowledge of what was going to happen.

"The first ones," he sighed. "There, coming around the octagonal tower."

There weren't many of them. Perhaps two hundred. They came on wide shimmering wings, fantastic little creatures with furry human bodies no more than four feet high.

They wore kilts of some woven stuff, and they bore tiny pencil tubes in their belts.

They landed like puffs of thistledown, in a wide circle on the roof, as strange and lost and pathetically beautiful as their dead city. "Well," rasped Quintal's mind. "What about them?"

Butch let their combined mental trend wash through him. "They're friendly, so far. I get a peculiar mass impact: 'We are the old race. We are without fear'."

The red northern half-light held them in an unreal glow. They were still, watching Quintal with great luminous eyes, and the Earthman's mind throbbed with calculating greed.

Two of the fairy creatures stepped forward. Male and female, the soft pale fur shining on their perfect bodies. The thought of them crammed into the dark hull of the big expeditionary ship, and then

aged and chained for the edification of gaping mobs, gave Quintal no pain whatsoever.

"Well, Butch?"

The tiny body stirred on his neck. "The chief, Chika, and her mate Hjan. Please, Quintal, don't steal these people. Environment has forced them into barbarism, but they were great once. They're all that's left of the ancient People of the Sky"

The People of the Sky! Legendary creatures out of Mars' lost youth. Quintal could scarcely restrain his excitement. What a find!

The winged man spoke. "Who are you, stranger from the heavens?"

He used a pure archaic form of the bastard Martian spoken in the starveling canal cities.

Quintal answered, "I am a great chief. I greet you, Chika. Hjan, your mate." He didn't have to stumble over the semi-aspirate. Butch gave him the exact pronunciation.

The little people started. "How did you know our names?"

"I am a very great chief," said Quintal. "I know all things."

It was a trick that, thanks to Butch, he used often in dealing with the semi-human beings of lost colonies. In rapid succession Butch read the names of the others, called to the mental forefront by the exchange, and Quintal repeated them solemnly.

Chika bowed with quiet dignity. "You are welcome."

Quintal thanked him. Butch said desperately, "I can't do these things much longer. Haven't you any human decency?"

"If I have," said Quintal, "it doesn't bother me."

Each tower was a sort of isolated camp where a part of the trihe lived. There was no communication over the treacherous sand, except by flying. They lived, Quintal guessed, on the rare Martian birds, and water, greens, and small animals brought from the low hills.

Chika and Hjan led the way down through a roof-trap into huge echoing halls filled with statuary and rotting furniture. Quintal prowled like a predatory beast through the two upper levels and then started down broad inlay steps toward the third.

Chika stopped, and Butch transmitted a quick mental thrill of I earri from the Martian.

"Not down there," said Chika. "There is sand."

Butch said sharply, "Don't anger them, Quintal. This is their one fear – being buried alive in the sand."

Sometimes the lower levels held the sand outside, and Quintal's restless curiosity could no more endure not going down to see than his lungs could endure without air.

"I will go alone, then," he said.

Chika drew back, reluctantly indicating that the Earthman's life was his own to risk. He and Hjan watched silently as Quintal went down, their people, grouped behind them, absurdly tiny on the broad steps of their ancestors.

Butch said again, urgently, "Can't you leave them alone?"

"Why should I?" demanded Quintal, in genuine irritation. "They're only freaks, like all the others."

Sand gritted under his feet, became drifts hiding the bottom of the steps. A square corridor opened to left and right. Ahead the stair led down again.

There was no light in the fourth level, and the sand was up to the Earthman's knees. He lit his pocket torch and ploughed on.

Sand. Tons of it, an ocean of it, running through the cracks of the heavy metal shutters, spreading into drifts as high as Quintal's head. The fifth level was choked.

"Let's go back," said Butch uneasily.

"There's a door down there where the stair ends. The room beyond it must take up the whole level. I'm going down."

Quintal lay flat and floundered across to a symbolic carving above the door. Gripping it, he began to dig with his free hand.

The sand rolled back into the hole he made, crawling as though it were alive. Quintal panted and swore, but his curiosity and his bull strength urged him on.

Butch loosened his suckers nervously, one by one. The door was visible now for almost half its length.

"Ah!" Quintal dropped into the hole, wrestling with the fastening of the door. It opened abruptly, sending him headlong.

He scrambled up and looked at the vast windowless room.

It was a foundry. There were blast furnaces and long open troughs that ran into the belly of a monstrous structure filling a third of the room. Beyond that were molds and forges and lathes.

He scowled in puzzled amazement. The ancient People of the Skymust have been great indeed, if their science had achieved these heights. Mars was like that. So many cultures had risen and died, so long ago, that no traces of them were left.

Work in the foundry seemed to have been dropped rather suddenly. A small mountain of ore and scrap awaited the furnaces. Tools had been dropped on the floor. Quintal reflected on that.

"Must have been in the middle of a job when the quakes came," he thought, referring to the shifting of the great polar fault that in ages past had laid waste half the planet.

"The few that survived here simply battened the shutters and for got about it. Just getting enough to eat took up most of their time, afterward."

Butch sighed. "All that art and knowledge and commerce, destroyed at one blow."

"Yeah." Quintal had just seen the hoppers for metal scrap from the tooling, and wondered why they were covered. He went over and raised a lid.

Bits of metal floated lazily up into the air.

Quintal's big hand caught a fragment. He stood staring at it, while Mars rocked and roared under his feet. After a long, long time, he whispered three words.

"Anti-gravity metal."

The enormous implications of his discovery staggered him. Money, power, glory beyond anything a man had ever had. All that and more – much more! The wonderful, the supreme personal importance of that scrap of metal came to him – metal that must be held in the cage of his fingers because it had no weight.

Words crowded into his throat. "I can go out. Out to Jupiter, Saturn – to the ends of space!"

"Take me home," cried Butch. "Quintal, take me home first!"

"Home," repeated Quintal. The moons of Jupiter and Saturn were worlds in themselves. There would be life of some kind on them, to be conquered and sent home to Earth, to the aggrandizement of Bert Quintal. And for that, he needed Butch.

He didn't need to speak. Butch read his thoughts. Quintal felt the convulsive shudder of the small warm body on his neck. Then he forgot Butch, and Butch's mate, and Venus. He remembered only that never, never could he be faced with his last horizon. All of space was his, to play with.

The huge enigmatic hulk through which the troughs ran he guessed must be a cyclotron.

Intense bombardment must alter the atomic structure of the molten metal to neutralize the magnetism of gravity. Oh, wonderful process that the scientists of Earth had sought for and never found! Quintal began to tremble violently.

With work in progress, the cyclotron must have been ready for use. He didn't know what element the Martians might have used, but even an unstable one would not have degenerated entirely.

"I can cut the rocket tubes, and some of the after bulkheads," he said, talking aloud in his towering excitement. "With what's there, I'll have enough metal for shields. I can use the rocket fuel for the furnaces and the cyclotron.

"But I'll need men. And I don't want Larkin and all the mob of scientists and promoters and thieves that would come the instant the news was out."

He wasn't going to share this with anyone, yet. He wasn't taking any risks.

He grinned suddenly. "Chika!"

Butch said, "They won't do it. They're afraid to come down here."

"I know a way to make them."

Butch saw it, stark and ugly in Quintal's mind. "I can't," he said. "I know how it feels."

Quintal's thought answered, slow and deliberate. "Remember your mate, Butch. She might get lonesome waiting, if I should drop you through the refuse chute in space."

The blob of transparent fur twitched convulsively. Quintal laughed, and ran up the steps.

The little people waited silently. Quintal smiled at them. "Let us go up on the roof again. I will show you my ship."

Chika grinned, and Hjan clapped her small hands. The group flooded up the steps and gathered with rustling wings around the Starhope.

"Come inside, Chika. And you, Hjan. I have gifts."

Chika entered the ship. Hjan danced before him on little furry feet.

Butch said, in helpless agony, "The rest of the tribe are curious. They'll be inside soon. Please!"

"Shut up," said Quintal, "and watch 'em."

Hjan was lost in wonder at the shiny instrument panel, Chika absorbed in the three dimensional space chart. Quintal's big hand shot out and jerked the little tube from Hjan's girdle.

She cried out, half spreading her wings before she realised she couldn't fly.

Chika spun about, his light body taut with the startled beginning of anger.

Quintal's heavy fist took him on the jaw. He collapsed, his wings spreading and twitching like those of a wounded bird.

Butch moaned, "Hurry!"

Hjan sprang at Quintal, her childish face hard with silent fury. One wing struck him across the face. The Earthman caught her, slapped her with callous strength.

She whimpered and fell. Quintal picked up the dazed Chika and went out, slamming the inner valve door behind him. He came to the lip of the air lock.

"Now!" said Butch. "Before they have time to think!"

"You!" shouted Quintal. "Look here!" He held Chika aloft in one big hand. "Behold your chief!"

The crowd stood thunderstruck, great eyes wide and glowing

the red dusk. Then they pressed forward, and pencil-tubes appeared. Butch listened to their minds. "Quick," he said. "Go on!"

"Don't fire!" the Earthman roared. He stood over them, unarmed, towering, colossal, godlike. "Hjan is my prisoner. Only I can free her. If I die, she dies too."

He shook the limp body in his hand. "Chika!"

The chief stirred. His eyes opened slowly. "Yes, Earthman," he whispered.

"I need men to cut metal from my ship and work it in the foundry below. Hjan is my prisoner. Do you understand?"

"I cannot order my people into the lower levels."

"It's that, or Hjan."

Butch trembled on the back of Quintal's neck. "Now! Now!" Quintal shook Chika high over his head. "Order them, or Hjan dies!"

Chika's mouth was set with a terrible grimace. "I cannot order," he whispered. "I will ask."

"A hundred men," cried Quintal. "A hundred, to work in the foundry."

There was a long, long moment of silence. Only sand and wind, the endless soft keening of the desert. Butch clung tautly to Quintal's neck. There was nothing more he could do.

A man stepped forward. Another followed, and another. Their wings drooped in the sullen dusk. A stifled moan went up from the women, and was silenced.

A hundred men, half the tribe, stood before Bert Quintal.

"Good," he said, and set Chika on his feet. "Drop your weapons in the sand, all of you. I'll give you tools from the ship. We'll start work now."

He could never have done it without Butch. In the days that followed, the watchful mind of the little creature hidden under his hood warned him a dozen times of danger. He put down the incipient revolts with a power that made the Martians think him supernatural.

He drove his men. They were slight, but wiry and quick. When the tubes and the bulkheads were cut, he forced them down into the hated lower dark, into the bellowing foundry.

And he made up his mind. He was going to Jupiter alone. With Butch, there was little danger. He'd give Larkin directions for finding the city and tell him to reft and follow, but he himself would go on, in the Starhope.

He wanted the glory he would get from that plunge into the unknown. But most of all, he wanted free space, with the outer planets toys for him to play with. He wanted it alone. It seemed that his whole life had been but a prelude, a preparation, for this dream.

Of Butch, doomed to years more of exile from Venus and his mate, he thought not at all. Butch was his, utterly. He was nothing.

At last the forward anti-gravity shield was bolted in place with infinite labor, fitted with crude controls for raising or lowering. The stern shield was almost finished. Crossing the roof on the morning of the last day, Quintal was filled with a wild eagerness.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow, Butch, we're off."

Butch didn't answer. The silver fire of Venus burned low in the Martian dawn. It sank, and the tiny warm body on his neck shivered and stirred.

Then, suddenly, Butch said, "The wind, Quintal! It's stopped."

The Earthman halted. The desert lay motionless under a brooding sky. Silence, brittle and ominous, hung over the ochre waves of sand.

Quintal's eyes narrowed. "Storm coming. It could bury the city. We've got to hurry."

He ran down the broad stairway, past the silent women who crouched on the upper levels, waiting. Chika met him at the found. door, his eyes deep with bitter hate.

"It is nearly done," he said. "Tonight, you will let Hjan go."

"Sure, sure," the Earthman snapped. "Get busy."

Great winged shadows leaped across the walls. Furnaces roared and the huge wicked hum of the cyclotron filled the room. Even through that, the racket of hammers and the scream of lathes, Quintal al heard the first low, snarling moan of the wind.

The winged folk faltered, looking at Chika with frightened until Quintal drove them on again. He could hear the rub and strain sand

against the buried tower. If it got in, disaster would follow, "Hurry," Quintal snarled. "Hurry, blast you!"

Chika touched him. "Let us go," he said. "We can make it to the hills if we go now."

