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*Eerie, Fascinating tales from one of
Science Fiction's foremost*

THE HALELING

and other stories
by Leigh Brackett



Barrier could see the others. Through a veil of shadowy gloom he could see them, dimly, and the gloom was behind his eyes, not before them. The outlines of the men were indistinct, blurred over. Their eyes were crazy. So were Barrier's.

The shocking swiftness of that leap, the noiselessness, the awful cold that poured in suddenly upon the flesh—the loathsome sense of an intruder grasping at mind and body, taking them over from within . . .

They're all dead, all the men and animals—and I know what killed them. . . .

—From THE SHADOWS

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THE HALFLING

Chapter I

Primitive Venus

I WAS watching the sunset. It was something pretty special in the line of California sunsets, and it made me feel swell, being the first one I'd seen in about nine years. The pitch was in the flatlands between Culver City and Venice, and I could smell the sea. I was born in a little dump at Venice, Cal., and I've never found any smell like the clean cold salt of the Pacific—not anywhere in the Solar System.

I was standing alone, off to one side of the grounds. The usual noises of a carnival around feeding time were being made behind me, and the hammer gang was pinning the last of the tents down tight. But I wasn't thinking about Jade Greene's Interplanetary Carnival, The Wonders of the Seven Worlds Alive Before Your Eyes.

I was remembering John Damien Greene running barefoot on a wet beach, fishing for perch off the end of a jetty, and dreaming big dreams. I was wondering where John Damien Greene had gone, taking his dreams with him, because now I could hardly remember what they were.

Somebody said softly from behind me, "Mr. Greene?"

I quit thinking about John Damien Greene. It was that kind of a voice—sweet, silky, guaranteed to make you forget your own name. I turned around.

She matched her voice, all right. She stood about five-

three on her bronze heels, and her eyes were more purple than the hills of Malibu. She had a funny little button of a nose and a pink mouth, smiling just enough to show her even white teeth. The bronze metal-cloth dress she wore hugged a chassis with no flaws in it anywhere. I tried to find some.

She dropped her head, so I could see the way the last of the sunlight tangled in her gold-brown hair.

"They said you were Mr. Greene. If I've made a mistake. . . ."

She had an accent, just enough to be fascinating.

I said, "I'm Greene. Something I can do for you?" I still couldn't find anything wrong with her, but I kept looking just the same. My blood pressure had gone up to about three hundred.

It's hard to describe a girl like that. You can say she's five-three and beautiful, but you can't pass on the odd little tilt of her eyes and the way her mouth looks, or the something that just comes out of her like light out of a lamp, and hooks into you so you know you'll never be rid of it, not if you live to be a thousand.

She said, "Yes. You can give me a job. I'm a dancer."

I shook my head. "Sorry, miss. I got a dancer."

Her face had a look of steel down under the soft kittenish roundness. "I'm not just talking," she said. "I need a job so I can eat. I'm a good dancer. I'm the best dancer you ever saw anywhere. Look me over."

That's all I had been doing. I guess I was staring by then. You don't expect fluffy dolls like that to have so much iron in them. She wasn't bragging. She was just telling me.

"I still have a dancer," I told her, "a green-eyed Martian babe who is plenty good, and who would tear my head off, and yours too, if I hired you."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I thought you bossed this carnival." She let me think about that, and then grinned. "Let me show you."

She was close enough so I could smell the faint, spicy perfume she wore. But she'd stopped me from being just a guy chinning with a pretty girl. Right then I was Jade Greene, the carny boss-man, with scars on my knuckles and an ugly puss, and a show to keep running.

Strictly Siwash, that show, but my baby—mine to feed and paint and fuel. If this kid had something Sindi didn't have, something to drag in the cash customers—well, Sindi would have to take it and like it. Besides, Sindi was getting so she thought she owned me.

The girl was watching my face. She didn't say anything more, or even move. I scowled at her.

"You'd have to sign up for the whole tour. I'm blasting off next Monday for Venus, and then Mars, and maybe into the Asteroids."

"I don't care. Anything to be able to eat. Anything to—"

She stopped right there and bent her head again, and suddenly I could see tears on her thick brown lashes.

I said, "Okay. Come over to the cooch tent and we'll have a look."

Me, I was tempted to sign her for what was wrapped up in that bronze cloth—but business is business. I couldn't take on any left-footed ponies.

She said shakily, "You don't soften up very easily, do you?" We started across the lot toward the main gate. The night was coming down cool and fresh. Off to the left, clear back to the curving deep-purple barrier of the hills, the slim white spires of Culver, Westwood, Beverly Hills and Hollywood were beginning to show a rainbow splash of color under their floodlights.

Everything was clean, new and graceful. Only the thin fog and the smell of the sea were old.

We were close to the gate, stumbling a little in the dusk of the afterglow. Suddenly a shadow came tearing out from between the tents.

It went erratically in lithe, noiseless bounds, and it

was somehow not human even though it went on two feet. The girl caught her breath and shrank in against me. The shadow went around us three times like a crazy thing, and then stopped.

There was something eerie about that sudden stillness. The hair crawled on the back of my neck. I opened my mouth angrily.

The shadow stretched itself toward the darkening sky and let go a wail like Lucifer falling from Heaven.

I cursed. The carny lights came on, slamming a circle of blue-white glare against the night.

"Laska, come here!" I yelled.

The girl screamed.

I PUT my arm around her. "It's all right," I said, and then, "Come here, you misbegotten Thing! You're on a sleighride again."

There were more things I wanted to say, but the girl cramped my style. Laska slunk in towards us. I didn't blame her for yelping. Laska wasn't pretty.

He wasn't much taller than the girl, and looked shorter because he was drooping. He wore a pair of tight dark trunks and nothing else except the cross-shaped mane of fine blue-gray fur that went across his shoulders and down his back, from the peak between his eyes to his long tail. He was dragging the tail, and the tip of it was twitching. There was more of the soft fur on his chest and forearms, and a fringe of it down his lank belly.

I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him. "I ought to boot your ribs in! We got a show in less than two hours."

He looked up at me. The pupils of his yellow-green eyes were closed to thin hairlines, but they were flat and cold with hatred. The glaring lights showed me the wet whiteness of his pointed teeth and the raspy pinkness of his tongue.

"Let me go. Let me go, you human!" His voice was hoarse and accented.

"I'll let you go." I cuffed him across the face. "I'll let you go to the immigration authorities. You wouldn't like that, would you? You wouldn't even have coffee to hop up on when you died."

The sharp claws came out of his fingers and toes, flexed hungrily and went back in again.

I dropped him.

"Go on back inside. Find the croaker and tell him to straighten you out. I don't give a damn what you do on your own time, but you miss out on one more show and I'll take your job and call the I-men. Get it?"

"I get it," said Laska sullenly, and curled his red tongue over his teeth. He shot his flat, cold glance at the girl and went away, not making any sound at all.

The girl shivered and drew away from me. "What was—that?"

"Cat-man from Callisto. My prize performer. They're pretty rare."

"I—I've heard of them. They evolved from a cat-ancestor instead of an ape, like we did."

"That's putting it crudely, but it's close enough. I've got a carload of critters like that, geeks from all over the System. They ain't human, and they don't fit with animals either. Moth-men, lizard-men, guys with wings and guys with six arms and antennae. They all followed evolutionary tracks peculiar to their particular hunks of planet, only they stopped before they got where they were going. The Callistan kitties are the aristocrats of the bunch. They've got an I. Q. higher than a lot of humans, and wouldn't spit on the other halfings."

"Poor things," she said softly. "You didn't have to be so cruel to him."

I laughed. "That What's-it would as soon claw my insides out as soon as look at me—or any other human, in-

cluding you—just on general principles. That's why Immigration hates to let 'em in even on a work permit. And when he's hopped up on coffee. . . ."

"Coffee? I thought I must have heard wrong."

"Nope. The caffeine in Earthly coffee berries works just like coke or hashish for 'em. Venusian coffee hits 'em so hard they go nuts and then die, but our own kind just keeps 'em going. It's only the hoppy ones you ever find in a show like this. They get started on coffee and they have to have it no matter what they have to do to get it."

She shuddered a little. "You said something about dying."

"Yeah. If he's ever deported back to Callisto his people will tear him apart. They're a clannish bunch. I guess the first humans on Callisto weren't very tactful, or else they just hate us because we're something they're not and never can be. Anyway, their tribal law forbids them to have anything to do with us except killing. Nobody knows much about 'em, but I hear they have a nice friendly religion, something like the old-time Thugs and their Kali worship."

I paused, and then said uncomfortably, "Sorry I had to rough him up in front of you. But he's got to be kept in line."

She nodded. We didn't say anything after that. We went in past the main box and along between the burglars readying up their layouts—Martian *getak*, Venusian *shalil* and the game the Mercurian hillmen play with human skulls. Crooked? Sure—but suckers like to be fooled, and a guy has to make a living.

I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. I thought, *if she dances the way she walks. . . .*

She didn't look much at the big three-dimensional natural-color pictures advertising the geek show. We went by the brute top, and suddenly all hell broke loose inside of it. I've got a fair assortment of animals from

all over. They make pretty funny noises when they get started, and they were started now.

They were nervous, unhappy noises. I heard prisoners yammering in the Lunar cell-blocks once, and that was the way this sounded—strong, living things shut up in cages and tearing their hearts out with it—hate, fear and longing like you never thought about. It turned you cold.

The girl looked scared. I put my arm around her again, not minding it at all. Just then Tiny came out of the brute top.

Tiny is a Venusian deep-jungle man, about two sizes smaller than the Empire State Building, and the best zooman I ever had, drunk or sober. Right now he was mad.

"I tell that Laska stay 'way from here," he yelled. "My kids smell him. You listen!"

I didn't have to listen. His "kids" could have been heard halfway to New York. Laska had been expressly forbidden to go near the brute top because the smell of him set the beasts crazy. Whether they were calling to him as one animal to another, or scared of him as something unnatural, we didn't know. The other half-lings were pretty good about it, but Laska liked to start trouble just for the hell of it.

I said, "Laska's hopped again. I sent him to the croaker. You get the kids quiet again, and then send one of the punks over to the crumb castle and tell the cook I said if he ever gives Laska a teaspoonful of coffee again without my say-so I'll fry him in his own grease."

Tiny nodded his huge pale head and vanished, cursing. I said to the girl, "Still want to be a carny?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Anything, as long as you serve food!"

"That's a pretty accent you got. What is it?"

"Just about everything. I was born on a ship between Earth and Mars, and I've lived all over. My father was in the diplomatic corps."

I said, "Oh. Well, here's the place. Go to it."

SINDI was sitting cross-legged on the stage, sipping *thil* and listening to sad Martian music on the juke box behind the screen of faded Martian tapestry. She looked up and saw us, and she didn't like what she saw.

She got up. She was a Low-Canaler, built light and wiry, and she moved like a cat. She had long emerald eyes and black hair with little bells braided in it, and clusters of tiny bells in her ears. She was wearing the skin of a Martian sand-leopard, no more clothes than the law forced her to wear. She was something to look at, and she had a disposition like three yards of barbed wire.

I said, "Hi, Sindi. This kid wants a try-out. Climb down, huh?"

Sindi looked the kid over. She smiled and climbed down and put her hand on my arm. She sounded like a shower of rain when she moved, and her nails bit into me, hard.

I said between my teeth, "What music do you want, kid?"

"My name's Laura—Laura Darrow." Her eyes were very big and very purple. "Do you have Enhali's *Primitive Venus*?"

Not more than half a dozen dancers in the System can do justice to that collection of tribal music. Some of it's subhuman and so savage it scares you. We use it for mood music, to draw the crowd.

I started to protest, but Sindi smiled and tinkled her head back. "Of course, put it on, Jade."

I shrugged and went in and fiddled with the juke box. When I came out Laura Darrow was up on the stage and we had an audience. Sindi must have passed the high sign. I shoved my way through a bunch of Venusian lizard-men and sat down. There were three or

four little moth-people from Phobos roosting up on the braces so their delicate wings wouldn't get damaged in the crush.

The music started. Laura kicked off her shoes and danced.

I don't think I breathed all the time she was on the stage. I don't remember anyone else breathing, either. We just sat and stared, sweating with nervous ecstasy, shivering occasionally, with the music beating and crying and surging over us.

The girl wasn't human. She was sunlight, quicksilver, a leaf riding the wind—but nothing human, nothing tied down to muscles and gravity and flesh. She was—oh, hell, there aren't any words. She was the music.

When she was through we sat there a long time, perfectly still. Then the Venusians, human and half-human, let go a yell and the audience came to and tore up the seats.

In the middle of it Sindi looked at me with deadly green eyes and said, "I suppose she's hired."

"Yeah. But it doesn't have anything to do with you, baby."

"Listen, Jade. This suitcase outfit isn't big enough for two of us. Besides, she's got you hooked, and she can have you."

"She hasn't got me hooked. Anyway, so what? You don't own me."

"No. And you don't own me, either."

"I got a contract."

She told me what I could do with my contract.

I yelled, "What do you want me to do, throw her out on her ear? With that talent?"

"Talent!" snarled Sindi. "She's not talented. She's a freak."

"Just like a dame. Why can't you be a good loser?"

She explained why. A lot of it didn't make sense, and

none of it was printable. Presently she went out, leaving me sore and a little uneasy. We had quite a few Martians with the outfit. She could make trouble.

Oh, hell! Just another dame sore because she was out-classed. Artistic temperament, plus jealousy. So what? Let her try something. I could handle it. I'd handled people before.

I jammed my way up to the stage. Laura was being mobbed. She looked scared—some of the halflings are enough to give a tough guy nightmares—and she was crying.

I said, "Relax, honey. You're in." I knew that Sindi was telling the truth. I was hooked. I was so hooked it scared me, but I wouldn't have wiggled off if I could.

She sagged down in my arms and said, "Please, I'm hungry."

I half carried her out, with the moth-people fluttering their gorgeous wings around our heads and praising her in their soft, furry little voices.

I fed her in my own quarters. She shuddered when I poured her coffee and refused it, saying she didn't think she'd ever enjoy it again. She took tea instead. She was hungry, all right. I thought she'd never stop eating.

Finally I said, "The pay's forty credits, and found."

She nodded.

I said gently, "You can tell me. What's wrong?"

She gave me a wide, purple stare. "What do you mean?"

"A dancer like you could write her own ticket anywhere, and not for the kind of peanuts I can pay you. You're in a jam."

She looked at the table and locked her fingers together. Their long pink nails glistened.

She whispered, "It isn't anything bad. Just a—a passport difficulty. I told you I was born in space. The records got lost somehow, and living the way we did—well, I

had to come to Earth in a hurry, and I couldn't prove my citizenship, so I came without it. Now I can't get back to Venus where my money is, and I can't stay here. That's why I wanted so badly to get a job with you. You're going out, and you can take me."

I knew how to do that, all right. I said, "You must have had a big reason to take the risk you did. If you're caught it means the Luna cell-blocks for a long time before they deport you."

She shivered. "It was a personal matter. It delayed me a while. I--was too late."

I said, "Sure. I'm sorry." I took her to her tent, left her there and went out to get the show running, cursing Sindi. I stopped cursing and stared when I passed the cooch tent. She was there, and giving.

She stuck out her tongue at me and I went on.

That evening I hired the punk, just a scrawny kid with a white face, who said he was hungry and needed work. I gave him to Tiny, to help out in the brute top.

Chapter II

Voice of Terror

WE PLAYED in luck that week. Some gilded darling of the screen showed up with somebody else's husband who wasn't quite divorced yet, and we got a lot of free publicity in the papers and over the air. Laura went on the second night and brought down the house. We turned 'em away for the first time in history. The only thing that worried me was Sindi. She wouldn't speak to me, only smile at me along her green eyes as though she knew a lot she wasn't telling and not any of it nice. I tried to keep an eye on her, just in case.

For five days I walked a tightrope between heaven

and hell. Everybody on the pitch knew I was a dead duck where Laura was concerned. I suppose they got a good laugh out of it—me, Jade Greene the carny boss, knocked softer than a cup custard by a girl young enough to be my daughter, a girl from a good family, a girl with talent that put her so far beyond my lousy dog-and-pony show. . . .

I knew all that. It didn't do any good. I couldn't keep away from her. She was so little and lovely; she walked like music; her purple eyes had a tilt to them that kept you looking, and her mouth—

I kissed it on the fifth night, out back of the cooch tent when the show was over. It was dark there; we were all alone, and the faint spicy breath of her came to me through the thin salt fog. I kissed her.

Her mouth answered mine. Then she wrenched away, suddenly, with a queer fury. I let her go. She was shuddering, and breathing hard.

I said, "I'm sorry."

"It isn't that. Oh, Jade, I—" She stopped. I could hear the breath sobbing in her throat. Then she turned and ran away, and the sound of her weeping came back to me through the dark.

I went to my quarters and got out a bottle. After the first shot I just sat staring at it with my head in my hands. I haven't any idea how long I sat there. It seemed like forever. I only know that the pitch was dark, sound asleep under a pall of fog, when Sindi screamed.

I didn't know it was Sindi then. The scream didn't have any personality. It was the voice of terror and final pain, and it was far beyond anything human.

I got my gun out of the table drawer. I remember my palm was slippery with cold sweat. I went outside, catching up the big flashlight kept for emergencies near the tent flap. It was very dark out there, very still, and yet not quiet. There was something behind the dark-

ness and the silence, hiding in them, breathing softly and waiting.

The pitch began to wake up. The stir and rustle spread out from the scream like ripples from a stone, and over in the brute top a Martian sand-cat began to wail, thin and feral, like an echo of death.

I went along between the tents, walking fast and silent. I felt sick, and the skin of my back twitched; my face began to ache from being drawn tight. The torch beam shook a little in my hand.

I found her back of the cooch tent, not far from where I'd kissed Laura. She was lying on her face, huddled up, like a brown island in a red sea. The little bells were still in her ears.

I walked in her blood and knelt down in it and put my hand on her shoulder. I thought she was dead, but the bells tinkled faintly, like something far away on another star. I tried to turn her over.

She gasped, "Don't." It wasn't a voice. It was hardly a breath, but I could hear it. I can still hear it. I took my hand away.

"Sindi—"

A little wash of sound from the bells, like rain far off— "You fool," she whispered. "The stage. Jade, the stage—"

She stopped. The croaker came from somewhere behind me and knocked me out of the way, but I knew it was no use. I knew Sindi had stopped for good.

Humans and halflings were jammed in all round, staring, whispering, some of them screaming a little. The brute top had gone crazy. They smelt blood and death on the night wind, and they wanted to be free and a part of it.

"Claws," the croaker said. "Something clawed her. Her throat—"

I said, "Yeah. Shut up." I turned around. The punk

was standing there, the white-faced kid, staring at Sindi's body with eyes glistening like shiny brown marbles.

"You," I said. "Go back to Tiny and tell him to make sure all his kids are there. . . . All the roustabouts and every man that can handle a gun or a tent stake, get armed as fast as you can and stand by. . . . Mike, take whatever you need and guard the gate. Don't let anybody or anything in or out without permission from me, in person. Everybody else get inside somewhere and stay there. I'm going to call the police."

The punk was still there, looking from Sindi's body to me and around the circle of faces. I yelled at him. He went away then, fast. The crowd started to break up.

Laura Darrow came out of it and took my arm.

She had on a dark blue dressing-gown and her hair was loose around her face. She had the dewy look of being freshly washed, and she breathed perfume. I shook her off. "Look out," I said. "I'm all-blood."

I could feel it on my shoes, soaking through the thin stuff of my trouser legs. My stomach rose up under my throat. I closed my eyes and held it down, and all the time Laura's voice was soothing me. She hadn't let go of my arm. I could feel her fingers. They were cold, and too tight. Even then, I loved her so much I ached with it.

"Jade," she said. "Jade, darling. Please—I'm so frightened."

That helped. I put my arm around her and we started back toward my place and the phone. Nobody had thought to put the big lights on yet, and my torchbeam cut a fuzzy tunnel through the fog.

"I couldn't sleep very well," Laura said suddenly. "I was lying in my tent thinking, and a little while before she screamed I thought I heard something—something like a big cat, padding."

The thing that had been in the back of my mind came out yelling. I hadn't seen Laska in the crowd

around Sindi. If Laska had got hold of some coffee behind the cook's back. . . .

I said, "You were probably mistaken."

"No. Jade."

"Yeah?" It was dark between the tents. I wished somebody would turn the lights on. I wished I hadn't forgotten to tell them to. I wished they'd shut up their over-all obligato of gabbling, so I could hear. . . .

"Jade. I couldn't sleep because I was thinking—" Then she screamed.

HE CAME out of a dark tunnel between two storage tents. He was going almost on all fours, his head flattened forward, his hands held in a little to his belly. His claws were out. They were wet and red, and his hands were wet and red, and his feet. His yellow-green eyes had a crazy shine to them, the pupils slitted against the light. His lips were peeled back from his teeth. They glittered, and there was froth between them—Laska, coked to hell and gone!

He didn't say anything. He made noises, but they weren't speech and they weren't sane. They weren't anything but horrible. He sprang.

I pushed Laura behind me. I could see the marks his claws made in the dirt, and the ridging of his muscles with the jump. I brought up my gun and fired, three shots.

The heavy slugs nearly tore him in two, but they didn't stop him. He let go a mad animal scream and hit me, slashing. I went part way down, firing again, but Laska was still going. His hind feet clawed into my hip and thigh, using me as something to push off from. He wanted the girl.

She had backed off, yelling bloody murder. I could hear feet running, a lot of them, and people shouting. The lights came on. I twisted around and got Laska by the mane of fur on his backbone and then by the scruff.

He was suddenly a very heavy weight. I think he was dead when I put the fifth bullet through his skull.

I let him drop.

I said, "Laura, are you all right?" I saw her brown hair and her big purple eyes like dark stars in her white face. She was saying something, but I couldn't hear what it was. I said, "You ought to faint, or something," and laughed.

But it was me, Jade Greene, that did the fainting.

I came out of it too soon. The croaker was still working on my leg. I called him everything I could think of in every language I knew, out of the half of my mouth that wasn't taped shut. He was a heavy man, with a belly and a dirty chin.

He laughed and said, "You'll live. That critter damn near took half your face off, but with your style of beauty it won't matter much. Just take it easy a while until you make some more blood."

I said, "The hell with that. I got work to do." After a while he gave in and helped me get dressed. The holes in my leg weren't too deep, and the face wasn't working anyway. I poured some Scotch in to help out the blood shortage, and managed to get over to the office.

I walked pretty well.

That was largely because Laura let me lean on her. She'd waited outside my tent all that time. There were drops of fog caught in her hair. She cried a little and laughed a little and told me how wonderful I was, and helped me along with her small vibrant self. Pretty soon I began to feel like a kid waking up from a nightmare into a room full of sunshine.

The law had arrived when we got to the office. There wasn't any trouble. Sindi's torn body and the crazy cat-man added up, and the Venusian cook put the lid on it. He always took a thermos of coffee to bed with him, so he'd have it first thing when he woke up—Venusian coffee, with enough caffeine in it to stand an

Earthman on his head. Enough to finish off a Callistan cat-man. Somebody had swiped it when he wasn't looking. They found the thermos in Laska's quarters.

THE SHOW went on. Mobs came to gawk at the place where the killing had happened. I took it easy for one day, lolling in a shiny golden cloud with Laura holding my head.

Along about sundown she said, "I'll have to get ready for the show."

"Yeah. Saturday's a big night. Tomorrow we tear down, and then Monday we head out for Venus. You'll feel happier then?"

"Yes. I'll feel safe." She put her head down over mine. Her hair was like warm silk. I put my hands up on her throat. It was firm and alive, and it made my hands burn.

She whispered, "Jade, I—" A big hot tear splashed down on my face, and then she was gone.

I lay still, hot and shivering like a man with swamp-fever, thinking, *Maybe*. . . .

Maybe Laura wouldn't leave the show when we got to Venus. Maybe I could make her not want to. Maybe it wasn't too late for dreaming, a dream that John Damien Greene had never had, sitting in a puddle of water at the end of a jetty stringer and fishing for perch.

Crazy, getting ideas like that about a girl like Laura. Crazy like cutting your own throat. Oh, hell. A man never really grows up, not past believing that maybe miracles still happen.

It was nice dreaming for a while.

It was a nice night, too, full of stars and the clean, cool ocean breeze, when Tiny came over to tell me they'd found the punk dead in a pile of straw with his throat torn out, and the Martian sand-cat loose.

Chapter III

Carnival of Death

WE JAMMED our way through the mob on the mid-way. Lots of people having fun, lots of kids yelling and getting sick on Mercurian *jitsi*-beans and bottled Venusian fruit juice. Nobody knew about the killing. Tiny had had the cat rounded up and caged before it could get outside the brute top, which had not yet opened for business.

The punk was dead, all right—dead as Sindi, and in the same way. His twisted face was not much whiter than I remembered it, the closed eyelids faintly blue. He lay almost under the sand-cat's cage.

The cat paced, jittery and snarling. There was blood on all its six paws. The cages and pens and pressure tanks seethed nastily all around me, held down and quiet by Tiny's wranglers.

I said, "What happened?"

Tiny lifted his gargantuan shoulders. "Dunno. Everything quiet. Even no yell, like Sindi. Punk kid all lonesome over here behind cages. Nobody see; nobody hear. Only Mars kitty waltz out on main aisle, scare hell out of everybody. We catch, and then find punk, like you see."

I turned around wearily. "Call the cops again and report the accident. Keep the rubes out of here until they pick up the body." I shivered. I'm superstitious, like all carnies.

They come in threes—always in threes. Sindi, the punk—what next?

Tiny sighed. "Poor punk. So peaceful, like sleeper with shut eye."

"Yeah." I started away. I limped six paces and stopped and limped back again.

I said, "That's funny. Guys that die violent aren't tidy about their eyes, except in the movies."

I leaned over. I didn't quite know why, then. I do now. You can't beat that three-time jinx. One way or another, it gets you.

I pushed back one thin, waxy eyelid. After a while I pushed back the other. Tiny breathed heavily over my shoulder. Neither of us said anything. The animals whimpered and yawned and paced.

I closed his eyes again and went through his pockets. I didn't find what I was looking for. I got up very slowly, like an old man. I felt like an old man. I felt dead, deader than the white-faced kid.

I said, "His eyes were brown."

Tiny stared at me. He started to speak, but I stopped him. "Call Homicide, Tiny. Put a guard on the body. And send men with guns. . . ."

I told him where to send them. Then I went back across the midway.

A couple of Europeans with wiry little bodies and a twenty-foot wing-spread were doing Immelmans over the geek top, and on the bally stand in front of it two guys with six hands apiece and four eyes on movable stalks were juggling. Laura was out in front of the cooch tent, giving the rubes a come-on.

I went around behind the tent, around where I'd kissed her, around where Sindi had died with the bells in her ears like a wash of distant rain.

I lifted up the flap and went in.

The tent was empty except for the man that tends the juke box. He put out his cigarette in a hurry and said, "Hi, Boss," as though that would make me forget he'd been smoking. I didn't give a damn if he set the place on fire with a blowtorch. The air had the warm, musty smell that tents have. Enhali's *Primitive Venus* was crying out of the juke box with a rhythm like thrown spears.

I pulled the stage master, and then the whites. They glared on the bare boards, naked as death and just as yielding.

I stood there a long time.

After a while the man behind me said uneasily, "Boss, what—"

"Shut up. I'm listening."

Little bells, and a voice that was pain made vocal.

"Go out front," I said. "Send Laura Darrow in here. Then tell the rubes there won't be a show here tonight."

I heard his breath suck in, and then catch. He went away down the aisle.

I got a cigarette out and lit it very carefully, broke the match in two and stepped on it. Then I turned around.

LAURA came down the aisle. Her gold-brown hair was caught in a web of brilliants. She wore a sheath-tight thing of sea-green metal scales, with a short skirt swirling around her white thighs, and sandals of the shiny scales with no heels to them. She moved with the music, part of it, wild with it, a way I'd never seen a woman move before.

She was beautiful. There aren't any words. She was —beauty.

She stopped. She looked at my face and I could see the quivering tightness flow up across her white skin, up her throat and over her mouth, and catch her breath and hold it. The music wailed and throbbed on the still, warm air.

I said, "Take off your shoes, Laura. Take off your shoes and dance."

She moved then, still with the beat of the savage drums, but not thinking about it. She drew in upon herself, a shrinking and tightening of muscles, a preparation.

She said, "You know."

I nodded. "You shouldn't have closed his eyes. I might never have noticed. I might never have remembered that the kid had brown eyes. He was just a punk. Nobody paid much attention. He might just as well have had purple eyes—like yours."

"He stole them from me." Her voice came sharp under the music. It had a hiss and a wail in it I'd never heard before, and the accent was harsher. "While I was in your tent, Jade. I found out when I went to dress. He was an I-man. I found his badge inside his clothes and took it."

Purple eyes looking at me—purple eyes as phony as the eyes on the dead boy. Contact lenses painted purple to hide what was underneath.

"Too bad you carried an extra pair, Laura, in case of breakage."

"He put them in his eyes, so he couldn't lose them or break them or have them stolen, until he could report. He threw away the little suction cup. I couldn't find it. I couldn't get the shells off his eyeballs. All I could do was close his eyes and hope—"

"And let the sand-cat out of his cage to walk through the blood." My voice was coming out all by itself. It hurt. The words felt as though they had fishhooks on them, but I couldn't stop saying them.

"You almost got by with it, Laura. Just like you got by with Sindi. She got in your way, didn't she? She was jealous, and she was a dancer. She knew that no true human could dance like you dance. She said so. She said you were a freak."

That word hit her like my fist. She showed me her teeth, white, even teeth that I knew now were as phony as her eyes. I didn't want to see her change, but I couldn't stop looking, couldn't stop.

I said, "Sindi gave you away before she died, only I was too dumb to know what she meant. She said, 'The stage.'"

I think we both looked, down at the stark boards under the stark lights, looked at the scratches on them where Laura had danced barefoot that first time and left the marks of her claws on the wood.

She nodded, a slow, feral weaving of the head.

"Sindi was too curious. She searched my tent. She found nothing, but she left her scent, just as the young man did today. I followed her back here in the dark and saw her looking at the stage by the light of matches. I can move in the dark, Jade, very quickly and quietly. The cook tent is only a few yards back of this one, and Laska's quarters close beyond that. I smelt the cook's coffee. It was easy for me to steal it and slip it through the tent flap by Laska's cot, and wake him with the touch of my claws on his face. I knew he couldn't help drinking it. I was back here before Sindi came out of the tent to go and tell you what she'd found."

She made a soft purring sound under the wicked music.

"Laska smelt the blood and walked in it, as I meant him to do. I thought he'd die before he found us—or me—because I knew he'd find my scent in the air of his quarters and know who it was, and what it was. My perfume had worn too thin by then to hide it from his nose."

I felt the sullen pain of the claw marks on my face and leg. Laska, crazy with caffeine and dying with it, knowing he was dying and wanting with all the strength of his drugged brain to get at the creature who had killed him. He'd wanted Laura that night, not me. I was just something to claw out of the way.

I wished I hadn't stopped him.

I said, "Why? All you wanted was Laska. Why didn't you kill him?"

The shining claws flexed out of her fingertips, under the phony plastic nails—very sharp, very hungry.

She said huskily, "My tribe sent me to avenge its

honor. I have been trained carefully. There are others like me, tracking down the renegades, the dope-ridden creatures like Laska who sell our race for human money. He was not to die quickly. He was not to die without knowing. He was not to die without being given the chance to redeem himself by dying bravely.