"Please, Quintal," Butch pleaded. "They'll carry us. They can come back and finish."

"They'd drop us in the sand, you fool." Quintal was in a frenzy lest the work be left unfinished. It might take months to clear the building again.

He said, "Send your women. But you've got to finish here!" "They won't go without their men," said Chika. "I beg you!"

"Listen," said Quintal ominously, "I'll kill your Hjan with my own hands, and you too, if you don't get in there and work."

"They worked, in misery and haste and fear.

The shield floated free of its rest. They held it with ropes, like a monstrous balloon.

Quintal led the way up the steps. The women followed without sound, no more than glowing eyes and shadowy wings in the corridor. They went up on the roof.

Wind beat them with brutal hands. The sky was ochreous and sullen. Under it, all across the yellow sea, the restless sandy breakers heaved and tossed.

Quintal shouted at the men to hurry. Flailing wings fought, little wiry bodies strained. The great unwieldy shield floated into place. The wind grew, and grew.

"For Heaven's sake!" cried Butch, but Chika had already caught Quintal in the murky dusk.

"We must go! Quintal, give me Hjan!"

Quintal struck him way, cursing the slowness of the men working at the bolting. Sand slashed across the roof. Great breakers of it piled and rolled against the towers, crested with choking spume.

One bolt was finished. The wind had grown to a vast shriek.

Men broke away from the Starhope, losing all fear of Quintal in their terror of the sand. Quintal saw them trying to take off with their women toward the distant hills, saw their thin wings ribboned and

torn, their bodies hurled into the hungry desert. The last of the People of the Sky.

"Quintal!" screamed Chika. "Give me Hjan!"

The last bolt was unfinished. Quintal got the welder and did it himself, his massive body braced in ungainly strength. Then he clawed his way toward the lee side of the ship. Chika had vanished.

The ship rocked wildly under the Earthman as he stumbled through the air lock, making the two vac suits jerk in their hooks. He wondered, in a brief flash, why one flapped more than the other. But the drifts were high on the weather side, and he was mad to get away before he was buried.

He slammed the outer valve and hurried on, not bothering to close the inner one. He wasn't going beyond the atmosphere, yet.

Hjan faced him in the cabin. Her eyes burned with witch-fires.

"You killed my people," she whispered. "You killed Chika."

Quintal shoved past her, and she sprang on his back. She was strong, and she hated him. Her flailing wings blinded and beat him.

He didn't want to damage her. She was valuable, being the last. He got his hand around her throat, and when she faltered, he slapped her hard across the temple. She relaxed in his hands, and he took her and put her through the door into the after part of the ship.

Butch said softly in his mind, "Quintal, what did God give you in place of a heart?"

The Earthman swore irritably. Ripping Butch loose from his neck, he flung him after Hjan and locked the door.

The loss of Chika and his tribe meant exactly as much to him as the loss of a flock of prize chickens. He was angry, not with himself for forcing them to work too long, but with fate for ringing in this storm and upsetting his plans.

The new controls were crude, and he had had no time to test them. But he knew his ship. He got the feel of her in his hands, and the Starhope lifted up from the roof, silent and soft as a bird.

He brought her to rest, balancing attraction nicely against repulsion, above the storm area, and turned to the teleradio.

He put out his hand to the switch. It clenched sharply into a fist. He stood there, swearing in slowly mounting fury.

He'd been in too much of a hurry to notice before. Now he looked around the cabin. With the exception of the control panel, protected by steel bulkheads, and the heavy-duty cables that operated the shields, everything in the cabin had been smashed.

Hjan must have done it. And it was Quintal's own fault, he knew. He should have tied her, or locked her in the sleeping cabin. But she was so tiny, and there was no weapon she could use. Moreover, he had been so desperately busy that he had almost forgotten her existence.

He found the thing she had used in her destructive rage, and smiled wryly. It was his own pipe, looted from a drowned city on the other side of Mars – a heavy thing, of some petrified, vanished wood.

There was nothing for it now but to take the Starhope south, Quintal gave Larkin his orders direct.

Quintal realized all at once that he ached in every nerve. His head seemed to weigh as much as the Starhope. He had driven himself hard for too long. He needed rest, before he did anything else.

He inspected the bulkhead door. It was locked, the handle set in a one-way latch. The ventilator was open, as usual, but nothing larger than Butch could crawl through its louvres.

Butch wouldn't. He hated Quintal too much to want to be around him if he didn't have to. And a man might as well fear a blown dandelion as fear Butch.

Quintal stretched out on the cabin couch and slept heavily.

He woke before he was ready, drawn by some queer uneasiness. He sat up stiffly and cursed, and knew that nothing could be wrong. But something was. The bulkhead door was open.

It swung icily, just a little, showing only darkness beyond. The faint

double light of Mars' little moons came in through the ports. Quintal could see Jupiter, blazing gold against the black sky.

He scowled, sitting tense on the couch. Not afraid, for there was nothing to fear. Just puzzled.

Butch, moving slowly on the retractible suckers of his four paws, could have come through the ventilator. He could have walked down

the door and inched the lock handle over, clinging to it with two paws while he pulled himself around with the others.

But why? Suppose he had established mental contact with Hjan? Suppose they had planned this together. What did it get them?

There was no sound from beyond the lazily swinging door.

Quintal rose. He crossed the cabin softly and went through the door. He was a tall man. The opening was low. He stooped, slightly, to clear his head.

Something dropped across his neck from over the door.

"Butch!" he yelled, startled. Then angrily he reached up.

Hands caught his wrists in the darkness. Small furry hands, four of them, strong with the strength of hate. There was a sudden searing pain in his neck, just over the spine. He roared and plunged backward into the open space of the cabin, where he could shake himself free.

He knew what was happening. Butch was sinking those prehensile, hungry fibres into his neck!

The desperate little hands clung to his wrists. Small hard thighs locked around his own. He could see faces now, in the moonlight.

Hjan's face – and Chika's.

Hideous acid fires ate into his neck. He bunched his shoulders. Nails tore through his flesh, and then his hands were free. He reached up, to rip Butch away.

Now that it was too late, he remembered the vac suit that had seemed heavier than the other, back in the lock chamber. Chika must have hidden there, when he saw that his people were lost, beyond help. Then he had slipped through into the after part of the ship while Quintal was struggling with Hjan, blinded by her wings.

They blinded him now. Wiry bodies darted and plunged, dragging at his frantic hands. The pain ran down his spine from his neck, and up into his skull.

Butch said in his mind, "You're finished, Quintal." There was something horrible in the calm, unexcited finality of his thought.

"Yeah?" Quintal laughed, in spite of the agony. He struck out, aiming craftily. Chika whimpered and flopped away, and there was

blood on the Earthman's knuckles. Hjan he caught in mid-leap and hurled her to the deck. His hands were free.

He took hold of Butch.

The stiff transparent hairs pricked his palm, Hjan got up, with Chika following. Quintal crouched, fending them off with one arm. His fingers locked under Butch's abdomen.

He could feel the fibres, crawling out like worms from their pouches. They weren't just quiescent roots, like those of a plant. They were mouths, as active and alive as his own.

He set his teeth against the pain, and pulled. The suckers held, stubbornly. Butch's mind said to him, "It's too Quintal." And he laughed, a little mocking quiver of thought Quintal's brain.

Quintal snarled, feeling the bruise of the suckers on his flesh.

"You'll never see Venus again," he said. "Your mate will die alone."

He hardly felt the lashing of wings against him, so great was the hurt inside. He knew that his wrist was clawed and bleeding, but they couldn't shake his grip. He was strong, too strong for them. He felt the waves of suffering in Butch's mind, and he grinned, a mirthless baring of the teeth.

"I have no right to see Venus again," whispered Butch. "I have no right to anything, after what I've done for you. And my mate is better to die alone, never looking into my mind again."

One sucker paw tore free. Another. The fibres tautened, into the flesh of Quintal's neck.

"My sin is worse than yours, Quintal," said Butch softly. "I knew better. You never did. You were born without a heart. But I — I was only selfish and afraid."

"Ah!

"The last two paws came loose. The fibres strained and broke. Quintal heard the scream in Butch's mind, though he had no mouth make it. He lurched up, triumphant, and the wings fell from him and there was silence in the Starhope. The Earthman laughed harshly. "You aren't so smart, Butch. It was a nice trick, trying to feed on me like a vampire. But it didn't work." He looked at the Martians.

I have a pair of 'em, now. And all I have to do is find Larkin, take him to the city, and wait until he fits out the big ship. I'll still have

Jupiter, even if I'm not alone. And you, Butch you know what happens to you with your feed line broken."

Years of training had made his mind sensitive enough to hear, faintly, Butch's laughter.

"Yes, I'll die, Quintal. And you'll have Jupiter."

Quintal scowled, not understanding the laugh. The pain was fading a little. It had settled now into a single ball of flame in his neck.

He was suddenly anxious to find Larkin. There was a doctor with the base ship. Those broken root-fibres ought to come out of him as soon as possible.

Quintal moved toward the controls. His legs seemed distant and detached. He watched his boots scuff over the deck plates, and it was as though they were someone else's boots.

Quite suddenly, he fell.

Butch rolled out of his hand. Quintal could see the fingers of it, lying open on the deck, and he could not close them.

He whispered, "What have you done to me, Butch?"

The answer came faintly to his mind — a mind clear and sharp now, with the iron frost of fear.

"Human tissue contains the same substances that I draw from the earth — organic phosphorus, potassium, magnesium. My 'roots,' as you call them, secrete chemicals that dissolve these substances and make them available to me.

"I wasn't trying to feed on you Quintal. I knew that you could pull me off in a few moments. Chika and Hjan knew that they could hold you helpless for only a very short time.

"But it was all I needed. The chemicals are at work inside you. You know my perceptions — I could see exactly where to go. You understand now, Quintal? The nerves of your spine are dissolving."

The tiny furry thing lay beyond Quintal's open fingers. He could see the Martians with their drooping wings, watching, and he could see Jupiter, a golden lamp beckoning beyond the port.

Butch went on, "I watched what you could not. I saw the city buried. I saw Chika's people die.

"It will be many years before the city, and its secret, are found again. All men are not as you, Quintal. Perhaps the next one who comes will use the gift of anti-gravity for good instead of evil. In the meantime, the little folk of the outer planets are free to live without chains and cages. There was a long pause. Then, very faintly, very wearily: "It will be good to die. It will be an end to thinking."

Chika stooped. His childish face was battered, the pale fur dark with blood. He picked Butch up and laid him gently across his neck, so that their two brains were close together. As though acting under instructions from Butch, he and Hjan turned and tugged at the controls. The Starhope settled toward Mars.

They didn't touch Quintal. They left him where he was, twisted awkwardly, his broad head dropped back so that he stared forward, out the visiport.

He watched them bring the Starhope down close over the desert. He watched them set the automatic controls of the airlock. He saw Butch shudder and slip, and be taken in Hjan's hands.

They opened the valves of the lock, and set the shields for full repulsion. Then, for a brief instant before diving with open wings, they looked at Quintal, their great eyes glowing, their bodies slim and poised, with Butch a tiny still puff of fur in Hjan's hands.

They turned and dropped through the airlock. In the instant before the valve doors closed, Quintal heard the beat of their wings on the thin, cold air.

Starhope lifted up from Mars, silent and soft as a bird. The atmosphere fell away, and the moons. Jupiter was a flame, a burning jewel on the dark breast of space.

Quintal lay inert on the cabin floor, his eyes wide open. A new frontier lay before him, vast and unexplored. A new world, a new horizon. Its name was not Jupiter. Its name was Death.

Weightless, joyous, swift, the Starhope bore him on.

The Lake of the Gone Forever

By 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 screees 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 craggy 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 oohone 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 fire 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.

The Dancing Girl of Ganymede

By Leigh Brackett

I: The Wanderer

Tony Harrah came into the bazaar of Komar, heading for the Street of the Gamblers. The sour wine was heavy in him and his pockets were light and he was in no hurry. Win or lose, there was nothing to be in a hurry about. He was on the beach and Komar is a far lost beach for an Earthman.

The wind blew slowly through the narrow streets, stirring the torch flames that burned eternally under the dim red sky. It smelled of heat and sulphur, of the volcanic heart of Ganymede. Even here on the plateau, a thousand feet above the jungle, there was no escape from it. The sliding roofs of the houses were open wide to receive it for there was no other breath of air.

Above the tumult of the bazaar the great yellow star that was the Sun blazed splendidly in the far darkness of space. Jupiter filled half the sky, misty, banded with crimson and purple and grey. Between Sun and Jupiter raced the thronging moons, catching light now from one, now from the other, burning, flashing, glorious.