"But I was not to be caught. I cost my people time and effort, and I am not easily replaced. I have killed seven renegades, Jade. I was to escape. So I wanted to wait until we were out in space."

She stopped. The music hammered in my temples, and inside I was dead and dried up and crumbled away.

I said, "What would you have done in space?"

I knew the answer. She gave it to me, very simply, very quietly.

"I would have destroyed your whole filthy carnival by means of a little bomb in the jet timers, and gone away in one of the lifeboats."

I nodded. My head felt as heavy as Mount Whitney, and as lifeless. "But Sindi didn't give you time. Your life came first. And if it hadn't been for the punk. . . ."

No, not just a punk—an Immigration man. Somewhere Laura had slipped, or else her luck was just out. A white-faced youngster, doing his job quietly in the shadows, and dying without a cry. I started to climb down off the stage.

She backed off. The music screamed and stopped, leaving a silence like the feel of a suddenly stopped heart.

Laura whispered, "Jade, will you believe something if I tell you?"

"I love you, Jade." She was still backing off down the aisle, not making any sound. "I deserve to die for that. I'm going to die. I think you're going to kill me, Jade. But when you do, remember that those tears I shed—were real."

She turned and ran, out onto the midway. I was close.

I caught her hair. It came free, leaving me standing alone just inside the tent, staring stupidly.

I HAD men out there, waiting. I thought she couldn't get through. But she did. She went like a wisp of cloud on a gale, using the rubes as a shield. We didn't want a panic. We let her go, and we lost her.

I say we let her go. We couldn't help it. She wasn't bothering about being human then. She was all cat, just a noiseless blur of speed. We couldn't shoot without hurting people, and our human muscles were too slow to follow her.

I knew Tiny had men at the gates and all around the pitch, anywhere that she could possibly get out. I wasn't worried. She was caught, and pretty soon the police would come. We'd have to be careful, careful as all hell not to start one of those hideous, trampling panics that can wreck a pitch in a matter of minutes.

All we had to do was watch until the show was over and the rubes were gone. Guard the gates and keep her in, and then round her up. She was caught. She couldn't get away. Laura Darrow. . . .

I wondered what her name was, back on Callisto. I wondered what she looked like when she let the cross-shaped mane grow thick along her back and shoulders. I wondered what color her fur was. I wondered why I had ever been born.

I went back to my place and got my gun and then went out into the crowd again. The show was in full swing; lots of people having fun, lots of kids crazy with excitement; lights and laughter and music—and a guy out in front of the brute top splitting his throat telling the crowd that something was wrong with the lighting system and it would be a while before they could see the animals.

A while before the cops would have got what they

wanted and cleaned up the mess under the sand-cat's cage.

The squad cars would be coming in a few minutes. There wasn't anything to do but wait. She was caught. She couldn't escape.

The one thing we didn't think about was that she wouldn't try to.

A Mercurian cave-tiger screamed. The Ionian quags took it up in their deep, rusty voices, and then the others chimed in, whistling, roaring, squealing, shrieking, and doing things there aren't any names for. I stopped, and gradually everybody on the pitch stopped and listened.

For a long moment you could hear the silence along the midway and in the tents. People not breathing, people with a sudden glassy shine of fear in their eyes and a cold tightening of the skin that comes from way back beyond humanity. Then the muttering started, low and uneasy, the prelude to panic.

I fought my way to the nearest bally stand and climbed on it. There were shots, sounding small and futile under the brute howl.

I yelled, "Hey, everybody! Listen! There's nothing wrong. One of the cats is sick, that's all. There's nothing wrong. Enjoy yourselves."

I wanted to tell them to get the hell out, but I knew they'd kill themselves if they started. Somebody started music going again, loud and silly. It cracked the icy lid that was tightening down. People began to relax and laugh nervously and talk too loudly. I got down and ran for the brute top.

Tiny met me at the tent flap. His face was just a white blur. I grabbed him and said, "For God's sake, can't you keep them quiet?"

"She's in there, Boss—like shadow. No hear, no see. One man dead. She let my kids out. She—"

More shots from inside, and a brute scream of pain. Tiny groaned.

"My kids! No lights, Boss. She wreck 'em."

I said, "Keep 'em inside. Get lights from somewhere. There's a blizzard brewing on the pitch. If that mob gets started."

I went inside. There were torchbeams spearing the dark, men sweating and cursing, a smell of hot, wild bodies and the sweetness of fresh blood.

Somebody poked his head inside the flap and yelled, "The cops are here!"

I yelled back, "Tell 'em to clear the grounds if they can, without starting trouble. Tell—"

Somebody screamed. There was a sudden spangle of lights in the high darkness, balls of crimson and green and vicious yellow tumbling towards us, spots of death no bigger than your fist—the stinging fireflies of Ganymede. Laura had opened their case.

We scattered, fighting the fireflies. Somewhere a cage went over with a crash. Bodies thrashed, and feet padded on the packed earth—and somewhere above the noise was a voice that was sweet and silky and wild, crying out to the beasts and being answered.

I knew then why the brute top went crazy when Laska was around. It was kinship, not fear. She talked to them, and they understood.

I called her name.

Her voice came down to me out of the hot dark, human and painful with tears. "Jadel Jade, get out; go somewhere safe!"

"Laura, don't do this! For God's sake—"

"Your God, or mine? Our God forbids us to know humans except to kill. How, if we kept men as you kept Laska?"

"Laura!"

"Get out! I'm going to kill as many as I can before I'm taken. I'm turning the animals loose on the pitch. Go somewhere safe!"

I fired at the sound of her voice.

She said softly, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all."

I beat off a bunch of fireflies hunting for me with their poisoned stings. Cage doors banged open. Wild throats coughed and roared, and suddenly the whole side wall of the tent fell down, cut free at the top, and there wasn't any way to keep the beasts inside any more.

A long mob scream went up from outside, and the panic was on.

I COULD hear Tiny bellowing, sending his men out with ropes and nets and guns. Some huge, squealing thing blundered around in the dark, went past me close enough to touch, and charged through the front opening, bringing part of the top down. I was close enough behind it so that I got free.

I climbed up on the remains of the bally stand. There was plenty of light outside—blue-white, glaring light, to show me the packed mass of people screaming and swaying between the tents, trampling toward the exits, to show me a horde of creatures sweeping down on them, caged beasts free to kill, and led by a lithe and leaping figure in shining green.

I couldn't see her clearly. Perhaps I didn't want to. Even then she moved in beauty, like wild music—and she had a tail.

I never saw a worse panic, not even the time a bunch of Nahali swamp-edgers clemmed our pitch when I was a pony punk with Triangle.

The morgues were going to be full that night.

Tiny's men were between the bulk of the mob and the animals. The beasts had had to come around from the far side of the tent, giving them barely time to get set. They gave the critters all they had, but it wasn't enough.

Laura was leading them. I heard her voice crying out above all that din. The animals scattered off sideways

between the tents. One Martian sand-cat was dead, one quag kicking its life out, and that was all. They hadn't touched Laura, and she was gone.

I fought back, away from the mob, back into a temporarily empty space behind a tent. I got out my whistle and blew it, the rallying call. A snake-headed kibi from Titan sneaked up and tried to rip me open with its double-pointed tail. I fed it three soft-nosed slugs, and then there were half a dozen little moth-people bouncing in the air over my head, squeaking with fear and shining their great eyes at me.

I told them what I wanted. While I was yelling the Europeans swooped in on their wide wings and listened.

I said finally, "Did any of you see which way *she* went?"

"That way." One of the mothlings pointed back across the midway. I called two of the Europeans. The mothlings went tumbling away to spread my orders, and the bird-men picked me up and carried me across, over the crowd.

The animals were nagging at their flanks, pulling them down in a kind of mad ecstasy. There was a thin salt fog, and blood on the night wind, and the cage doors were open at last.

They set me down and went to do what I told them. I went alone among the swaying tents.

All this hadn't taken five minutes. Things like that move fast. By the time the Europeans were out of sight the mothlings were back, spotting prowling beasts and rolling above them in the air to guide men to them—men and geeks.

Geeks with armor-plated backs and six arms, carrying tear-gas guns and nets; lizard-men, fast and powerful, armed with their own teeth and claws and whatever they could pick up; spider-people, spinning sticky lassos out of their own bodies; the Europeans, dive-bombing the quags with tear gas.

The geeks saved the day for us. They saved lives, and the reputation of their kind, and the carnival. Without them, God only knows how many would have died on the pitch. I saw the mothlings dive into the thick of the mob and pick up fallen children and carry them to safety. Three of them died, doing that.

I went on, alone.

I was beyond the mob, beyond the fringe of animals. I was remembering Laura's voice saying, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all." I was thinking of the walls being down and all California free outside. I was hearing the mob yell and the crash of broken tents, and the screams of people dying—my people, human people, with the claws bred out of them.

I was thinking—

Guns slamming and brute throats shrieking, wings beating fast against the hot hard glare, feet pounding on packed earth. I walked in silence, a private silence built around me like a shell. . . .

Four big cats slunk out of the shadows by the tent. There was enough light left to show me their eyes and their teeth, and the hungry licking of their tongues.

Laura's voice came through the canvas, tremulous but no softer nor more yielding than the blue barrel of my gun.

"I'm going away, Jade. At first I didn't think there was any way, but there is. Don't try to stop me. Please don't try."

I COULD have gone and tried to find a cop. I could have called men or half-men from their jobs to help me. I didn't. I don't know that I could have made anybody hear me, and anyway they had enough to do. This was my job.

My job, my carnival, my heart.

I walked toward the tent flap, watching the cats.

They slunk a little aside, belly down, making hoarse,

whimpering noises. One was a six-legged Martian sand-cat, about the size of an Earthly leopard. Two were from Venus, the fierce white beauties of the high plateaus. The fourth was a Mercurian cave-cat, carrying its twenty-foot body on eight powerful legs and switching a tail that had bone barbs on it.

Laura called to them. I don't know whether she said words in their language, or whether her voice was just a bridge for thought transference, one cat brain to another. Anyway, they understood.

"Jade, they won't touch you if you go."

I fired.

One of the white Venusians took the slug between the eyes and dropped without a whimper. Its mate let go a sobbing shriek and came for me, with the other two beside it.

I snapped a shot at the Martian. It went over kicking, and I dived aside, rolling. The white Venusian shot over me, so close its hind claws tore my shirt. I put a slug in its belly. It just yowled and dug its toes in and came for me again. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the dying Martian tangle with the Mercurian, just because it happened to be the nearest moving object.

I kicked the Venusian in the face. The pain must have blinded it just enough to make its aim bad. On the second jump its forepaws came down on the outer edges of my deltoids, gashing them but not tearing them out. The cat's mouth was open clear to its stomach.

I should have died right then. I don't know why I didn't, except that I didn't care much if I did. It's the guys that want to live that get it, seems like. The ones that don't care go on forever.

I got a lot of hot bad breath in my face and five parallel gashes in back, where its hind feet hit me when I rolled up. I kicked it in the belly. Its teeth snapped a half inch short of my nose, and then I got my gun up

under its jaw and that was that. I had four shots left.

I rolled the body off and turned. The Martian cat was dead. The Mercurian stood over it, watching me with its four pale, hot eyes, twitching its barbed tail.

Laura stood watching us.

SHE looked just like she had the first time I saw her. Soft gold-brown hair and purple eyes with a little tilt to them, and a soft pink mouth. She was wearing the bronze metal-cloth dress and the bronze slippers, and there was still nothing wrong with the way she was put together. She glinted dully in the dim light, warm bronze glints.

She was crying, but there was no softness in her tears.

The cat flicked its eyes at her and made a nervous, eager whine. She spoke to it, and it sank to its belly, not wanting to.

Laura said, "I'm going, Jade."

"No."

I raised my gun hand. The big cat rose with it. She was beyond the cat. I could shoot the cat, but a Mercurian lives a long time after it's shot.

"Throw down your gun, Jade, and let me go."

I didn't care if the cat killed me. I didn't care if Death took me off piggy-back right then. I suppose I was crazy. Maybe I was just numb. I don't know. I was looking at Laura, and choking on my own heart.

I said, "No."

Just a whisper of sound in her throat, and the cat sprang. It reared up on its four hind feet and clawed at me with its four front ones. Only I wasn't where it thought I was. I know it was going to jump and I faded—not far, I'm no superman—just far enough so its claws raked me without gutting me. It snapped its head down to bite.

I slammed it hard across the nose with my gun. It hurt, enough to make it wince, enough to fuddle it just

for a split second. I jammed the muzzle into its nearest eye and fired.

Laura was going off between the tents, fast, with her head down, just a pretty girl, mingling with the mob streaming off the pitch. Who'd notice her, except maybe to whistle?

I didn't have time to get away. I dropped down flat on my belly and let the cat all on top of me. I only wanted to live a couple of seconds longer. After that, the hell with it!

The cat was doing a lot of screaming and thrashing. I was between two sets of legs. The paws came close enough to touch me, clawing up the dirt. I huddled up small, hoping it wouldn't notice me there under its belly. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly, with a cold precision. I steadied my right hand on my left wrist.

I shot Laura three times, carefully, between the shoulders.

The cat stopped thrashing. Its weight crushed me. I knew it was dead. I knew I'd done something that even experienced hunters don't do in nine cases out of ten. My first bullet had found the way into the cat's little brain and killed it.

It wasn't going to kill me. I pulled myself out from under it. The pitch was almost quiet now, the mob gone, the animals mostly under control. I kicked the dead cat. It had died too soon.

My gun was empty. I remember I clicked the hammer twice. I got more bullets out of my pocket, but my fingers wouldn't hold them and I couldn't see to load. I threw the gun away.

I walked away in the thin, cold fog, down toward the distant beat of the sea.

THE DANCING GIRL OF GANYMEDE

Chapter 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 fear-some 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 smouldering 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.

Chapter 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 aborigines 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 go."

"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 sombrely. "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 aborigines, 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, headed 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 Mar-

tian. "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.

Chapter 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 aborigines, 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 wineshops.

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 aborigines 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.

Chapter 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, moulded 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."

Chapter 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.

Chapter 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 ten-

derness, 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 aborigines 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 CITADEL OF LOST AGES

Chapter I

Strange Awakening

DARKNESS—nothingness—a void and a voice that spoke to him across the muffled deeps. "Remember! Think, and remember! Who are you?"

It was painful to be thus aroused. And yet he tried to answer and could not. He said, "I don't know."

"Yes, you know. You can remember if you will. *Who are you?*"

The voice continued to torture him, calm and insistent, and in order to quiet it he tried desperately to remember. It seemed that he should know. He had known, once.

"I am . . ."

A pause, a groping and then, "I am—Fenway."

"Ah!" said the voice. "*Good!* You see, you do know—you can remember. Now—*where* are you, Fenway? *Where?*"

Again he answered, "I don't know." The mists were thick and he was growing tired.

But the voice went on. "You are walking, Fenway. There is a street, buildings, people. Where are you going?"

Suddenly he knew. Of course he knew! He must have been asleep or dreaming not to know. He was walking down the Avenue of the Americas. He had just left his office in Rockefeller Center. It was dusk and a thin snow was falling. He could see the immense towers of the city

leaping skyward, their ledges rimmed with white, their myriad windows blazing and above them in the smother the blinking lights of the airways.

He said, answering the voice, "I am in New York. It is winter and I am going home."

"Good! Now the year. What year, Fenway?"

"I'm tired," he said. "I want to sleep."

"Tell me the year, Fenway. The *year!*"

He said uncertainly, "The year I was born, the year I married, the year my son was born. The year, this year. I don't . . . Yes, nineteen hundred and eighty-seven."

He *was* tired. The voice was growing faint, the restful dark increasing.

"Fenway!" It seemed to him that the voice quivered with a terrible excitement. "Fenway, the Citadell *Do you know of the Citadel?*"

"The Citadel?" Some chord within him stirred to the touch of that word, a chord of fear, of doom and desolation.

"Perhaps it won't happen," he murmured. "Perhaps they're wrong. The Citadel—I can't think about the Citadel. Let me sleep!"

He let himself drift into the enfolding darkness. From far off he heard the voice clamoring his name and another voice that cautioned, "Softly. Don't force him! You know the danger of force."

For a brief instant, blurred and gigantic in the void above him, he thought he saw their faces, bearded, bright and hateful—the faces of torment. He thought he heard the voice say softly in triumph, "One more time. Once more and he will remember!"

Then it was all gone—sight and sound and sense. There was only slumber, the deep deep night of silence and forgetting.

DAYLIGHT—a narrow shaft of it, red and rusty on the

stone floor. He lay for a long time looking at the light, not understanding it, not understanding anything. His head was heavy, as though weighted with iron bands.

He was enclosed in a small chamber of stone. It was very still. Except for the single spear of light it was dark. He could not remember having seen this place before. He looked at the light, and wondered, and his wondering was slow and vague.

He wondered who he was and where he was and why.

Once he had known. Once he had had a name and a place and a reason.

They were gone beyond remembering. He felt that this should have frightened him but it did not. He was puzzled and worried but not afraid. Not very much afraid.

He stood up suddenly, trembling, bathed in a chill sweat. Dim broken images whirled across his mind, too formless for grasping, and he cried out, "I can't remember!"

The cry was only a groan. It echoed dully from the stones with a sound like heavy laughter.

He looked down at himself. He saw his feet, shod in rawhide sandals. His legs, brown and long-thighed and muscular, were marked here and there with old scars. A strip of white cloth was wound tight around narrow loins, above that was a flat brown midriff.

He studied his hands. They were strong but they had no meaning for him. He lifted them and felt his face, the hard high ridges of bone, the hollow planes of flesh. He ran his fingers through short-cropped hair and did not know the color of it nor the color of his eyes—nor his name.

It was an evil thing, to be shut in a place of stone without a name. He stood still until the spasm passed.

The narrow shaft of light drew him, three slow unsteady steps. He leaned his face to the slit in the wall and looked out—out and down and far away. And again

there came the chill sweat and the trembling, the poignant sense of memory hiding just beyond the threshold of his mind.

A copper Sun hung in the sky and the sky was coppery and thick, streaked with clouds of reddish dust that deepened into crimson where they touched the far-off hills.

He looked at the sky and something said within him, *The sky is wrong*. It did not tell him how.

Below him, at the foot of granite cliffs that seemed to fall forever down from where he stood, there was a city.

It was a great city. There were many buildings, some huge and built of stone, some built of wood, some of clay brick and endless crowding masses of little huts that seemed like lumps of earth itself. It was a bright city, blazing with sullen color under the copper sky.

It was a rich city. He could see the market places, the patterns of the streets and lanes and huddled alleys thronged with men and beasts, the pens and paddocks and the roads that led in and out. The sound of it rose up to him, soft with distance—the speaking of many voices and of much motion.

A large rich busy city—but again the inner something told him, *It is wrong*. And he visioned white towers rearing godlike, thundering with light and sound, roaring with a great voice of wheels and motors and swift wings in the sunset sky.

He visioned them as a man sees a wisp of smoke erased by the wind. And they were gone, without form or meaning, as though they had never been.

He stood where he was, gazing dully at the city and the wide land that spread beyond it, patched with forest and cleared meadows and the roofs of villages. There were streams and three broad roads that led away toward the hills. The roads were hung with dust where men and horses moved.

The shadows did not change. The Sun hung unmov-

ing in the sky. He did not know how long he stood. There was no time. And that too was somehow wrong, that red unstimulating Sun in a dusty sky.

From somewhere above him, as though on the roof of whatever place this was, there came the brazen thunder of a gong.

The stone walls shuddered with it. He could hear the echoes rolling out across the land, solemn and fierce, and he thought it must be a great gong indeed, fashioned by giants. When the ringing strokes were ended the world seemed filled with silence.

Below him the city quieted. The voices were stilled, the streets and the market places grew empty. Out on the plain the caravans left the roadways and lay down under the shelter of the trees. The villages were silent. The world slept.

And still the sun had not shifted in its place.

HE began to be afraid again. The city and the plain seemed deathly, too quiet in the unchanging sunlight. He turned from the narrow window-place. There was an iron door in one wall, a low thing heavily made. He hammered on it with his fists and shouted. He did this again and again until he was hoarse and his hands were bruised. There was no answer, not the slightest sound from beyond.

He went back to the couch where he had wakened. He saw a water jug on a ledge beside it and an earthen plate with meat and black bread. He was not hungry. He drank from the jug and then sat down and put his head between his hands and set himself to remember, to know. And that was as useless as the pounding.

His eyes fell again on the food and water. They glittered with a sudden realization.

"Someone will come," he whispered. "Sooner or later, someone will come with food. They will know. They will tell me who I am!"

He would *make* them tell him—who he was, where he was and why. He shivered again but now it was not with fear but with hope. He waited, his brown hands curved and sinewy and cruel.

He waited.

The wall and the iron door must have been very thick for he heard nothing until there came to him the sound of a bolt drawn softly. He lay back on the couch as though in heavy sleep. A second bolt, a third. The door swung in.

Light footsteps crossed the stones. Peering through his lashes in the half dark he could see only a blurred small shape that came and bent over him.

He reached up and caught it.

Chapter II

Arika

WHATEVER it was he had hold of, it behaved like a small panther. He clamped one hand over its face to keep it from crying out and then he rose and dragged it, struggling, into the red shaft of daylight.

He saw that he had caught a girl.

Her hair was black and her eyes were two dark points of fire looking at him over the rim of his hand. He held her so for a moment, watching the empty doorway, listening. Then he whispered:

"Stop struggling and I'll take my hand away. But if you make a sound I'll kill you!"

She nodded. Cautiously he lifted his hand from her face. He saw a pointed chin, a red mouth drawn into what was almost a snarl—a cat-face, predaceous, startled, capable.

Only for a moment did he see that face. Then it softened and the cat-look was gone, and the hardness, so that he thought he had only imagined them. Her expression now was as sweet and plaintive as the voice that whispered:

"Why do you treat me so? Don't you remember me—Arika?"

"Arika," he repeated slowly. And again, "Arika?" His fingers tightened on her arms. "No, I don't remember you, Arika." He began to shake her, not meaning to, hardly knowing that he did so. "I don't remember you. I don't remember anything. Who am I? Tell me who I am!"

Soft pity welled in the dark eyes. "It was so before. But I thought you would remember me. I came only four nights ago to tell you that your escape was arranged."

She touched him, pleading. "Don't shake me so. I don't know who you are or where you came from or even why you're here. I only know you're human and a captive and—I hate the Numi."

With a part of his mind he heard that and was conscious of a crushing disappointment. But his brow was drawn and he stared at her, saying, "Night? This is *night*?"

"You must have heard the gong."

"Night!" His gaze turned to the shaft of light. Tentatively he formed the word, "darkness."

HE felt the girl quiver. "Don't say that word. It's evil like the Numi. Let me go—we'll talk later when it's safe. Come now, we have a long way to go before the day-gong."

Slowly he released her. The full impact of what she had said about escape reached him. He had a terrible desire to be out of this cage of stone, yet he was afraid somehow of the world he had seen below the

window-slit, the world that seemed so strangely wrong.

"Night," he said again.

Sunset, dusk and dark. A man walking in the dusk, going-somewhere. . . .

His head swam and for a moment he thought the veil had lifted. He cried out hoarsely, "Fen . . . my name . . . Fen!" Then he covered his face with his hands and whispered, "I don't know. I can't remember. It's all gone."

She picked up that syllable and used it. "You will remember—Fenn. But you must come now. I'm only a temple slave. If they catch me . . ." She finished with a shudder and added, "You'll never have another chance."

She pulled at his hand and he suffered himself to be led through the iron door into a corridor shrouded in utter darkness. In his mind he turned the word Fenn over and over and still he did not know.

Somehow it was worse than being nameless to be called by a name that had no meaning.

The girl Arika guided him surely. The corridor was short, little more than a landing. Then there were steps, cut in the living rock and leading steeply downward.

When they reached the foot of the steps Arika's hand stayed him. "Make no sound," she whispered. "There is danger here."

She moved forward a few cautious steps. Fenn could see nothing in the complete blackness. Then a crack of sombre light appeared and widened slowly and he saw that a block of stone had swung soundlessly on a pivot, revealing an opening large enough for a man to pass through.

Arika made again an intense gesture of silence. She stepped through the doorway and Fenn followed. Behind him the block of stone swung shut and became an indistinguishable part of a massive wall.

Arika gave him a quick bright glance as though seeking acknowledgement of her cleverness and he gathered that the stone block, with the passage and cell beyond it,

were very secret things that she should not have known existed.

They stood now in a space no more than three feet wide. Behind them was the wall. Before them was a hanging of some heavy black stuff. Overhead both wall and hanging vanished upward into shadow.

The girl beckoned him on, keeping close to the wall lest she should brush against the hangings and disturb them. Fenn copied her every movement with great care. The air was heavy and still and there was a quality in the silence that set his nerves prickling.

The wall curved and curved, it seemed, without end and they crept mouselike in that narrow space behind the black curtain that was as endless as the wall.

Fenn was consumed with a great curiosity as strong as his unease. At last Arika stopped and he brought his mouth close to her ear, pointing to the curtain.

"What is beyond it?" he breathed.

SHE hesitated. Then she smiled, a rather wicked smile. Without touching the hanging she studied it until she found the place where two sections overlapped. Very slowly, very carefully, she drew the edges apart the merest crack so that he might see through.

He looked out into a vault of glimmering darkness. How large it was, how high, he could not tell but it seemed to stretch up and away as high as the sky and as wide as half the Earth. And again painful submerged memories wrenched at him.

He knew that it was all a cheat. The black hangings covered ordinary walls of stone and the upper vault also would be shrouded in the sombre cloth. But the black "sky" burned with points of diamond fire, blazing, magnificent and sown so thick that all the space below was filled with a pale shining, reflected back from peaks and plains of purest white.

Fenn knew that the peaks were only painted on the

black cloth and that beneath the white substance underfoot there was only stone. But a shivering of awe and recognition ran through him and a terrible giddiness that made him reel.

Somewhere, sometime before he had seen those fires in the night sky and known a whiteness on the Earth!

Arika's voice whispered in his ear, softer than thought. "This is the Temple of Eternal Night. See them sleeping there, the Numi priests, trying to appease their own dark gods?"

He saw them then and all sense of recognition or kinship vanished. Whatever night or winter he had known, it had no part with this!

On pallets of white fur they slept, row upon row, the ones she had called the Numi priests. And they were not men.

Or were they? Their form was like his own except that the bodies of the Numi had a look of tremendous toughness and strength, more like the bodies of lions than of men. And like lions they were furred. He could see the soft gleaming pelts of them, their long hair and their silken beards. They were beautiful, lying there in their sleeping strength.

Some were light and some were dark and some were reddish and some gray, exactly as color runs in the human hair. And in spite of their strength and their gleaming fur there was nothing beastlike about them. Rather they seemed to Fenn to be above men like himself, as he was above the brutes.

It was their faces, he thought—their cold wise cruel beautiful faces, so full of knowledge and power even in sleep.

A terrible anger swept suddenly over him. He had seen faces like that before. His clouded mind could not remember where but he knew that they were the faces of torment, of pain, of loss.

He lifted up his eyes then to the fire-shot vault, the

darkness and the glistening hills. He saw the awful savagery of that cunningly wrought landscape, the remote uncaring sky and the white peaks sharp as fangs to rend the flesh—a landscape that hated man.

A revulsion of fear and loathing shook him. He stepped back, turning his face away, and Arika dropped the edges of the curtain. He saw that she was still smiling that strange smile full of secret thoughts.

She turned, her fingers gliding surely over the stones of the wall. Presently another silent door swung open and he followed her onto yet another lightless stairway, going down.

The descent was very long. Arika counted the treads with great care. Several times she guided him over traps, balanced stones that would have triggered death upon him had he stepped on them. Once he thought he heard her drop some soft thing as though deliberately but he did not speak to disturb her counting.

When at last they stood on the level again she laughed a little shakily and said, "The Numi built the temple with human slaves and then took care to kill them all so that the passages should be unknown. But we humans are clever too in our way."

She was proud of herself. Fenn laid a grateful hand on her shoulder. But his mind was on other things.

"Arika," he said, "what are the Numi?"

He could feel her staring at him and when she spoke her tone held incredulity. "Surely you haven't forgotten them?"

"But I have," he said. *I have forgotten them and the world and myself. I live now but did I live before? When and where and how did I live before?*

His hand tightened on Arika's shoulder. She seemed to understand and she did not rebuke him. "Numi means in their language New Men," she told him quietly. "They are the race that came from out of the Great Dark to conquer us. And you and I aren't free of them yet."

They came to the end of the short passage. Arika stopped and he heard her draw a deep breath. "Go carefully, Fenn," she whispered. "If we can pass the tomb of the Numi kings we'll be safe."

She opened the third pivoted door of stone.

Fenn stepped after her into a low square chamber lighted by a golden lamp that burned upon a tripod. The dressed blocks of the wall were hung with golden wreaths and inscribed with the names of men. Fenn thought at first this was the tomb Arika had mentioned. Then he looked through an archway that had been hidden from him by the outswung door.

Arika's murmur reached him. "In here are the names of the honored ones, the favorites. *There* is the place of the kings."

Fenn glided forward to peer cautiously around the side of the arch. The space beyond was empty of life, steeped in a drowsing silence and a haze of red-gold light that came softly through hidden openings.

It was a large space. It was grand and strong and somehow insolent in its sheer lack of adornment, as though the Numi needed nothing but themselves. And around its walls of sombre stone were ranked the kings of the New Men, embalmed and dressed in their crimson robes, buried upright in pillars of clear-shining crystal, a solemn company too proud to bend their necks even to the Lord of Death.

It seemed to Fenn that the bearded kings looked at him from out their upright crystal coffins and smiled with their handsome mouths, a chill and secret smile.

He heard Arika breathe a deep sigh. "The gods are with us, Fenn. Come on."

He had no desire to linger there. The human-unhuman faces of the dead filled him with a kind of horror. He followed more than halfway to the great arch at the far end when they heard the stamp of hoofs and the jingle of harness outside and then the sound of voices.

They remained poised for a moment, frozen. There were a number of voices. Many feet moved sharply in the dust and the horses stamped and snorted. Fenn glanced at Arika.

Her dark eyes had the fear of death in them but her mouth was set hard. "Back into the alcove, Fenn—and pray!"

Chapter III

The Trap

RIGID and still as the dead kings they stood, pressed back into the corners on either side of the arch. By moving his head a little Fenn could see a part of what went on in the tomb.

They were all Numi who entered. Some of them wore the harness of soldiers and these remained by the outer door. Two came on, a man and a woman, walking slowly along the lines of crystal pillars.

The man was golden-bearded, dressed in black robes frosted with silver. The woman held herself regally, moving with the deliberate pace of age. She was gowned and cloaked in purple and her hair was white. Fenn noted that her face was as smooth as Arika's. It was haughty and sorrowful and her eyes were quite mad.

Neither of them spoke. They came on until Fenn thought surely they were not going to stop short of the alcove. Then the man—Fenn guessed from his robes that he was a priest—inclined his head and drew back, leaving the woman standing alone before the crystal-sheathed body of a tall king, big and black-bearded, with an eagle look about him even in death.

For what seemed an endless time she stood there, her mad eyes studying the face of the dead king. Then, she

spoke. "You never change, my husband. Why do you not change? Why do you not grow old as I do?"

The king regarded her with a lightless agate gaze and did not answer.

"Well," she said, "no matter. I have much to tell you. There is trouble in your kingdom, trouble, always trouble, and no one will listen to me. The human cattle grow insolent and your son, who does not fill *your* throne, my lord, is soft and will not punish them."

Her voice droned on and on, full of disquiet. An eerie qualm crept over Fenn. It began to seem to him that the dead king had a curious air of listening.

The priest had withdrawn himself beyond Fenn's vision. The soldiers stood motionless by the outer door, bored and heavy-eyed. Fenn looked at Arika. The expression of catlike ferocity he had surprised before in the cell was on her face again—and this time there was no mistaking it. Her hands opened and closed like the flexing of claws and her body was drawn with tension.

Fenn began to sweat.

The Numi queen talked. She told of endless slights and injuries, of the misdeeds and follies of the courts. She was a vain spiteful old woman, mad as a March wind, and she would not have done with talking.

Arika's lips moved. She made no sound but Fenn could read the words as she shaped them.

"Be still, be still! Gods above, make her be still and go! If we don't get into the city before the day-gong we are lost, both of us, and all because she won't shut up!"

Presently she went from prayers to curses and still the old queen talked.

Arika glanced from time to time at Fenn and her eyes were desperate. Fenn himself began to feel the pressure of moments passing. He did not clearly understand the reason but Arika's fury was convincing enough.

Fenn's legs began to ache with standing in one place. The sweat trickled down his breast and back. It came

to him that the air was hot and the old queen's unending words filled it like a swarm of bees.

Abruptly she said, "I am tired. And I do not think you listen. I shan't stay any longer. Good night, my lord!"

She turned and moved away in a whispering of purple robes. The priest appeared, hovering discreetly at her elbow. The guard formed ranks.

Fenn glanced at Arika and her eyes warned him to be still. He found time to wonder what sort of girl she was and why she should be taking these risks for him.

The woman, the priest and the guards went out of the tomb.

Fenn's knees grew weak with relief. He remained where he was, listening to the sounds that reached him from outside. At last he sighed.

"They've gone now, Arika. Hear the horses?"

She nodded. "The old sowl I've heard that she comes here often at night to talk to *him*. But why, of all nights—!"

"We're all right now," said Fenn soothingly.

And as he spoke the priest returned alone into the temple.

HE was moving fast, a man who has got rid of a confining duty and is on his way to better things. He reached out and struck one of the crystal pillars so that it rang and all the others picked up the sound and gave it back like the distant chiming of bells. The priest laughed. He strode on, straight for the alcove, and this time there was no hope. He was going up into the temple by the stairway in the rock.

As though they were doing it of themselves Fenn felt his muscles twitch and tighten. He held his breath that there should be no warning sound. Arika's eyes were two black narrow sparks and he saw that one hand had fallen to the girdle of yellow cloth she wore above her waist.

The priest came through the archway, and Fenn made his leap from behind.

He got one arm around the Numi's neck and his thighs locked tight around his loins. He had gauged the strength of the priest by the strength of a strong man and any man would have been borne over forward by the rush and the weight. But Fenn had forgotten that the Numi were not men.

He had not realized that anything living could be so strong. The body under the black robes seemed not of flesh, but of granite and whalebone and steel. Instead of falling as he should have done the priest threw himself backward, crushing Fenn beneath him on the stone floor.

The breath went out of him in a sickening grunt. His skull rang on the stone and for a moment he thought he was done for. From somewhere above him he heard Arika's voice and knew it had a deadly urgency but he could not grasp the words.

He was suddenly aware that he hated this golden-furred creature he had between his hands.

It was a hatred without memory or reason. But it was so red and furious that he found himself growling like a beast, forgetful of everything except that he was going to kill. New strength poured into him and a terrible excitement. He locked his thighs tighter and made of his arm an iron vise to shut off voice and breath and the moving blood. He was no longer conscious of Arika. He had forgotten escape. There was nothing in the world but this straining powerful golden body that he was going to destroy.

They were out of the alcove, thrashing among the crystal pillars where the red-robed kings looked down and watched them. The strength of the Numi priest was a wonderful thing. Fenn thought it was like trying to pinion a storm wind or ride the crest of a flood.

Their lunging bodies rolled and crashed against the ringing pillars. The robes of the Numi wrapped them

both and presently there were stains of crimson against the black and silver. Fenn would not relax his grip. He was oblivious to pain. He knew that if he once let go he was lost and he would not let go.

The fingers of the priest clawed at his legs, threatened to tear the living muscle from his arms. He set his teeth in the gold-furred flesh and tasted blood and tightened, tightened, tightened the pressure of his limbs.

"Fenn!"

It was Arika's voice, far off. Arika, calling, touching him, urging. He was getting tired. He could not hold on much longer. Why did she bother him now before the priest was dead?

He turned his head to snarl at her. And he realized then that the Numi was very still in his arms, that there was no slightest movement between his straining thighs.

"Let him go, Fenn. He's dead. He's been dead for minutes. Oh Fenn, wake up and let him go!"

Very slowly, Fenn relaxed. The body of the Numi slipped heavily away from him. He watched it. After awhile he tried to rise. His muscles were palsied with tremors like the muscles of an old man. Dark streams of blood ran from his torn wrists and down his thighs and his bones ached.

Arika helped him. She looked at him now with a kind of awe, mingled with something else that he was too tired to read. Doubt, perhaps, or even fear—a shrewd calculating something he did not like. It occurred to him to wonder again why she was so bent on his escape from the Numi.

The dead priest wore a gown of fine white linen under his robe. Working very swiftly Arika ripped it and gave the worst of Fenn's wounds a hasty binding.

"You'd leave a trail a blind man could follow," she explained. "Now come!"

She led him out of the tomb into the glare of the sullen copper Sun that never moved. A strong wind

blew. It smelled of heat and dust and the edges of the world were veiled in crimson.

High above him Fenn could see the half-monolithic temple crowning the cliff. It looked an evil place to be prisoned in. Why had the Numi had him there? What did they want with him?

WHAT did Arika want with him? He was glad to be free of the temple.

He stumbled after Arika down a slope clothed in tall trees that thrased in the wind. The tomb of the kings was built on a ledge of the cliff itself and almost beneath it the city began. It must still be night for no one was stirring in the streets.

Again that world "night" evoked a sense of wrongness and Fenn glanced at the burning sky and shook his head.

Halfway down the slope Arika stopped and brought forth from its hiding place in a thicket a bundle of cloth. "Here," she said, "wrap this around you. Over your head, Fenn! Keep your face hidden."

He struggled clumsily with the garment—a large shapeless length of cotton much smeared with dust and gray ash. Arika draped her own around her and helped him impatiently with his.

"What are these?" he asked her.

"Mourners' cloaks. Since humans are allowed to visit their burying grounds only at night no one will pay any attention to us if we're seen in the streets." She added wryly, "There are always mourners!"

"But why only at night?"

"Would you have them go by day and waste the time they should be working? The Numi don't keep humans just for pets!"

She led off down the slope again, going almost at a run. Fenn could not keep up with her. A number of times she came back to him and urged him on, snapping

at him, cursing him in an agony of worry. Now and again she glanced upward at the temple and as the angle changed Fenn could see the cause of her apprehension—a great gong as tall as several men, glinting dully in the sunlight upon the temple roof.

They entered the city, slowing their pace to a walk. These were the mean quarters, the vast huddle of huts that girdled the magnificence of the palace and the opulent dwellings of the Numi like a muddy sea. Here were refuse and filth and the scuttering feet of rats. Here were twisting lanes and the ancient smells of humanity crowded and unwashed. Fenn snorted in disgust and Arika shot him a smouldering glance from under her ash-smeared hood.

“The air was cleaner in the cell, Fenn, but you’ll live to breath this longer!”

They did not speak again. The crumbling mud-brick houses slept under the dusty wind, their windows covered with bits of cloth or hide. Here and there a child cried and an occasional cur-dog barked. They did not pass anyone in the bewildering tangle of lanes and if anyone saw them there was no sign of it. Arika’s face was drawn and anxious and Fenn knew that she held herself from running only by the greatest restraint. She was cursing the old queen under her breath.

Up on the temple roof two black-robed priests appeared, tiny dolls in the distance.

Arika turned into an even narrower way, hardly more than a crack between the walls. Here she risked a faster pace, dragging Fenn without pity.

The distant priests bent and a second later a great hammer swung on counterweights and the day-gong sent its first harsh sonorous stroke echoing over the land.

A low doorway curtained with greasy cloth appeared on Fenn’s right. Arika thrust him through it, into a stifling dusk that was blinding after the light.

Something large stirred in the shadows and a man's voice whispered, "All right?"

Arika said, "He killed a priest." And then to Fenn, "Stay here!"

The curtain rose and fell again. Fenn turned, reaching out for her. But the mourner's cloak lay on the earthen floor, and Arika was gone.

Again the large bulk moved, very lightly for its size. The shadow of a man came between Fenn and the curtain. He bent slowly and picked up the fallen cloak and as he straightened Fenn caught a glimpse of his face in the dusty gloom.

It was the face of a Numi.

Chapter IV

Remembered Doom

A KIND of bleak fury came over Fenn. He had had it in the back of his mind that Arika was engineering some treachery but this he had not expected. His two hands reached and encircled a corded throat, and under the vast booming of the gong he said the one word: "Numi!"

The voice of the man said harshly, "Wait!" The curtain was lifted to admit a single beam of light. Gasping against Fenn's grip the man said, "Look again!"

Fenn looked. Uncertainly his fingers loosened. The man was beardless, his cheeks shaven close to smooth skin. His hair was cropped and his body, naked except for a twist of cloth, showed only a fine down and not the silken fur of the New Men.

And yet in the eyes, the shape of the head, the unmistakable cast of the features . . .

The man lifted his arms and struck Fenn's hands away. "I'm Malech. I'm Arika's brother."

"Arika's brother? And who is Arika? What does she want with me?" Fenn's hands were still raised, and hungrily curved. "What do *you* want with me, Malech? And why do you look like a Numi, a Numi plucked and stripped?"

"I'm a half-blood," Malech said sourly. "So is Arika. I can assure you we have no love for our fathers, who give us their blood and then despise us for it. As for the rest of it, it will have to wait until tonight."

"I'm a slave. I work in the palace gardens. If I don't go there at once I shall be flogged, with ten stripes extra because I'm half the breed of the masters. Arika has the same problems at the temple. Besides, she might draw suspicion by her absence. So . . ."

He thrust Fenn ahead of him, into another room. It was not large but it was clean. There was a hearth, two box-beds filled with straw, a table, three or four rough benches.

"This is the house," said Malech. "All of it. Stay in it. Don't even look out the window. You'll find water, wine and food. Be quiet and trust us if you can. If you can't, after all we've risked to get you free—why, the priests will be delighted to have you back."

He swung on his heel to go, and then paused, turning to look again at Fenn as though he found in him something of special interest.

"So you killed a priest." Malech's eyes, which were lighter than Arika's, almost tawny, gleamed with an evil joy. "With a knife? A strangling cord? How?"

Fenn shook his head slowly. "I had no weapons."

"With your hands? Don't tell me with just your hands!" Malech's smile was the feral grin of a tiger. "May the gods of the humans beam upon you, my friend!"

At the door into the lean-to he said over his shou-

der, almost casually, "As half-blood Numi, my sister and I—particularly my sister—share some of the mental peculiarities of our illustrious fathers. It's quite possible, if you do decide to trust us, that we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost."

He was gone before the other could speak.

Fenn stood where he was for some time without moving, his gaze fixed upon the doorway. The mighty voice of the gong was stilled and in its place came the numberless tongues of the waking city, jarring, clattering, settling at last to a steady beehive drone, punctuated by the shrill cries of children.

But Fenn was conscious of nothing except those words of Malech's that were still ringing in his ears. ". . . *we can restore the memory Arika tells me you have lost.*"

He sat down and tried to think but he was very weary. His wounds were stiffening and his body ached beyond endurance. He did not like Malech. He did not trust Arika. He understood nothing—why he had been imprisoned, why he was free. But whatever else happened he did not want to be taken back to the temple. And—if he could remember again, if he could have a name he knew was his own and a past that was longer than yesterday . . .

If Malech had been a horned demon and Arika his sister Fenn would not have left that place.

He washed his cuts with wine and then drank off a good bit of what remained. He was seized with a desire to go after Malech, to drag him back and force him to do his magic now. He felt he could not wait for night. But he realized that was folly speaking. He lay down in one of the straw-filled beds but he could not sleep.

*To remember! To be again a man with a whole mind,
a whole life!*

What kind of memories would they be? How would

he appear to himself after he remembered? What stains would he find upon his hands?

Even evil memories would be better than none, better than his terrible groping into nothingness.

Suppose that Malech lied?

IT was hot and the fumes of the wine were clouding his thoughts. His body wanted rest even if his mind did not. The world began to slip away from him. He thought how strange it was that Arika was half Numi—such a handsome girl for all he did not trust her. Very handsome . . .

He slept and in his dreams ghostly towers brightened against a dusky sky and the word "night" returned to plague him.

Twice he spoke aloud, saying, "I am Fenway."

Arika woke him. He had not heard the gong that marked off night from day nor had he heard the others return. Yet they must have been there for some time. A pot bubbled fragrantly on the hearth and the cloth was laid for supper. Outside the wind howled in the alleys, filling the air with dust.

He rose, feeling stiff and sore but otherwise normal and ravenously hungry. Yet he hardly thought of food. He was shaken with an eager half-fearful excitement. He told Arika what Malech had said and demanded, "Is that true? Can you do it?"

"Not all at once perhaps—but I can try. You must eat now; Fenn. Otherwise the body will disturb the mind."

That seemed reasonable and he curbed his impatience. He watched the others for awhile in silence, trying to judge them, but there was something about their strange breed that was beyond his grasp.

He demanded abruptly, "Why did you rescue me?"

"As I told you," answered Arika. "You were human and a captive of the Numi. This isn't the first time a

human has vanished out of the Numi dungeons—though not, I'll admit, out of the temple. That was a brilliant feat, Fenn. You should appreciate it."

"I'd still like to know why."

"Does there have to be a reason?" asked Malech. "Haven't you ever done anything without a reason except that it was a good thing to do?"

Fenn shot him a hard glance. "You don't have to remind me that I don't know the answer to that. However, I won't quarrel with your motives—not now." He turned to Arika again. "What did the priests want of me? Why was I there?"

She shook her head. "I couldn't find out. RhamSin—he was your special jailor, Fenn—is a very brilliant man. He rules in the temple as the king rules in the palace and there is great rivalry between them.

"Whatever purpose he had with you, it was something of great importance to him, something he wanted to keep secret from the king and even from the other priests. Else you would not have been hidden away in that cell. The Numi are free to use humans in any way they wish, just as we use cattle, so there could be no other reason."

She met Fenn's gaze directly. "Perhaps that's why I rescued you, Fenn. I hate RhamSin. Remember, I've been a temple slave since I was old enough to climb there. Perhaps I wanted simply to cheat him of whatever success he was after just to make him sweat."

An expression of such diabolical hatred crossed her face that Fenn was convinced she had told at least a part of the truth.

Suddenly she smiled. "All that being so—have you wondered why RhamSin hasn't searched the city for you?"

"Perhaps it's easier just to get another human."

"Maybe. But I made sure—partly, of course, to clear myself. Only the priests and the royal family and some

of the nobles are supposed to know about those temple passages. So on the stair I dropped a girdle belonging to a man of the royal house—which Malech managed to steal for me. Therefore it will appear to RhamSin that *he* stole you away and took you directly to the palace. So I am safe and you are safe—at least for a while.”

“You’re a clever girl,” said Fenn admiringly. “Very clever indeed.” Arika’s smile broadened. And Fenn wondered silently, *Just how clever are you, Arika? Too clever to trust?* In one thing he was forced to trust, whether he would or not.

He got up with sudden violence. “I can’t wait any longer! Get to work, blast you, do your magic—I can’t wait any longer!”

“Softly, Fenn,” said Arika. “All right.” She pointed to the bed. “Lie down. Let your body relax. You’ll have to help me, Fenn. I’m not like the Numi, who can do what they want to with the minds of men and beasts. You’ll have to open the way for me Fenn. Don’t fight me. Let your mind be easy.”

HE stretched out. He tried to do as she said, to relax his limbs and let his mind go free. Her face hovered above him, white in the shrouded light from the windows. She *was* handsome. Her eyes had strange dark fires in them. Her voice spoke to him softly.

“You’ll have to trust me, Fenn, if you want to remember.” Malech handed her a drinking cup and she held it to Fenn’s lips. “There is a drug in this wine. It will not hurt you. It only makes the way easier and the time shorter. Drink it, Fenn.”

He would not drink it. His muscles tensed again and he looked at her with narrow-eyed suspicion, almost ready to strike her aside and run. But she only took the cup away and said, “It’s up to you. Your memory is your loss, not mine.”

After a minute he said, “Give me the cup.”

He drank it. Again he lay still, listening to her voice, and now it was easier to relax. Gradually he lost all sense of time. Arika's eyes were huge and dark and full of little dancing lights. They drew him. They compelled him. Soft folds of colorless mist slowly blotted out the face of Malech in the background, the mud-brick walls, the roof, Arika herself—all except her eyes.

Just at the last he felt the power that lay behind them but it was too late. They willed him into the final darkness and he could not but go.

Deep, deep, timeless dark.

A voice . . .

Under the prodding of that voice he roused a bit as though from slumber. Another voice had spoken once, asking, asking—but this time it was easier to answer.

"My name is Fenway," he told the voice. "I am in New York."

Yes, it was much easier to answer. He told about Times Square on a summer night, the blaze of light and the crowd. He told about Central Park in the morning after rain.

"And pretty soon it will all be gone," he said. "All the buildings and the subways and the people—gone, erased, forgotten."

He laughed. "They're working on the Citadel. They're burying it deep in the rock above the Palisades. It's almost finished—and for what? What good is a citadel without men?"

He laughed again, dreadful laughter. "‘Repent ye, for the end is at hand!’ I repent me that I had a son. I repent me, I repent me that I begot him just for death!"

"Fenway—Fenway!" The voice shook him, brought him to himself. "You must remember—yourself, New York, the Palisades. Draw it, Fenway. Draw the size and shape of New York, of the Palisades, so that when you wake you will remember."

Dully under the urging of the voice he began to draw. Whether he had pencil and paper he neither knew nor cared. He drew as one does in a dream, the familiar outlines, and as he did so he was filled with sadness and a sense of loss and he began to weep.

"I will not draw," he said. "What good is drawing on the evening of Destruction?"

The voice called to him. It called again and again and he fled away from it. He was running beside the wide gray river. Night was closing down and from the darkling water the mist rose thick and cold, clinging round him, drowning out the world that was so soon to die.

Chapter V

Secret of Ages

THERE was a drawing, done with charcoal on a slab of wood. It was lopsided and clumsy and unfinished, showing a long, narrow little island between two rivers near the sea.

Fenn stared at it. His hands trembled. Arika said softly, "You told me its name was New York. Do you remember?"

, "I—I don't know." His mouth was dry and it was difficult to talk. "My head feels queer. It's full of smoke. Sometimes I see things and then they're gone again."

He looked up, almost pleadingly, from Arika to Malech and back again. "Where is this place I called New York?"

Malech shook his head. "I never heard of it."

There was an odd tone to his voice. Arika rose and removed two bricks from the wall above the bed. From the cavity behind them she drew a bundle of parchment scrolls. Even in his distress Fenn could see that she was laboring under some great excitement. She spread the scrolls beside him on the bed.

"When the Numi came out of the Great Dark and into the human part of the world they made pictures of the lands they passed through. I stole these from the temple long ago. Let us see if the pictures of the Numi show your island."

Fenn studied the maps. Strange maps of a strange Earth. The Numi must have traveled far. The names and inscriptions were in a tongue he did not know but Arika pointed out desert and jungle and mountains, forest land and sea, and there was nothing that resembled the island he had drawn while in that uncanny sleep.

"No," he said. "It isn't here."

A quick glance passed between Arika and Malech. She unrolled another scroll, the last.

"This," she said, "is the birthplace of the Numi. You remember the Hall of Eternal Night in the temple, Fenn? All their birthland is like that, I have heard, white and cruel and very cold. It is what humans call the Great Dark."

"I don't understand," said Fenn. "What is the Great Dark?"

"The other side of the world," she answered. "Its face is turned always away from the Sun, toward the black gods of night that men say spawned the Numi."

Fenn concentrated on that last map. Endless areas of whiteness, broken here and there by the dim outlines of continents. In imagination, remembering that hall that he had glimpsed, he could see the jagged mountains rearing under a black sky shot with fire and at their feet the wrinkled ice of oceans.

It was Malech's quick eye that saw it first. "Herel!"

he said. "Look here, see it!" He traced with his strong finger. "Away from the Sun, beyond even the Shadow, well into the Great Dark itself. Here is the edge of the sea and here—two rivers and an island!"

He laughed, a short harsh burst of merriment, and then was still.

Arika whispered, "This is a thing of wonder. It is a miracle from the gods."

And Fenn said, as he seemed always to be saying, "I don't understand."

"Nor do I! Listen to me, Fenn—listen carefully and try to remember." Her hand had caught his now, gripping it almost cruelly, as though she would grip his mind that way.

"I tried to call your memory back. I gave you the drug to throw down all your conscious barriers and I tried to draw aside the bars that keep your memory prisoned. I called to you and you answered, naming yourself Fennway, and you talked quite readily.

"But the things you spoke of were not of this world you stand in now! You told of great buildings and of things that roared in the sky and in the streets and under the earth. You told of day and night, of the things we have never seen—the moon, the stars, dawn, sunset."

Her fingers tightened until her nails brought blood. "*Fenn, your memories were of the world that was before the coming of the dark star—the world before Destruction!*"

He was glad of her hand holding him. Because suddenly the solid earth dissolved beneath him and he was falling, spinning, crying through a reeling vortex.

He whispered, "I remember, I remember."

He put his face between his hands. He shivered, a shallow rippling of the flesh, and presently the palms of his hands were wet with a salty moisture.

I remember.

But did he? He still had no full memory of a past life. He had only flashes of a life, disjointed, infinitely strange—painful and yet somehow distant, somehow not of his flesh.

He asked hoarsely, "If I remember that far past, does that mean that I *belong* to that past? That RhamSin somehow dragged me out of it?"

Arika shook her head. "It seems impossible. And yet the powers of the Numi priests are great."

Malech interrupted, asking him passionately, "Where are the Palisades?"

Fenn was too numbed with horror to answer. He felt suspended over an abyss that yawned between two worlds, himself a stranger to them both.

Malech's hands rose in a fierce aborted gesture and Arika warned him back. She said in the compelling voice that Fenn had answered in his dream, "Fenn, show me the Palisades."

Without thought or volition, he placed a finger on the charcoal map.

MALECH'S eyes suddenly blazed. He said in an exultant whisper, "It was what RhamSin was trying to get from him—the secret of the Citadel's location. And now we have it. In Fenn we have it!"

Fenn had begun to talk. It was like a dead man slowly speaking.

"The dark star," he said to no one. "They looked at it through their telescopes. They watched it rushing closer and they told us that the world as we knew it would die. A dark star, coming out of space to kill the world."

Arika whispered, "Do you remember the Destruction?"

"No. It was not to be—not just yet. The dark star would pass the Sun. They had it charted, they knew what it would do. It would take away some of the planets, the

outer ones, and go on—and the worlds that were left would be torn and changed.”

He added slowly, “There was a terrible fear on the world. Not for ourselves but for our children. Sometimes we would not believe it could happen. We looked at the great cities and the mountains and the green land. We looked at the sea and we did not believe it could ever change.”

“But it did,” Arika said somberly. “Legend tells how it did—how when the dark star passed all Earth was rent and shaken and its spinning slowed, so there was no more day and night. How the cities were thrown down and the mountains moved and the seas ran wild and millions died.”

“They knew what was coming,” said Fenn in his dead strange voice. “It was why they built the Citadel, to preserve man’s knowledge and power for those who might survive.”

Malech was shaken with bitter mirth. “And the Numi have hunted for that legended Citadel without dreaming that it lay in the Great Dark from which they came! They mapped this place New York and didn’t know the Citadel was there! And now, with Fenn’s help, *we* shall find it!”

Fenn looked at him and at Arika with hopeless eyes. “What difference does it make to me who wins the Citadel? The only world I can remember perished—how many thousand years ago?”

Arika’s face flashed and she took his hands warmly, strongly, into hers. “Fenn, don’t you realize what you can do? You are human—all human. You’ve seen a little of how humans live in this world—slaves of the Numi here in the cities or as outlaw tribes in the wilds. That has gone on since the Numi first came out of the darkness that bred them.

“But you can change all that, Fenn. You can free us

from the Numi. You can make the world as it was before the Destruction—a good world for men to live in. You can give men back all their lost knowledge!”

“Or would you prefer,” Malech said, “to give the Citadel to the Numi so that with the knowledge in it they can rivet fetters on us forever?”

A blaze of anger leaped up in Fenn’s mind. “No! Men built the Citadel, men like us—for men like us!”

He was remembering again the tragic last hope of that doomed world, the hope centered in the Citadel that was to be man’s answer to the coming night.

“Then help us find it, that its secrets may belong to man!” Arika pressed. “We can get you out of the city and the outlaw humans out in the wilds will aid us in *this* quest. Will you lead the way?”

Fenn felt iron resolution hardening swiftly in his mind, a resolve born as much of bitter hatred of the Numi as of loyalty to his own kind.

He said between his teeth, “I will lead you. And if the Citadel has power in it—it will be used to destroy the Numi or to drive them back into their darkness.”

He added eagerly, “And it may be that there at the Citadel, at the place New York that I remember so strangely, I shall remember *all* my past!”

Malech was on his feet, his face flaring with excitement. “I’ll begin preparations at once! We’ll need to have horses ready and slip out of the city tomorrow ‘night!’”

He swung aside the curtain to leave. As he did so, with startling suddenness, a man stumbled in from outside. He came as though the howling wind had brought him—a quite human man, with the marks of the lash on his back.

“Temple soldiers are searching the quarters!” he cried and then he caught sight of Fenn. His eyes widened and his mouth became an open oblong in his seamy face. He started to speak.

Malech stepped between them, reaching one hand to the small man's shoulder, turning him around as he demanded, "Which way are they coming?"

"From the tomb of the kings, ransacking every house. We're spreading the word."

The edge of Malech's free hand took him in a slicing blow under the ear. The little man folded quietly over his own middle and Malech shoved him behind a water cask in the lean-to.

Fenn crossed the room. He gripped Malech by the shoulders. "That man knew me," he said harshly. "Why would you not let him speak?"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Malech. "He saw a stranger and was surprised. He would have sold you to the Numi for a sack of corn."

Arika's face was white with fury and despair. "Rham-Sin was too cunning to be completely deceived by my trick! If we had had but one day more. . . ."

FENN'S hard new determination would not let him share their despair. He said, "We are going to find the Citadell! Since we can't wait until tomorrow night we go now."

"But horses—" Malech objected.

Fenn cut him short. "I saw paddocks of horses near the gates. We can steal mounts. Quickly!"

Arika gave him a startled glance as though revising her estimate of him. But she caught fire from his resolution. "He is right, Malech—we must risk it now!"

She brought forth the mourner's cloaks for them. While Malech was hastily improvising one for himself from a length of cotton smeared on the hearth, Arika rolled the map-scrolls and tied them in her girdle.

Fenn led the way out. The narrow valley was deserted but in the distance they saw furtive figures running from house to house with the warning. The parching wind enveloped them in clouds of dust and the

Sun burned red and evil in an ochre sky.

"Which gate?" snapped Fenn.

"This way," said Malech. "The Desert Gate."

The driven dust made everything obscure as they went swiftly, their heads down. Temple and cliffs were veiled by the blowing haze. Fenn could see no soldiers yet.

They skirted the edge of a market square, deserted except for a few folk sleeping huddled in the stalls. Beyond the market were the great stock pens and the quartering places of the caravans lying inside the Desert Gate.

Next to the wall of the caravan building was the fenced horse-paddock. There were at least fifty horses in it, shaggy creatures patiently standing with their heads away from the wind-driven dust. There were also a half dozen saddled horses, powerful sleek animals, tethered separately.

"There are our mounts, waiting for us," Fenn said.

"They're Numi horses!" Malech warned. "They don't like human riders and you'll have trouble. . . ."

"Don't worry—I'll manage," Fenn snapped. "But first I want a look at the gate."

From around the corner of the paddock fence he peered. He saw the road, hollowed deep by the wind, and the posts that marked the gateway and beyond them the way that led over the hills to the desert and freedom.

A dozen Numi soldiers guarded the gate and their big, sleek steeds were picketed within the gateway.

"We can't ride through them!" Malech said. "It's hopeless!"

Fenn's eyes had begun to gleam with an unholy light. He said to Arika, "Give me your dagger—and then you two mount and hold a horse ready for me."

Arika stared, then gave him the weapon. She and

Malech slipped back to the corner of the paddock where the saddled Numi horses were tethered.

Fenn sprang to the bars of the paddock gate. He took them down silently. Then he went through the shaggy horses to the rear of the paddock.

He suddenly drew the dagger point in a long shallow scratch down the quarter of the nearest horse. The animal recoiled with a whinnying scream of pain and terror.

Fenn scratched another horse. It too screamed. The shaggy herd began to mill frightenedly, scared by the outcries and the smell of blood.

Fenn suddenly cried out, a long shrill howl with an eerie wolf note in it, and leaped forward at the herd with his reddened dagger upraised. Instantly, the whole herd bolted out of the paddock.

There was only one way for them to go. They poured out with a great thundering of hoofs and an explosion of dust—fifty horses, stampeding in panic toward the Desert Gate.

The Numi had no chance against that onslaught. It came too suddenly even to give them time to run. The wild-eyed herd crashed over them, broke their picket-line, carried their own steeds out with them.

And close on the heels of that stampede, so close that they were almost a part of it, came Fenn and Malech and Arika.

Fenn had been fighting the Numi horse since the instant he had leapt on its back and only the fact that it too was panicky kept it from setting itself to throw him.

"Swords!" he yelled to Malech. *"Get swords!"*

Ahead of them in the gate sprawled the broken furry bodies of the Numi soldiers caught by the stampede. They would need the weapons that lay there but Fenn dared not check his own steed now.

Malech heard him and with catlike deftness pulled

up his steed long enough to reach down for two of the Numi blades.

"Soldiers come!" warned Arika's cry.

A half-dozen Numi were running out from the horse-paddock, after them. Fenn laughed, as he caught the sword Malech tossed him and gave his bolting steed its head.

"We have their horses—let them catch us!"

They went full gallop down the road. The forefront of the stampede had gone on to wear itself out among the villages.

The road climbed to a low pass through the hills. Beyond the pass lay desolation—of copper Sun and copper sky and under them the rusty barren earth.

"It is far to the Great Dark—and RhamSin will follow!" Arika warned. "He will follow to the world's end for the Citadell"

Chapter VI

The Quest of Yesterday

THEY had left the caravan track and struck out across the open desert. They had no guide but the gossip of the drovers that Malech had heard in the market place.

"Where or how far the place of the outlaw tribesmen may be I don't know," he told Fenn. "But it lies in this direction, away from the Sun." He pointed to his shadow stretching out before him.

Fenn asked, "How do you know these men will help us?"