Harrah took no joy in that magnificence. He had looked at it too long.

He shouldered his way toward the square where the Street of the Gamblers joins the Street of Maidens and the Street of Thieves and at his heels like a furry shadow came Tok the aboriginal, the lemur-eyed child of the forests, who was Harrah's and who loved him utterly.

It was on the edge of the square that Harrah caught the first wild rhythms of the music. And it was there that Tok reached out one

sudden hand-like paw and caught his master's shirt and said, "Lord—wait!"

Harrah turned, startled by the urgency in Tok's voice. He opened his mouth to speak but he did not speak. The look in Tok's eyes stopped him. A queer blank look, luminous with some great fear.

The aboriginal moved forward, past Harrah, and then became a motionless shape of darkness between the torches and the moons. His head was lifted slightly into the wind. His nostrils quivered and gradually the quivering spread over his whole slim body as though he breathed in terror with every breath. Imperceptibly his flesh seemed to shrink in upon itself until all the look of humankind was gone from him and he was an animal poised for flight.

"Lord," he whispered. "Evil, Lord—evil and death. It is in the wind."

Harrah repressed a shiver. He could see nothing but the crowded square—the polyglot life of Komar, the landless, the lawless, the unwanted and forgotten, the mingled off-scourings of the Inner Worlds, mixed with the dark native-human folk of Ganymede. The only unusual thing was the music and there was nothing fearsome in that. Pipe and drum and a double-banked harp, raw and barbaric but stirring to the blood.

Yet Tok half turned and looked at him with the eyes of one who has seen forbidden things and cried out, "Go! Go back, Lord. The wind is full of death!"

And as he spoke others of his kind came running from the square, furry man-things far from their native jungles, and one of them whimpered as he ran, "Demons. Demons with the eyes of darkness!"

"Go, Lord," whispered Tok.

The power of suggestion was so strong that Harrah almost obeyed. Then he caught himself and laughed. "What is it, Tok?" he demanded, in the simple aboriginal speech. "I see no demons."

"They are there. Please, Lord!"

"Nonsense." He jingled the coins in his pocket. "Either I win some money or you steal to feed us. Go back yourself."

He patted Tok's quivering shoulder and went on into the square, forging his way through the crowd. He was curious now. He wanted to

see what had frightened Tok and set the aboriginals to flight.

* * *

He saw the dancing girl, whirling crimson and white across the dirty stones, to the music of pipe and drum and harp, played by three men who might have been her brothers.

She was a Wanderer, from her ornaments and her ragged dress—a sort of interplanetary gypsy, one of the vast worldless tribe of space who travel from planet to planet but are citizens of none. Their blood is a mixture of every race in the System capable of cross-breeding and they are outcaste below the lowest.

There had been a few of them in Komar but this girl was new. If Harrah had seen her before he would not have forgotten. He thought that no man could ever forget her. There was something about her eyes.

Half naked in her bright rags she went on swift white feet through the tossing glare of the torches. Her hair was tawny gold and her face was the face of a smiling angel and her eyes were black.

They did not smile, those dark, deep eyes. They had no kinship with the lithe gaiety of her body. They were sorrowful and smoldering and full of anger—the most bitter raging eyes that Harrah had ever seen.

He pushed forward, farther still, until he stood in the open space where she danced, so close that her loose mane of hair almost brushed him as she passed. And as he watched he became aware of an odd thing.

The music was sensuous and the very steps of the dance were an invitation as old as humankind. Yet in some peculiar way the girl took the primitive animal rhythms and transmuted them into something cool and lovely. An old old memory came back to Harrah, of silver birches dancing in the wind.

Then, abruptly, she came to a halt before him, her arms high above her head, poised on a quivering note of longing from the reed pipe. She looked at him, the dark, sinewy Earthman with a handful of coins, and her look was a curse.

He could feel the hatred in her as a personal thing, alive and thirsting. The violence of it shook him. He was about to speak, and then she was gone again, blown like a leaf on the surging music.

He stood where he was, waiting, in the grip of a sudden fascination that he had no wish to break. And between his feet as he watched a small brown cur slunk snarling.

The dogs of Komar are like many another pack on worlds far from their parent Earth. Lost, strayed or abandoned from the ships that land there out of space, they have thriven in the gutters and the steaming alleys. And now, quite suddenly, Harrah became aware of a new sound in the bazaar.

The narrow streets were as full of noise as ever and the wild oblique rhythms of the music filled the square. But the little brown cur lifted his muzzle to the sky and howled, a long savage wail, and somewhere close by another dog-throat picked it up, and another, and still another, until the square rang with it. Harrah heard the cry spreading out and away, running through the twisting alleys and the dark ways of Komar, howl answering howl, desolate and full of fear, and a coldness crept along the Earthman's spine.

There was something terrible about that primitive warning out of Earth's far past, unchanged even on this alien moon.

The music faltered and died. The girl stopped her dancing, her body half bent, poised and still. A silence fell across the square and gradually the sound of human voices ceased entirely as the city listened to the howling of its dogs.

Harrah shivered. The crowd began to stir uneasily and a little muttering began to creep under the wailing of the dogs. The dancing girl relaxed very slowly from her pose, gathering herself.

A rough body brushed Harrah's knee. He looked down to see a great lurcher moving half-crouched into the open space. He realized then that the square was full of dogs, furtive shadows gliding between the legs of the men. They had stopped howling, these dogs. They growled and whimpered and their white fangs gleamed.

The small brown cur moaned once. Then he went with a rush and a scrabble out across the stones and leaped straight for the dancing girl's throat.

II: The Brothers

She did not scream. She moved, as swiftly as the dog, and caught the wiry brown body in mid-leap, between her two hands. Harrah saw her stand so for a split second, holding the frenzied beast that was shrieking now to get at her, and her eyes had narrowed to two slits of cold fire, utterly black and without fear.

Then she threw the dog into the jaws of the lurcher, that had started a rush of his own, and the two went down in a snarling tangle.

After that there was bedlam. The one act of violence was all that was needed. The crowd turned and rolled in upon itself in a panic desire to be quit of the square. Dogs and humans were mixed in a trampling screaming turmoil. Something had set the beasts mad and in their madness they snapped and tore at whatever got in their way. There began to be blood on the stones and weapons flashed in the torchlight and the voice of fury bayed in the hot wind.

Dogs and men only fought there. The aboriginals were gone.

Harrah managed to stand his ground for a moment. He saw the girl run past him and brought the barrel of his gun down across the head of a long-jawed brute that came at her from behind. When he looked again she had disappeared.

The press of the crowd bore him on then, the way she had gone. After a few paces he stumbled and looked down to see scarlet cloth and white flesh between his feet. She was trying to get up. He fought a clear space for her, battering with fists and elbows. In a second she was up, tearing like a wildcat with her long nails at the bodies that threatened to crush her down again.

She was still not afraid.

Harrah grinned. He caught her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She was small, and surprisingly light. He let the tide carry them, concentrating only on keeping his feet, clubbing dog and man alike.

The girl had drawn a little knife from somewhere in her rags. Hanging head down over his shoulder, she plied it and laughed. Harrah

thought that it was fine to be brave but he thought she needn't have enjoyed it so much. Her body was like spring steel, clinging around him.

An alley mouth opened before him. He went down it with a rush of escaping humanity and raging dogs, making for the wall. The houses were irregularly built and presently he found a crevice between two of them that had once housed a stall. He dodged into it, set the girl on her feet behind him and stood getting his breath back, watchful of the crowd still streaming by not a foot away from him.

He knew that the girl was looking at him. She was very close in that cramped space. She was not trembling nor even breathing hard.

"Why did you glare at me like that, in the square?" he asked her. "Was it personal or do you just hate all men?"

"Did you pick me up just to get the answer to that question?" She spoke English perfectly, without a trace of an accent, and her voice was as beautiful as her body, very clear and soft.

"Perhaps."

"Very well then. I hate all men. And women too—especially women."

She was matter-of-fact about it. It came to Harrah with a small qualm that she meant it. Every word of it. He was suddenly uneasy about having her little knife where she could use it on his back.

He turned around, catching her wrist. She let him take the knife, smiling a little.

"Fear," she said. "Always fear, no matter where you are."

"But you're not afraid."

"No." She glanced past him, into the alley. "The crowd is thinning now. I will go and find my brothers."

A big rusty-red mongrel thrust his head into the crevice and snarled. Harrah kicked him and he slunk back reluctantly, his lips winkled, his red-rimmed eyes fixed on the girl.

"I wouldn't," said Harrah. "The dogs don't seem to like you."

She laughed. "I haven't a scratch on me. Look at yourself."

He looked. He was bleeding in a number of places, and his clothes were in shreds.

He shook his head.

"What the devil got into them?" he demanded.

"Fear," said the girl. "Always fear. I will go now."

She moved to pass him, and he stopped her. "Oh, no. I saved your life, lady. You can't walk away quite so easily."

* * *

He put his hands on her shoulders. Her flesh was cool and firm, and the strands of her tawny mane curled over it between his fingers. What mingling of alien strains had bred her he could not guess but she was like no one he had ever seen before, inexpressibly lovely in the light of the flashing moons. She was like moonlight herself, the soft gleam of it in her hair, her skin, her great haunted eyes.

Outcaste, dancer in the public streets, pariah in crimson rags, there was a magic about her. It stirred Harrah deeply. Some intuition warned him to take his hands from her and let her go, because she was a stranger beyond his knowing. But he did not. He could not.

He bent and kissed her lightly between the brows. "What's your name, little Wanderer?"

"Marith."

Harrah knew that word, in the lingua franca of the thieves' markets. He smiled.

"And why should you be called 'Forbidden'?"

Her dark gaze dwelt upon him somberly. "I am not for any man to love."

"Will you come home with me, Marith?"

She whispered, "I warn you, Earthman—I am death!"

He laughed and gathered her into his arms. "You're a child and children should not be full of hate. Come home with me, Marith. I'll only kiss you now and then and buy you pretty things and teach you how to laugh."

She did not answer at once. Her face was distant and dreaming as though she listened to some far-off voice. Presently she shrugged and said, "Very well. I will come."

They started off together. The alley was deserted now. There were lingering sounds of turmoil in the bazaar but they were far away.

Harrah led the girl toward his house and the streets were empty and still under the thronging moons.

He kept his arm around her. He was full of a strange excitement and his bored ill-temper had left him completely. Yet as he walked he became aware again of a gulf between him and Marith, something he could not understand. A pang of doubt that was almost fear crossed his heart. He did not know what he held, child, woman or some alien, wicked creature, close in the hollow of his arm.

He remembered the aboriginals, who had cried of death and demons. He remembered the howling of the dogs. And he wondered because of what he felt within himself.

But she was very lovely and her little white feet stepped so lightly in the dust beside his and he would not let her go.

They had left the bazaar behind them. They came to a quiet place, surrounded by the blank walls of houses, and suddenly, without sound, as though they had taken form ghost-like from the shadows, two men stepped out and barred their way.

One was an Earthman, a large man, heavy-shouldered, heavy-faced, with a look of ponderous immovability about him. The other was a Venusian, slim and handsome, with bright pale hair. Both men were armed. There was something infinitely ominous about the way they stood there, neither moving nor speaking, with the moonlight touching a hard blue glitter from their guns.

Harrah stopped, his hands half raised, and Marith moved forward, one step, away from him. Then she too stopped, like a crouching cat.

Harrah said, "What is this? What do you want?"

The Earthman answered, "We want the—the girl, not you." His slow, deep voice hesitated oddly over that word, "girl."

Marith turned. She would have fled past Harrah, back the way they had come, but again she came to a dead halt.

"There is someone behind you," she said. Her eyes looked at Harrah and he was startled to see that they were full of terror. She was afraid now—deathly afraid.

"Don't let them take me," she whispered. "Please don't let them take me!" And then, as though to herself, "Hurry. Oh, hurry!"

Her head moved tensely from side to side, the head of an animal seeking escape, but there was no escape.

* * *

Harrah glanced over his shoulder. A third man had come from somewhere to stand behind them with a gun, a yellow-eyed Martian with a smiling, wolfish face. Deep within Harrah a small chill pulse of warning began to beat. This was no spur-of-the-moment holdup. This was ambush, carefully planned. He and Marith had been deliberately followed, herded and trapped.

"Marith," he said. "Do you know these men?"

She nodded. "I know them. Not their names—but I know them." It was terrible to see her so afraid.