"They have all suffered from the Numi. Every living human has in one way or another. And to find the Citadel—they'll help!"

Fenn looked at the barren earth and said, "We had better find them soon."

They went on, keeping their shadows always before them, pushing the horses as hard as they dared.

Fenn rode silently, withdrawn in his own thoughts. He had had it out with the Numi horse and won his battle and after that brief violence his mind had turned again to himself. He thought of the things that had been said between himself and Arika and Malech and the decision that he had made so swiftly and with such conviction.

His mood was not one of doubt or hesitation. It was only a hardening and clarifying of what was in his mind. In the city he had felt confused and driven, tortured by the blankness of his memory, raging against a world he could not understand. Here, where he was free of walls and houses, he could think again.

He still did not know who he was or where he came from or how. He had a feeling that when he reached New York he would remember. But even if he did not he remembered other things—the world that was before the dark star and the Numi, the pride and the courage of the men who had built the Citadel so that knowledge might not perish from the Earth.

It holds all the past of man, they said, and it will hold the future. The Citadel will stand forever, man's challenge to the coming night.

Men had built it and it should be given back to man. A deep anger rose in Fenn against Rhamsin, who had tried to steal knowledge that did not belong to him—human knowledge to use against humankind! Fenn's hatred of the Numi was a towering thing and it stood large over everything else—larger even than his passionate desire to know himself.

He looked. He looked ahead across the desert, and he thought, *Once this earth was green and men lived upon it and were free. It shall be so again!*

He smiled at Arika and urged his horse a little faster, impatient of every step that lay between him and his goal.

Here there was no temple gong to tell them day and night. The angry Sun burned forever in the sky. The fierce wind lashed them and the dust-clouds rolled in red and ochre across the land and there was no time. They hungered and they thirsted and now and again they stopped to rest the horses and to sleep.

They had slept twice when Fenn looked back and saw atop a distant rise a plume of dust that was not made by any wind.

He said, "RhamSin."

Malech nodded. "They will have spare horses, food and water. They will push hard and the Numi are stronger than men."

Fenn smiled, an ugly smile. He began to lead by devious ways, covering and confusing the track, going on bare rock or on loose earth where the wind would blow away the prints of the horses' hoofs. And for a time they lost the distant plume of dust.

But Malech said, "They know our direction. They will follow without a track. And remember, RhamSin is a Numi and a priest. He may be able to touch our minds with his enough to guide him."

Fenn's mouth hardened. He said nothing and they went on across the bitter land. Hunger became a gnawing pain and then a weakness and an agony but it was forgotten in the pangs of thirst. The splendid horses began to falter. Arika rode bowed and silent and the men were not much better.

At rare intervals Fenn would stop and dig, wherever there was a shadow of green life in some sunken spot or the hollow of a dead watercourse. Sometimes a few drops of muddy water welled up to keep them alive.

They stopped for the third time to rest. Fenn did not sleep. He sat looking over the desert with red-rimmed

eyes, thinking of the Citadel and feeling an iron determination not to die.

The plume of dust showed itself again on the horizon. He cursed it and rose to wake the others.

They started on again. The wind blew, never ceasing, and all at once Fenn's horse lifted his head and snorted, pulling against the rein. The others snuffed the wind and they too began to go aside from the straight line they followed. A kind of madness seemed to have come over them. Their dragging pace quickened to a shambling gallop.

A RAW scarp of rock lifted from the desert. The ground sloped downward to form a ragged basin at its foot. Fenn saw that a sullen river ran from a cleft in the scarp and spread into a great marsh before the thirsty desert drank it up. He set his heart on that vivid patch of green that seemed so far away and would not come closer.

Then he saw the men riding toward them—leathery sun-bitten men, well mounted and riding fast, carrying long spears that glinted red in the angry daylight.

There were half a dozen of them. They swept up and ringed the three fugitives round and made them stand, holding the plunging horses. They looked at Fenn and Arika and Malech and when they saw Malech their lips drew back as though they were wolves about to tear their prey.

One said, harshly, "*Numi!*"

"Half-blood—slave." Malech's voice was a croaking whisper. He turned to let them see the old scars of the lash across his back and Fenn tried to crowd between him and the hungry spears.

"They saved my life," he said. He too was almost mute with thirst. "They saved me from the temple." Then, angrily, "Let us drink!"

They studied Fenn a long time without answering.

Their hesitation alarmed him and he knew that Malech was the cause of it—Malech, who looked so much like the hated creature that had fathered him. The green marsh tortured Fenn with the promise of water. He looked at Arika's drawn face and the suffering horses and he became so furious that he lost all caution.

He reached out to the man who was holding his horse and caught him by his long hair and pulled him out of the saddle, shouting as loud as he could out of his swollen throat, "If we die, no one will ever find the Citadell I know where it is. Do you hear that? *I know!*"

Arika whispered, "The Numi priests are hunting us to get the secret. We ask protection." She managed the ghost of a laugh. "What are you afraid of? We are only three."

The cold suspicion did not leave the face of the outlaws but Fenn saw that they were uncertain now. The leader said, "No one knows that secret."

Fenn met his hard gaze fairly. "All right. Kill us. Let the Numi rule forever over slaves and outlaws. You haven't the courage to be free."

The leader looked again at Malech, saying, "You travel in bad company for an honest human. But I'll let Lannar decide this one. Give me your swords." When he had them he reined his horse around. "Come on."

They started on again toward the marsh. It spread for several miles along the base of the scarp, wide, lush, dotted with islands of higher ground on which there were trees and thick scrub. It was beautiful, green, soft and moist under the red haze of the desert.

They were allowed to stop beside a shallow pool, to drink and wallow in brackish water that tasted to Fenn like the wine of heaven. Then they were made to mount again.

"Keep your horses exactly in line," said the outlaw. "One slip and you'll never be found again."

He began to thread an invisible path through mud and quaking bog and green water. Here and there submerged bridges had been laid, narrow things of slippery planks that could be taken up, Fenn guessed, to make the marsh impassable.

At first he saw no sign of any dwelling places. Then as they got deeper and deeper into the marsh he saw there were huts of mud and wattle under the trees of the larger hammocks. Men and women watched the strangers pass and naked children splashed out through the mud to shout at them.

They came onto dry ground again, on a long narrow island close under the scarp. A man stood waiting for them. There were others behind him but Fenn saw only the one, a lean dark laughing man who looked all fire and acid and steel, controlled and shaped by a keen intelligence.

Fenn knew that this must be Lannar. He began to hope again. The man who had brought them in from the desert dismounted and began to speak. While he talked Lannar's gaze moved slowly over the three.

The man finished, pointing to Fenn, "*He* says he knows the secret of the Citadel."

Imperceptibly the muscles of Lannar's face tightened until the lines of it were hard as iron. He looked up at Fenn, a gaunt parched man sitting on a jaded horse and waiting now with a strange sort of patience.

"Is that true?" asked Lannar.

"It is true."

A muscle began to twitch in Lannar's cheek. "Dismount. I want to talk to you." His gesture included all three. He turned away toward a large hut, first giving a rapid order or two that Fenn could not hear.

FENN and the others got stiffly down and followed him. The men who had been with Lannar stared at them

with a mixture of hostility and wolfish eagerness as they went with the three into Lannar's house.

The shadowy interior was furnished with a haphazard richness. Bright silks, rugs and furs and bits of ornate furniture and dishes of crystal and gold—the loot of the caravans that went between the Numi cities, consorting oddly with the mud walls and floor of beaten earth.

Women came from somewhere in the back, bringing bread and dried meat, water and wine. Fenn and the others ate and drank voraciously. The portions seemed very small.

"You can have more later," Lannar said. "Too much now will make you sick." He leaned forward, his wiry body poised and unrelaxed in a gilded chair. "Now! What is this about the Citadel?"

Fenn told him, speaking without haste. Lannar listened. His eyes glowed with a still hot light. The men in the shadows listened too. Fenn could hear their breathing, tense and short. From time to time Arika spoke and Malech. At last the scroll was spread out at Lannar's feet, showing the island that was lost in the Great Dark.

"There is the Citadel," Fenn said and was silent.

Lannar voiced a harsh sigh. He rose and began to move back and forth, a catlike man suddenly drunk with hope but suspicious none the less, too old and hard to take anything for granted.

Abruptly he took Fenn's head by the hair and bent it back, studying his face with those hot shrewd eyes that saw everything.

"You tell the truth," said Lannar. "But perhaps it is a truth these Numi spawn have put into your head, so that you believe it."

"It is the truth," said Fenn steadily.

"Memories—*dreams!*" said Lannar, and let him go. "You cannot prove these things. There is no bone and flesh in them for a man to get his hands on."

Arika said, "I can open his mind again. Then you can hear him speaking of the past he knows."

He glanced at her half contemptuously. "I know the tricks of the Numi, the things they can do with a man's mind. I would hear words but they would not prove themselves."

Malech asked quietly, "What have we to gain by such a deception?"

"I don't know. I cannot see a gain now but there may be one that is hidden from me." He faced the half-blood, saying with a vicious softness, "I learned so long ago, with so much blood and pain, never to trust a Numi!"

"Numi," whispered Malech. "*Numi!*" He got up. He was a big man. He towered over Lannar. His eyes blazed with such a passion of fury that it seemed he would take the smaller man between his hands and tear him to bits. He laughed.

"Numi. That's funny, Lannar. You don't know the humor of it. All my life I have lived with that joke. The Numi spit upon me because I'm human and the humans want to kill me because I'm Numi."

He glanced at Arika with a flash of sheer hatred that startled Fenn. "My sister is more fortunate. She *looks* human." He turned again to Lannar, who had not moved or even raised his hands. Malech seemed to sense contempt in that very lack of fear. He laughed again, a short harsh ugly sound.

"If I stood over you, full-furred and bearded and wearing the trappings of a Numi, it would be different, Lannar. Oh, yes! But I am naked and shorn and therefore nothing." He sat down again abruptly, hunched sullenly over his knees. "Try your courage on RhamSin, Lannar. See if you can face *him* down!"

Lannar said, "RhamSin?" From the tone of his voice it was obvious that he held that name in great respect. Fenn rose.

"Yes," he said. "RhamSin. I have told you all the story,

and it's a true one. RhamSin will prove it to you. He has followed me from the city to get the secret back."

He paused to let that sink in. And Lannar said to himself, "He would not do that for any ordinary captive nor for any slave."

He began to pace again, more slowly. Fenn moved to stand before him. "Give us the things we need, Lannar, and we'll go on alone."

"No," said Lannar. He was silent for a time, looking up into Fenn's gaunt face, his gaze narrowed and withdrawn. Then he murmured, "He has the stamp of the deserts on him, the same as I." He laughed. "No, Fenn—we'll go together. After all I gamble my life against every caravan I plunder—and even the chance of finding the Citadel is worth the risk. There are others here who will think so too."

Arika leaped up. She looked at Lannar but it seemed she could not speak. Her eyes were very bright and Fenn saw that there were tears in them. She turned suddenly and put her arms around him.

"The gods are with you, Fenn," she whispered.

He found that he had caught her to him almost without knowing it. Over her shoulder he said fiercely to Lannar, "We will find it!"

From outside came the heavy splashing of a horse through mud and water and a man's voice crying, "Lannar! *Lannar!* The Numi come!"

Chapter VII

The Great Dark

THE harsh braying of horns spread the alarm across the swamp. Two or three more riders came in from the desert, the last of the patrols. The bridges were taken

up. From among the trees of the island Fenn watched the company of the Numi come down to the edge of the green water and stop. Lannar laughed with savage humor.

"They have done this for generations, trying to wipe us out. But they can't pass the swamp." He pointed among the hammocks. "See how our bowmen are placed? Even if, by treachery or miracle, the Numi were able to come in our arrows would kill them on the path. So they come and threaten us and offer bribes and go away again when their food runs out."

His brows drew down. "All in the black and silver of the temple, eh? It seems you were not lying, Fenn!"

He turned aside, talking with rapid urgency to his chieftains. Fenn remained, watching the Numi. They were too far away to distinguish details. But there was one commanding figure robed in black and riding a black horse, and Fenn shivered.

Arika was close beside him. Her face was worried.

A captain of the Numi began to speak, using a trumpet of bark that magnified his voice. In the name of RhamSin, he offered pardon, power, and reward for the return of a runaway slave who had murdered a priest.

There was no answer from the marsh. He repeated the offer three times and still there was no answer.

The distant figure that was RhamSin reached out and took the speaking tube.

The voice of RhamSin spoke, carrying clear across the silent marsh.

"Fenway! There is no escape from me. I brought forth your mind and it belongs to me. When the time comes I will call—and you will obey!"

That voice seared into Fenn's brain like fire. He had heard it before, commanding, torturing. He had heard it and obeyed.

RhamSin wheeled his horse and galloped away and his men turned to follow.

Fear rose up and caught Fenn by the throat. He tried to shout defiance after the Numi priest but the words would not come. The hot Sun burned him but he was cold and his face was damp with a clammy sweat.

"He lies, Fenn. He lies!" cried Arika but Fenn shook his head.

He muttered, "I am not sure that RhamSin lies."

He turned to Lannar and his eyes had a strange look. "How long will it take to be ready?"

"My men are already gathering horses and supplies." Lannar gave him a side-long glance that seemed to penetrate him like a sword-thrust but he did not mention RhamSin's words. He nodded toward the retreating Numi.

"They have drawn off so that we may feel free to go where we will. But they will watch and follow. However, we have a back door—a way up the scarp, hacked out long ago in case of need. The Numi will have to go many miles around to get up onto the plateau, so we'll have that much start of them."

He smiled, a nervous, vulpine baring of the teeth and Fenn knew that Lannar, too, was eager to be moving.

"I can't spare many men," he said. "But a light force moves faster and is easier to feed. But in the end we'll need help. The Numi are twice our number and better armed. So I have ordered messengers to go among the other outlaw tribes, asking them to follow."

He paused, and added, "This is all madness, Fenn. We can't live long in the Great Dark without warmth or sight of the Sun. But the Numi will be on their own ground. Even though RhamSin's generation may never have seen the homeland, it is the place that bred them as they are."

He shrugged. "Well, we shall see what madmen can do! And now you had better sleep while you can."

In Lannar's house Fenn slept—a nervous slumber

plagued with ugly dreams. He was glad when the time came to mount and go. Malech was of the party. No one had suggested otherwise. But he rode a little apart with a proud sullen look, speaking to no one, and Fenn saw that Lannar kept a close eye upon him.

They scrambled up the steep trail to the plateau, twenty men armed with sword and bow and axe, and from every island in the swamp the eyes of men and women watched in fear and hope and wonder.

At the crest of the scarp, Fenn looked back across the vast emptiness of the desert, a wind-torn desolation under a copper sky. He had survived it and now it seemed familiar to him. He felt almost a sadness at leaving it to go into the trackless dark that was forbidden to humankind.

He saw the dusty plume that marked the march of the Numi following the scarp, knew that they had already begun the chase.

Ahead, the plateau stretched to the short horizon. The rusty clouds seemed lower here, scudding close over the earth. Stiff grasses bent before the wind. They had climbed a long way up from the desert and it seemed to Fenn that the wind had an edge to it, a memory of cold.

They formed their ranks for the long trail, twenty men and forty horses, heading outward toward the Shadow and the Great Dark.

It was a strange and timeless journey. For some distance the way was known to Lannar. There was game on the plateau and good forage at certain times of the year and the men of the marshes made use of both. But they were soon beyond those limits, plodding across an endless dreary upland of tumbled hills. The shadows grew longer and the Sun sank lower and lower at their backs and the teeth of the whistling wind grew sharper.

The country was too rough to let them see far along

their backtrail. But they would spot from time to time the distant smoke of cooking fires and Fenn thought that they drew always closer.

The desert horses were small but tough and enduring and more used to short rations and hard work than the Numi beasts. Fenn loved the rough ill-tempered little brutes and that gave them this one advantage over the Numi.

"Wait though," said Lannar. "Wait until we are all on foot."

The wind boomed ever stronger and colder and there were bursting storms of rain and then, at one sleep period, Fenn roused to find the whole earth mantled with a chill whiteness. From that time on the men grew more morose and silent and he knew that they were afraid.

He was beginning to be afraid himself.

ARIKA clung close to him. She seemed very strong for her slight body, riding as long as the men and never complaining. When they slept, huddled together around the fires, it seemed natural that she should be near Fenn. They did not talk much—no one did. They rode and ate their meagre rations and slept and were too weary for anything else.

Malech kept always apart. He seemed to have taken a dislike even to his sister, who was tolerated if not welcomed by the humans. His beard had grown and his hair was longer. He was wrapped in fur and leather like the others and with his body covered it was impossible to tell him now from a true Numi. He did not seem to need the warmth of the fire and he slept alone with an air of contemptuous strength.

And as Malech grew more like a Numi the tribesmen's distrust and hatred of him deepened. But Malech's strength and unhuman endurance helped enormously in the tight places of the trail. That held their aversion to him in check.

One of the horses died. They flayed him and dried the meat.

"They will all die," said Lannar grimly. "They will give us hides and food for the rest of our journey." He was a desert man and did not like to watch the death of horses.

The Sun became a red ember on the horizon behind them. They went down into a valley filled with snow and darkness and when they reached the other side the Sun was gone beyond the higher hills. Arika whispered. "This is what men call the Shadow."

There was still light in the sky. The land began to slope gradually downward, flattening out. Here there were no trees, nor even the stunted scrub that had grown to the edge of the Shadow. The wind-swept rocks were covered with wrinkled lichens and the frozen earth was always white.

One by one the horses died. The frozen meat was hidden by the way so that there should be food for the return march—if there was to be one. The men suffered from the cold. They were used to the dry heat of the deserts. Three of them sickened and died and one was killed by a fall.

The Shadow deepened imperceptibly into night. The rolling rusty clouds of the dayside had become the greyer clouds of storm and fog. The men toiled through dimming mist and falling snow that turned at last to utter darkness.

Lannar turned a lined and haggard face to Fenn. "Madmen!" he muttered. And that was all.

They passed through the belt of storm. There came a time when the lower air was clear and a shifting wind began to tear away the clouds from the sky.

The pace of the men slowed, then halted altogether. They watched, caught in a stasis of awe and fear too deep for utterance. Fenn saw that there was a pallid eerie radiance somewhere behind the driving clouds.

Arika's hand crept into his and clung there. But Malech stood apart, his head lifted, his shining eyes fixed upon the sky.

A rift, a great ragged valley sown with stars. It widened, and the clouds were swept away, and the sky crashed down upon the waiting men, children of eternal day who had never seen the night.

They stared into the black depths of space, burning with a million points of icy fire. And the demoniac face of the Moon stared back at them, pocked with great shadows, immense and leering, with a look of death upon it.

Someone voiced a thin, wavering scream. A man turned and began to run along the backtrail, floundering, falling, clawing his way back toward the light he had left forever.

Panic took hold of the men. Some of them fell down and covered their heads. Some stood still, their hands plucking at sword and axe, all sense gone out of them. And Malech laughed. He leaped up on a hummock of ice, standing tall above them in the cold night so that his head seemed crowned with blazing stars, "What are you afraid of? You fools! It's the moon and stars. Your fathers knew them and they were not afraid!"

The scorn and the strength that were in him roused the anger of the men, giving their fear an outlet. They rushed toward him and Malech would have died there in the midst of his laughter if Fenn and Lannar together had not turned them back.

"It's true!" Fenn cried. "I have seen them. I have seen the night as it was before the Destruction. There is nothing to fear."

But he was as terrified as they.

Fenn and Lannar and the bearded Malech who had shed every trace of humanity, beat the men into line again and got them moving, fifteen of the twenty who had started, alone in the Great Dark. Tiny motes of

life, creeping painfully across the dead white desolation under the savage stars. The cold Moon watched them and something of its light of madness came into their eyes and did not go away.

Fifteen—twelve of these lived to see the riven ice of the ocean, a glittering chaos flung out across the world. Malech looked toward the east, where the Moon was rising.

Fenn heard him say, "From beyond the ocean, from the heartland of the Great Dark—that is where we came from, the New Men who conquered the earth!"

Following the tattered map they turned northward along the coast. They were scarecrows now, half starved, half frozen, forgetting that they had ever lived another life under a warm Sun—almost forgetting why they had left that life behind them.

Nine of them lived to see an island between two frozen rivers near the frozen sea and on that island the skeletal towers of a city buried in the ice.

Nine of them lived to see New York.

Chapter VIII

The Citadel

FENN stood alone with Arika on the high cliff above the river. The others waited at a distance and their waiting was a cruel thing. Their faces made him feel afraid.

Then he forgot them. He looked out across the white river, across white snow and reaches of gleaming ice to the island city lying silent under the stars and the black sky.

There was no light in that city now but the cold shining of the Moon. No voice spoke there but the voice

of the wind. Yet even in death the grandeur was not gone from it. The shattered towers stood up proudly from the ice that shrouded them, the massive bulk and size were not lessened. New York was not a city. It was a dream of titans and the destruction of half a world had not effaced it.

A feeling of pride and sorrow came over Fenn, mixed with a despair so deep that he could not bear it. Memories crowded in on him, fleeting pictures of another time, half seen but poignant with regret and longing.

He whispered, "Once it lived!" And the tears ran down his cheeks and froze in glittering drops.

Arika said, "Remember, Fenn. Remember those days when the city lived. Remember this place and the building of the Citadel."

Her face came before him, pale in its dark frame of fur. Her eyes were huge, filled with the frosty moonlight, compelling, inescapable.

"Here you can remember, Fenn-way. Here is your past. Look at the city. *Remember!*"

Her eyes probed deep into his brain and her voice spoke, ringing down dark hidden corridors. Fenn looked past her at the city. His face changed slowly. He was no longer Fenn. He was another man, seeing another world.

He had come to see the Citadel. Everyone came. It was the ninth wonder, the greatest work of mankind. It drew them with an ugly fascination. It was the symbol of death but a death that would not come in their time and so they could find in it excitement and a gratifying pride.

There were lights on the Palisades. There were crowds, children shouting in the summer night, vendors, music. Across the Hudson loomed the immense and blazing bulk of New York, thrusting giant shoulders against the sky.

He began to walk. And as he walked he thought he

saw also a phantom landscape, a place of ice and desolation, with the wreck of a city lifting broken girders through the snow.

He had come to see the Citadel. Floodlights, many people, many voices, guards in uniform, a man talking through a loudspeaker.

"Sunk a half mile deep in solid rock—area larger than the Empire State Building—lined and reinforced with steel—earthquake-proof, floodproof—heat and air supplied by sealed atomic generators with an efficiency period of five thousand years . . ."

There wasn't much to see on the surface. Only the great uplifted valve of the door, a core of rustproof alloy many feet thick that fitted into a seat of similar metal sunk into the rock.

The voice of the loudspeaker talked on, explaining that valve, the compressed-air mechanism that would outwear time, the system of levers that would open the door again after it was sealed—after the Destruction.

A system that needed no tool but the human hand and the intelligence to use it. An intelligence capable of operating that door would be on a level high enough to profit by the things that were behind it.

The crowd moved on toward the entrance to go down into the Citadel. He moved with them. The doorway was before him. But he could not reach it. There was a barrier between him and the door, something cold and hard and shining.

He thought he must have fainted then. It was all very strange. He heard the sound of axes and sometimes there were glimpses of things flowing like smoke across his vision. He was frightened. He thought he must be very ill.

Voices—shouting, laughing, sobbing, praying. The voices of crazy men. The axes and the chopping sounds had stopped.

Another voice, saying clearly, "Fenn-way, open the door!"

He could see it, then. It was closed. It had never been closed before. The round metal gleamed at the bottom of a ragged pit, hacked out of ice.

Ice? But it was summer!

He slid down into the pit. The levers were counter-sunk, sealed against freezing. But they were frozen. He put all his strength into it and one by one they moved, stiff, protesting. He heard the shrill hissing of compressed air . . .

The great valve swung slowly upward.

He saw light in the opening below it. Warm air touched his face. And then the world blanked out.

When his mind cleared again he found himself lying on a metal floor. Someone had taken off his furs. It was warm, blessedly warm—almost hot, after the gelid cold. Above him he could see a web of girders mighty enough to hold a mountain. There was light.

Arika bent over him. Her eyes shone with a feral joy. "You've done it, Fenn," she whispered. "We're in the Citadell"

His heart began to pound. He sat up, remembering that he had dreamed. Lannar was standing near him. He had been weeping, the hard man of the desert.

"I would have killed you," he said. "If you had failed I would have broken you in my hands."

HE reached out to Fenn and Fenn nodded. "I knew that." He took Lannar's hand and rose and the men crowded around him. They blazed now. They knew what they had done and it was a great thing. They were proud. But they looked at Fenn with an awe that was close to veneration.

Lannar said, "I have set guards at the door. The stair that leads down is narrow, and if the Numi come, they

must do it one at a time." He frowned uneasily. "Is there no other entrance?"

"None."

"I don't like a place with only one door," said Lannar.

Fenn laughed. "We have the Citadel. Let us not worry about doors!" He caught Arika to him. He was wild with elation. He looked at the long still corridors that rayed away from the central place where they stood. He thought of the many levels below this one, and of all the knowledge and the strength that waited there, to build the world again. Tears stung his own eyes, and there was no room in him now for fear.

He started to walk, and the others came with him. Like men in a dream they went through the silent halls of the Citadel that had waited twelve hundred years for their coming.

Twelve hundred years ago they had sealed this place, those men of the past who had known they were doomed. This was their gift—their last great offering to the future.

Fenn's mind wavered uncertainly between that time and this. Sometimes he was Fenn-way, going with a guided group through the myriad rooms. Sometimes he was Fenn, holding a half-Numi girl in the hollow of his arm, walking with the naked riders of the desert. Sometimes he understood fully all that he saw and again only native intelligence enabled him to guess at the nature and uses of the complex things about him.

But whether he was Fenn or Fenn-way the sense of awe did not leave him. It grew and deepened with every step he took. And with the awe came pride—not for himself but for the blood that was in him, and Lannar and every son of man. He felt the heavy obligation they owed to those long-dead builders of the Citadel. He felt the challenge that was inherent in their gift.

Knowledge is a two-edge sword, they seemed to say.

We gave ourselves deep wounds. How will you use knowledge, you men of the future? To build or to destroy?

They had done their work well, the builders of the Citadel. There were books, countless microfilm volumes stored in countless rooms. There were objects, from the first crude axe of stone to a tiny complex model of a cyclotron. There were a million working models of every conceivable type of machine. There were films.

Whole levels had been devoted to chemistry and physics, to engineering and agriculture, to medicine, to every science man had learned to help him live. The art and the music and the thought of a world were stored there too and the records of man's history and his hopes and dreams and follies. Only one thing had been left out.

There were no weapons.

Thinking of the Numi they searched for weapons, for strong implements of war to use against RhamSin and the conquerors they would have to fight after him. And there was nothing.

Frowning, groping for memory, Fenn said slowly, "I think—they said that in all the Citadel there would be no instrument of death."

Lannar's hand tightened on his bow. He laughed, a bitter sound. "That was noble. But they reckoned without the Numi!"

A shadow of dread began to grow in all their minds. Fenn saw how carefully the incredible multitudes of books and models and diagrams had been arranged so that one could grasp the simple things first and use them as steps to climb on. Some knowledge still lived in the world. If nothing had survived but man's own vigor and intelligence the treasures of the Citadel could still have been used, so magnificently had every step been planned.

They did not see more than a hundredth part of that colossal monument to the faith and courage of man.

Their own faith and courage had brought them half across a world to find it. They were tired and they had an enemy at their backs. Dazed, stricken with awe and wonder, they returned to the central hall.

The guards at the stairway had seen nothing.

"They will come," said Malech. He walked over to a globe of the world as tall as two men that occupied the center of the hall. Idly he set it spinning, watching the play of light and shadow on the countries and the seas. He had shed his wrappings and Fenn saw that the light down on his body had grown thicker. It was as though the intense cold had brought out the last of the latent Numi characteristics in Malech.

Fenn went to him. He asked a question he had asked before. "Malech—what are the Numi?"

Malech's large hand stopped the globe from spinning. His fingers rested on a land that had once been called Europe.

"Here," he said. "When the Earth's spinning slowed, all this side of it turned its face forever away from the Sun and was trapped in the Great Dark. The air here did not freeze, for there was still warmth from Earth's heart. But all else here froze and died.

"All except a very few men and women—a few strong enough to survive. These few survivors gathered together and found ways to live. They adapted themselves to the dark and cold, even growing furred against it and their minds sharpened by necessity."

Malech smiled and spun the globe again. "They were the New Men—the Numi. But they were men still and they remembered the Sun! And they came at last to take their place under it!"

Lannar had come soft-footed up behind them. "So they did," he said. "And where is *your* place, Malech? With the Numi or with us?"

Malech turned slowly. Fenn thought of another time they two had faced each other and now Malech towered

over the smaller man, arrogant—and strong. The journey had not told on him too much.

"I made my decision long ago," he said to Lannar.
"Tell me, Malech."

But the tall man laughed and did not answer. He stood there looking down at Lannar and the globe spun round and round behind him. The hand of the desert man dropped to his sword.

Fenn had gripped his own blade. And then there came the swift sharp twang of a bowstring, and a cry and a man pitched head first down the stairs.

He was a Numi, wearing the black and silver of RhamSin.

Chapter IX

The Courage of Fenn

ANOTHER soldier of the temple died on the stairway, and a third retreated with an arrow through his thigh. Then there was silence. Fenn sprang to the foot of the narrow well.

"Come down!" he shouted. He cursed the Numi and bade them come and die. Above in the outer darkness, the voice of RhamSin spoke.

"When it is time we'll come!" He laughed. "What will you do with the Citadel now that you have it?"

"Keep it for mankind!" cried Fenn defiantly, and again RhamSin laughed.

"Mankind," he said, "is a long way off."

He seemed to withdraw and Fenn heard the Numi making camp in a circle around the doorway.

Lannar plucked with hard fingers at his bowstring, making it thrum like the string of a harp. He looked angrily around the great hall, including by inference the whole Citadel.

"In all this place, not a weapon. Nothing!" He had counted on the strength of the Citadel. Fenn realized that they all had.

Lannar continued bleakly, "They can't get in, we can't get out. They have food and snow to make water. We have a little food. They're cold and we're warm and the toughest hide will hold out the longest. I only hope the tribesmen don't linger on the way."

"If," said Fenn, "they had faith enough to come at all."

He turned from the mocking stair, desperately searching his mind and the fragments of memory for something, anything, that could be used to help them. And he saw something huddled on the floor near the great globe of the world.

It was Arika.

She stirred in his arms as he lifted her and whispered, "Malech. I tried to stop him." There was a reddening welt on her temple where an iron fist had struck her.

Savagely angry Fenn looked around at the knot of men by the stair, at the huge empty hall.

Malech had disappeared.

A twang and hiss from somewhere up above and the man next to Lannar fell with an arrow through his body. Fenn thought that Lannar would have died then except that he was sheltered by the stair.

Malech's voice cried, "Clear the stair, you human dogs! Stand away!"

The men scattered then, wildly, taking cover where they could behind the pillars that upheld the girders of the roof, and as they went a second shaft took one tribesman through the leg. A cat-squall of sheer animal rage came from Lannar and Fenn dragged the still-dazed Arika close under the bulge of the globe.

He unslung his bow and set an arrow to the string and then he peered into the cold upper light of the hall, following the sound of Malech's voice.

Some distance from the narrow well of the stair, a steel ladder climbed the wall to a small blind gallery set high among the sockets of the girders. Fenn guessed that behind that gallery was the chamber of the valve mechanism. The gallery itself was little more than a platform but it was large enough for Malech.

He glimpsed the dark bulk of Malech's body, half hidden in the shadows of the niche. He raised his bow, then let it drop. He could not hope to hit him at that angle.

He called to Lannar, and Lannar and his men answered with a flight of arrows that rattled against the corners and the railing of the gallery.

Malech shouted, "Shoot away!"

He sounded as though he were enjoying himself. He had everything on his side, the light, the angle, the elevation. He covered the whole area around the stairway. He could keep it clear so that the next time the Numi could come down without too much interference.

He said as much, and Lannar cursed him for a traitor.

Malech answered, "I was born to be one. The only choice I had was to betray—my mother or my father." He laughed. "Arika decided for the mother's blood and cast her lot with you humans. She told me on the trail and I knew it was because she loves Fenn.

"So, since she had ruined our plans, I too made my choice on the trail. I knew which blood was strongest in *me*. I left a message, scrawled in charcoal on a strip of hide. RhamSin was sure to find it. Let the humans do the work, I told him. What matter? They are weak, and they will be weaker. I promised him the Citadel."

"What was your price?" asked Lannar bitterly. "What was the price of the human world?"

"To let it be forgotten that my blood is tainted! To be accepted for what I am—a Numil!"

Again his humming bow sent a shaft through the breast of a man who exposed himself to shoot.

FENN reached up and set the world-globe to whirling.

Arika caught his arm but he flung her hand aside. He went low and fast, belly down, keeping the globe between him and the gallery.

Malech called his name. "Will you die now, Fenn-way? *Fenn-way!* All that talk about time and the past and how the Citadel belonged to men. Listen to me, man without a memory! Do you know who found the Citadel? Not men, who had lost it! No. The Numi found it. Numi wisdom, Numi sciencel You were only the little tool in the hands of RhamSin."

He paused. Fenn had gained the far wall. He crouched behind a pillar, measuring the distance to the next. Malech said, "Don't bother, Fenn. Come here, where you want to be. I won't harm you."

Fenn did not move. Lannar shouted, "*Don't!*"

"Why not?" asked Malech. "It's his only chance. I will have killed him by the third pillar, if he works his way around."

Under the spinning globe Arika crouched and looked at Fenn with eyes that hurt him, full of fear and sorrow and none of it for herself.

Fenn stepped out from behind the pillar. He began to walk toward the gallery, across the wide still hall. He held his bow slack, the arrow nocked point down. Malech kept back in the angle and the shadows. He did not show himself.

He talked. "You told me once that you wanted to remember. Very well, you shall. Why do you stop, Fenn? Are you afraid to remember?"

Sweat glistened on Fenn's drawn face, on his naked breast. The muscles of his arms stood out like ropes.

"Or," asked Malech softly, "are you afraid to have the others know the truth? They're watching you, their great god Fenn-way, who led them to the Citadel. Don't you want them to know the truth about you, about humanity?"

Fenn started on again. He said, "I am not afraid." And it was a lie.

"Then I'll tell you the real story of the finding of the Citadel. You had lost it, you humans, and it would have been lost forever if it had not been for RhamSin. He took a rebel tribesman off the desert—another such as Lannar there, captured in a raid—and used his science on him, so carefully, so patiently, making the little mind of the captive a mirror of the past."

He laughed softly. "Are you faltering again? You don't like to hear this, do you? You're so proud of your achievement!"

The bowstring burned Fenn's fingers. His heart was pounding. Somewhere in him was a sickness that grew and grew. He went on toward the gallery. Malech's voice continued relentlessly, like the biting of salt in a raw wound.

"Arika knew. She watched. She watched RhamSin blot out the memories of this tribesman's own life, closing the channels of his own remembrances. That opened the way. RhamSin probed back then into memories that were *not* the tribesman's own—the memories of his fathers who had lived before him, ancestral memories, the inherited books of knowledge we do not know we possess but which are there, buried deep in the secret parts of the brain.

"Arika waited. And just before this raw sun-bitten rat of the deserts, under the power of RhamSin's mind, was about to speak with the voice of his long-dead ancestors, telling the secrets of the Citadel, she stole him away from the temple. And why? You wondered about that, Fenn. I will tell you. *So that the Numi powers that she and I possess might gain that secret for ourselves to sell to the highest bidder!*"

Fenn had stopped entirely. He stared up at Malech. Malech's bow was ready with an arrow aimed at his heart and his own arrow was on the string. But Fenn was

not concerned with killing in this moment. His mind was lost in a dark turmoil.

It seemed that he could remember dimly the agony of that probing into his mind. RhamSin's voice, forbidding, commanding, opening hidden doors . . .

Ancestral memory—the Fenn-way of the past had known that term. There was a word to go with it—hypnosis.

Malech cried, "Look at your hero, you humans! We were only slaves and half-breeds, my sister and I—but he was a tool in our hands! Now tell me who has the best right to the Citadel?"

A cold bleak anger took possession of Fenn. It drove away all thought and emotion, all concern with himself. He began to raise his bow.

"It's too late, Fenn," said Malech, laughing. His own shaft pointed unwaveringly at Fenn's heart, ready to fly. "Too late—your masters are already here!"

IT was true. From the corner of his eye Fenn saw the Numi soldiers coming one by one, swiftly down the narrow stair. Lannar and what men he had left had fallen back. Their arrows killed a few but they could not stop the Numi rush. Their only hope had been to hold the stair and Malech had prevented that.

Malech!

Fenn's eyes glittered with a hard malevolence. He dropped to one knee to let fly his arrow, knowing that Malech would instantly shoot.

He expected instant death. But in that second a black shaft suddenly stood out from Malech's breast. The bow of the half-breed fell from his hands unused. He stood for a moment with the long arrow in 'him, staring over Fenn's head with a look of shocked incredulity.

Fenn heard the voice of RhamSin speak to Malech. "The man's mind can still be useful to me. And *your* usefulness is done."

MALECH went down on his knees. And Fenn laughed.

Two long strides took him to the ladder. He went up it with a bound and crouched behind the railing. Malech looked at him, still with that hurt unbelief.

He was quite dead. Fenn began to shoot into the ranks of the Numi around the stair.

He shouted, "Lannar! Up here!"

They made a bolt for it, Lannar and his men and Arika. From his vantage point Fenn gave them what cover he could. Lannar, Arika, and three men made it. Lannar and two others were wounded.

They were crowded on the gallery. Fenn shoved the body of Malech down the ladder and there was room enough for them to crouch together behind the railing.

"What use?" asked Lannar grimly. "We have shot away our arrows."

"Because," Fenn said with a queer desperate hope in his voice, "there may still be a weapon herel One that I can't quite remember."

He was looking down into the hall at the Numi who were gathering there, at the globe of cold light that hung above them.

Cold light? What was it that he could not remember? He looked at the globe and the web of girders close above his head and his brows knit in a cruel effort.

The last of the Numi came down the stairs. RhamSin said, "Will you come down peaceably or must we come up after you?"

"Come if you will," snarled Lannar. "We still have our swords."

Fenn turned to Arika. His fingers bit into her flesh. He whispered, "Help me to remember! The Citadel—the guide that took us through—something he said . . ."

RhamSin's voice rang in her ears like the voice of doom. "I told you once that I would call you and you would come. I call you now. And I warn you—your use—

fulness will not save your life if you anger me too far."

Arika said, "Don't listen, Fenn! Remember!"

Her eyes burned deep into his. The voice of RhamSin called and Fenn felt a terrible compulsion to obey. But there was an iron fury in him and he would not yield.

The Citadel, the crowd, the guide, talking—*Cold light. Radioactive dust suspended in an inert liquid. Deadly compound, harnessed for the peaceful use of man. Bulbs of plastic that screened out harmful rays—absolutely safe—will give light almost forever.*—

"Stay here," said Fenn to the others very softly. "Keep down. Don't move or lean out to look!"

He leaped up and caught the girder overhead, swinging himself upon it. Balancing precariously on that narrow bridge of steel he began to run.

RhamSin shouted.

Arrows began to fly around Fenn—black arrows with barbed tips. But he was a hard mark to hit, running high among the interlacing shadows of the girders. And he had not far to go.

Below him he could see the Numi, their angry faces looking up, tall proud lords of conquest in a citadel of peace. He flung himself down across the girder. Here were bolted the chains that held the globe of radioactive light.

He took his sword, a good keen blade of tempered Numi steel. With every ounce of strength and madness that was in him he struck downward at a single chain.

It parted, helped by the weight of the massive bracket it upheld. And Fenn found it in his heart to laugh a little bitterly. Even in a citadel of peace the ingenious mind of man could find a means of killing!

The globe of light fell with the snapping of the chain. Out of the round bracket that swung now by one edge it fell—down, down, to smash upon the metal floor below.

Fenn hugged the girder. There was a crash and a burst of vicious light, a hissing, snarling explosion, and then . . .

He thought that even Numi did not deserve to die that way, in such corrosive agony of the body, in such shocked terror of the mind.

He waited until the last one had stopped screaming. He did not look again at the seared scored twisted bodies. He worked his way back along the girder and this time he did not run. He was sick and shaken and full of a sense of guilt.

ARIKA and Lannar helped him back down onto the gallery. They too looked sick and pale from what they had seen on the floor below. "They are all dead," whispered Arika. "But how—"

Fenn said heavily, "The men of the far past built this Citadel to be a light in the darkness, a light of hope and peace and knowledge. And now war and death have come into it. And my hands are red."

"You were forced to do it, Fenn!"

He knew that she was right. And men would be forced to war against the Numi, and the knowledge of the Citadel would free them from that alien yoke. But after that . . .

He spoke and his whisper was not for those beside him but for men dead twelve hundred years, the men who had bequeathed them this heritage of the ages. "After that," he whispered, "we will learn to build and not destroy. I will redeem my guilt, men of the past."

He would not be alone. There was Arika—and Lannar, a desert man like himself.

His own memories, of his life before RhamSin, might never return. But that did not seem to matter now. He could start a new life when before them lay a whole new world.

ALL THE COLORS OF THE RAINBOW

It had rained in the valley, steadily and hard, for thirty-six hours. The ground was saturated. Every fold in the rough flanks of the hills spouted a muddy torrent and the torrents flowed in sheets over the flat country below and poured through raw self-gouged channels into the river. And the river, roused from its normal meek placidity, roared and rolled like a new Mississippi, tearing away its banks, spreading wide and yellow across the fields, into the orchards and over the roads, into the streets of Grand Falls where the people had left their houses and fled to the safety of higher land. Uprooted trees and broken timbers knocked at the walls of the old brick buildings on the main street. In the lobby of the Grand Falls Hotel the brass spittoons floated ever higher, clanging mournfully when they struck their sides together.

High on the ridges that enclosed the valley to the northeast and the southwest, hidden by a careful hand, two small mechanisms hummed quietly, ceaselessly. They were called miniseeders and they were not part of Earth's native technology. Their charges would run out in a matter of days, but in the meantime they were extremely efficient, hurling a steady stream of charged particles into the sky to seed the clouds moving over the ridges.

In the valley, it continued to rain. . . .

IT WAS HIS FIRST BIG JOB ON his own responsibility, with no superior closer than Galactic Center, which

was a long way off. He was not at all sure he was going to be able to do it.

He said so to Ruvi, slowing down the cumbersome ground car so she could see what he meant.

"Look at it. How can this mess ever be made into a civilized continent?"

She turned her head in the quick way she had and said, "Scared, Flin?"

"I guess I am."

He was ashamed to say it, particularly since it was not really the difficulty and importance of the job that daunted him but the planet itself.

He had studied weather-control engineering on his home-world at Mintaka, which was one of the science's earliest triumphs, and he had done research and field work on five other worlds, at least two of which were in fairly early stages of control. But he had never been anywhere before that was so totally untouched by galactic civilization.

Peripheral Survey had made contact with these fringe systems only in the last couple of decades and that was far too short a time to make much of an impress on them. Even in the big urban centers an alien like himself could hardly walk down the street yet without attracting an unwelcome amount of attention, not all of it polite. Coming from the Federation worlds with their cosmopolitan populations, Flin found this hard to take.

But Galactic Center was enthusiastic about these fringe worlds because quite a few of them had an amazingly high, if highly uneven, degree of civilization which they had developed literally in their several vacuums. Center was in a rush to send them teachers and technicians and that was why he, far ahead of his due time, had been pitchforked into the position of leading a four-man planning-and-instruction team of weather-control experts.

It was a splendid opportunity with splendid possi-

bilities for the future, and the raise in pay had enabled him to take on Ruvi as a permanent mate much sooner than he had hoped. But he hadn't bargained for the loneliness, the constant uncertainty in relationships, the lack of all the vast solid background he was used to on the Federation worlds.

Ruvi said, "All right then, I'll admit I'm scared too. And hot. Let's stop this clumsy thing and get a breath of air. Right over there looks like a good place."

He eased the car off the narrow road, onto a point of land with a few big stones around the edge to mark the drop-off. Ruvi got out and went to stand by them, looking out over the valley. The breeze pressed her thin yellow tunic against her body and ruffled the soft short silvery mass of curls around her head. Her skin glistened even under this alien sun with the dark lovely green of youth and health. Flin's heart still turned over in him every time he looked at her. He did not suppose this would last forever but as long as it did it was a beautiful sort of pain.

He made sure he had done the required things to keep the car from bolting away over the cliff and then joined her. The breeze was hot and moisture-laden, full of strange smells. The valley wound away in a series of curves with a glint of water at the bottom. On either side of it the rough ridges rolled and humped, blue in the distance where the heat haze covered them, rank green closer at hand with the shaggy woods that grew wild on them, the trees pushing and crowding for space, choked with undergrowth and strangling vines, absolutely neglected.

"I suppose," said Ruvi, "they're full of wild animals, too."

"Nothing very dangerous, I believe."

Ruvi shivered slightly. "Whenever I get just a little way out of the cities I begin to feel that I'm on a truly savage world. And everything's wrong. The trees, the

flowers, even the grass-blades are the wrong shape, and the colors are all wrong, and the sky isn't at all the way it ought to be."

She laughed. "Anyone would know this was my first trip away from home."

Two huge birds came into sight over one of the ridges. They hung in the sky, wheeling in slow circles on still gray-brown wings. Instinctively Flin put his arm around Ruvi, uncertain whether the birds would attack. They did not, drifting on down over the valley where the air currents took them. There was no sign of human habitation and except for the narrow road they might have been in a complete wilderness.

"It is rather beautiful, though," Ruvi said, "in its own way."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the only standard you really should use to judge things, isn't it? Their own."

Flin said sourly, "That's easier to do when you know what 'their own' standard is. They seem to have thousands of them here. That's why Sherbondy keeps telling us to get out and see the country, to learn what his people are really like." Sherbondy was their contact with the local Government, a big hearty man with an enormous enthusiasm for all the things that were going to be done. "The only trouble with that is that it would take a lifetime to—"

There was a noise like an avalanche behind them. Flin jumped and turned around, but it was only a huge red vehicle roaring by, spouting smoke from a pipe behind the driver's compartment. The driver noticed them just before the truck passed out of sight and Flin thought the man was going to drive it right into the woods while he was staring.

He sighed. "Let's go."

They got back into the car and Flin managed to get it back onto the road and headed in the direction he

wanted to go without mishap—always, he felt, a minor triumph. The primitive vehicles that were subject to everybody's individual whim of operation on these equally primitive road systems still frightened the wits out of him after nearly six months.

It was just as hot as ever. As a gesture of courtesy, and to avoid attracting any more attention than was necessary, he had adopted the local variety of shirt and pants. Most of the men in the various instruction groups did this soon after landing. It didn't seem to matter what the women of the groups wore as long as certain puritanical tabus were observed, but the men found it less embarrassing to conform. Flin thought the garments abominably uncomfortable and envied Ruvi her relatively cool tunic.

She seemed wilted and subdued, leaning back in the corner of the wide overstuffed seat, her eyes half closed, the graceful tilted contours of her face accentuated by the gleaming of sweat on the delicate ridges.

"I think of home," she said, "and then I think of the money."

"It's something to think of."

The woods rolled by, clotted underneath with deep shadow, full of rustlings and rank dusty smells. Sometimes they passed a kind of food-raising station that had not been seen in the Federation for centuries, where part of the land was in several kinds of crops and part of it in pasture and the whole thing was operated by one man and his family. Sometimes they passed through little towns or villages with very strange names, where the people stared at them and the children pointed and yelled, *Green niggers, lookit the green niggers!*

Flin studied the houses. They were different from each other, and quite different from the ones he had grown used to in the cities, but they were all built on the same hut-based principle. He tried to imagine what life would be like in one of these towns, in one of these

wooden or stone or brick houses with the queer decorations and the pointed roofs. Probably Sherbondy was right. Probably all the Federation people should try to get closer to the everyday life of the planet, familiarize themselves with what the people thought and felt, how they coped with their environment. The next few decades would see changes so radical and complete that this present life would soon begin to be forgotten. . . .

The change had already begun. This planet—the native name for it was Earth, a rather pretty one, Flin thought—had been making its first wobbling steps into space on its own when the Survey ships arrived. With Federation technicians and techniques that process had been enormously accelerated. The first manned ships built on Earth and operated by Federation-trained but native-born personnel had been licensed for limited service within the last seven or eight years. Planning surveys were under way, guided by groups like his own, not only in weather-control but in global unification, production, education, and above all pacification—the countless things that would have to be accomplished to make Earth a suitable member of the Federation.

But these things had not yet made themselves felt on the population as a whole. Most of Earth was going along just as it always had, and Flin knew from experience that many of the natives even on the administrative level were extremely touchy and proud, not inclined to accept any sudden alterations in their thinking; probably the more provincial masses were even more so. It would be necessary to win them over, to make them feel that they were equals in the task and not merely the recipients of gifts from an older and wider culture.

It would be a long, interesting business. An energetic young man who stuck with it could make a career out of it, a satisfying and very profitable one.

The only trouble was—

Ruvi's thoughts seemed to have paralleled his own, because she said, "Are we going to stay on here?"

"We have to stay until we've finished our immediate job."

"But after that? I know some of the men have already decided to."

"The offers these people make are very good," Flin said slowly. "They'll need technicians and educators for a long time yet, and Center is in favor of it because it'll speed up integration." He reached out and patted her. "We could be rich and famous."

She smiled, very fleetingly. "All right," she said in a quiet voice, "I'll start making myself like it."

She began to stare grimly at the queerly shaped and colored trees, the peculiar houses that looked so dreadfully functional, the crowds of chattering natives in the towns. Finally she shook her head and gave up, lying back with her eyes closed.

"I'll try it again sometime when it isn't so hot."

"Weather-control will fix that."

"But not for years."

They drove in silence. Flin felt vaguely ill at ease and unhappy, but he kept thinking of Sherbondy's offer and the things it might lead to for them, and he did not say anything. He did not want to commit himself with Ruvi yet, one way or the other.

About mid-afternoon there was a violent downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning. As a weather expert Flin knew perfectly well what caused the disturbance, but the knowledge did nothing to decrease the effect of it on himself. Ruvi simply hid her head in the corner and shook. Flin kept on driving. If you let the natives know that you were afraid of their weather, they would never believe that you would be able to control it. He made it a practice in Washington to walk out in storms that had even the natives cowering. He could barely see the road well enough to stay

on it and he was nervous about floods, but he trundled resolutely ahead.

Eventually he ran out of the storm, or it passed over. The sun came out again, boiling and steaming the saturated air. It was difficult to breathe. Great black clouds still bulked in the sky, presaging more trouble later. In the strange light the countryside took on a look completely alien and somehow ominous, the little scattered houses crouching among their weird trees like suspicious gnomes with hostile eyes, the empty fields and dripping woods suggestive of infinite loneliness.

"I'm tired and hungry," Ruvi said. "Let's stop."

"The next town that has accommodations." Flin was tired himself. He found driving a strain and yearned for the fleet little air-cars that darted so easily and safely through the peaceful skies of the Federation worlds. They would not be practical here until global weather-control was an actuality.

The next town was a long way off. The road lifted and wound through low rough mountains and over brawling stream beds. The villages they passed through were very tiny, sometimes with only two or three dwellings.

The shadows grew heavy in the valleys. Ruvi began to fret a bit. Flin knew that it was only because the shadows and the wild country made her nervous, but it irritated him. He was having trouble enough of his own. An animal of some sort scuttered across the road and he nearly went into the ditch avoiding it. The light was bad. He was worried about the fuel gauge, which was low. And the road seemed to go on forever through a steadily darkening tunnel of trees.

They passed a tiny wooden temple next to one of the absolutely barbaric native burying grounds that always horrified them, the ritual stones gleaming pallid among uncut grass and briar roses. It all flashed by so quickly that Flin realized he had pushed the speed of the big

car beyond the limit of safety. So he was already slowing down when he swung around a curve and came right onto a farm vehicle moving very slowly in the road. He managed to go around it without hitting anything but it gave him a sharp fright. The man driving the thing shouted after them. Flin could not hear exactly what he said but there was no doubt he was angry. After that Flin went carefully.

There began to be painted signs along the edge of the road.

Ruvi read them off. "Restaurant. Hotel. Garage. There is a town ahead. Grand Falls, I think."

The road passed suddenly over a crest and there was a wide irregular valley below them, full of light from the low sun which shone through a gap in the west. Perhaps Flin was in an exceptionally receptive mood but it struck him as one of the loveliest places he had seen. There was a river flashing with curious dull glints from the setting sun, rolling smoothly over a pretty little falls that burst into bright foam at the bottom. The white houses of the town were bowered in trees and blooming vines, slumbrous and peaceful in the hot evening, with one tall white spire standing over them.

"Look, I see the hotel," said Ruvi, pointing. "Oh glorious, how I will love a cool bath before dinner!"

She ran her fingers through her silvery curls and sat up straight beside him, smiling as he drove down the hill into Grand Falls.

It had rained here recently. The pavements still glistened and the air steamed with it. There was a fragrance of nameless flowers, very sweet and heavy. On the shadowy porches of the houses along the way there was a sound of voices and hidden laughter, and the small scurrying shapes of children moved under the dripping trees.

The road became the main street splashed with the crude colors of neon signs, the lighted windows showing

yellow in the dusk. On both sides now there were curious low buildings, apparently quite old, built tight together so that each row looked like one building except its front was broken up into narrow vertical sections with different cornices and different patterns of wood or brickwork around the windows. They were mostly of red brick, which seemed to be a common building material, and not above two stories high.

The shops and offices were closed. The eating and drinking places were open and busy, and somewhere inside there was music playing, a strong simple beat with a high-pitched male voice wailing over it. The smell of flowers was drowned out by the pungence of hot wet brick and hotter, wetter asphalt. A few couples walked toward the gaudily lighted entrance of a theatre farther along the street, the women wearing bright-colored dresses, their long hair done in elaborate coiffures, their thick sturdy legs and arms bare. Knots of young men lounged against the walls near the drinking places. They were smoking the universal cigarettes and talking, looking after the women.

Seen close up now the town was less beautiful than it had looked from the crest. The white paint was dirty and peeling, the old buildings poorly kept up.

"Well," Flin muttered, "Sherbondy said to get off the beaten track and see the real native life undiluted."

"The hotel looks charming," Ruvi said determinedly. "I am not going to quarrel with anything."

Even in the dusk they were beginning to draw attention. First the little knots of idlers were attracted by the long gleaming car with the Government plates, and then by Flin and Ruvi themselves. There were other cars in the street, both moving and parked along the curb, but the one Flin was driving seemed to be newer and fancier than most. He could see people pointing and looking at them. He swore silently and wondered if they could have dinner sent up to their room.

The hotel was on the corner of the main intersection. It was three stories high, built of the red brick, with a crudely ornate cornice and long narrow windows. A balcony ran around its two exposed sides at the second floor level, extending over the street and supported on slender metal pillars which had once been painted white. A second tier of pillars on the balcony itself supported a roof. There were five or six oldish men sitting in chairs on the balcony, and several more below on the covered portion of the street.

Flin looked at it doubtfully. "I wonder if it *has* a bath."

Her own enthusiasm somewhat cooled, Ruvi said, "It'll do for one night. It might be a long way to the next one and I don't suppose it would be any better."

Flin grunted and pulled the car in to the curb and stopped.

There was a scraping of chair legs as the men sat forward or rose to come closer. Flin got out and walked around the car. He smiled at the men but they only stared, blowing strong smoke and squinting through it at him and the car and the license plates and then at Ruvi.

Flin turned and opened the door for her. He noticed over the low roof of the car that men were beginning to come from across the street, and already a number of boys had sprung from nowhere and were clustering like insects, their eyes bright and excited.

He helped Ruvi out, slim in her yellow tunic, her silver curls picking up the light from the tall front door of the hotel.

One of the men said in a high shrill voice. "Green as grass, by God!" There was laughter and somebody whistled.

Flin's face tightened but he did not say anything nor look at the men. He took Ruvi's arm and they went into the hotel.

They walked on a faded carpet, between islands of heavy furniture in worn leather and dusty plush. Fans turned slowly against the ceiling, barely disturbing either the hot air or the moths that had come in to flutter around the lights. There was a smell that Flin could not fully identify. Dust, the stale stink of dead tobacco, and something else—age, perhaps, and decay. Behind the large wooden desk a gray-haired man had risen from a chair and stood with his hands spread out on the desk top, watching them come.

The men from the street followed, crowding quickly through the doors. One particular man seemed to lead them, a red-faced fellow wearing an amulet on a gold chain across his broad paunch.

Flin and Ruvi stood in front of the desk. Once more Flin smiled. He said, "Good evening."

The gray-haired man glanced past them at the men who had come in, bringing with them a many-faceted odor of sweat to add to what was already inside. They had stopped talking, as though they were waiting to hear what the gray-haired man would say. The fans in the ceiling creaked gently as they turned.

The gray-haired man cleared his throat. He, too, smiled, but there was no friendliness in it.

"If you're wanting a room," he said, with unnecessary loudness as though he were speaking not to Flin but to the others in the lobby, "I'm sorry, but we're filled up."

"Filled up?" Flin repeated.

"Filled up." The gray-haired man took hold of a large book which lay open in front of him and closed it in a kind of ceremonial gesture. "You understand now. I'm not refusing you accommodations. I just don't have any available."

He glanced again at the men by the door and there was a little undertone of laughter.

"But—" said Ruvi, on a note of protest.

Flin pressed her arm and she stopped. His own face

was suddenly hot. He knew the man was lying, and that his lie had been expected and was approved by the others, and that he and Ruvi were the only two people there who did not understand why. He also knew that it would do them no good to get into an argument. So he spoke, as pleasantly as he could.

"I see. Perhaps then you could tell us of another place in town—"

"Don't know of any," said the gray-haired man, shaking his head. "Don't know of a single place."

"Thank you," said Flin and turned around and walked back across the lobby, still holding Ruvi's arm.

The crowd had grown. Half the people in Grand Falls, Flin thought, must be gathered now on that one corner. The original group of men, reinforced to twice its size, blocked the doorway. They parted to let Flin and Ruvi through but they did it with a certain veiled insolence, staring hard at Ruvi who bent her head and did not look at them.

Flin walked slowly, refusing to notice them or be hurried. But their nearness, the heat and smell of them, the sense of something menacing about them that he did not understand, twisted his nerves to a painful tightness.

He passed through the door, almost brushing against a young girl who squealed and jumped back out of his way with a great show of being afraid of him. There was a bunch of young people with her, both boys and girls, and they began a great cackling and shoving. The crowd had become more vocal as it grew. There were a lot of women in it now. Flin waited politely for them to separate, moving a step at a time toward the car, and the voices flew back and forth over his head, at him, around him.

—ain't even human!

Hey, greenie, can't you afford to feed your women where you come from? Lookit how skinny—

Are they kidding with that crazy hair?

—just like I seen on the teevee, and I says to Jack then, Jack Spivey I says, if you ever see anything like them coming down the road—

Hey, greenie, is it true your women lay eggs?

Laughter. Derision. And something deeper. Something evil. Something he did not understand.

He reached the car and got Ruvi into it. As he bent close to her he whispered in her ear, in their own language, "Just take it easy. We're getting out."

Mama, how come them funny niggers got a bigger car'n we got?

Because the Government's payin' them big money to come and kindly teach us what we didn't know before.

"Please hurry," whispered Ruvi.

He started around the car to get in and found his way blocked by the red-faced man with the gold chain, and beyond him a solid mass in the street in front of the car. He sensed that they were not going to let him through, so he stopped as though he had intended to do so and spoke to the man with the chain.

"I beg your pardon—could you tell me how far it is to the next city?"

The girls were giggling loudly over Ruvi's tunic and the way she looked generally. They were all the fat-hipped, heavy-breasted local type, with thick legs and thick faces. Flin thought they had very little to criticize. Just beyond the man with the gold chain were four or five younger men standing together. They had very obviously come out of one of the taverns. They were lean rangy young men with their hair slicked down and their hips thrust forward in a curiously insolent slouch. They had eyes, Flin thought, like animals. They had been by the door when he came out. They were still looking at Ruvi.

"The next city?" said the man with the gold chain.

He accented the word *city* as Flin had. He had a deep, ringing voice, apparently well used to addressing crowds. "A hundred and twenty-four miles."

A long way at night through strange country. A great anger boiled up in Flin but he kept it carefully inside.

"Thank you. I wonder where we might get something to eat before we start?"

"Well now, it's pretty late," the man said. "Our restaurants have just about now stopped serving. Am I right, Mr. Nellis?"

"You are, Judge Shaw," said a man in the crowd.

This too was a lie, but Flin accepted it. He nodded and said, "I must have fuel. Where—"

"Garage is closed," Shaw said. "If you got enough to get you down the road apiece there's a pump at Patch's roadhouse. He's open late enough."

"Thank you," said Flin. "We will go now."

He started again, but Shaw did not move out of Flin's way. Instead he put up his hand and said, "Now just a minute there, before you go. We've been reading about you people in the papers and seeing you on the teevee but we don't get much chance to talk to celebrities here. There's some questions we'd like to ask."

The rangy young men with the animal eyes began to sidle past Shaw and behind Flin toward the car, leaving a heavy breath of liquor where they moved.

"A damn lot of questions," somebody shouted from the back, "like why the hell don't you stay home?"

"Now, now," said Shaw, waving his hand, "let's keep this friendly. Reverend, did you have something to say?"

"I certainly do," said a fat man in a soiled dark suit, shouldering his way through the crowd to stand peering at Flin. "I bet I've preached a sermon on this subject three Sundays out of five and it's the most important question facing this world today. If we don't face it, if we don't answer this question in a way that's accept-

able to the Almighty, we might just as well throw away all these centuries of doing battle with Satan and admit we're licked."

"Amen," cried a woman's voice. "Amen to that, Reverend Tibbs!"

Reverend Tibbs thrust his face close to Flin's and said, "Do you consider yourselves human?"

Flin knew that he was on dangerous ground here. This was a religious man and religion was strictly a local affair, not to be discussed or meddled with in any way.

So he said cautiously, "On our own worlds we consider ourselves so. However, I am not prepared to argue it from your viewpoint, sir."

He moved toward the car, but the crowd only pulled in and held him tighter.