It seemed to Harrah that he knew the men also, an intuitive knowledge based on long experience.

"You smell of law," he said to them. He laughed. "You've forgotten where you are. This is Komar."

The large man shook his head. "We're not law. This is—personal."

"Let us have no trouble, Earthman," said the Martian. "We have no quarrel with you. It is only the girl-thing we want." He began to move closer to Harrah, slowly, like a man approaching a dangerous animal. At the same time the others moved in also.

"Unfasten your belt," said the large man to Harrah. "Let it drop."

"Don't let them take me," whispered Marith.

Harrah lowered his hands to his belt.

He moved then, very swiftly. But they were swift too and there were three of them. Harrah had not quite cleared his gun from the holster when the Martian's weapon took him club-fashion across the side of the head. He fell. He heard his gun clatter sharply against stone, far away where someone had kicked it. He heard Marith cry out.

With infinite effort he raised himself on his hands. Wavering bands of blackness and intense light obscured his vision. But he saw dimly that the Venusian had caught the girl and that the other two were struggling to subdue her, and that her struggle was beyond belief, the small white body fighting to be free.

He tried to rise and could not. In a minute they had borne her down, the three of them. The slender wrists were snared and bound. One of the men produced a cloth that gleamed like metal and raised it above her head.

They seemed to recede from Harrah, gliding away down a street curiously lengthened into some dark dimension of pain. The echoes of their grunts and scufflings rang queerly muffled in his ears. But he saw, quite clearly, the last despairing look that Marith gave him before the shining cloth descended and hid her face.

His heart was wrenched with sorrow for her and a terrible rage rose in him against the men. He tried to get up and go after her and for a time he thought he had but when his sight cleared a little he realized that he had only crawled a few inches. How long the effort had taken him he did not know but the street was empty and there was no sound.

"Marith," he said. "Marith!"

Then he looked up, and saw that her brothers were standing over him, immensely tall, their beautiful strange faces very white in the shifting light of the moons.

III: A Broken Edge

One of the Wanderers reached down and gathered Harrah's shirtfront into his hand. Without effort, he lifted the Earthman to his feet. He looked into Harrah's face with eyes that were like Marith's, black and deep, charged with some cruel anger of the soul.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Where have they taken her?"

"I don't know." Harrah found that he could stand up. He tried to shake off the Wanderer's grip. "Where did you come from? How did you—"

"Find her." The hand that would not be shaken off tightened on Harrah's shirt until the cloth was drawn close around his throat. "You took her away, Earthman. Between you and the dogs something has happened that was not meant to happen. You took her—now find her!"

Harrah said between his teeth, "Let go."

"Let him go, Kehlin," said one of the others. "He will be no use dead."

Almost reluctantly the throttling grip relaxed and was gone. Harrah stepped back. He was furious but he was also more than a little frightened. Again, as with Marith, he had touched something strange in this man Kehlin. The terrible relentless strength of that strangling hand seemed more than human.

Then he swayed and nearly fell and realized that he was still dizzy from the blow and probably not thinking very clearly.

The man called Kehlin said, with iron patience, "She must be found quickly. At once, do you understand? She is in great danger."

Harrah remembered his last sight of Marith's face. He remembered her fear and the quiet deadly urgency with which the three strangers had gone about the taking of her. He knew that Kehlin spoke the truth.

"I'll get Tok," said Harrah. "He can find out where she is."

"Who is Tok?"

Harrah explained. "The aborigines know everything that goes on in Komar almost before it happens."

He turned, suddenly in a hurry to get on to his lodgings and look for Tok, but Kehlin said sharply, "Wait. I can do it more quickly."

Harrah stopped, a cold tingle sweeping across his skin. Kehlin's face had the same look that he had seen on Marith's before, the odd expression of one listening to distant voices. There was a moment of silence and then the Wanderer smiled and said, "Tok is coming."

One point of mystery cleared up for Harrah. "Telepaths. That's how you found me, how you knew what had happened to Marith. She was calling to you to hurry."

Kehlin nodded. "Unfortunately it's a limited talent. We can communicate among ourselves when we wish, and we have some control over minds of the lower orders, that are animal or very near it, like Tok's. But I cannot read or even trace the minds of the men who have taken my sister—and she is being prevented from using her own ability to talk to me."

"They put a cloth over her head," said Harrah. "A shining sort of cloth."

"Thought waves are electrical in nature," said Kehlin. "They can be screened."

After that no one spoke. They stood in the empty space under the blank walls of the houses and waited.

Presently among the shadows a darker shadow moved. Slowly, with a terrible reluctance, it came toward them into the moonlight and Harrah saw that it was Tok. Tok, creeping, cringing, bent as though under a heavy burden—not wanting to come but drawn as a fish is drawn unwilling by hook and line.

The hook and line of Kehlin's mind. Harrah glanced from the Wanderer's still face to the awful misery of fear in Tok's eyes and a wave of anger swept over him, mingled with a certain dread.

"Tok," he said gently. "Tok!"

The aboriginal turned his head and gave Harrah one look of hopeless pleading—just such a look as Marith had given when the strangers took her away. Then he crouched down at Kehlin's feet and stayed there, shivering.

Impulsively, Harrah started forward and one of Kehlin's brothers caught him by the arm.

"If you want to save her—be still!"

Harrah was still, and felt the aching of his flesh where the man had gripped it, as though with five clamps of steel instead of human fingers.

Kehlin did not speak and the only sound that came from Tok was a sort of unconscious whimpering. But after a minute or two Kehlin said, "He knows where she is. He will guide us."

* * *

Tok had already turned to go. The men followed him. Harrah saw that Tok's step was swift now, almost eager. But the terror had not left him.

Kehlin watched him and his eyes were black and deep as the spaces beyond the stars.

Demons. Demons with the eyes of darkness.

A shiver of superstitious fear went over Harrah. Then he looked again at the Wanderers in their tawdry rags—outcasts of an outcaste tribe, selling their sister's beauty in the marketplace for the sake of a few coins, and his awe left him.

He had caught too much of it from the aboriginals, who could make an evil spirit out of every shadow.

He began to think again of Marith, and the yellow-eyed Martian who had cracked his skull, and his knuckles itched.

He had no weapon now except a knife he carried under his shirt but he felt that he could make shift.

Abruptly he asked a question that had been on the top of his mind. "What did the men want with her?"

One of the Wanderers shrugged. "She is beautiful."

"That was not in their minds," said Harrah. "Nor is it yours."

"An old feud," said Kehlin harshly. "A blood feud."

Something about his voice made Harrah shiver all over again.

There was something strange about Komar now. After that brief violence of the dogs, nothing stirred. The sound of voices came from the roofless houses, a sort of uneasy muttering that burst into sharper cadence around the wine shops.

But no man walked in the streets. Even the dogs were gone.

Harrah was sure that eyes watched them from the darkness, as Marith and her captors had been watched. But it was only a feeling. The aboriginals themselves were intangible as smoke.

Tok led the way swiftly, doubling back toward the lower side of the bazaar. Here was a section that Harrah never visited—the Quarter of the Sellers of Dreams. Poetic name for a maze of filthy rat-runs stinking with the breath of nameless substances. The sliding roofs were always closed and what few voices could be heard were beyond human speech.

They came to a house that stood by itself at the end of an alley. It looked as though it had stood a long time by itself, the fecund weeds growing thick around the door, rooting in the chinks of the walls.

There was no light, no sound. But Tok stopped and pointed.

After a moment Kehlin nodded. With that gesture he dismissed Tok, forgot him utterly, and the aboriginal went with three loping

strides into the shadows and was gone.

* * *

Kehlin moved forward, treading noiselessly in the dust.

The others followed. Around at the side was a wing, partially destroyed in some old quake. A thick stubby tree had sprouted in the dirt floor, its branches spreading out over the broken walls.

Without waiting for Kehlin's orders Harrah swung up into the tree and climbed from there to the coping of the house, where he could look down upon the roof.

The sliding sections were closed. But they were old and rotted and through the gaps Harrah saw a dim glow of light. Somewhere below a lantern burned and a man was talking.

The Wanderers were beside him now on the coping, moving with great care on the crumbling brick. Their eyes caught the lantern-glow with a feral glitter, giving them a look unutterably cruel and strange.

Harrah thought they had forgotten him now as completely as they had forgotten Tok.

He shifted position until he could see directly down through a hole in the roof. Kehlin was beside him, very close.

The man's voice came up to them, slow, deliberate, without pity.

"We've come a long way for this. We didn't have to. We could have stayed safe at home and let somebody else do the worrying. But we came. One man from each world—men, hear me? Human men."

His shadow fell broad and black across the floor, across Marith. A large shadow, ponderous, immovable. The girl lay on the floor. The metallic cloth still covered her head and a gag had been added outside it, to keep her from screaming. She was still bound but the cords had been replaced by metal cuffs, connected by wires that led to a little black box. A tiny portable generator, Harrah thought, and was filled with fury.

"You're tough," said the man. "But we're tough too. And we won't go away empty handed. I'll ask you once more. How many—and where?"

Marith shook her head.

A lean dark hand that could only have belonged to the Martian reached out and pressed a stud on the black box. The body of the girl stiffened, was shaken with agony.

Harrah gathered himself. And in the instant before he jumped Kehlin moved so that his shoulder struck the Earthman a hard thrusting blow and sent him plunging head foremost through the roof.

There was a great splintering of rotten wood. The whole room was suddenly revealed to Harrah—the three men looking upward, the girl scarlet and white against the brown floor, the small black box, all rushing up, up to meet him.

He grasped at a broken edge of roof. It crumbled in his hands, and he saw the Venusian step back, it seemed very slowly, to get out of his way. The momentary breaking of his fall enabled Harrah to get his feet under him and he thought that he was not going to die at once, he would surely live long enough to break Kehlin's neck instead of his own.

He hit the floor in a shower of dust and splinters. Half smiling the Martian drew his gun.

IV: As Leopards . . .

After that for a moment no one moved. The dust of years sifted down on them. Another board fell with a crash. Harrah gasped for the breath that had been knocked out of him and the girl writhed in her uninterrupted pain. A brief moment of stillness in which the Earthman, the Martian and the Venusian stared at Harrah and thought of nothing else.

Then, very stealthily and swiftly, the Wanderers dropped through the open roof as leopards drop on their quarry from above. In a way, it was beautiful to watch—the marvelous grace and strength with which they moved, the flashing of the three bright silent blades. A ballet with knives. The Martian's gun went off once. It didn't hit anything. The big Earthman turned to grapple with Kehlin and grunted as the steel went home between his ribs.

Harrah got up. There didn't seem to be any place for him in that fight. It was over too fast, so fast that it seemed impossible that three men could die in so few seconds. The faces of Marith's brothers were cold with a terrible coldness that turned Harrah sick to look at them.

He stepped over the body of the Venusian, noting how the curling silver hair was mottled with crimson and dark dust. He cut the power from the black box and Marith relaxed slowly, her flesh still quivering. He tore the gag and the metal cloth from her head, and thought that men who could do this thing to a girl deserved to die. And yet he took no joy in it.

Marith looked up at him and he thought she smiled. He lifted her and held her in his arms, touching her with awkward gentle hands.

The big Earthman raised his head. Even death he would meet on his own time, refusing to be hurried. He saw what had been done, and there was something now in his broad stolid face that startled Harrah—a grim and shining faith.

He looked at the Wanderers with a look of bitter fury in which there was no acknowledgment of defeat.

"All right," he said. "All right. You're safe for a while now. You set a trap and you baited it with her and it worked—and you're safe now. But you can't hide. The very dogs know you. There's no place for you in earth, heaven or hell. If it takes every drop of human blood in the System to drown you we'll do it."

He turned to Harrah, kneeling in the dirt with Marith in his arms.

"Don't you know what they are?" he demanded. "Are you in love with that and you don't know what it is?"

Harrah felt Marith shudder and sigh against him and before he could speak Kehlin had stooped, smiling, over the big man. The Wanderer's knife made one quick dainty motion and there were no more words, only a strangled grunting such as a butchered pig makes when it falls. Then silence.

Marith's fingers tightened on Harrah's wrist. She tried to rise and he helped her up and steadied her.

Still smiling, Kehlin came across the room, the knife swinging languidly in his hand.

Marith said, "Wait."

Kehlin's smile turned into something sardonic. As one who is in no hurry he waited, coming only far enough so that the blood of the big Earthman would not touch his sandals.

Marith looked up into Harrah's face. There was no hatred in her eyes now.

"Is it true?" she asked. "Do you love me?"