"Well now," said the Reverend Tibbs, "what I want to know is how you *can* call yourselves human when it says right in Scriptures that God created this good Earth here under my feet and then created man—*human* man—right out of that self-same earth. Now if you—"

"Oh, hell, save that stuff for the pulpit," said another man, pushing his way in front of Tibbs. This one was sunburned and leathery, with a lantern jaw and keen hard eyes. "I ain't worried about their souls and I don't care if they're all pups to the Beast of the Apocalypse." Now he spoke directly to Flin. "I been seeing faces on my teevee for years. Green faces like yours. Red ones, blue ones, purple ones, yellow ones—all the colors of the rainbow, and what I want to know is, ain't you got any white folks out there?"

"Yeah!" said the crowd and nodded its collective heads.

The man they called Judge Shaw nodded too and said, "I reckon you put the question for all of us, Sam."

"What I mean is," said the lantern-jawed Sam, "this here is a white town. In most other places nowadays,

I understand, you'll find blacks and whites all run together like they were out of the same still, but we got kind of a different situation here, and we ain't the only ones, either. There's little pockets of us here and there, kind of holding out, you might say. And we ain't broken any laws. We didn't refuse to integrate, see. It was just that for one reason or another what colored folks there was around—"

Here the crowd snickered knowingly.

"—decided they could do better somewheres else and went there. So we didn't need to integrate. We don't have any color problem. We ain't had any for twenty years. And what's more, we don't want any."

A shout from the crowd.

Shaw said in his big booming voice, "The point we'd like to make clear to you, so you can pass it on to whoever's interested, is that some of us like to run our lives and our towns to suit ourselves. Now, this old Earth is a pretty good place just as she stands, and we never felt any need for outsiders to come and tell us what we ought to do. So we ain't any too friendly to begin with, you see? But we're not unreasonable, we're willing to listen to things so as to form our own judgments on them. Only you people had better understand right now that no matter what goes on in the big cities and other places like that, *we* aren't going to be told anything by a bunch of colored folks and it doesn't matter one damn bit what color they are. If—"

Ruvi gave a sudden cry.

Flin spun around. The young men who smelled of liquor were beside the car, all crowded together and leaning in over the door. They were laughing now and one of them said, "Aw now, what's the matter? I was just—"

"Flin, *please!*"

He could see her over their bent backs and bobbing

heads, as far away from them as she could get on the seat. Other faces peered in from the opposite side, grinning, hemming her in.

Somebody said in a tone of mock reproach. "You got her scared now, Jed, ain't you ashamed?"

Flin took two steps toward the car, pushing somebody out of the way. He did not see who it was. He did not see anything but Ruvy's frightened face and the backs of the young men.

"Get away from there," he said.

The laughter stopped. The young men straightened slowly. One of them said, "Did I hear somebody say something?"

"You heard me," said Flin. "Get away from the car."

They turned around, and now the crowd was all quiet and watching. The young men were tall. They had big coarse hands, strong for any task. Their mouths hung open a little to show their teeth, and they breathed and smiled, and their eyes were cruel.

"I don't think," said the one they called Jed, "I liked the tone of your voice when you said that."

"I don't give a damn whether you liked it or not."

"You gonna take that, Jed?" somebody yelled. "From a nigger, even if he is a green one?"

There was a burst of laughter. Jed smiled and tilted his weight forward over his bent knees.

"I was just trying to talk friendly with your woman," he said. "You shouldn't object to that."

He reached out and pushed with his stiffened fingers hard against Flin's chest.

Flin turned his body and let the force of the thrust slide off his shoulder. Everything seemed to be moving very slowly, in a curiously icy vacuum which for the moment contained only himself and Jed. He was conscious of a new and terrible feeling within him, something he had never felt before. He stepped forward, lightly, strongly, not hurrying. His feet and hands per-

formed four motions. He had done them countless times before in the gymnasium against a friendly opponent. He had never done them like this before, full force, with hate, with a dark evil brute lust to do injury. He watched the blood spurt from Jed's nose, watched him fall slowly, slowly to the pavement with his hands clutching his belly and his eyes wide open and his mouth gasping in astonishment and pain.

Outside this center of subjective time and hate in which he stood Flin sensed other movement and noise. Gradually, then with urgent swiftness, they came clear. Judge Shaw had thrust himself in front of Flin. Others were holding Jed, who was getting up. A swag-bellied man with a badge on his shirt was waving his arms, clearing people away from around the car, Jed's friends among them. There was a confused and frightening clamor of voices and over it all Shaw's big authoritative voice was shouting.

"Calm down now, everybody, we don't want any trouble here."

He turned his head and said to Flin, "I advise you to be on your way just as fast as you can go."

Flin walked around the car where the policeman had cleared the way. He got in and started the motor. The crowd surged forward as though it was going to try and stop him in spite of Shaw and the policeman.

Suddenly he cried out at them.

"Yes, we have white folks out there, about one in every ten thousand, and they don't think anything of it and neither do we. You can't hide from the universe. You're going to be tramped under with color—all the colors of the rainbow!"

And he understood then that that was exactly what they feared.

He let in the drive and sent the big car lurching forward. The people in the street scattered out of his way. There were noises as thrown objects struck the top and

sides of the car and then the street was long and straight and clear ahead of him and he pushed the throttle lever all the way down.

Lights flashed by. Then there was darkness and the town was gone.

Flin eased back on the throttle. Ruvi was bent over in the seat beside him, her hands covering her face. She was not crying. He reached out and touched her shoulder. She was trembling, and so was he. He felt physically sick, but he made his voice quiet and reassuring.

"It's all right now. They're gone."

She made a sound—a whimper, an answer, he was not sure. Presently she sat erect, her hands clenched in her lap. They did not speak again. The air was cooler here but still oppressive with moisture, almost as clammy as fog against the skin. No stars showed. Off to the right there were intermittent flashes of lightning and a low growling of thunder.

A clot of red light appeared on the night ahead, resolving itself into a neon sign. Patch's. The roadhouse with the pump.

Ruvi whispered, "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"I have to," he said gently, and pulled off the road onto a wide gravelled space beside a ramshackle frame building with dimly lighted windows. Strongly rhythmic music played inside. There was a smaller building, a dwelling-house, beside the tavern, and midway between them was a single fuel pump.

Flin stopped beside it. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he turned and fumbled in the back seat for his hat and jacket and put them on, pulling the hatbrim down to hide his face as much as possible. Ruvi had a yellow shawl that matched her tunic. She drew it over her head and shoulders and made herself small in the corner of the seat. Flin switched off the dashboard lights.

A raw-boned lanky woman came out of the dwelling.

Probably the man ran the tavern, leaving her to tend to smaller matters. Trying to keep his voice steady, Flin asked her to fill the tank. She hardly glanced at him and went surlily to the pump. He got out his wallet and felt with shaking hands among the bills.

On the dark road beyond the circle of light from the tavern, a car went slowly past.

The pump mechanism clicked and rang its solemn bells and finally was still. The woman hung up the hose with a clash and came forward. Flin took a deep breath. He thrust a bill at her. "That'll be eight-eighty-seven," she said and took the bill and saw the color of the hand she took it from. She started to speak or yell, stepping back and bending suddenly in the same movement. He saw her eyes shining in the light, peering into the car. Flin had already started the motor. He roared away in a spurt of gravel, leaving the woman standing with her arm out, pointing after them.

"We won't have to stop again until we reach the city. It'll be all right there."

He threw his hat into the back seat. Ruvi let the shawl fall away from her head.

"I've never wanted to hide my face before," she said. "It's a strange feeling."

Flin muttered savagely, "I've got a lot to say but I can't say it now, not if I'm going to drive."

The road was narrow and black beneath the thunderous sky, between the empty fields and dark woods.

There was another car in the road ahead, moving slowly.

Flin overtook it.

It was well out in the middle. He waited a moment for the driver to see that he wanted to pass and make room for him. The car continued to block the road. He sounded his horn, politely at first and then loudly. The car stayed where it was, moving slower and slower so that he had to brake to keep from hitting it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Ruvi. "Why won't they let us by?"

Flin shook his head. "I don't know."

He began to be afraid.

He pulled as far as he could to the left, riding on the rough berm. He sounded the horn and tramped on the throttle.

The other car swerved too. Its rear fender struck his front one. Ruvi screamed. Flin steadied the wildly lurching car. Sweat prickled like hot needles all over his skin. He stamped his foot hard on the brake.

The other car skidded on ahead. Flin swung the wheel sharp right and pushed the throttle down, whipping the big car across the road and onto the berm on the other side.

For one brief moment he thought he was going to make it. But the other car swayed over with ruthless speed and punched and rebounded and punched again with its clattering fenders like a man pushing another with his shoulder. Holes and stones threw Flin's car back and forth. He fought to control it, hearing the voices of men shouting close by . . .

Hit the sonofabitch, knock his goddam ass off the road, That's the way—

There was a tree ahead. His headlights picked it up, brought it starkly into view, the rough-textured bark, the knots and gnarls, the uneven branches and dark leaves. Flin spun the wheel frantically. The lights made a wide slicing turn across meadow grass and weeds. The car bounded, leaped, sprang over uneven ground and fell with a jarring crash into the ditch of a little stream and died.

Silence, dazed and desperate.

Flin looked back. The other car had stopped at the side of the road. Men were getting out of it. He counted five. He thought he knew what men they were.

He reached across Ruvi and opened the door and

pushed her ahead of him. "We're going to run now," he said, surprised at the flat banality of his voice, as though he were speaking to a child about some unimportant game. The car tilted that way and Ruvi slid out easily. Flin came behind her into mud and cold water that lapped around his ankles. He half helped, half threw her up the low steep bank and followed, grabbing her hand then and pulling her along.

He did not look back again. He did not have to. The men called as they ran, laughing, hooting, baying like great hounds.

Crooked fire lighted a curtain of black cloud. Flin saw trees, a clump of woods. The fire died and was followed by a hollow booming. The woods vanished. He continued to run toward them. The grass and weeds tangled around his legs. Ruvi lagged, pulling harder and harder against his grip, sobbing as she ran.

They were among the trees.

He let go of her. "Go on. Hide yourself somewhere. Don't make a sound no matter what happens."

"No. I won't leave—"

He pushed her fiercely, trying not to scream at her aloud. "Go on!"

The young men came loping through the long grass, into the trees. They had a light. Its long white beam probed and poked.

See anything?

Not yet.

Who's got the bottle? I'm dry from runnin'.

See anything?

They're in here somewhere.

Breath rasping in big hard throats, legs ripping the undergrowth, feet trampling the ground.

I'm gonna find out, by God. After I take care of that sonofabitch I'm gonna find out.

Whatcha gonna find out, Jed?

If it's true they lay eggs or not.

Laughter.

Who's got the goddam bottle?

Wait a minute, hey, right there, swing that light back, I hear the bastards moving—

Hey!

Flin turned, straightening his shoulders, standing between them and Ruvi.

One of them held the light in his face. He could not see them clearly. But he heard the voice of the one called Jed speaking to him.

"All right, greenie, you're so anxious to teach us things—it ain't fair for us to take and not give, so we got a lesson for you."

"Let my wife go," said Flin steadily. "You have no quarrel with her."

"Your wife, huh?" said Jed. "Well now, how do we know she's your wife? Was you married here under the laws of this land?"

"We were married under our own laws—"

"You hear that, boys? Well, your laws don't cut any ice with us, greenie, so it don't seem that you are man and wife as we would say. Anyway, she stays. That's part of the lesson."

Jed laughed. They all laughed.

In their own language Flin said to Ruvi, "Run now."

He sprang forward at the man holding the light.

Another man moved quickly from the side and struck him across the shoulders and neck with something more than the naked hand. A tree branch, perhaps, or a metal bar. Flin went down, stunned with pain. He heard Ruvi cry out. He tried to tell her again to run but his voice had left him. There were scuffling sounds and more cries. He tried to get up and hard-shod feet kicked him and stamped him down. Iron knuckles battered his face. Jed bent over him and shook him.

"Hold him up there, Mike, I want to be sure he hears

this. You hear me, greenie? Lesson One. Niggers always keep to their own side of the road."

Crash. Blood in the mouth, and pain.

Ruvi?

"Hold him, Mike, goddam it. Lesson Two. When a white man takes a mind to a female nigger, she ain't supposed to get uppity about it. It's an honor, see? She's supposed to be real nice and happy and flattered. See?"

More blood, more pain.

Ruvi, Ruvil

"Lesson Three. And this one you better remember and write out and hang up where all the other red, blue, green, and purple niggers can see it. *You never lay a hand on a white man.* Never. No matter what."

Ruvi was quiet. He could not hear her voice.

"You understand that? No matter what!"

Hya-hool

Give it to him, Jed. Tell him so he don't forget.

Dark, night, thunder, red fire, red blood, silence, distance, one long fading echoing voice.

—just like a real human woman by God what do you know—

Laughter.

Ruvi—

Gone.

There was a great deal of public indignation about it. Newspapers all over the world had editorials. The President made a statement. The Governor made a formal apology for his state and a sincere promise to find and punish the handful of men responsible for the outrage.

Grand Falls protected its own.

No witnesses could be found to identify the men involved in the incident that had occurred in town. Judge Shaw was sure he had never seen them before. So was the policeman. The attack itself had taken place out in

the country, of course, and in the dark. Flin did not remember the license number of the car nor had he seen the faces of the men clearly. Neither had Ruvi. They could have been anyone from anywhere.

The name "Jed" by itself meant nothing. There were a number of Jeds in the neighborhood but they were the wrong ones. The right Jed never turned up, and if he had Flin could only have identified him definitely as the man he himself had struck in front of the Grand Falls Hotel. ("Mighty hot tempered, he seemed," Judge Shaw said. "Took offense where I'm sure none was meant. Like he just didn't understand our ways.")

So there was no finding and no punishment.

As soon as the doctors told him he was fit to travel, Flin informed his group that he was returning home. He had already been in contact with Galactic Center. Someone else would be sent to take his place. They were very angry about the whole thing at home and various steps were being considered. But since Earth was not a member planet she was not subject to galactic law, and since the future of a world was considerably more important than the actions of a few individuals or the feelings of their victims, probably nothing very drastic would be done. And Flin recognized that this was right.

Sherbondy came to see him.

"I feel responsible for all this," he said. "If I hadn't advised that trip—"

"It would have happened sooner or later," Flin said. "To us or to somebody else. Your world's got a long way to go yet."

"I wish you'd stay," said Sherbondy miserably. "I'd like to prove to you that we're not all brutes."

"You don't have to prove that. It's obvious. The trouble now is with us—with Ruvi and me."

Sherbondy looked at him, puzzled.

Flin said, "We are not civilized any more. Perhaps

we will be again some day. I hope so. That's one reason we're going home, for psychiatric treatment of a kind we can't get here. Ruvi especially . . ."

He shook his head and began to stride up and down the room, his body taut with an anger he could only by great effort control.

"An act like that—people like that—they foul and degrade everything they touch. They pass on some of themselves. I'm full of irrational feelings now. I'm afraid of darkness and trees and quiet places. Worse than that, I'm afraid of your people. I can't go out of my rooms now without feeling as though I walk among wild beasts."

Sherbondy sighed heavily. "I can't blame you. It's a pity. You could have had a good life here, done a lot—"

"Yes," said Flin.

"Well," said Sherbondy, getting up, "I'll say good bye." He held out his hand. "I hope you don't mind shaking my hand—"

Flin hesitated, then took Sherbondy's hand briefly. "Even you," he said, with real sorrow. "You see why we must go."

Sherbondy said, "I see." He turned to the door. "God damn those bastards," he said with sudden fury. "You'd think in this day and age—Oh, hell . . . Goodbye, Flin. And the best of luck."

He went away.

Flin helped Ruvi with the last of the packing. He checked over the mass of equipment the weather-control group had brought with them for demonstration purposes, which he would be leaving behind for his successor.

Then he said quietly, "There is one more thing I have to do before we go. Don't worry about me. I'll be back in plenty of time for the take-off."

She looked at him, startled, but she did not ask any questions.

He got into his car and drove away alone.

He spoke as he drove, grimly and bitterly, to someone who was not there.

"You wanted to teach me a lesson," he said. "You did. Now I will show you how well you taught me, and how well I learned."

And that was the real evil that had been done to him and Ruvi.

The physical outrage and the pain were soon over, but the other things were harder to eradicate—the sense of injustice, the rankling fury, the blind hatred of all men whose faces were white.

Especially the hatred.

Some day, he hoped and prayed, he could be rid of that feeling, clean and whole again as he had been before it happened. But it was too soon. Far too soon now.

With two fully charged miniseeders in his pockets he drove steadily toward Grand Falls. . . .

THE SHADOWS

FOR COUNTLESS numbers of its years there had been no sight or sound or sense of man upon the world of the little blue star. But now, without warning, a remembered thing had come suddenly into the air again—a quiver, a subtle throbbing that meant only one kind of life. The Shadows felt it, the Shadows that had waited so long and patiently. They began to stir among the ruined walls. They rose and shook themselves, and a soundless whisper ran among them, a hungry whisper, wild and eager. "Man! Man! Man has come again!"

THE GALACTIC SURVEY ship lay in an expanse of level plain, ringed on one side by low mountains and on the other by a curving belt of forest. A river ran across the plain and there was much grass. But nothing cropped it, and there were no tracks in the mud of the river bank to show that anything had.

Hubbard sniffed the warm air and dug his feet into the soil, which was rich and dark. He grinned broadly. "This is something like it," he said. "A pretty world. Real pretty."

He was a young man. His field was anthropology, and this was his first voyage out. For him, the stars still shone brightly. Barrier looked at him between envy and sadness. He said nothing. His gaze roving off across the plain and the forest, studied the sky—a suspicious, sombre gaze. He was old enough to be Hubbard's father and he felt every year of it, pressed down and running over.

"Of course, the colors are all wrong," said Hubbard, "but that's nothing. After they'd lived with a blue sun

for a while people would think it was the only kind to have."

Barrier grunted. "What people?"

"Why, the colonists, the people that will live here some day!" Hubbard laughed suddenly. "What's the matter with you? Here at last we've found a beautiful world, and you're as glum as though it were a hunk of dead rock."

"I guess," said Barrier slowly, "that I've seen too many hunks of dead rock, and too many beautiful worlds that—"

He broke off. This was no time to talk. In fact, it was not his place to talk at all. If he didn't like what he was doing any more he could go home to Earth and stay there, and leave the stars to the young men who had not yet lost their faith.

The mountains, the plain, and the forest were very still in the bright blue morning. Barrier could feel the stillness. No wing cut the sweet air, no paw rustled the tangled grass, no voice spoke from among the curious trees. He moved restlessly where he stood, looking rather like an old hound that scents danger where there should be game. That was Barrier's job, his science, the oldest science of mankind—to venture into strange country and feel the invisible, sense the unknown and survive. He was head of the Ground Exploration team, and an expert on exploring. He had been at it all his life. Too long.

Hubbard said, "I wish Kendall would come back. I want to get started."

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"How do I know? That's the fun of it. But on a world like this there's bound to be life of some kind."

"Human life?"

"Why not?"

Again Barrier grunted, and again he said nothing.

They waited. Other men were scattered about the

plain and the river bank, taking samples of soil, rock, water, and vegetation. They stayed close to the ship, and all were armed. The technical staff, after checking solar radiation, atmospheric content, temperature, gravitation, and the million and one other things that go to make a world habitable or otherwise for Earthmen, had rated this planet Earth-Type A, and in obedience to Survey ruling the ship had landed to determine surface conditions. So far, they had all been favorable. So far.

Barrier fidgeted, and listened to the silence.

PRESENTLY a speck appeared far off in the sky. It gave off a thin droning, coming closer, and developed into a small 'copter which settled down beside the ship, a gnat alighting beside a whale. Kendall and his observer and cameraman got out.

Barrier went up to him. "What did you find?"

"More of the same," said Kendall, "and nothing in it. Except—" He hesitated.

"Except what?"

"Over there beyond the forest. I thought it might be the ruins of a city."

"There!" cried Hubbard. "You see?"

Kendall shrugged. "The boys said no, it was just a bunch of rocks grown over with the woods. I don't know. You can decide for yourselves when you see the pictures."

The men who were out on the plain and the river bank had come running up. They were all young men, like Hubbard. Only the Captain, the chief of Technical, a couple of research scientists and Barrier were old. There was an uproar of voices, all talking at once. The Survey ship had made few landings, and it had been a long time since the last one. They were like youngsters let out of confinement, bursting with excitement and pride at what they had found.

Barrier went with them into the ship, into the main salon. There was a brief wait while the film, which had been developed automatically on exposure, was fed into the projector. The lights were cut. The small screen came to life.

They all watched, with intense interest. The panorama unfolded in natural color, like and yet unlike Earth. On closer inspection, the forest trees were not trees at all, but monstrous flowers with stems as thick as trunks, bearing clusters of brilliant and improbable blooms. Barrier caught a glimpse of something that might have been a butterfly or a drifting petal, but other than that, nothing moved.

He asked, "Were there any signs of animal life?"

Kendall shook his head. "No."

Impatiently, Hubbard said, "The 'copter probably frightened it away."

"Frightened things run," said Barrier. "There's nothing running."

Hubbard swore under his breath, and Barrier smiled. It had become a personal necessity for Hubbard to discover life here, and no wonder. He had had very little chance to practice his anthropology, and the voyage was almost over. His insistence on animals arose from the fact that without them there were not likely to be men.

"There," said Kendall, and held up his hand. The film was stopped, on a frame showing an area of tree-flowers and clambering vines rather more open than the forest proper. Humps and ridges of stone showed here and there among the tangled growths.

"You see what I mean," said Kendall, and gestured again. The film rolled, repeating the long low swings the 'copter had made across the area. "I got as close as I could, and I still couldn't figure it."

"It sure looks like a city," said Hubbard. He was quivering with excitement. "Look there. See how regular

those lines are, like streets, with houses fallen down on either side."

Two other voices spoke up. Aiken, the expert on planetary archaeology, admitted cautiously that it might be a city. Caffrey, the geologist, said that it might just as well be a natural rock formation.

"What do you think, Barrier?" asked Captain Verlaine.

"Can't tell from the picture, sir. I'd have to examine the stones."

"Well," said Verlaine, "that seems to settle it. Make that area your first objective. Don't you agree, Cristofek?"

Cristofek, who was Chief of Technical, nodded emphatically. "And Barrier, in case it does turn out to be a ruin, make every effort to discover what sort of inhabitants it had and, above all, what happened to them."

Barrier stood up. "All right," he said. "Let's be on our way."

The seven men of his team joined him—all, like Hubbard, specialists, young men picked for physical condition and trained in the use of arms. Aiken and Caffrey were among them, also a lad named Morris who was in charge of the walkie-talkie. Barrier consulted Kendall about bearings, and then went with the others to get his gear. Within a quarter of an hour they were marching off across the plain.

BARRIER felt a twinge of nostalgia so strong as to be a physical pain—nostalgia for the days when he had been green and eager like the rest, leaving the ship, which he hated, for the uncrossed horizons of new worlds, full of a shivering fascination, full of hope. The hope had been the first to go, and then the fascination.

Now, looking at the bright landscape, beautiful in spite of its unearthly tints, he found himself thinking that he would like to be in a certain bar he remembered

in Los Angeles, not worrying about anything, not pondering meanings and significances and the shapes of alien leaves, forgetting completely the dark conviction that had grown in him over the years.

Schmidt, the entomologist, was chattering with Gordon, whose field was zoology, about worms and insect forms, of which many had been found. Hubbard speculated with Aiken on The City. They already called it that. The high grasses swished against their boots. The wind blew softly and the sun was warm. But apart from the eight invading humans there was nothing sentient to enjoy these blessings. Barrier disliked the empty silence. It was unnatural in such a lush and joyous setting.

His eyes roved constantly, grey eyes set in a face the color of old leather and surrounded by the complex wrinkles that come from squinting against numberless foreign suns. For a long time they saw nothing. And then, more and more, they narrowed and watched a certain sector to their left.

Barrier lifted his hand, and the little column stopped.

"Over there," he said. "Do you see those shadows?"

They all stared.

Hubbard laughed. "Cloud shadows."

"There are no clouds."

"Well, then, it's the wind making ripples in the grass." He glanced sidelong at Barrier. "What's the difference what makes them? They're only shadows!"

Barrier said heavily, speaking to them all, "Will you please try to remember that you are not on Earth? In a strange world anything, a shadow, a blade of grass, may be alive and deadly."

Their faces regarded him, intelligent, uncomprehending, trying not to show that they thought he was being a trifle ridiculous. He knew that they now felt hardened veterans of the star-worlds, with the vast experience of their four or five landings behind them, and all on plan-

ets that had had only normally dangerous life-forms. He could not make them understand the things he had seen, the inimical stealthy things that hated man.

He motioned them on again. They had already forgotten the shadows, but he had not. There seemed to be a number of them—how do you count shadows? Smallish clots of darkness they were that flitted along some distance away, losing themselves in the waving grass, difficult to see in the brilliant sunshine, but unmistakably there. They seemed to be running parallel with the men. They looked like perfectly normal shadows and Barrier would not have given them a second thought—except that in his experience a shadow must be thrown by something, and here there was nothing, not even so much as a patch of cloud or a bird's wing.

They marched on across the beautiful, empty, silent plain. And then, again, Barrier called a halt.

They had come to the edge of a stream that ran down toward the river, cutting itself a cleft in the soil of the plain. Caffrey immediately scrambled down the steep bank and began to study the layers of silt and sand and clay. Gordon followed him, casting back and forth along the edge of the water. He became vastly excited when he discovered a hideous small creature that resembled a purple prawn. Something else, that might have been a snake or an eel, went off with a ropy slither between the wet rocks.

Hubbard danced up and down. "I told you there was life here!"

Barrier said gently, "I never denied it."

He glanced upstream. The shadows were bunched together, hovering over the cleft. They had not come any closer, but they were watching. He could not see with his eyes that they were watching, for they were only featureless blobs of gloom. But he felt it, in every nerve, in every pore of his prickling skin. There was something ugly about being watched by shadows.

ABRUPTLY, Caffrey began to dig like a terrier in the soft ground midway up the bank. Presently he held up an object like a blackened, broken stick that was knobbed at one end. He handed it to Gordon, who voiced a sharp exclamation and cried out for Barrier.

"It's a bone," said Gordon. "The leg bone of a large deer, I should say, or a small horse. You know what I mean, the equivalents thereof."

Hubbard was quite beside himself. "Vertebrate life! That proves that evolution here has followed practically the same path it did on Earth." He looked around, as though he expected to see a man materialize from among the rocks.

Barrier said to Gordon, "How old is that bone?"

Gordon shook his head. "It's been in the ground a long time. How long would you say, Caffrey?"

Caffrey squinted at the bank. "Judging from its depth under the present topsoil, I should guess five or six hundred years, maybe more. That's only a guess of course. There are so many factors I haven't any data for."

"In other words," said Barrier, "a long time." He frowned at the ancient bone, and then at the deserted landscape around him.

Morris sent word of their find back to the ship. They marched on.

The shadows followed.

There were several miles of the flat grassland now between them and the ship. It lay glinting dully in the blue light, Leviathan at rest. The outposts of the forest, solitary clumps and little clustered groves of the giant flowers and equally lofty ferns, sprang up around the men, gradually screening off both the plain and the sky, until they walked in a warm blue gloom shot through with the brilliant spectral colors of the blooms.

At first they went slowly, on the watch for dangerous

plant-forms. Apparently there were none. Hansen, the botanist, chanted aloud with wonder at every step. Schmidt was entranced by huge butterflies and numerous insects that crept and flew and made tiny buzzings. Gordon and Hubbard peered eagerly, but there was nothing for them to see.

Barrier walked ahead, going with a lanky noiseless stride like an Indian. His eyes were anxious, and his nerves on edge.

It was very lovely in the forest, with the blooms of many colors nodding overhead. Barrier thought of a garden at the bottom of the sea. The glades were full of blueness like still water. There began to be wisps of mist along the ground.

He thought for a time that they had lost the shadows. Then he saw them again, low down, slipping along between the rough, pale flower-trunks. They had changed their formation. They were all around the men now, in a circle. They had come closer. Much closer.

Barrier made the men bunch up. He pointed out the shadows to them, and this time they were less inclined to shrug them off.

"Better let me talk to the ship," he said, and Morris clicked the switch on the walkie-talkie. He did that several times, repeating the call letters, and then he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said nervously, "I'm blanked out. There's some electrical disturbance, very strong . . ."

Barrier glanced at the shadows. Creatures of force? They must be, since they were not solid matter. Electronic discharge from their bodies might well disrupt the small transmitter.

He considered turning back. They were now about equidistant from the ship and the area of the possible ruins, and if the shadows had anything evil in mind, turning back could not stop them. The ship was well

out of reach. Besides, he had his orders, and if these shadows were a native life-form, it was his duty to find out about them.

They had made no hostile move as yet. Hostile or not, could shadows hurt men? And if so, how did you fight them?

The ground mists were thickening. They must be approaching swampy ground, although he had not noticed any on Kendall's films. Tenuous wreaths and veils hung in the blue glades, each separate droplet glittering with diamond fires in the filtered sunlight. The breeze rippled them to and fro very prettily. They were not fever mists. Barrier forgot them, returning his watchful attention to the shadows.

Within the past few minutes they had drawn their circle in until they were only a few feet away from the men. They glided round and round, utterly silent, in a kind of nervous dance. The men were all watching them now. Hubbard spoke to Barrier, and his voice had an edge of fright.

"What are they? What do they want?"

"They're only shadows," said Barrier irritably. "What does it matter what they want?" Then he called out to the others, "Keep together. If things get rough we'll turn back. But no matter what happens, don't bolt. If you do, there won't be any way to help you."

THEY WENT on, treading on each other's heels staring around them. The shadows wove and bounded. Quite suddenly, Schmidt screamed. His gun went off with a snarling hiss. It flared again and again into a clot of darkness, which did not flinch.

"It touched me," Schmidt shuddered. "It touched me!"

He began to run, not very far, because there was no space with the ring of shadows to run in. Barrier caught him by the arm.

"Shut up," he snarled. "Shut up!"

Schmidt stood shivering. "It was cold. Cold as death."

"You're not dead, are you?"

"No."

"You're not hurt?"

"I—No."

"Then shut up." Barrier glared at Schmidt, at the others. "The next one of you that panics, I'll knock him flat."

He was afraid himself. Miserably afraid. But he said, "They haven't hurt us yet. Maybe they can't. Anyway, let's wait a while before we blow our tops."

The young men swallowed and straightened their faces out into stiff lines and tried hard not to see the shadows. Schmidt twitched as he walked. Barrier wished there was a sound in the forest. A squeak, a grunt, a roar that meant something warm-blooded and alive. There wasn't. Even their own footfalls were deadened on the soft ground.

The mists thickened, sparkling, bright. The alien sun was blotted out. The shadows skulked and clung. Sweat poured down the cheeks of the men, stained their drill jackets. Hubbard said, licking his lips, "How much farther?"

"Another mile or two."

Barrier wished the mists were not there. They made him feel shut in and suffocated. He worried about bogs. The blue daylight was maddening. He thought of the honest yellow glare of Sol and wondered what madness it was that sent men out to the ends of the galaxy seeking other suns.

He stumbled suddenly, and looked down. At first he thought the obstacle was a rounded stone half buried in the mold of fallen petals. And then he knew it wasn't. He stooped and lifted it up and held it out to Hubbard.

"You wanted man," he said.

Hubbard rubbed his palms up and down along his

thighs. He stared at the thing in Barrier's hands, and the others stared over their shoulders, and the thing grinned at them with a single gaping line of teeth.

Hubbard reached out and took it.

"It's very old," he said. "As old as that." He pointed to Gordon's trophy.

Schmidt said in a curiously shrill voice, "There were men here once, and animals. Now there aren't any. They're all dead, and I know what killed them." He stared hard at the shadows.

Barrier swore. "That's fine talk from a scientist. I thought you people were trained not to jump to conclusions."

Hubbard muttered, "Barrier is right." He looked at the skull and repressed a shiver. "Come on, I want to see those ruins."

They went on, so close together that their shoulders rubbed. The mists grew denser and brighter and heavier. The men sweated, ignoring the shadows, desperately ignoring them.

Without any warning, the shadows sprang.

There was a moment's terrible screaming from the men, and then there was silence, and after that a few stifled, horrid sounds. The skull fell from Hubbard's grasp and rolled away, grinning a wise grin as it went. Barrier swayed where he stood, clawing blindly with his hands at his own flesh.

He could see the others. Through a veil of shadowy gloom he could see them, dimly, and the gloom was behind his eyes and not before them. Some of the men had tried to run, and the shadows had caught them as they ran. Two of them kicked and grovelled on the ground. Their outlines were indistinct, blurred over. Their eyes were crazy. So were Barrier's.

The shocking swiftness of that leap, the noiselessness, the awful cold that poured in suddenly upon the flesh

—the loathsome sense of an intruder grasping at mind and body, taking them over *from within*. . . .

It was inside him. The shadow was inside him. Its icy substance interpenetrated his warm and living flesh, its alien and unreadable intelligence was clinging tight against his own, and it was shaking him, driving him, and he was going to die. . . .

They're dead, all the men and animals, and I know what killed them—Schmidt was gone, plunging off into the mist, taking with him the terrible invader in his flesh. There were still shadows, a lot of them, running loose, for there had not been enough men. Some of these went after Schmidt.

Barrier forgot his orders, his command, his pride. Blind black terror overwhelmed him and he ran. He wanted to outrun the thing that held him, to shake it free and lose it utterly, and go on running right off this filthy blue-lit world. But he couldn't. It was part of him. He would not lose it till he died.

He ran, through the silent forest, where the nodding blossoms were shrouded thick in mist and the flower-trunks were hidden, and there was nothing but himself and the nightmare that dwelt in his flesh, and a darkness in the air around him.

Several times he fell, but something forced him up and on again. He had lost all track of the other men. He had almost forgotten them. Once, far off, he heard a shriek and knew that someone was dying, but he did not care. His mind was lost inside the shadow.

He was only distantly aware that suddenly the mists were gone and he was staggering over ground that had once been cleared but now was overgrown, though not so thickly as the forest. He stumbled among stones, reeled and scrambled around great hummocks from which peeped shattered cornices, and crossed an open space where his feet brought forth a sound of dry sticks

cracking. He looked down and saw that the sticks were human bones.

He sobbed and turned his head to see the little group of shadows that hovered at his heels.

"Are you waiting your turn?" he yelled at them, or tried to yell, and made only a hoarse whispering. His face, so strangely blurred and dimmed, twisted into an insensate mask of rage. He bent and picked up the old bare bones from around his feet and threw them at the shadows, and cursed, and sobbed, and then he ran again, five paces, ten, across the crackling open space, and there was a hummock too high to climb and too wide to go around. He butted himself against it, into a knee of stone that thrust out between the creepers, and then he fell. His body jerked convulsively, and was still. . . .

HE WAS looking at a moon. It was a red moon, small but very close. There were mountains on it, and gouged-out hollows. His mind made idle pictures of them, a face, a crouching rabbit. There were stars. He did not recognize them. Presently another moon came up, a larger one, and pallid green. He tired of making pictures on the moons.

Someone was moaning, close at hand.

Mildly curious, Barrier turned his head. He saw a man, lying curled up with his knees against his chest and his arms clasped over his head. He seemed to know the man. He studied the partly visible face. Of course he knew him, it was young Hubbard, who had been looking for men. . . .

Barrier sprang up. Cold sweat burst out on him and his body trembled, standing rigid in the moonlight. He searched inside himself as a man will search for a remembered pain, sick and praying not to find it.

It was gone. The shadow was gone. He clutched at Hubbard, and saw that the unholy dimness had left his features. He shook Hubbard and shouted at him, and

then he saw that there were other men huddled on the ground, two, three, four of them. He ran from one to the other, and they looked up at him with empty, frightened eyes. Schmidt was not among them, nor Morris.

Six. Six living out of eight. And the shadows had gone away out of their flesh.

For one short second he was hopeful. Then he looked out across the open space where the bones were and saw the company of dark and restless blots that moved among the spiky ribs and tumbled, careless limbs. He almost laughed that he had considered hope.

He returned to Hubbard. "How did you get here?" he asked, and slapped the young man's face until he answered.

"I don't know. I—just ran." Hubbard gave a racking shiver. "Oh God, Barrier, that thing inside me just like smoke blows through a bush, and *cold*. . . ."

Barrier slapped him again. "Where're Schmidt and Morris?"

"I don't know"

Barrier set about getting the others on their feet. None of them knew precisely how they had gotten there. None of them knew what had happened to Morris, but Aiken said:

"I saw Schmidt. I was running and I passed by Schmidt lying on the ground, at least I think it was Schmidt, it had his specimen case still strapped around it, and it was dead. Oh yes, there wasn't any doubt at all about its being dead."

He turned away suddenly and tried hard to be sick.

Barrier said slowly, "So they finished off two of us, and brought the rest of us here. I suppose they want to complete the job at their leisure. So here we are. We can't communicate with the ship, and they won't send Kendall out to look for us before morning. And if we're still alive by then, and Kendall does happen to find us, and lands—what do you think *they'll* do about it?"

He glanced toward the shadows.

Nobody answered.

"I wonder," said Barrier at last, "if fire would keep them off."

The others stared at him. They they scurried about, gathering dead creepers, dry grass, anything that would burn. They made fires, a ring of them across the mouth of the cul-de-sac where they were caught. They waited, breathless with hope.

The shadows crept up toward the flames. Then, as though delighted with them, they began to flit back and forth around the fires, frolicking over and through them, almost, it seemed, playing tag among the columns of smoke.

Hubbard wept.

Mist was crawling up out of the forest. The small red moon was sinking, and the larger pale green one shed a ghastly light. The fires burned low and the shadows danced around them.

"They look real cute there, don't they?" said Barrier viciously. "Having fun."

The flames died down, became beds of embers. Some of the shadows began to make tentative small rushes toward Barrier and the five who were left of his team.

Coffrey whispered, "I guess they're coming for us." He still had a withered blossom stuck in his buttonhole.

The shadows darted nervously, toward the men and then back to the glowing red embers. Beyond them tenuous arms of mist advanced and coiled between the ruins. They began to obscure the remaining moon, and as the light faded the shadows moved more swiftly, with a greater eagerness.

Aiken had been rooting among the creepers that shrouded the hummock. Suddenly he bleated, "There's a passage here, a doorway. Maybe we could get inside and—and barricade it."

"Against shadows?" said Barrier, and laughed.

"It's better than nothing," Hubbard said. "Anything's better than just sitting here."

HE SCRAMBLED toward Aiken, who had disappeared, and the others followed. All at once, Barrier began to laugh. They stared at him, their faces round and startled. Barrier shouted at them, laughing.

"You still don't get it, do you? You still think you can run and hide, and put up little defences, and win out somehow in the end because you're men and man always wins out. You haven't learned yet, have you?"

"Learned what?" asked Hubbard, in a low, queer voice.

Barrier studied the shadows. "Why should I tell you, though? It took me half a lifetime and a lot of worlds to learn the truth. Why shouldn't I keep it to myself, and let you die happy?"

Abruptly, Hubbard sprang at him. He was like an enraged child, boiling with a confused flurry of which the greater part was the fear of death. Barrier caught his wrists.

"You dirty yellow-belly," Hubbard squealed. "You're supposed to be our leader, you're supposed to show us what to do, and what do you do? You give up." He called Barrier a number of evil names. "The great explorer, the big brave leader, hell! You're just an old man with all the guts run out of you. You should have gone back to Earth and let somebody that could fight take over."

Barrier thrust him away, quite hard but without anger.

"All right," he said, "I'll let you in on it. Earth was a soft planet. Oh, she tried to put her foot down—ice ages, volcanoes, plagues, floods, droughts, and famines—but it was too late, and it wasn't enough, and now we've got the upper hand of her. But the other worlds are tougher. Sooner or later, they find a way. . . .

"We aren't welcome in the universe. I don't know

why. Maybe it's because we aren't content to be the animals we are, but must always be pretending that we're something else, prying about and upsetting things, grasping after stars, making trouble and screaming because it hurts. I don't know. I only know that we're hated. Everywhere I've been, wherever there was a man, they'd been gotten rid of somehow."

He glanced up at the alien stars, dimming now with the mist that rolled across them.

"They hate us," he said softly. "Their children hate us. Everywhere we have enemies, but never any friends."

Then he sighed. "You're right, Hubbard. I am an old man, with the guts worn out of me. You run on in and hide, now, and I wish you luck. Me, I don't like holes."

The shadows were hard upon him now. One brushed against him, and its touch was cold, cold as the bones that lay in the open space. Swiftly, so swiftly that none of the men could stop him, Barrier whirled and leaped through them, running like a deer.

He took them by surprise, the small dark blots that hung so close to him. He got past them, trampling on the brittle bones. And then the shadows followed, spreading out fanwise behind him, with three or four racing on to catch him.

He was some distance ahead of them. He heard Hubbard's voice shrieking after him, but not the words it said. He put out every ounce of strength that was in him, rushing between the heaped-up ruins, into the arms of mist that reached along the ground.

The shadows were closing in. But it was the mist that sprang.

It rolled around and wrapped him in, and where it touched his flesh he knew that the glittering droplets were not drops of mist at all but tiny flecks of life, separate, sentient, gathered together in formidable colonies of cloud. And he knew two other things, in that second when it was too late for knowledge—that the mist

had not touched him nor the others in the forest, and that it had moved into the ruined city after them, against the wind.

Tiny flecks of life, glittering like powdered gems. And they hated man with a curious, inherited enmity.

There was a numbing agony in Barrier, an ecstasy of curious anguish that made his body twitch and dance. His throat convulsed, but no sound came out of it, and his eyes were filled with motes of fire. He tried to run again, and could not, and somewhere far away in another world, Hubbard was still shouting.

The shadows came. A broken thought went tumbling into the stricken emptiness of his mind—*They work together, damn them, and they both hate man.* Then there was the horrid cold, the alien presence sweeping through him, and this was death. . . .

The mists drew back. The tearing anguish left him, and the chill darkness that possessed him was somehow healing to his seared nerves. It was like being shocked with icy water, so that suddenly he could see and think again, even through the gloomy veil that dimmed his sight and mind.

The shadows leaped and swirled around him, and where they leaped the mists that were not mists at all drew back, sullen and reluctant, but coiling all the same upon themselves. And the shadow-thing that was inside of Barrier made him turn and go back toward the ruins, not fast this time, but slowly because he had been hurt, giving Barrier, in some unfathomable way, of its own strength.

The others came behind, a rear guard, dodging, weaving, pouncing on the stealthy tentacles of mist that sought to reach around them to the men who stood gaping by the great hummock. Here and there a glistening cloud engulfed a single shadow, and suddenly it was not.

Barrier's face, obscured by the dim aura, took on a strange expression.

He sat down at Hubbard's feet and the Shadow left him, and they were as they had been before, the men, the shadows, the little beds of ash still glowing, and the wavering mist beyond.

Hubbard swore meaningless oaths meant to conceal his shame. "Were you crazy, Barrier? Did you think you could draw them all away from us?"

Aiken said, "He was trying to get away, to get a warning to the ship so maybe they could save us." He bent over. "Barrier, listen. Barrier. . . ."

He paid them no attention. He was watching the shadows that hovered between them and the mist. A few of them were darting as they had before, from the burned-out fires to the men and back again.

"They want us to put on more fuel," he said slowly. "The fires help them keep the mist away." He turned abruptly to the others. "They saved me, did you see that? They came after me, and one protected me with its own body, and some of them died." He was shaking a little. "We were wrong about them. They were trying to help us in the forest. They followed us like—"

A word hovered on his tongue and he considered it, thinking of his boyhood and a small soiled terrier who had eaten his boots and loved him and once had interposed his body between Barrier and a fearsome hissing thing. It had only been a gopher snake, but the idea was the same.

"I think," he said, "that those shadows were the dogs, the protectors, of the men who lived here once. Different from our own, but trained to hunt down and turn aside enemies from their men. It was the mist that killed Schmidt and Morris, of course. We didn't keep together, and the shadows couldn't save us all."

The men stared at the shadows. It was hard to change their minds now, but they could not deny what they had seen. Their faces softened, just a little, losing some of the hard fear. Then Hubbard said:

"But what about *them*?" and he pointed at the bones.

Barrier shook his head. "Whatever killed them, it wasn't the shadows." His voice had an odd far-away note. His mind was very busy with something, taking it apart and studying the pieces intently and then putting it back together a different way. At last he smiled a little and went toward the shadows. He began to talk to them, putting out his hands, and they clustered around him, bounding up playfully.

"They must have been lonesome all this time," he said, "guarding their masters' bones."

Aiken said, "Down there in that passage—it's built of solid rock and hasn't crumbled a bit—there are some symbols cut in the wall. I haven't really looked at them, but—well, it seems as though all the people in the city gathered here to die at once, and it could be that they left a message or two in the strongest places."

"Let's look," said Hubbard.

They went down through the opening Aiken had found, all except Barrier, who was still playing with the shadow-dogs, and smiling. He was only mildly interested when they came back, Aiken and Hubbard both flushed and joyous.

"Those symbols," said Aiken. "They're pictographs, so simple and clear that anyone could read them. They must have hoped, those people, that someone would come along sooner or later. Anyway, they told what happened to them, or rather, what was going to happen. The planet had already entered the edges of a cloud that was death for lung breathers. That's why the animals died too, and only the lungless creatures lived. And Barrier. . . ."

"Yes?"

"They mentioned the dogs. They drew quite clear pictures of them at work, so that strangers would know."

Barrier nodded. He looked at the dark blots romping about his feet. "They've waited all this time. Well, they can wait a little longer."

Then he straightened up, still with that odd, wry smile.

"Seems like I spoke too soon," he said. "Maybe there's enough worth in us that here and there some little world will give us another chance. Anyway, it's nice to know there's one place where we have some friends."

They heaped fuel on the fires, and the shadows danced. Barrier watched them, looking somehow younger, like a man who has rediscovered hope.

ENCHANTRESS OF VENUS

Chapter I

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

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

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

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

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

There was something ominous about the sea itself. Even on its own world, the Red Sea is hardly more than legend. It lies behind the Mountains of White Cloud,

the great barrier wall that hides away half a planet. Few men have gone beyond that barrier, into the vast mystery of Inner Venus. Fewer still have come back.

Stark was one of that handful. Three times before he had crossed the mountains, and once he had stayed for nearly a year. But he had never quite grown used to the Red Sea.

It was not water. It was gaseous, dense enough to float the buoyant hulls of the metal ships, and it burned perpetually with its deep inner fires. The mists that clouded it were stained with the bloody glow. Beneath the surface Stark could see the drifts of flame where the lazy currents ran, and the little coiling bursts of sparks that came upward and spread and melted into other bursts, so that the face of the sea was like a cosmos of crimson stars.

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

There was a padding of bare feet, and the captain, Malthor, came up to Stark, his outlines dim and ghostly in the gloom.

"We will reach Shuruun," he said, "before the second glass is run."

Stark nodded. "Good."

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

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

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

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

Stark said, "That's fine."

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

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

Stark said, "No."

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

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

Stark said again, flatly, "No."

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

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

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

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

The reflected glare showed Stark that the Straits of Shuruun were defended. Squat fortresses brooded on the

cliffs. There were ballistas, and great windlasses for the drawing of nets across the narrow throat. The men of Shuruun could enforce their law, that barred all foreign shipping from their gulf.

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly he stopped, his head thrown back, listening.

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

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

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

Stark turned to Malthor. "What was that?"

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

"That wailing sound," said Stark impatiently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stark said for the third time, "No."

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

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

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

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

Torches blazed on the quays and in the streets, and

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

The ship drifted in toward the quays.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter II

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

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

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

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

It struck him that the gulf was very deep.

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

No. There was some deeper reason. A reason connected with Malthor's insistence that he lodge with him. Stark smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. He was think-

ing of Shuruun, and the things men said about it, around the shores of the Red Sea.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stark did not venture into the shadowy denseness below the topmost branches. A strange fear came over

him, at the sight of that vast forest dreaming in the depths of the gulf, drowned and forgotten, as though wondering why the birds had gone, taking with them the warm rains and the light of day.

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

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

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

Huts of wattle-and-daub took shape out of the fog, increased in numbers, became a street of dwellings. Here and there rush-lights glimmered through the slitted windows. A man and a woman clung together in a low doorway. They saw him and sprang apart, and the woman gave a little cry. Stark went on. He did not look back, but he knew that they were following him quietly, at a little distance.

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

Stark passed among them, alien and strange with his black hair and sun-darkened skin. They did not speak, nor try to stop him. Only they looked at him out of the red fog, with a curious blend of amusement and fear, and some of them followed him, keeping well

behind. A gang of small naked children came from somewhere among the houses and ran shouting beside him, out of reach, until one boy threw a stone and screamed something unintelligible except for one word—*Lhari*. Then they all stopped, horrified, and fled.

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

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

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

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

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

There were a number of people in the open space,

mostly sailors and their women. They were loose and foolish with wine, but even so they stopped where they were and stared at the dark stranger, and then drew back from him, still staring.

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

The woman stopped singing in the middle of a phrase.

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

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

"Stranger," they said. "Earthman."

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

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

"I came on Malthor's ship."

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

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

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

The young men looked at him, scowling, in an odd mood of indecision. Stark settled himself, every muscle

loose and ready. And the woman who had laughed crept closer and peered at Stark through her tangled hair, breathing heavily of the poppy wine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The young men gave one hesitant glance at Stark's feral eyes. Then they looked at each other and shrugged, and went away across the square half sheepishly, like great loutish boys caught in some misdemeanor.

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

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

It was the captain he had branded.

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

Chapter III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why the hell did you have to come here and start me remembering? I'm Larrabee. I live in Shuruun. I've been here forever, and I'll be here till I die. There isn't any Earth. It's gone. Just look up into the sky, and you'll know it's gone. There's nothing anywhere but clouds, and Venus, and mud."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stark said, "Who are the Lhari?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Its lights were winking out now, one by one, blotted by the creeping fog. Lightning etched its shadowy bulk

against the night, and then was gone. And through the noise of the thunder that followed, Stark thought he heard a voice calling.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do what?" asked Stark.

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

Chapter IV

THE STREET WAS EMPTY. Nothing showed, nothing stirred anywhere. Stark leaned over and pulled the girl to her feet, drawing her in under the shelter of the thatched eaves.

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

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

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

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

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

"I promise."

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

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

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

"But I can't lead you into the ambush. I do hate

Malthor, even if he is my father, because he beats me. And the Lost Ones . . ." She paused. "Sometimes I hear them at night, chanting way out there beyond the mist. It is a very terrible sound."

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

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

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

"They must. There are many islands there."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At length he stumbled against a carven pillar of black

stone and found the gate that hung from it, a massive thing sheathed in metal. It was barred, and the pounding of his fists upon it made little sound.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it was their racial characteristics that surprised him. They had interbred with the pale tribes of the

Swamp-Edges that had peopled Shuruun, and there were many with milk-white hair and broad faces. Yet even these bore an alien stamp. Stark was puzzled, for the race he would have named was unknown here behind the Mountains of White Cloud, and almost unknown anywhere on Venus at Sea-level, among the sweltering marshes and the eternal fogs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He flung open the heavy door and cried the word

down the hallway. Stark could hear it echoing hollowly within, and presently from the shadows came servants clad in silks and wearing jewelled collars, and from the guttural sound of their laughter Stark knew that they had no tongues.

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

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

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

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

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

Walking down the hall, preceded by the tongueless

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

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

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

Chapter V

THEY HAD THE APPEARANCE in that first glance, of creatures glimpsed in a fever-dream, very bright and distant, robed in a misty glow that gave them an illusion of unearthly beauty.

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

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

There had been no sound in the place when Stark entered, for the opening of the golden doors had caught

the attention of the Lhari and held it in contemplation of the stranger. Stark began to walk toward them in this utter stillness.

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

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

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

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

A voice spoke. Slow, harsh, sexless, it rang thinly through the vault. Thin—but a steel blade is thin, too. It speaks inexorably, and its word is final.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were of the Cloud People, the folk of the High Plateaus, kings of the land on the farther slopes of the Mountains of White Cloud. It was strange to see them here, on the dark side of the barrier wall, but here they were. How they had come, and why, leaving their rich

cool plains for the fetor of these foreign swamps, he could not guess. But there was no mistaking them—the proud fine shaping of their bodies, their alabaster skin, their eyes that were all colours and none, like the dawn sky, their hair that was pure warm silver.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her saw her looking at him. Her eyes bored into his as though they would search out his very guts and study them, and he knew that she expected him to turn away, unable to bear her gaze. He did not. Presently he smiled and said, "I have outstared a rock-lizard, to determine

which of us should eat the other. And I've outstared the very rock while waiting for him."

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

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

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

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

"And you are angry?"

"Ask Malthor if I am, and why!"

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

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

"I will."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two men at the gaming table rose, their faces

flushed and angry. One of them strode forward and gripped the girl's arm roughly.

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

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

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

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

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

Quite suddenly, it was Stark's turn to laugh. "Nol!" he said.

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

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

He wrenched off his girdle with his free hand, at the same time bending the girl around so he could get a fair shot at her. The creature of prey, a Terran falcon, clung to her wrist, beating its wings and screaming, its hooded head jerking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come and try it," answered Varra.

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

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

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

All this time the old woman had eaten and watched,

watched and eaten, her eyes glittering with interest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Egil finished,—“but I see a better target.”

Chapter VI

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

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

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

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

Blood in his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stark.

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

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

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

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

The terror he had felt before was nothing to the agony that filled him now. He lay entombed in his own flesh,

staring up at Zareth, wanting an answer to a question he dared not ask.

She understood, from the look in his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are we?" he asked.

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

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

Black walls, black vault above him, a vast hall filled

with the wash of the sea that slipped in streaks of whispering flame through the high embrasures. A hall that was twin to the vault of shadows where he had met the Lhari.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," said Stark. "That was the wrong thing to say."

The ludicrous side of it struck him, and he was suddenly roaring with laughter. "Malthor should have kept his mouth shut!"

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

Stark stopped laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OUT of the dim red murk beyond the open door they swam, into the long, long vastness of the hall that was filled with same red murk, moving slowly, their white bodies trailing wakes of sullen flame. The host of the

damned drifting through a strange red-litten hell, weary and without hope.

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

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

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

"Brother!"

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

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

"Would you have followed me?" asked Stark.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Little by little, life returned to his body. A mongrel guard came now and again to examine him, pricking

Stark's flesh with his knife to test the reaction, so that Stark should not malingering.

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

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

Chapter VII

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

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

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

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

pruned, the fresh soil turned this morning—by whose hand?

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

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

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

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

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

A great building had fallen in the centre of the square. The gods only knew what force had burst its walls and

tossed the giant blocks like pebbles into a heap. But there is was, the one untidy thing in the city, a mountain of debris.

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

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

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

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

An overseer came up to Stark, thrusting him roughly toward a sledge already partly loaded with broken rocks. Stark hesitated, his eyes turning ugly, and Helvi said,

"Come on, you fool! Do you want to be down flat on your back again?"

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

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

He laboured with the others, hauling the huge blocks

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

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

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

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

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

♦

ZARETH saw that look. She kept as close to Stark as possible, asking no favours, but following him around with a sort of quiet devotion, seeming contented only when she was near him. One "night" in the slave barracks she crouched beside his pallet, her hand on his

bare knee. She did not speak, and her face was hidden by the floating masses of her hair.

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

"What troubles you, little sister?"

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

"Why not?"

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

"What about her?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Helvi explained.

"There are boundaries laid down. Within them we may range, if we have the strength and the desire after work. Beyond them we may not go. And there is no

chance of escape by breaking through the barrier. How this is done I do not understand, but it is so, and the collars are the key to it.

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

He made a cutting motion with his hands.

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

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

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

Many times Stark made that pilgrimage with the others. Up from the red depths they would come, through the reeling bands of fire where the currents ran, through the clouds of crimson sparks and the sullen

patches of stillness that were like pools of blood, a company of white ghosts shrouded in flame, rising from their tomb for a little taste of the world they had lost.

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

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

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

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

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

Then, one "day" as the work was ending, Varra came smiling out of the red murk and beckoned to him, and Stark's heart gave a great leap. Without a backward look

he left Helvi and Zareth, and went with her, down the wide still avenue that led outward to the forest.

Chapter VIII

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

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

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

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

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

show his strength. They sped on and on, trailing wakes of flame, a black hawk chasing a silver dove through the forests of a dream.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll tell you, wild man."

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

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

"And if I do—what then?"

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

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

"Who knows? And what does it matter? The years take care of themselves." She shrugged. "The Lhari

blood has run out, and it's time there was a fresh strain. Our children will rule after us, and they'll be men."

Stark laughed. He roared with it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fair! Was Egil fair with you—or me?"

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

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

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

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

"Yes or no?"

"Yes or no?"

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

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

"I'll arrange that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Besides," mocked Stark shrewdly, "you wouldn't care to see Egil and Cond striding across the heavens of

Venus, and you're doubtful just what your own place would be in the new pantheon."

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

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

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

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

Chapter IX

HE CROSSED THE SQUARE, moving very carefully through the red murk, and presently he saw her.

It was not hard to find her. There was one temple larger than all the rest. Stark judged that it must once have faced the entrance of the fallen building, as though the great figure within was set to watch over the scientists and the philosophers who came there to dream their vast and sometimes terrible dreams.

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

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

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

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

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

All expression left Stark's face, leaving it perfectly blank except for his eyes, which took on a sudden lambent gleam. He began to move toward the temple, not hurrying even then, but moving in such a way that it seemed an army could not have stopped him.

Zareth broke free from her father. Perhaps she was intended to break free.

"Egil" she screamed. "It's a trap . . ."

Again Malthor caught her and this time he struck her harder, so that she crumpled down again across the image that watched with its jewelled, gentle eyes and saw nothing.

"She's afraid for you," said Malthor. "She knows I mean to kill you if I can. Well, perhaps Egil is here also. Perhaps he is not. But certainly Zareth is here. I have beaten her well, and I shall beat her again, as long as she lives to be beaten, for her treachery to me. And if you want to save her from that, you outland dog, you'll have to kill me. Are you afraid?"

Stark was afraid. Malthor and Zareth were alone in the temple. The pillared colonnades were empty except for the dim fires of the sea. Yet Stark was afraid, for an instinct older than speech warned him to be.

It did not matter. Zareth's white skin was mottled with dark bruises, and Malthor was smiling at him, and it did not matter.

Under the shadow of the roof and down the colonnade he went, swiftly now, leaving a streak of fire behind

him. Malthor looked into his eyes, and his smile trembled and was gone.

He crouched. And at the last moment, when the dark body plunged down at him as a shark plunges, he drew a hidden knife from his girdle and struck.

Stark had not counted on that. The slaves were searched for possible weapons every day, and even a sliver of stone was forbidden. Somebody must have given it to him, someone . . .

The thought flashed through his mind while he was in the very act of trying to avoid that death blow. *Too late, too late, because his own momentum carried him onto the point . . .*

Reflexes quicker than any man's, the hair-trigger reactions of a wild thing. Muscles straining, the centre of balance shifted with an awful wrenching effort, hands grasping at the fire-shot redness as though to force it to defy its own laws. The blade ripped a long shallow gash across his breast. But it did not go home. By a fraction of an inch, it did not go home.

While Stark was still off balance, Malthor sprang.

THEY grappled. The knife blade glittered redly, a hungry tongue eager to taste Stark's life. The two men rolled over and over, drifting and tumbling erratically, churning the sea to a froth of sparks, and still the image watched, its calm reptilian features unchangingly benign and wise. Threads of a darker red laced heavily across the dancing fires.

Stark got Malthor's arm under his own and held it there with both hands. His back was to the man now. Malthor kicked and clawed with his feet against the backs of Stark's thighs, and his left arm came up and tried to clamp around Stark's throat. Stark buried his chin so that it could not, and then Malthor's hand began to tear at Stark's face, searching for his eyes.

Stark voiced a deep bestial sound in his throat. He

moved his head suddenly, catching Malthor's hand between his jaws. He did not let go. Presently his teeth were locked against the thumb-joint, and Malthor was screaming, but Stark could give all his attention to what he was doing with the arm that held the knife. His eyes had changed. They were all beast now, the eyes of a killer blazing cold and beautiful in his dark face.

There was a dull crack, and the arm ceased to strain or fight. It bent back upon itself, and the knife fell, drifting quietly down. Malthor was beyond screaming now. He made one effort to get away as Stark released him, but it was a futile gesture, and he made no sound as Stark broke his neck.

He thrust the body from him. It drifted away, moving lazily with the suck of the currents through the colonnade, now and again touching a black pillar as though in casual wonder, wandering out at last into the square. Malthor was in no hurry. He had all eternity before him.

Stark moved carefully away from the girl, who was trying feebly now to sit up on the knees of the image. He called out, to some unseen presence hidden in the shadows under the roof,

"Malthor screamed your name, Egil. Why didn't you come?"

There was a flicker of movement in the intense darkness of the ledge at the top of the pillars.

"Why should I?" asked the Lord Egil of the Lhari. "I offered him his freedom if he could kill you, but it seems he could not—even though I gave him a knife, and drugs to keep your friend Helvi out of the way."

He came out where Stark could see him, very handsome in a tunic of yellow silk, the blunt black weapon in his hands.

"The important thing was to bait a trap. You would not face me because of this—" He raised the weapon. "I might have killed you as you worked, of course, but

my family would have had hard things to say about that. You're a phenomenally good slave."

"They'd have said hard words like 'coward', Egil," Stark said softly. "And Varra would have set her bird at you in earnest."

Egil nodded. His lip curved cruelly. "Exactly. That amused you, didn't it? And now my little cousin is training another falcon to swoop at me. She hooded you today, didn't she, Outlander?"

He laughed. "Ah well. I didn't kill you openly because there's a better way. Do you think I want it gossiped all over the Red Sea that my cousin jilted me for a foreign slave? Do you think I wish it known that I hated you, and why? No. I would have killed Malthor anyway, if you hadn't done it, because he knew. And when I have killed you and the girl I shall take your bodies to the barrier and leave them there together, and it will be obvious to everyone, even Varra, that you were killed trying to escape."

The weapon's muzzle pointed straight at Stark, and Egil's finger quivered on the trigger stud. Full power, this time. Instead of paralysis, death. Stark measured the distance between himself and Egil. He would be dead before he struck, but the impetus of his leap might carry him on, and give Zareth a chance to escape. The muscles of his thighs stirred and tensed.

A voice said, "And it will be obvious how and why *I* died, Egil? For if you kill them, you must kill me too."

WHERE Treon had come from, or when, Stark did not know. But he was there by the image, and his voice was full of a strong music, and his eyes shone with a fey light.