Harrah could not answer. He looked at the dead men and the three silent beings that stood over them and there was a sickness in him, a sickness beyond the fear of death.

"What are you?" he said to them. "The dogs know you. Tok knows you. But I don't know you."

His gaze came back to Marith. She had not taken her eyes from him. They broke his heart.

"Yes," he said, with a queer harshness. "Yes, I guess I love you as much as you can make any meaning out of the word." The smell of blood lay heavy and sweet on the air and the blade gleamed in Kehlin's hand and it seemed a strange word to be speaking in this place. It had a jeering sound of laughter.

Marith whispered, "Kiss me."

* * *

Stiffly, slowly, Harrah bent and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips were cool and very sweet and a queer wild pang rang through him so that his flesh contracted as though from pain or fear and his heart began a great pounding.

He stepped back and said, "You're not human."

"No," she answered softly. "I am android." Presently she smiled. "I told you, Earthman. I am Marith. I am Forbidden."

She did not weep. She had no human tears. But her eyes were heavy with the sadness of all creation.

"From time to time," she murmured, "men and women have loved us. It is a great sin and they are punished for it and we are destroyed. We have no souls and are less than the dogs that tear at us. Ashes to

ashes, dust to dust—even that is denied us for we are not born of the earth, of Adam's clay. The hand of man made us, not the hand of God, and it is true that we have no place in heaven or hell."

"We will make a place," said Kehlin, and his fingers played with the shining knife. There was no sadness about him. He looked at the dead men, the man of Earth, the man of Venus, the man of Mars.

"On their worlds we will make a place. Heaven has no meaning for us nor hell. Only the life we have now, the life man gave us. You, Earthman! How long have you been out here beyond the Belt?"

"A long time," said Harrah. "A long, long time."

"Then you haven't heard of the war." Kehlin's white teeth glittered. "The secret quiet war against us—the slaves, the pets, the big wonderful toys that grew so strong we frightened the men who made us. It's not strange you haven't heard. The governments tried to keep it secret. They didn't want a panic, people killing each other in mistake for runaway androids. We were so hard to detect, you see, once we shed our uniforms and got rid of our tattoo marks." He stirred the Martian with his foot, the dark face turned upward, snarling even in death.

"It took men like this to recognize us," he said. "Men trained in the laboratories before they were trained against crime. We thought we were safe here, far beyond the law, but we had to be sure. Law wouldn't matter if word got back to the Inner Worlds. They would come out and destroy us." He laughed. "Now we're sure."

"For a time," said Marith. "There will be others like them."

"Time," said Kehlin. "A little time. That's all we need."

He moved again toward Harrah, casually swift, as though one more thing needed to be done.

Harrah watched him come. He did not quite believe, even now. He was remembering androids as he had known of them long ago—Kehlin had named them. The slaves, the pets, the big wonderful toys. Synthetic creatures built of chemical protoplasm, molded in pressure tanks, sparked to intelligent life by the magic of cosmic rays drawn pure from outer space.

Creatures made originally to do the work that human flesh was too frail for—the dangerous things, the experiments with pressure and

radiation, the gathering of data from places where men could not go, the long lonely grinding jobs that tear human nerves to pieces.

For man had built better than Nature. The androids were not hampered by the need of food, air and water. A few ounces of chemicals every year or so kept them going. Their lungs were ornamental, for the purpose of speech only. They had no complicated internal structure to break down and their flesh was tough-celled, all but indestructible.

And because they could be made beautiful, because they had strength and grace and endurance beyond the human, their uses had widened. Entertainers, household servants, fashionable adjuncts to expensive living. Things. Objects to be bought and sold like machines. And they had not been content.

Kehlin's eyes were brilliant with the glory of hate. He was as splendid and inevitable as the angel of death and, looking at him, Harrah became aware of a bitter truth—the truth that the big Earthman had denied with his dying breath. Man had wrought too well. These were the natural inheritors of the universe.

Marith said again, "Wait."

This time Kehlin did not stop.

Marith faced him, standing between him and Harrah's vulnerable body.

"I have earned this right," she said. "I demand it."

Kehlin answered without a flicker of emotion. "This man must die." And he would not stop.

Marith would not move and behind her back Harrah drew his own knife into his hand. Futile as it was he could not submit to butchery without at least the gesture of fighting back. He looked into Kehlin's face and shuddered, an inward shudder of the soul.

* * *

Marith spoke.

"This man has already helped us greatly—perhaps he has saved us by saving me." She pointed to the bodies. "We're not free of their kind and what we have to do can't be done in a minute. We need supplies

from Komar—metals, tools, chemicals, many things. If we get them ourselves we run the risk of being recognized. But if we had an agent, a go-between—" She paused, then added, "A human."

Kehlin had at last halted to listen. One of the other men—Harrah could not, somehow, stop thinking of them as men—spoke up.

"That is worth thinking about, Kehlin. We can't spend all our time in the public squares, watching for spies."

Kehlin looked across Marith's white shoulder at the Earthman, and shook his head.

"Trust a human?" He laughed.

"There are ways to prevent betrayal," said Marith. "Ways you know of."

And the android who had spoken before echoed, "That is so."

Kehlin played with the knife and continued to watch Harrah but he did not move. Harrah said hoarsely, "To the devil with you all. No one has asked me whether I'm willing to betray my own kind."

Kehlin shrugged. "You can join them quite easily," he said, and glanced at the bodies. Marith turned and took Harrah by the arms. Her touch sent that queer pang through his flesh again, and it was strangely sweet.

"Death is yours for the asking, now or later. But think, Earthman. Perhaps there is justice on our side too. Wait a little before you die."

She had not changed, he thought. Her little white feet that had walked beside his in the dust of Komar, her voice that had spoken to him through the moonlight—they had not changed. Only her eyes were different.

Marith's eyes and himself, because of what he knew. And yet he remembered.

He did not know what he held—child, woman or some alien wicked creature, close in the hollow of his arm. But she was very lovely and he would not let her go.

He drew a long breath. Her eyes, searching his, were a beauty and a pain so poignant that he could neither bear it nor look away.

"All right," he said. "I'll wait."

V: The Same Beauty

They had come a long way down from the plateau of Komar, into the jungle that laps around it like a hungry ochereous sea. They had come by steep and secret ways that were possible only to an aboriginal—or an android.

Harrah, who had been handed bodily down the dizzy cliffs, was more conscious than ever of his human inferiority. He was exhausted, his bones ached with wrenching, and his nerves were screaming. But Marith, so small and sweetly made, had dropped over the precipices like a little white bird, unaided, and she was quite unwearied.

Once during the descent Kehlin had paused, holding Harrah without effort over a thousand feet of sheer space, between the wheeling moons and the darkness.

He had smiled, and said, "Tok is following. He is afraid but he is following you."

Harrah himself was too much afraid even to be touched.

Now they stood, the four androids and the man from Earth, in the jungle of Ganymede. Vapor from some hidden boiling spring drifted through the tangle of branches and flowering vines, the choking wanton growth of a hothouse run wild. There was a taste of sulphur in the air and a smell of decay and a terrible heat.

Kehlin seemed to be listening to something. He turned slightly once, then again as though getting his direction. Then he started off with complete certainty and the others followed. No one spoke. No one had told Harrah where they were going or why.

Only Marith kept close to him and now and again he would meet her gaze and she would smile, a smile wistful and sad as far-off music. And Harrah hated her because he was weary and drenched with sweat and every step was a pain.

He hoped that Tok was still following them. It was comforting to think of that furry shape gliding noiselessly along, at home in the jungle, part of it. Tok was not human either. But he too could feel pain and weariness and fear. He and Harrah were brothers in blood.

The sky was blotted out. The eternal moonlight sifted through the trees, restless, many-hued, tinged here and there with blood from the red glow of Jupiter. The forest was very still. It seemed as endless as the dark reaches of the dreams that come with fever, and Harrah fancied that it held its breath and waited.

Once they came to a place where the trees were slashed by a vast sickle of volcanic slag. To the north a gaunt cone stood up against the sky, crooked, evil, wearing a plume of smoke on its brow. The smell of sulphur was very strong and heat breathed out of the mountain's flanks with a hissing sound like the laughter of serpents.

Lightly, swiftly, the white-skinned beautiful creatures sped across that blasted plain and the man came staggering after them.

Three times they passed through rude villages. But the huts were empty. Word had gone through the jungle as though the wind carried it and the aboriginals had vanished.

Kehlin smiled. "They have hidden their women and children," he said, "but the men watch us. They crouch in the trees around our camp. They are afraid and they watch."

At length through the stillness Harrah began to hear a sound very strange in this primal forest—the clangor of forges. Then, quite suddenly, they came to the edge of a place where the undergrowth had been cleared away and their journey was over.

The picked bones of a rusty hull lay among the trees and beneath its skeletal shadow there was motion. Long sheds had been built. Lights burned in them and figures passed to and fro and vast heaps of metal torn from the ship lay ready to be worked.

Kehlin said softly, "Look at them, Earthman. Thirty-four, counting ourselves. All that are left. But the finest, the best. The lords of the world."

Harrah looked. Men, a few women or creatures made in their semblance, all stamped with the same beauty, the same tireless strength. There was something wonderful about them, working, building, untouched by their environment, apart from it, using it only as a tool to serve them. Something wonderful, Harrah thought, struggling for breath in the bitter heat. Wonderful and frightening.

Kehlin had apparently given them the whole story telepathically, for they did not pause from their work to ask questions. Only they glanced at Harrah as he passed and in their eyes he saw the shadow of fate. Kehlin said, "We will go into the ship."

* * *

Some of the inner cabins were still intact. The ship had been old and very small. Stolen, Harrah guessed, the best that they could do, but they had made it good enough. No more than ten men could have survived in its cramped quarters. Yet thirty-four androids had ridden it across deep space. Darkness, lack of air and food, did not bother them.

"We brought what equipment we could," said Kehlin. "The rest we must fashion for ourselves." The sound of the forges echoed his words. He led Harrah into what had been the captain's cabin. It was crammed with delicate electronic apparatus, some of which Harrah recognized as having to do with encephalographs and the intricacies of thought-waves.

There was no room for furniture. Kehlin indicated a small clear space on the deck-plates. "Sit down."

Harrah did not obey at once and the android smiled. "I'm not going to torture you and if I had wished to kill you I could have done so long ago. We must have complete understanding, you and I." He paused and Harrah was perfectly aware of the threat behind his words. "Our minds must speak, for that is the only way to understanding."

Marith said softly, "That is so, Earthman. Don't be afraid."

Harrah studied her. "Will I be able to understand you then?"

"Perhaps."

Harrah sat down on the hard iron plates and folded his hands between his knees to hide their trembling. Kehlin worked smoothly for a time. Harrah noted the infinite deftness of his movements. A distant humming rose in the cabin and was lost to hearing. Kehlin placed round electrodes at the Earthman's temples and Harrah felt a faint tingling warmth.

Then the android knelt and looked into his eyes and he forgot everything, even Marith, in the depths of that passionate alien gaze.

"Seventy-three years ago I was made." said Kehlin. "How long have you lived, Earthman? Thirty years? Forty? How much have you done, what have you learned? How is the strength of your body? How is the power of your mind? What are your memories, your hopes? We will exchange these things, you and I—and then we will know each other."

A deep tremor shook Harrah. He did not speak. Two sharp movements of Kehlin's hands. The cabin darkened around him. A swift reeling vertigo, an awful plunging across some unknown void, a loss of identity . . .

Harrah cried out in deadly fear and the voice was not his own.

He could not move. Vague images crowded his mind, whirling, trampling, unutterably strange.

Memories coming back, confused, chaotic, a painful meshing of realities.

Silence. Darkness. Peace.

He lay at rest. It seemed that there had never been anything but this bodiless negation in the very womb of sleep. He had no memories. He had no identity. He was nothing. He was without thought or trouble, wrapped in the complete peacefulness of not-being. Forever and forever, the timeless sleep.

Then, from somewhere out of the void, vast and inescapable as the stroke of creation upon nothingness, a command came. The command to wake.

He awoke.

Like a comet, cruel and bright across the slumbrous dark, awareness came. A sudden explosion of being, leaping full upon him with a blaze and a shriek. Here was no slow gentle realization, softened by the long years of childhood. Here was inundation, agony—self.

The little part of Harrah that remained cringed before that terrible awakening. No human brain could have borne it. Yet it was as though the memory were his own. He felt the flood tide of life roar in and fill his emptiness, felt the fabric of his being shudder, withstand and find itself.

He knew that he was remembering the moment of Kehlin's birth. He opened his eyes.

Vision keen as an eagle's, careless of darkness, of shadows, of blinding light. He saw a tall Earthman with a haggard face, who sat before him on the rusty deck and regarded him with strange eyes. An Earthman named Tony Harrah. Himself. Yet it was Kehlin the android who looked out of his eyes.

He started up, wavering on the brink of madness, and Marith's hands were on his shoulders, holding him steady.

"Don't be afraid. I am here."

It was not her voice speaking to him but her mind. He could hear it now. He could feel it touching his, sweet and full of comfort. Quite suddenly he realized that she was no longer a stranger. He knew her now. She was—Marith.

Her mind spoke gently. "Remember, Earthman. Remember the days of Kehlin." He remembered.

VI: Lords of the World

He remembered the laboratory, the birthplace, the doorway to the world of men. He remembered the moment when he first rose up from the slab where he had lain and stood before his makers, embodied and alive. He remembered the fine smooth power of his limbs, the bright newness of sounds, the wonderful awareness of intellect.

Brief vivid flashes, the highlights of seventy-three years of existence, coming to Harrah as though they were his own. The long intensive training—Kehlin, Type A, technical expert. The ease of learning, the memory that never faltered, the growth of mental power until it overtopped the best of the human teachers.

He remembered the moment when Kehlin first looked upon the redness of human blood and realized how frail were the bodies of men.

He watched the gradual development of emotion.

Emotion is instinctive in natural life. In the android, Harrah saw it grow slowly from the intellect. An odd sort of growth, like a tree of crystal with clear, sharp branches—but alive and no less powerful than the blind sprawling impulses of man. Different, though. Very different

One great root was lacking—the root of lust. Kehlin's hungers were not of the flesh and because he was free of this he was free also of greed and cruelty and—this came to Harrah with a shock of surprise—of hate.

In this uncanny sharing of another mind he remembered testing experimental ships at velocities too great for human endurance. He had enjoyed that, hurtling across infinity like a rogue asteroid with a silent shriek of speed.

He remembered being cast adrift in space alone. He wore no protective armor. The cold could not harm him and he had no need of air. He looked at the naked blaze of the universe and was not awed. The magnificence of space did not crush him with any sense of his own smallness.

He did not expect to be as big as a star. Rather, for the first time, he felt free. Free of the little worlds, the little works of men. They were bound but he was not. Distance and time were no barriers to him. He was brother to the roving stars because both had been made, not born. He wanted to go out to them.

The rescue ship came and took him in but he never forgot his dream of the other suns and his longing to go among them, clear out to the edge of the universe.

Instead he gathered data for the scientists in the forbidden places of the Solar System. He walked the chasms of Mercury's Darkside, where the human mind will crack in the terrible night, where the black mountain ranges claw at the stars and no life has ever been or ever will be. He went deep into the caverns of the Moon. He went into the Asteroid Belt and charted a hundred deadly little worlds alone while his masters waited safely in the shelter of their ship.

And still he was outcaste—a thing, an android. Men used him and ignored him. They were human and he was an object out of nature, vaguely repulsive, a little frightening. He had not even any contact with his own kind. As though they had some foreknowledge of trouble men kept their androids apart. Harrah was aware, in Kehlin's mind, of a piercing loneliness.

There's no place for you in earth, heaven or hell!

Marith's thought crossed his like the falling of tears. "For us there was no comfort, no hope, no refuge. We were made in your image, man and woman. Yet you were cruel gods for you made a lie and gave us the intelligence to know it. You denied us even dignity. And—we did not ask to be made."

Kehlin said, "It is enough."

Once again Harrah was flung across a reeling darkness. This time the change was not so frightening but in a way it was worse. He did not realize that until he was again fully aware of himself. Then he was conscious of a bitter contrast, a thing both saddening and shameful.

The mind of the android, that he had shared for that brief time, had been as a wide space flooded with light. His own seemed cluttered and dark to him now, haunted by ugly shapes that crept along the borders of consciousness. All the splendid strength was gone. The crushing weariness of his body descended upon him, and he looked down almost with disgust at his unsteady hands.

He did not ask what Kehlin had found in him. He did not want to know.

"Can you understand now how we felt?" asked Kehlin. "Can you understand how we learned to hate men?"

Harrah shook his head. "You don't hate," he said. "You don't know the meaning of hate as we do. What I mistook for hatred in you was something much bigger. I'd call it pride."

He had seen so much in Kehlin's mind. Pity for man in his weakness, admiration for his courage because he had survived and built in spite of his weakness. Perhaps even gratitude.

* * *

But Kehlin had called his fellow androids the lords of the world, and he was right. They were proud and their pride was just and they would not live in chains.

Kehlin shrugged. "Call it what you will, it doesn't matter." He looked at Harrah, and for the first time the Earthman saw in the android a softening, almost a weariness.

"It isn't that we want to rule men. It isn't that we want power! It's only that men have driven us through fear. Should we go down into nothingness because men fear us? Remember, we don't even have the hope of a hereafter to soften our going!"

He shook his head. "It will be a long fight and a bitter one. I don't want it, none of us do. But we must survive and to do that we must rule and perhaps men will come out the better for it. There will never be any peace or real advancement until these wretched little worlds are governed by those who are not of the mass but above it, not driven by every wind that blows."

He was silent a moment, brooding, and then he echoed Marith's words.

"Fear. Always fear. The human race is ridden with it. Lust and fear and greed and sorrow. If only they had not been afraid of us!"

The old blaze of anger came again into his eyes. "With acid and with fire they destroyed us, Earthman. Thirty-four, all that are left. But not for long. Human reproduction is slow and clumsy, but not ours. Only a little time and there will be more of us, many more, and we will go back and take what is ours."

He said it very quietly and Harrah heard truth in his voice like the tolling of a bell—the passing-bell for the mastery of human kind.

"Will you help us, Earthman, or will you die?"

Harrah did not answer and Marith said, "Let him rest."

Kehlin nodded. He left and Harrah was hardly aware of his going. The girl spoke to him gently and he rose and stumbled after her, out of the ship.

She led him to a space apart from the main sheds, an unfinished lean-to where only a dim light filtered from the work-lamps. It was dark under the trees and hot. Terribly hot. Harrah sat down on the moist ground and put his head between his hands and there was still no answer in him, only a great blankness.

Marith waited and did not speak.

After awhile Harrah lifted his head and looked at her. "Why did you save me from Kehlin's knife?"

She answered slowly, "I'm not like Kehlin. I was made only for beauty, a dancer. My mind won't reach so high. It asks questions but

they're little ones, of small account."

"What questions, Marith?"

"I have been alive for nineteen years. My owner was very proud of me and I made him a great deal of money. And everywhere I went, in every city, on every world, I watched men and women. I saw the way they looked at each other, the way they smiled. Many of the women were not beautiful or talented. But men loved them and they were happy."

Harrah remembered her words—I hate all men and women also. Especially women.

"When I was through working," she said, "my owner put me away like a dancing doll until it was time to work again. I had nothing to do but sit alone and think and wonder."

She was close to Harrah. Her face was indistinct in the gloom, a shadowy thing of dreams.

"When you thought that I was human you said you loved me. I think that is why I saved you from the knife."

There was a long silence and then Harrah said the words she was waiting for, wanting to hear, and they were the truth.

"I love you now."

She said, very softly, "But not as you would love a woman."

He remembered her dancing in the bazaar, the ancient sensual dance that became in her a thing of sheer loveliness.

"No," he said. "But that's because you're more than human, not less."

He took her into his arms and he knew now what he held there. Not child nor woman nor any wicked thing but a creature innocent and beautiful as the moonlight and as far beyond him.

He held her close and it was as though for a moment he held his own youth again, the short bright days before he had learned the things Kehlin had named—lust and fear and greed and sorrow. He held her close and there was no passion in him, only an immense tenderness, a longing and regret so deep that his heart was near to breaking. He had his answer.

* * *

Marith drew away from him and rose, turning her face into the darkness so that he could not see her eyes. She said, "I should have let you die in Komar. It would have been easier then for both of us."

An eerie chill ran over Harrah. "You can read my mind now." He got up, very slowly.

She nodded. "Kehlin more than I because he shared it fully. That was what I meant when I reminded him that there were ways to prevent betrayal. If I were human I would tell you to run quickly and hide yourself from Kehlin and I would hope. But I am not human and I know there is no hope."

She turned toward him then, clear in the barred moonlight.

"Like to like." she whispered. "You have your burden and your pride and you would not be free of either. Kehlin was right. And yet I wish—oh, I wish . . ."

Quite suddenly she was gone and Harrah was reaching out his hand to emptiness.

For a long moment he did not move. He heard the sound of movement in the camp and knew that the telepathic warning had gone out and that within a few seconds he would be dead but he could only think that Marith was gone and he had lost her.

Then from the dark jungle, swift with love and terror, Tok came crying out to his lord.

Harrah had forgotten Tok, who had followed him down from the safety of Komar. He had forgotten a number of things. Now he remembered. He remembered Kehlin's words and the three men who had died in Komar and why they had died.

He remembered that he was human and could hope where there was no hope. "Come, Lord! Run!"

Harrah ran. And it was already too late.

The androids came, the fleet lithe creatures heading him off. Tok stood not thirty feet away, but he knew that he could never make it.

He stopped running. He saw Kehlin among those who came to trap him and he saw the gun the android carried now in place of the knife.

With acid and with fire they destroyed us . . .

With fire.

It was Harrah's turn to cry out to Tok, to the unseen watchers in the trees. He shouted with all his strength in the split second before he fell and his words carried over even the sound of the shot.

He thought that Tok was gone. He thought that there was an answer from the jungle but he was not sure. He was not sure of anything but pain.

* * *

He lay where he had fallen and he knew that he would continue to lie there because his leg was broken above the knee. He looked incuriously at the dark blood seeping around the wound, and then up into the face of Kehlin, wondering why the android had aimed so low.

Reading his thought Kehlin answered, "You had already spoken. And—I preferred you should die with us."

For a long time after that he did not speak and there was a great silence on the clearing. The androids stood, the thirty-four tall splendid beings who were the last of their kind, and they made no sound.

The jungle also was very still. But the aboriginals had done their work well and already there was a taint of smoke on the air and the wind blew hot. The naked bones of the ship mocked them with the shelter they might have had. There was no refuge, no escape, and they knew it.

Harrah saw how Kehlin looked up at the sky, at the distant suns that light the edges of the universe. The jungle sighed and flames stood up among the trees all around them like a ring of spears. Harrah thought that humans were not alone in their knowledge of sorrow. Kehlin turned abruptly and called, "Marith!"

She came out from among the others and stood before him.

"Are you happy, Marith? You have done a human thing. You have behaved like a woman, wrecking empires for love."

He flung her down beside Harrah and then he shook his head slowly and said, "No, the blame is mine. I was the leader. I should have killed the man."

He laughed suddenly. "And so this is the end—and it does not come to us from the hands of man but from the paws of apes who have learned no more than the making of fire!"

Harrah nodded. "Apes," he said. "Yes. That's the gulf between us. That's why we fear you. You were never an ape."

He watched the ring of fire brighten and draw in. The pain in his leg was very great and he was bleeding and his mind seemed distant from his body and full of profound thoughts.

"We distrust anyone who is different," he said. "We always destroy them, one way or another."

He looked up at Kehlin. "Apes. A restless, unruly bunch, driven by passions and hungers you could never understand. You would not have been able to rule us. No one ever has. We can't even ourselves. So in the end you would have destroyed us."

Kehlin's eyes met his, the black, deep eyes, brilliant now with some terrible emotion that Harrah could not read.

"Perhaps," he said softly. "Perhaps. And you're proud, aren't you? The weakling has pulled down his betters and it makes him feel strong. You're proud to die because you think you've put an end to us. But you have not, Earthman! You have not!"

Standing very tall beneath the banners of red light that shook from the flaring trees Kehlin cried out strongly, shouting to the stars, to all creation.

"You made us once, you little men who love to feel like gods! You will make us again. You can't keep from it—and we will inherit the universe!"

Harrah knew now what was in Kehlin's mind. It was faith. He saw it in the faces of all those who stood with Kehlin, the beautiful creatures trapped and waiting under the crimson pall.

A great curtain of flame and falling ash swept between them, hiding the androids from Harrah's sight. A bitter pang struck through him, a wild regret, and he tried to call out, to say that he was sorry. But the words would not come and he felt ashamed and very small and full of a black and evil guilt. He bowed his head and wept.

* * *

Marith's voice spoke close beside him. "They are gone and soon we will be too and it is better so."

Harrah turned. He was amazed to see that there was a strange look of joy about her as though she had been released from some dark prison.

"Do you love me, Marith? Do you love me still after what I've done?"

She answered, "You have set me free."

He took her in his arms and held her and it came to him that only this way, only now, could they two have been joined. And he was happy.

THE SCIENCE-FICTION FIELD

I am sitting here staring my typewriter in the face, trying to think how to begin this article. There's so much to be said about science-fiction. It's admittedly the screwball of the magazine family. It is also, regrettably, more or less a stepchild, inclined to be overlooked and even sneered at. Anyone who has taken the trouble to read a good science-fiction yarn, and read it honestly, knows that the field is no more worthy of contempt than the detective, adventure, western, or any other – in fact, less, since pseudo-science books lure some very bright brains indeed, and names with strings of degrees flying like tails on so many kites.

I don't know of any field of writing that offers more opportunity to the beginning writer; to the established man who wants a change; to any writer at all who has an imagination, a little tolerance, and the desire to have fun while he works. The rate of pay compares favorably with that in any other pulp group, and there is literally no limit to the adventures you can have. If you're tired of this planet, or system, or galaxy, throw it away and build a new one. You're God, with all creation to play around in.

They say you have to be a little crazy to write stf*. Well, maybe. But we don't think we're nuts. We think we're imaginative, and forward-looking, and even sometimes a little prophetic. Were we astonished at the War Department releases concerning the rocket-gun, the jet-propelled plane, radar, and some other things they'll only hint at darkly? We were not. We've lived around those gadgets since we've cut our teeth.

Take a look at the plans for the house of the postwar future. Take a look at television, plastics, new surgery, new techniques in psychological living. All of them have been forecast, used, and reused in the pages of the stf magazine. The brass hats already are swiping our terminology!

Maybe you're one of those people who will say, "Oh, sure, they make a few good guesses and all that, but it's still kid stuff. Nothing but a bunch of funny-looking monsters chasing around, or a Rube-Goldberg machine that integrates fraldemors out of the palefranesus. Who wants that junk? An adult mind has to have something real to work on."

All right. Have you read the stories of Heinlein, de Camp, Hubbard, Leiber? The social histories of the future as they might well be written, with not one monster included. Have you read the exquisite other-world adventures of C. L. Moore, Kuttner's psychological masterpieces, the emotional "contemporary" yarn like Bradbury's "King of the Grey Spaces"? All of them as intelligent, as finally written, as searching, and a darn sight more thought-provoking than most of what you read in the top slicks.

Some of the greatest writers haven't been above writing stf. H. G. Wells, Conan Doyle, even Prime Minister Winston Churchill — so you needn't feel too snooty about it. The only measure of a man's pride in his work is the excellence of it, and the only time anyone needs to be ashamed of writing science-fiction is when he writes it badly.

I'm not saying that there isn't childish stuff written and published. There is in every field of writing you can name. But too many people judge us all by the poorer comic strips.

Why should we be apologetic when we say we write for the fantasy field? We have Williamson. We have Hamilton. We have Wellman. We had Abraham Merritt, rest his soul. Why should we apologize? God knows there are enough novels perpetrated by Grade B morons.

I will say, however, that there seems to be a special type of psychology that goes with writing stf. Not everybody can do it, which is why the field is such a wide-open market for new talent. I can cite my own case, and in talking with other writers, I have discovered that it has been more or less the same with all of them.

Childhood, by and large, is a long, dull period of supervision, orders, tabus, and general pushing-around by a variety of persons vested with authority and the power to enforce same. The inevitable result is that the child escapes mentally into a dream world where he is king and things are done to his liking. He is Robin Hood, he is

Blackbeard, he is Tarzan. Some of these children, like myself, discover the most thrilling, the most tantalizing and fascinating realm of all — the kingdom of the imagination.

We enjoy riding the plains of Zane Grey, but we would rather walk the dead sea-bottoms of Mars under the little racing moons. We have found forests deeper and wilder than Sherwood, with giant trees lifting to a strange sun. We have furrowed seas more mystic than the Spanish Main. We have ridden the beasts of nightmare and peered into the canyons of the Moon. We have bridled the hippogriff under Koshtra-Belorn, and there is nowhere, nowhere we cannot go.

As we grow older, we learn to our delight that many of these adventures we have had are possible. Some day men will be landing, on worlds other than this, and much of this world is still secret and hidden. Our concepts of space and time and mass and relativity tell us that so much is possible, so many weird and incredible things going on constantly all around us. We are fascinated now with our minds as well as our hearts and emotions. And does something for us.

We who live half our lives in other worlds are never upset by anything new. We've always known it was coming. Because we're used to thinking in terms of whole solar systems, even whole galaxies, the cautious proddings of the postwar planners toward global thinking seem rather silly. We're not too much impressed by anything, and we have reams of literature, based on actual scientific data, exploring almost every social trend, so we can hazard a fairly good guess about where every shade of thought is going to end up if it gets a chance. I'll be willing to bet that not one reader or writer of *sf* was among those stampeded by the famous Orson Welles broadcast. We'd all have been in the other direction — to get first look at the Marshies and then pump each other's hands delightedly while yelling, "I told you so — there is life on Mars!"

The point I'm trying to make is this — unless you have always read and loved fantasy (using the term in its broad sense), the chances are you simply haven't any taste for it, and unless you have you had better give the field a wide bye. Perhaps in no other type of writing is it as important to believe implicitly in what you are doing. Detective stories, westerns, all other types of fiction use backgrounds, readily

recognizable to the reader. In stf you build your own background out of the raw stuff of your creative mind, and unless you are so sure of it that you could draw a map, sketch a brief history and outline the culture of the inhabitants, nobody else is going to be sure of it either. We like our worlds, and we get a kick out of doing this. If you don't, stf is not for you. And please, for God's sake, don't think you can write down to the market. Editors have enough trouble as it is.

Having led you subtly to it, I shall now spring my second conclusion. I shall even put it in italics because I believe it so thoroughly and because it gave me my start as a professional: There is no field of writing so well adapted to the needs of the very young writer who has not yet seen much of this world.

Beginners are forever being told to write about life in their own back yards. But most young people are bored as hell with life in then own back yards. They've lived too much of it themselves, and going to take time and perspective to get the taste out of then mouths. So they try writing about Buda Pesth and Paris and the Old Manor at Trembling-on-the-Brink, and collect endless rejection slips, and become very sad characters indeed.

The weakness in this system, of course, is that a lot of people have been to Buda Pesth and Paris and the Old Manor. They know I low the people there act and talk, what the streets look like, and how the cooking smells at dusk. Furthermore, because the tyro doesn't know these things, the blood of life is not in his stories, and even people who haven't been farther away from home than the corner grocery store know that they are hollow and without truth.

Suppose, then, that this restless young writer decides to set one of his yarns on Mars. No one has been to Mars, at least not lately. No one can rise and scream, "Kahora doesn't look like that!" or, "That's not the way the caravans go from Ved to the Wells of Tamboina!" All the kid needs to do is read a few non-technical books on what science knows or guesses about Mars, take what he wants, modify it to suit, and knock together his own personal Mars, on which he can do as he pleases and no kicks from anybody.

Furthermore, because there is such a wide latitude of characters to choose from, the young writer is less apt to betray a lack of knowledge

about people. The more he has, of course, the better — and this is the writer's chief purpose in life, to learn about people. But he can afford to let his imagination run away with him in dealing with extra-terrestrial beings, human, semi-human, and monstrous. He will find that he loves these imaginary creatures with a peculiar and passionate devotion, because they are his own fears and hopes and desires speaking out with the voice he himself has given them.

Let's say I want to write a story about India. The closest I ever came to India was Kipling and a lone Sikh with bow-legs I pass occasionally in Pershing Square. It's obvious that in trying to handle the character of, say, a Pathan warrior, or perhaps a Hindu prince, I would fall flat on my face. Four years ago, when I sold my first yarn to *Astounding Stories*, I was doing just that with characters a lot closer to home than India. But I could take my readers into the hollow heart of a dark place between Mercury and the Sun and introduce them to a flaming child born of the Sun itself, and make them believe it. I understood that creature. I didn't always, or even most of the time, understand the people I passed in the street, but I understood the Sun-Child because it was an expression of my own longing for freedom, for strength — the galaxy to play with, racing the comets out on the edges of creation, drunk with the sheer immensity of space. The fact that the Sun-Child was imprisoned in a dark shell was, I suppose, symbolic of my own frustration. But we freed it, the hero and I, and I suppose that, too, was a symbol. Anyway, I got personal pleasure out of the whole thing, as well as a very nice check. In this sense, writers of stf have an advantage over craftsmen in other fields. Frequently sheer power of imagination translated into mood, atmosphere, and unusual, compelling extra-terrestrials will carry a story otherwise undistinguished in plot and characterization.

Perhaps you like stf and want to write it, but are scared off by that word "science." You're no Ph.D., and aren't likely to be, and you are thrown into a panic of inferiority by casual references to discontinuous functions in a four-dimensional space-time grid. Well, brother, you'd be surprised how many top-notch stf writers don't know any more about it than you do. That same terror of ignorance held me off, too, although I was crazy to write the stuff, until a certain young man who

was already big-time material in the game confided in me that all the science he knew could be put into a quart bottle and still leave room for a fifth of Scotch. Then I began to perceive that there's a trick to it.

There are, to be sure, quite a few stf men who are brilliant scientific minds, including professors of physics, engineers, etc. Their stories are impressively larded with advanced math and all the other super-scientific gimmicks that leave us simple souls politely dazed and gaping. I often wish I were smart like that. But I'm not, and still I get by all right and have a lot of fun doing it.

There are few editors who insist on heavy science — John W. Campbell, Jr., of *Astounding Stories* being the notable example. But even Mr. Campbell will buy stories completely lacking in this regard, so long as they are well done and unusual. Also, many of his important novels are based on the human sciences — psychology, sociology, etc. — which are comprehensible to any intelligent person who is interested in them. (The beauty of the human sciences is that they're inexact, abounding in conflicting theories, and it's fairly hard to get tripped up — whereas, as I know to my sorrow, blundering around with chemistry is an invitation to disaster.)

To be sure, you must have some grounding in science. Impress this firmly in your mind: You cannot contravene a known and accepted principle of science unless you have a logical explanation based on other known and accepted principles. You must take into account all the basic laws of gravity, magnetism, electricity, atomic structure, astronomy, velocity, and all the rest. This requires research, and there are many non-technical books available. Inasmuch as you have to observe the same rules in any story — to avoid, for instance, glaring blunders in police procedure when doing detective stuff— this shouldn't cause any trouble. Also, it's interesting to know what goes on in the world about you.

There's a wide range of material in stf, from the frankly juvenile on up. And the readers, barring a few heavy-science fanatics, look for the same things you look for when you read — entertainment, release, an emotional punch, a stimulus to the imagination. If you can give them that, let the four-dimensional space-time grids go hang. Most of us fans skip that part anyhow, so we can get on with the story.

Let's take a look at the mechanics involved in putting stf on paper and collecting checks for same.

If you're an old fan, you're probably painfully aware of all the cliches. If not, I advise you to read all the stf mags you can get hold of and learn what is overdone. The mad-scientist plot is on its last legs, thank God. The dictator-who-wants-to-rule-or-destroy is getting frayed around the edges from over-use. And unless you have an especially fresh and brilliant idea for the threatened or accomplished destruction of Earth, let the poor old girl have a rest. Ed Hamilton has kicked her around enough already.

Space pirates are old stuff, and there has to be something more than blazing ray-guns and thundering rockets to pull them through. And the readers are tired of the yarn based on the super-hero and the ravishing babe (who seldom has a valid excuse for being there anyhow) who get themselves all tangled up with bug-eyed monsters on some planet, asteroid, or moon. This is the story replete with such dialogue as, "My, God, look there!" and such descriptions as, "His square jaw set grimly as he aimed his proton gun squarely into the gaping jaws of the advancing monster."

When I was trying to break into stf, the criticism was frequently made that my stories were just present-day plots jazzed up with ray-guns instead of automatics, and rockets instead of planes. Your stf plot has to be part and parcel of its time and setting. It must be integrated so that that particular episode could not have occurred under any other circumstances of locale and social conditions. You see why you have to build solid backgrounds.

For instance, my novel "Shadow Over Mars," which will appear soon in Startling Stories, is based on the struggle between various groups for the domination of Mars. There are the Pan-Martians, fiercely resistant to any infiltration of outlanders. There is the Terran Exploitations Company, ruthless and greedy, crushing Martian and Terran settler alike. There are the Unionists, men of both races who want to use the best of both planets to bring life back to a dying world. And, inevitably, there are the little guys of both races who just want to

be left alone, to live their own lives with decency and hope. This is a situation which has occurred in pioneer America and other places, I know. But the Martians, and the obstacles faced by the characters, are peculiar unto Mars and themselves, a valid part of their own matrix. Furthermore, the old piratical corporations here could only hope to dominate a small part of a continent. Only in the future, with interplanetary commerce and colonization, could a company possibly hope to control an entire world.

It helps a great deal if you get a broad mental picture of what the world of the future is apt to be like, taking into consideration logical developments in television, transportation, and so on. Some writers even make detailed chronological charts. Decide what your own personal planets are going to look like, and stick to it. This saves inventing whole new sets of names, natives and conditions with each story. You'll find in reading stf that authors use the same cities and localities over and over, developing various races with individual traits and customs. If you are a reader of Brackett, for instance (and if you are a devotee of the best in stf you must, of course, be a reader of Brackett*), you will find references to the Low-Canals, the Jekkara spaceport, the trade-city of Kahora, the tribes of Shun and Kesh. On Venus the trade-city is Vhia. The Nahali with their scarlet eyes dance in the hot rains of the Middle Swamps, and pale giants with white hair done in intricate braids fight and laugh and sail their ships, sheathed in pearl shell, across the tideless sea. Mercury is a savage place of heat and mountain peaks that stretch up to space beyond the thin air, and the men who come from the Terran coloniees of the Twilight Belt are as huge and darkly cruel as their native cliffs. All this makes for coherence in your stories, gives your readers something familiar to hang to, and it's always nice to go back and meet old friends. Let's drop in to Madame Kan's on the Jekkara Low-Canal, and drink green thil in tall glasses, and watch the little dark women dance, with the tinkling bells in their ears. Ah me! Would that I could...

Mr. Mathieu tells me to let you in on my formula, if any. Well, I've been trying to hook into other people's formulas these many, many moons, and so far I haven't been able to find one. They just look at me vaguely and say, "Well, I think of a situation or a character or a setting

that interests me, and then I get a guy in an awful mess, and —well, it just sort of builds from there."

If you're a struggling newcomer, you've read all the books there are on the subject, and I'll bet you don't know much more than when you started. You read the directions intelligently and they go into your head, but they don't flow through your fingers to the typewriter keys. And until those cold mechanical arrangements of character, complication, obstacle, suspense, and so on are translated into warm and vital beings as unconsciously as you breathe, you have not mastered the "formula!" I am sadly convinced the only way to bring about this miracle is to write endlessly — to read and study and soak yourself in the stuff of other people's talents, to be sure, but most of all, to write. And write. And write.

There is a thing known as "plot sense." It is, like all the other tools of this maddening trade, an intangible. It is something developed over a period of time, absorbed from motion pictures, books, stories. You're developing this when you feel satisfied with a certain story, or feel unsatisfied with another. Most people just leave it there, but because you're a writer you'll want to know why you are pleased or displeased. Plot sense is the nameless little geek that sits on your shoulder, peering, and tells you to develop character here, or emotional reaction there, or to speed up and boot the reader in the guts on page nine. It's the monitor that keeps you from getting lost in the maze of possible homes you conjure up with the first word of your story.

Some writers never seem to get a firm grip on plot. W. R. Burnett, for instance, whom I admire immensely and who can't be beat for character and dialogue, commits sins of plotting such as ruined "The Quick Brown Fox." Burnett should worry, of course, but if he had a solid sense of plot he would never have had his hip, fascinating menace killed off-stage by a minor character, thereby leaving the book to fall like a punctured tire. I point out Burnett because he's good enough to get by anyway, and so say that if you are genius you, too, can do it.

Basically, the stf plot is no different from any other plot. It has to have the same elements of character, suspense, action, etc. The only difference is that in non-stf yarns you are limited by conditions already imposed by nature, history, and politics. In stf you are limited only by

the conditions you yourself create, taking care to remain logically true to them.

The human characters in stf have to be as carefully drawn as people in any other field. Let Buck Rogers and Superman remain king in their own domain, and concentrate on genuine three-dimensional men and women. People in the year 3044 will love and hate and laugh and cry just as they were doing in 1944. Women will have babies, men will die for their beliefs. Their clothes, food, and entertainment will be as familiar to them as ours to us. They'll squabble over politics, rob and kill each other, moan over the younger generation, and give up safe homes on Earth to go pioneering on the frontiers of alien planets, just as our ancestors went to Oregon and California.

The guy that boots his tin kettle around the Triangle trade routes — Earth-Venus-Mars — won't be any more a superman than the transport pilots of today. There will be heroes and scoundrels, but they will be no less human than the Colin Kellys and the John Dillingers of our time. They will be motivated by the same psychology and emotional habit-pattern that motivates you, the guy next door. The stimuli may be a bit different, but that's all.

The human story is the backbone of stf, make what you will about ultra scientific gimmicks. And the farther you can stay away from steely eyes, bulging biceps, snarling ray guns, and bug-eyed monsters, the better off you will be.

Most of my own heroes are fairly hard boys, not above using their boot-heels in a scrap and giving a handsome wench one of those 40-second Bogart-type kisses. They're not invincible. They can be drowned when the opposition is too tough. They're a fairly seamy bunch, because to me people who have bucked the realities of pain and hunger and fear are a lot more vital, more natural, than people well insulated by money and the inhibitions of custom.

I use women when the story calls for it. A novelet usually does. It there's no logical reason for a woman, she stays out. And this, little kiddies, brings us to the delicate subject of Sex in Science-fiction. All those under 21 please turn to the next page.

There is nothing wrong with sex, in stf, or out of it. To be sure, much of the sex stuff, politely termed romantic interest, is the same

puerile sugar-icing crap you get in all the magazines, from Terrible Tales up to For Snobs Only. The heroine is a vision of feminine loveliness. (She usually does nothing but have tantrums, shriek, and generally gum up the action so that any normal man would have let her have a stiff one to the bottom, but let that go.) He and she exchange a little light banter, usually at its cutest just as destruction closes in on them. They wouldn't dream of making a pass at each other. In fact, it always takes them about 6,000 words to discover that they are, well, in love, and they're always just as astonished and flustered as though they'd never heard the word before.

Well, if you like that sort of thing, fine. But if you don't, I inform you happily that you can get away with practically anything as long as it's well and subtly done, and you don't try to emulate Hemingway and James Cain. This does not mean that you can become vulgar and offensive, and an affair based on sex alone, with no deeper emotional meaning, would be out of place as well as dull. But sensitive, adult writing can put over equally adult situations. If you don't believe me, take a look at C. L. Moore's last novel for Astounding.

From my own work ("Thralls of the Endless Night,") Planet Stories, Fall, '43) here is a case in point. The setting is a lost colony of Earthmen, wrecked long ago on an asteroid far from the Sun. Generations of environment have wrought changes in them, a degenerative evolution returning slowly to the primitive. A boy and a girl are trapped, alone in a bleak wilderness, facing death.

A strange cold terror shook him. He turned his head toward the yellow girl and saw the same thing in her eyes. They looked at each other, not moving nor breathing, thinking that they were young and going to die.

He shivered. The girl's golden body burned in the grey light. He moved. He didn't know why, only that he had to. He took her in his arms and found her lips and kissed them, roughly, with an urgent, painful hunger. She fought him a little and then lay still against him.

If that ain't sex, brother, I don't know what is. It is also, I think in my humble way, truth. My women are usually on the bitchy side — warm-blooded, hot-tempered, but gutsy and intelligent. I like them, and I have fun working with them. I find that a great deal can be

accomplished, when the temperature gets too warm, by simply slapping the space lever twice and letting the reader fill in the gap himself. Just try to be honest, not dirty, and you'll be okay.

Next comes the question of ideas. People are always asking me how I think up these things, and I always give them the old saw about lobster and ice cream. But seriously, happenings in the news can be translated into the future. Put Rickenbacker's raft, for instance, in Venusian ocean and see what happens.

The stories of other writers, particularly the classics, are fertile sources, and that doesn't mean plagiarism. Nobody can copyright a mood or an emotion. The idea for one of my favorite yarns, "The Veil of Astellar," which will appear soon in Thrilling Wonder Stories, came from Lord Dunsany's tale, "The Man with the Golden Earrings." Another of my favorites, "The Halfling," which came out

Astonishing Stories, was inspired in part by "The Maltese Falcon" and the circus-of-the -future background just naturally grew out of Ringling Brothers.

The classical properties of the work that you create often suggest plots. I used this to get my hero crashed or abandoned on page one and let him stagger off into the cave of Mercury or some place to see what he could see. The result was that Julie (Julius Schwartz, my guardian angel, sometimes spelled agent) wrote plaintively to please quit sending him so many stories beginning with just one guy going somewhere. A story, he pointed out, should have characters, plural. So let that be a lesson to you, too. Nonetheless, I still get yens to explore my private planets. A recent sale to Planet Stories was the result of interest in the ancient cities long buried under the warm and hungry seas.

Monsters — that is to say, creatures non-human and evolved under different environmental conditions — are a necessary adjunct to stf, and not to be sneered at unless they are crudely done. I always try to give my queeps and faldemors at least a touch of beauty and sympathy. I believe where they came from, and why and how. I am not interested in dull masses of flesh equipped with an unlikely array of

fangs, tentacles, claws, mandibles, and glaring eyeballs, usually four of them mounted on stalks. Some of these e-t's (extra-terrestrials, to you) are merely projections of our own dogs and horses and wild life. Others are your most fragile, or fascinating, or terrifying characters.

Be careful of your names, when christening people and places beyond this earth. I got a lot of complaints at first because most of mine looked like Zqfxl, which is difficult to pronounce and therefore annoying to the reader.

Well, and there it is. The trailways of space are before you, to blaze as you will. The editors of the science-fiction mags are a swell bunch — my special and personal thanks to Alden Norton, Malcolm Reiss, W. Scott Peacock, Leo Margulies, and Oscar Friend. All the books have felt the paper pinch badly. But on the other hand, much of their big-name, big-producer talents is in service, or busy in Washington, so the gates swing for new blood.

I'll be looking for you when I get back. Right now my little Fitts-Sothern is warming up in the launching rack, ready to blast off for Venus. There's a situation developing there, up in the high plateaus north of the Sea of Morning Opals. I've got to see what happens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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"...one of the true godmothers of the New Wave. Anyone who thinks they're pinching one of my ideas is probably pinching one of hers."

—Michael Moorcock

"...Brackett's tone derives more from the noir writers than from her fellow SF authors. Life is hard, brutal and treacherous, and demands constant alertness and ingenuity from those who wish to survive. And although she uses stock landscapes, there is always a wealth of sensual details—sweat down a spacesuit's collar; the hot control handles of a ship close to the sun—to render everything vivid. Finally, her pacing is relentless. She starts each story with a bang and never lets up. Combine all these skills and predispositions into one package and you are talking about a writer who simply imprinted her forceful style and worldview onto everything she wrote."

—Paul di Filippo, *Sci Fi Weekly*
on *Martian Quest: The Early Brackett*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leigh Brackett was born on December 7, 1915 in Los Angeles, and raised near Santa Monica. Having spent her youth as an athletic tom-boy—playing volleyball and reading stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. Rider Haggard—she began writing fantastic adventures of her own. Several of these early efforts were read by Henry Kuttner, who critiqued her stories and introduced her to the sf personalities then living in California, including Robert A. Heinlein, Julius Schwartz, Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton—and another aspiring writer, Ray Bradbury.

In 1944, based on the hard-boiled dialogue in her first novel, *No Good From a Corpse*, producer/director Howard Hawks hired Brackett to collaborate with William Faulkner on the screenplay of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*.

Brackett maintained an on-again/off-again relationship with Hollywood for the remainder of her life. Between writing screenplays for such films as *Rio Bravo*, *El Dorado*, *Hatari!*, and *The Long Goodbye*, she produced novels such as the classic dystopia *The Long Tomorrow* (1955) and the Spur Award-winning Western, *Follow the Free Wind* (1963).

Brackett married Edmond Hamilton on New Year's Eve in 1946, and the couple maintained homes in the high-desert of California and the rural farmland of Kinsman, Ohio.

Just weeks before her death on March 17, 1978, she turned in the first draft of the screenplay for *The Empire Strikes Back*.

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