Egil had started, and now he swore in fury. "You idiot! You twisted freak! How did you come here?"

"How does the wind come, and the rain? I am not as other men." He laughed, a sombre sound with no

mirth in it. "I am here, Egil, and that's all that matters. And you will not slay this stranger who is more beast than man, and more man than any of us. The gods have a use for him."

He had moved as he spoke, until now he stood between Stark and Egil.

"Get out of the way," said Egil.

Treon shook his head.

"Very well," said Egil. "If you wish to die, you may."

The fey gleam brightened in Treon's eyes. "This is a day of death," he said softly, "but not of his, or mine."

Egil said a short, ugly word, and raised the weapon up.

Things happened very quickly after that. Stark sprang, arching up and over Treon's head, cleaving the red gases like a burning arrow. Egil started back, and shifted his aim upward, and his finger snapped down on the trigger stud.

Something white came between Stark and Egil, and took the force of the bolt.

Something white. A girl's body, crowned with streaming hair, and a collar of metal glowing bright around the slender neck.

Zareth.

They had forgotten her, the beaten child crouched on the knees of the image. Stark had moved to keep her out of danger, and she was no threat to the mighty Egil, and Treon's thoughts were known only to himself and the winds that taught him. Unnoticed, she had crept to a place where one last plunge would place her between Stark and death.

The rush of Stark's going took him on over her, except that her hair brushed softly against his skin. Then he was on top of Egil, and it had all been done so swiftly that the Lord of the Lhari had not had time to loose another bolt.

Stark tore the weapon from Egil's hand. He was cold, icy cold, and there was a strange blindness on him, so

that he could see nothing clearly but Egil's face. And it was Stark who screamed this time, a dreadful sound like the cry of a great cat gone beyond reason or fear.

Treon stood watching. He watched the blood stream darkly into the sea, and he listened to the silence come, and he saw the thing that had been his cousin drift away on the slow tide, and it was as though he had seen it all before and was not surprised.

Stark went to Zareth's body. The girl was still breathing, very faintly, and her eyes turned to Stark, and she smiled.

Stark was blind now with tears. All his rage had run out of him with Egil's blood, leaving nothing but an aching pity and a sadness, and a wondering awe. He took Zareth very tenderly into his arms and held her, dumbly, watching the tears fall on her upturned face. And presently he knew that she was dead.

Sometime later Treon came to him and said softly, "To this end she was born, and she knew it, and was happy. Even now she smiles. And she should, for she had a better death than most of us." He laid his hand on Stark's shoulder. "Come, I'll show you where to put her. She will be safe there, and tomorrow you can bury her where she would wish to be."

Stark rose and followed him, bearing Zareth in his arms.

Treon went to the pedestal on which the image sat. He pressed in a certain way upon a series of hidden springs, and a section of the paving slid noiselessly back, revealing stone steps leading down.

Chapter X

TREON LED THE WAY DOWN, into darkness that was lightened only by the dim fires they themselves

woke in passing. No currents ran here. The red gas lay dull and stagnant, closed within the walls of a square passage built of the same black stone.

"These are the crypts," he said. "The labyrinth that is shown on the chart my father found." And he told about the chart, as Varra had.

He led the way surely, his misshapen body moving without hesitation past the mouths of branching corridors and the doors of chambers whose interiors were lost in shadow.

"The history of the city is here. All the books and the learning, that they had not the heart to destroy. There are no weapons. They were not a warlike people, and I think that the force we of the Lhari have used differently was defensive only, protection against the beasts and the raiding primitives of the swamps."

With a great effort, Stark wrenched his thoughts away from the light burden he carried.

"I thought," he said dully, "that the crypts were under the wrecked building."

"So we all thought. We were intended to think so. That is why the building was wrecked. And for sixteen years we of the Lhari have killed men and women with dragging the stones of it away. But the temple was shown also in the chart. We thought it was there merely as a landmark, an identification for the great building. But I began to wonder . . ."

"How long have you known?"

"Not long. Perhaps two rains. It took many seasons to find the secret of this passage. I came here at night, when the others slept."

"And you didn't tell?"

"No!" said Treon. "You are thinking that if I had told, there would have been an end to the slavery and the death. But what then? My family, turned loose with the power to destroy a world, as this city was destroyed? No! It was better for the slaves to die."

He motioned Stark aside, then, between doors of gold that stood ajar, into a vault so great that there was no guessing its size in the red and shrouding gloom.

"This was the burial place of their kings," said Treon softly. "Leave the little one here."

Stark looked around him, still too numb to feel awe, but impressed even so.

They were set in straight lines, the beds of black marble—lines so long that there was no end to them except the limit of vision. And on them slept the old kings, their bodies, marvelously embalmed, covered with silken palls, their hands crossed upon their breasts, their wise unhuman faces stamped with the mark of peace.

Very gently, Stark laid Zareth down on a marble couch, and covered her also with silk, and closed her eyes and folded her hands. And it seemed to him that her face, too, had that look of peace.

He went out with Treon, thinking that none of them had earned a better place in the hall of kings than Zareth.

"Treon," he said.

"Yes?"

"That prophecy you spoke when I came to the castle—I will bear it out."

Treon nodded. "That is the way of prophecies."

He did not return toward the temple, but led the way deeper into the heart of the catacombs. A great excitement burned within him, a bright and terrible thing that communicated itself to Stark. Treon had suddenly taken on the stature of a figure of destiny, and the Earthman had the feeling that he was in the grip of some current that would plunge on irresistibly until everything in its path was swept away. Stark's flesh quivered.

THEY reached the end of the corridor at last. And there, in the red gloom, a shape sat waiting before a black, barred door. A shape grotesque and incredibly

misshapen, so horribly malformed that by it Treon's crippled body appeared almost beautiful. Yet its face was as the faces of the images and the old kings, and its sunken eyes had once held wisdom, and one of its seven-fingered hands was still slim and sensitive.

Stark recoiled. The thing made him physically sick, and he would have turned away, but Treon urged him on.

"Go closer. It is dead, embalmed, but it has a message for you. It has waited all this time to give that message."

Reluctantly, Stark went forward.

Quite suddenly, it seemed that the thing spoke.

Behold me. Look upon me, and take counsel before you grasp that power which lies beyond the door!

Stark leaped back, crying out, and Treon smiled.

"It was so with me. But I have listened to it many times since then. It speaks not with a voice, but within the mind, and only when one has passed a certain spot."

Stark's reasoning mind pondered over that. A thought-record, obviously, triggered off by an electronic beam. The ancients had taken good care that their warning would be heard and understood by anyone who should solve the riddle of the catacombs. Thought-images, speaking directly to the brain, know no barrier of time or language.

He stepped forward again, and once more the telepathic voice spoke to him.

"We tampered with the secrets of the gods. We intended no evil. It was only that we love perfection, and wished to shape all living things as flawless as our buildings and our gardens. We did not know that it was against the Law . . .

"I was one of those who found the way to change the living cell. We used the unseen force that comes from the Land of the Gods beyond the sky, and we so harnessed it that we could build from the living flesh as the

potter builds from the clay. We healed the halt and the maimed, and made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg, and for a time we were as brothers to the gods themselves. I myself, even I, knew the glory of perfection. And then came the reckoning.

"The cell, once made to change, would not stop changing. The growth was slow, and for a while we did not notice it, but when we did it was too late. We were becoming a city of monsters. And the force we had used was worse than useless, for the more we tried to mould the monstrous flesh to its normal shape, the more the stimulated cells grew and grew, until the bodies we laboured over were like things of wet mud that flow and change even as you look at them.

"One by one the people of the city destroyed themselves. And those of us who were left realized the judgment of the gods, and our duty. We made all things ready, and let the Red Sea hide us forever from our own kind, and those who should come after.

"Yet we did not destroy our knowledge. Perhaps it was our pride only that forbade us, but we could not bring ourselves to do it. Perhaps other gods, other races wiser than we, can take away the evil and keep only the good. For it is good for all creatures to be, if not perfect, at least strong and sound.

"But heed this warning, whoever you may be that listen. If your gods are jealous, if your people have not the wisdom or the knowledge to succeed where we failed in controlling this force, then touch it not! Or you, and all your people, will become as I."

THE voice stopped. Stark moved back again, and said to Treon incredulously, "And your family would ignore that warning?"

Treon laughed. "They are fools. They are cruel and greedy and very proud. They would say that this was a lie to frighten away intruders, or that human flesh would

not be subject to the laws that govern the flesh of reptiles. They would say anything, because they have dreamed this dream too long to be denied."

Stark shuddered and looked at the black door. "The thing ought to be destroyed."

"Yes," said Treon softly.

His eyes were shining, looking into some private dream of his own. He started forward, and when Stark would have gone with him he thrust him back, saying, "No. You have no part in this." He shook his head.

"I have waited," he whispered, almost to himself. "The winds bade me wait, until the day was ripe to fall from the tree of death. I have waited, and at dawn I knew, for the wind said, *Now is the gathering of the fruit at hand.*"

He looked suddenly at Stark, and his eyes had in them a clear sanity, for all their feyness.

"You heard, Stark. 'We made those stand tall and straight who came crooked from the egg'. I will have my hour. I will stand as a man for the little time that is left."

He turned, and Stark made no move to follow. He watched Treon's twisted body recede, white against the red dusk, until it passed the monstrous watcher and came to the black door. The long thin arms reached up and pushed the bar away.

The door swung slowly back. Through the opening Stark glimpsed a chamber that held a structure of crystal rods and discs mounted on a frame of metal, the whole thing glowing and glittering with a restless bluish light that dimmed and brightened as though it echoed some vast pulse-beat. There was other apparatus, intricate banks of tubes and condensers, but this was the heart of it, and the heart was still alive.

Treon passed within and closed the door behind him.

Stark drew back some distance from the door and its guardian, crouched down, and set his back against the

wall. He thought about the apparatus. Cosmic rays, perhaps—the unseen force that came from beyond the sky. Even yet, all their potentialities were not known. But a few luckless spacemen had found that under certain conditions they could do amazing things to human tissue.

It was a line of thought Stark did not like at all. He tried to keep his mind away from Treon entirely. He tried not to think at all. It was dark there in the corridor, and very still, and the shapeless horror sat quiet in the doorway and waited with him. Stark began to shiver, a shallow animal-twitching of the flesh.

He waited. After a while he thought Treon must be dead, but he did not move. He did not wish to go into that room to see.

He waited.

Suddenly he leaped up, cold sweat bursting out all over him. A crash had echoed down the corridor, a clashing of shattered crystal and a high singing note that trailed off into nothing.

The door opened.

A man came out. A man tall and straight and beautiful as an angel, a strong-limbed man with Treon's face, Treon's tragic eyes. And behind him the chamber was dark. The pulsing heart of power had stopped.

The door was shut and barred again. Treon's voice was saying, "There are records left, and much of the apparatus, so that the secret is not lost entirely. Only it is out of reach."

He came to Stark and held out his hand. "Let us fight together, as men. And do not fear. I shall die, long before this body changes." He smiled, the remembered smile that was full of pity for all living things. "I know, for the winds have told me."

Stark took his hand and held it.

"Good," said Treon. "And now lead on, stranger with the fierce eyes. For the prophecy is yours, and the day is

yours, and I who have crept about like a snail all my life know little of battles. Lead, and I will follow."

Stark fingered the collar around his neck. "Can you rid me of this?"

Treon nodded. "There are tools and acid in one of the chambers."

He found them, and worked swiftly, and while he worked Stark thought, smiling—and there was no pity in that smile at all.

They came back at last into the temple, and Treon closed the entrance to the catacombs. It was still night, for the square was empty of slaves. Stark found Egil's weapon where it had fallen, on the ledge where Egil died.

"We must hurry," said Stark. "Come on."

Chapter XI

THE ISLAND WAS SHROUDED heavily in mist and the blue darkness of the night. Stark and Treon crept silently among the rocks until they could see the glimmer of torchlight through the window-slits of the power station.

There were seven guards, five inside the blockhouse, two outside to patrol.

When they were close enough, Stark slipped away, going like a shadow, and never a pebble turned under his bare foot. Presently he found a spot to his liking and crouched down. A sentry went by not three feet away, yawning and looking hopefully at the sky for the first signs of dawn.

Treon's voice rang out, the sweet unmistakable voice. "Ho, there, guards!"

The sentry stopped and whirled around. Off around

the curve of the stone wall someone began to run, his sandals thud-thudding on the soft ground, and the second guard came up.

"Who speaks?" one demanded. "The Lord Treon?"

They peered into the darkness, and Treon answered, "Yes." He had come forward far enough so that they could make out the pale blur of his face, keeping his body out of sight among the rocks and the shrubs that sprang up between them.

"Make haste," he ordered. "Bid them open the door, there." He spoke in breathless jerks, as though spent. "A tragedy— a disaster! Bid them open!"

One of the men leaped to obey, hammering on the massive door that was kept barred from the inside. The other stood goggle-eyed, watching. Then the door opened, spilling a flood of yellow torchlight into the red fog.

"What is it?" cried the men inside. "What has happened?"

"Come out!" gasped Treon. "My cousin is dead, the Lord Egil is dead, murdered by a slave."

He let that sink in. Three or more men came outside into the circle of light, and their faces were frightened, as though somehow they feared they might be held responsible for this thing.

"You know him," said Treon. "The great black-haired one from Earth. He has slain the Lord Egil and got away into the forest, and we need all extra guards to go after him, since many must be left to guard the other slaves, who are mutinous. You, and you—" He picked out the four biggest ones. "Go at once and join the search. I will stay here with the others."

It nearly worked. The four took a hesitant step or two, and then one paused and said doubtfully.

"But, my lord, it is forbidden that we leave our posts, for any reason. Any reason at all, my lord! The Lord Cond would slay us if we left this place."

"And you fear the Lord Cond more than you do me," said Treon philosophically. "Ah, well. I understand."

He stepped out, full into the light.

A gasp went up, and then a startled yell. The three men from inside had come out armed only with swords, but the two sentries had their shock-weapons. One of them shrieked,

"It is a demon, who speaks with Treon's voice!"

And the two black weapons started up.

Behind them, Stark fired two silent bolts in quick succession, and the men fell, safely out of the way for hours. Then he leaped for the door.

He collided with two men who were doing the same thing. The third had turned to hold Treon off with his sword until they were safely inside.

Seeing that Treon, who was unarmed, was in danger of being spitted on the man's point. Stark fired between the two lunging bodies as he fell, and brought the guard down. Then he was involved in a thrashing tangle of arms and legs, and a lucky blow jarred the shock-weapon out of his hand.

Treon added himself to the fray. Pleasuring in his new strength, he caught one man by the neck and pulled him off. The guards were big men, and powerful, and they fought desperately. Stark was bruised and bleeding from a cut mouth before he could get in a finishing blow.

Someone rushed past him into the doorway. Treon yelled. Out of the tail of his eyes Stark saw the Lhari sitting dazed on the ground. The door was closing.

Stark hunched up his shoulders and sprang.

HE HIT the heavy panel with a jar that nearly knocked him breathless. It slammed open, and there was a cry of pain and the sound of someone falling. Stark burst through, to find the last of the guards rolling every which way over the floor. But one rolled over onto his feet

again, drawing his sword as he rose. He had not had time before.

Stark continued his rush without stopping. He plunged headlong into the man before the point was clear of the scabbard, bore him over and down, and finished the man off with savage efficiency.

He leaped to his feet, breathing hard, spitting blood out of his mouth, and looked around the control room. But the others had fled, obviously to raise the warning.

The mechanism was simple. It was contained in a large black metal oblong about the size and shape of a coffin, equipped with grids and lenses and dials. It hummed softly to itself, but what its source of power was Stark did not know. Perhaps those same cosmic rays, harnessed to a different use.

He closed what seemed to be a master switch, and the humming stopped, and the flickering light died out of the lenses. He picked up the slain guard's sword and carefully wrecked everything that was breakable. Then he went outside again.

Treon was standing up, shaking his head. He smiled ruefully.

"It seems that strength alone is not enough," he said. "One must have skill as well."

"The barriers are down," said Stark. "The way is clear."

Treon nodded, and went with him back into the sea. This time both carried shock weapons taken from the guards—six in all, with Egil's. Total armament for war.

As they forged swiftly through the red depths, Stark asked, "What of the people of Shuruun? How will they fight?"

Treon answered, "Those of Malthor's breed will stand for the Lhari. They must, for all their hope is there. The others will wait, until they see which side is safest. They would rise against the Lhari if they dared, for we have brought them only fear in their lifetimes. But they will wait, and see."

Stark nodded. He did not speak again.

They passed over the brooding city, and Stark thought of Egil and of Malthor who were part of that silence now, drifting slowly through the empty streets where the little currents took them, wrapped in their shrouds of dim fire.

He thought of Zareth sleeping in the hall of kings, and his eyes held a cold, cruel light.

They swooped down over the slave barracks. Treon remained on watch outside. Stark went in, taking with him the extra weapons.

The slaves still slept. Some of them dreamed, and moaned in their dreaming, and others might have been dead, with their hollow faces white as skulls.

Slaves. One hundred and four, counting the women.

Stark shouted out to them, and they woke, starting up on their pallets, their eyes full of terror. Then they saw who it was that called them, standing collarless and armed, and there was a great surging and a clamour that stilled as Stark shouted again, demanding silence. This time Helvi's voice echoed his. The tall barbarian had wakened from his drugged sleep.

Stark told them, very briefly, all that happened.

"You are freed from the collar," he said. "This day you can survive or die as men, and not slaves." He paused, then asked, "Who will go with me into Shuruun?"

They answered with one voice, the voice of the Lost Ones, who saw the red pall of death begin to lift from over them. The Lost Ones, who had found hope again.

Stark laughed. He was happy. He gave the extra weapons to Helvi and three others that he chose, and Helvi looked into his eyes and laughed too.

Treon spoke from the open door. "They are coming!"

STARK gave Helvi quick instructions and darted out, taking with him one of the other men. With Treon, they hid among the shrubbery of the garden that was

outside the hall, patterned and beautiful, swaying its lifeless brilliance in the lazy drifts of fire.

The guards came. Twenty of them, tall armed men, to turn out the slaves for another period of labour, dragging the useless stones.

And the hidden weapons spoke with their silent tongues.

Eight of the guards fell inside the hall. Nine of them went down outside. Ten of the slaves died with blazing collars before the remaining three were overcome.

Now there were twenty swords among ninety-four slaves, counting the women.

They left the city and rose up over the dreaming forest, a flight of white ghosts with flames in their hair, coming back from the red dusk and the silence to find the light again.

Light, and vengeance.

The first pale glimmer of dawn was sifting through the clouds as they came up among the rocks below the castle of the Lhari. Stark left them and went like a shadow up the tumbled cliffs to where he had hidden his gun on the night he had first come to Shuruun. Nothing stirred. The fog lifted up from the sea like a vapour of blood, and the face of Venus was still dark. Only the high clouds were touched with pearl.

Stark returned to the others. He gave one of his shock-weapons to a swamp-lander with a cold madness in his eyes. Then he spoke a few final words to Helvi and went back with Treon under the surface of the sea.

Treon led the way. He went along the face of the submerged cliff, and presently he touched Stark's arm and pointed to where a round mouth opened in the rock.

"It was made long ago," said Treon, "so that the Lhari and their slavers might come and go and not be seen. Come—and be very quiet."

They swam into the tunnel mouth, and down the dark

way that lay beyond, until the lift of the floor brought them out of the sea. Then they felt their way silently along, stopping now and again to listen.

Surprise was their only hope. Treon had said that with the two of them they might succeed. More men would surely be discovered, and meet a swift end at the hands of the guards.

Stark hoped Treon was right.

They came to a blank wall of dressed stone. Treon leaned his weight against one side, and a great block swung slowly around on a central pivot. Guttering torchlight came through the crack. By it Stark could see that the room beyond was empty.

They stepped through, and as they did so a servant in bright silks came yawning into the room with a fresh torch to replace the one that was dying.

He stopped in mid-step, his eyes widening. He dropped the torch. His mouth opened to shape a scream, but no sound came, and Stark remembered that these servants were tongueless—to prevent them from telling what they saw or heard in the castle, Treon said.

The man spun about and fled, down a long dim-lit hall. Stark ran him down without effort. He struck once with the barrel of his gun, and the man fell and was still.

Treon came up. His face had a look almost of exaltation, a queer shining of the eyes that made Stark shiver. He led on, through a series of empty rooms, all sombre black, and they met no one else for a while.

He stopped at last before a small door of burnished gold. He looked at Stark once, and nodded, and thrust the panels open and stepped through.

Chapter XII

THEY STOOD INSIDE THE vast echoing hall that stretched away into darkness until it seemed there was

no end to it. The cluster of silver lamps burned as before, and within their circle of radiance the Lhari started up from their places and stared at the strangers who had come in through their private door.

Cond, and Arel with her hands idle in her lap. Bor, pummelling the little dragon to make it hiss and snap, laughing at its impotence. Varra, stroking the winged creature on her wrist, testing with her white finger the sharpness of its beak. And the old woman, with a scrap of fat meat halfway to her mouth.

They had stopped, frozen, in the midst of these actions. And Treon walked slowly into the light.

"Do you know me?" he said.

A strange shivering ran through them. Now, as before, the old woman spoke first, her eyes glittering with a look as rapacious as her appetite.

"You are Treon," she said, and her whole vast body shook.

The name went crying and whispering off around the dark walls, *Treon! Treon! Treon!* Cond leaped forward, touching his cousin's straight strong body with hands that trembled.

"You have found it," he said. "The secret."

"Yes." Treon lifted his silver head and laughed, a beautiful ringing bell-note that sang from the echoing corners. "I found it, and it's gone, smashed, beyond your reach forever. Egil is dead, and the day of the Lhari is done."

There was a long, long silence, and then the old woman whispered, "*You lie!*"

Treon turned to Stark.

"Ask him, the stranger who came bearing doom upon his forehead. Ask him if I lie."

Cond's face became something less than human. He made a queer crazed sound and flung himself at Treon's throat.

Bor screamed suddenly. He alone was not much con-

cerned with the finding or the losing of the secret, and he alone seemed to realize the significance of Stark's presence. He screamed, looking at the big dark man, and went rushing off down the hall, crying for the guard as he went, and the echoes roared and racketed. He fought open the great doors and ran out, and as he did so the sound of fighting came through from the compound.

The slaves, with their swords and clubs, with their stones and shards of rock, had come over the wall from the cliffs.

Stark had moved forward, but Treon did not need his help. He had got his hands around Cond's throat, and he was smiling. Stark did not disturb him.

The old woman was talking, cursing, commanding, choking on her own apoplectic breath. Arel began to laugh. She did not move, and her hands remained limp and open in her lap. She laughed and laughed, and Varra looked at Stark and hated him.

"You're a fool, wild man," she said. "You would not take what I offered you, so you shall have nothing—only death."

She slipped the hood from her creature and set it straight at Stark. Then she drew a knife from her girdle and plunged it into Treon's side.

TREON reeled back. His grip loosened and Cond tore away, half throttled, raging, his mouth flecked with foam. He drew his short sword and staggered in upon Treon.

Furious wings beat and thundered around Stark's head, and talons were clawing for his eyes. He reached up with his left hand and caught the brute by one leg and held it. Not long, but long enough to get one clear shot at Cond that dropped him in his tracks. Then he snapped the falcon's neck.

He flung the creature at Varra's feet, and picked up the gun again. The guards were rushing into the hall now at the lower end, and he began to fire at them.

Treon was sitting on the floor. Blood was coming in a steady trickle from his side, but he had the shock-weapon in his hands, and he was still smiling.

There was a great boiling roar of noise from outside. Men were fighting there, killing, dying, screaming their triumph or their pain. The echoes raged within the hall, and the noise of Stark's gun was like a hissing thunder. The guards, armed only with swords, went down like ripe wheat before the sickle, but there were many of them, too many for Stark and Treon to hold for long.

The old woman shrieked and shrieked, and was suddenly still.

Helvi burst in through the press, with a knot of colared slaves. The fight dissolved into a whirling chaos. Stark threw his gun away. He was afraid now of hitting his own men. He caught up a sword from a fallen guard and began to hew his way to the barbarian.

Suddenly Treon cried his name. He leaped aside, away from the man he was fighting, and saw Varra fall with the dagger still in her hand. She had come up behind him to stab, and Treon had seen and pressed the trigger stud just in time.

For the first time, there were tears in Treon's eyes.

A sort of sickness came over Stark. There was something horrible in this spectacle of a family destroying itself. He was too much the savage to be sentimental over Varra, but all the same he could not bear to look at Treon for a while.

Presently he found himself back to back with Helvi, and as they swung their swords—the shock weapons had been discarded for the same reason as Stark's gun—Helvi panted,

"It has been a good fight, my brother! We cannot win, but we can have a good death, which is better than slavery!"

It looked as though Helvi was right. The slaves, unfor-

tunately, weakened by their long confinement, worn out by overwork, were being beaten back. The tide turned, and Stark was swept with it out into the compound, fighting stubbornly.

The great gate stood open. Beyond it stood the people of Shuruun, watching, hanging back—as Treon had said, they would wait and see.

In the forefront, leaning on his stick, stood Larrabee the Earthman.

Stark cut his way free of the press. He leaped up onto the wall and stood there, breathing hard, sweating, bloody, with a dripping sword in his hand. He waved it, shouting down to the men of Shuruun.

“What are you waiting for, you scuts, you women? The Lhari are dead, the Lost Ones are freed—must we of Earth do all your work for you?”

And he looked straight at Larrabee.

Larrabee stared back, his dark suffering eyes full of a bitter mirth. “Oh, well,” he said in English. “Why not?”

He threw back his head and laughed, and the bitterness was gone. He voiced a high, shrill rebel yell and lifted his stick like a cudgel, limping toward the gate, and the men of Shuruun gave tongue and followed him.

After that, it was soon over.

THEY found Bor’s body in the stable pens, where he had fled to hide when the fighting started. The dragons, maddened by the smell of the blood, had slain him very quickly.

Helvi had come through alive, and Larrabee, who had kept himself carefully out of harm’s way after he had started the men of Shuruun on their attack. Nearly half the slaves were dead, and the rest wounded. Of those who had served the Lhari, few were left.

Stark went back into the great hall. He walked slowly, for he was very weary, and where he set his foot there

was a bloody print, and his arms were red to the elbows, and his breast was splashed with the redness. Treon watched him come, and smiled, nodding.

"It is as I said. And I have outlived them all."

Arel had stopped laughing at last. She had made no move to run away, and the tide of battle had rolled over her and drowned her unaware. The old woman lay still, a mountain of inert flesh upon her bed. Her hand still clutched a ripe fruit, clutched convulsively in the moment of death, the red juice dripping through her fingers.

"Now I am going, too," said Treon, "and I am well content. With me goes the last of our rotten blood, and Venus will be the cleaner for it. Bury my body deep, stranger with the fierce eyes. I would not have it looked on after this."

He sighed and fell forward.

Bor's little dragon crept whimpering out from its hiding place under the old woman's bed and scurried away down the hall, trailing its dragging rope.

STARK leaned on the taffrail, watching the dark mass of Shuruun recede into the red mists.

The decks were crowded with the outland slaves, going home. The Lhari were gone, the Lost Ones freed forever, and Shuruun was now only another port on the Red Sea. Its people would still be wolf's-heads and pirates, but that was natural and as it should be. The black evil was gone.

Stark was glad to see the last of it. He would be glad also to see the last of the Red Sea.

The off-shore wind set the ship briskly down the gulf. Stark thought of Larrabee, left behind with his dreams of winter snows and city streets and women with dainty feet. It seemed that he had lived too long in Shuruun, and had lost the courage to leave it.

"Poor Larrabee," he said to Helvi, who was standing near him. "He'll die in the mud, still cursing it."

Someone laughed behind him. He heard a limping step on the deck and turned to see Larrabee coming toward him.

"Changed my mind at the last minute," Larrabee said. "I've been below, lest I should see my muddy brats and be tempted to change it again." He leaned beside Stark, shaking his head. "Ah, well, they'll do nicely without me. I'm an old man, and I've a right to choose my own place to die in. I'm going back to Earth, with you."

Stark glanced at him. "I'm not going to Earth."

Larrabee sighed. "No. No, I suppose you're not. After all, you're no Earthman, really, except for an accident of blood. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Away from Venus, but I don't know yet where."

Larrabee's dark eyes surveyed him shrewdly. "'A restless, cold-eyed tiger of a man', that's what Varra said. He's lost something, she said. He'll look for it all his life, and never find it."

After that there was silence. The red fog wrapped them, and the wind rose and sent them scudding before it.

Then, faint and far off, there came a moaning wail, a sound like broken chanting that turned Stark's flesh cold.

All on board heard it. They listened, utterly silent, their eyes wide, and somewhere a woman began to weep.

Stark shook himself. "It's only the wind," he said roughly, "in the rocks by the strait."

The sound rose and fell, weary, infinitely mournful, and the part of Stark that was N'Chaka said that he lied. It was not the wind that keened so sadly through the mists. It was the voices of the Lost Ones who were forever lost—Zareth, sleeping in the hall of kings, and all

the others who would never leave the dreaming city and the forest, never find the light again.

Stark shivered, and turned away, watching the leaping fires of the strait sweep toward them.

THE LAKE OF THE GONE FOREVER

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 con-

trolled 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 anaesthetic 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 Es-

mond 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 sure-footed even among the deceptive drifts. Several times he was forced to stop and wait lest he leave the party too far behind.

Suddenly, above the organ notes of the wind, there was another sound.

Conway lifted his head to listen. Clear and sweet and strong he heard the winding of horns from the upper slopes. They echoed away down the valley, calling one to the other with ringing voices that stirred Conway's blood to a wild excitement. He shook the snow out of his hair and plunged on, leaving the rest to follow as best they could.

A jutting shoulder of the mountains loomed before him. The wind blew and the deep-throated horns called and called again across the valley. The blown drifts leaped at him and the icy screes were a challenge to his strength but they could not slow him down. He laughed and went on around the shoulder and saw the white city glittering under the stars.

It spread across the valley floor and up the slopes as though it grew from the frozen earth, a part of it, as enduring as the mountains. At Conway's first glance, it seemed to be built all of ice, its turrets and crenellations glowing with a subtle luminescence in the dusky twilight, fantastically shaped, dusted here and there with snow. From the window openings came a glow of pearly light.

Beyond the city the twin ranges drew in and in until their flanks were parted only by a thin line of shadow, a narrow valley with walls of ice reaching up to the sky.

Conway's heart contracted with a fiery pang.

A narrow valley—*The valley.*

For a moment everything vanished in a roaring darkness. Dream and reality rushed together—his father's notes, his father's dying cry, his own waking visions and fearful wanderings beyond the wall of sleep.

It lies beyond the city, in a narrow place between the mountains—The Lake of the Gone Forever. And I can never go back!

Conway said aloud to the wind and the snow and the crying horns, "But I have come back. I have come!"

Exulting, triumphant, he looked again at the city, the white beauty of it, the wind-carved towers bright beneath the golden stars.

It was a strong place, walled and fortified against whatever enemies there might be on this world of Iskar. Conway ran toward it and as he did so the braying of horns rose louder and then was joined by the shrill war-cry of pipes.

They went skirling along the wall and through the snow-mist he saw that men were there above him looking down. The glitter of their spears ran like a broken line of silver from both sides of the great stone gate.

Chapter III

The Fear

CONWAY'S blood leaped hot within him. The pipes set him mad and he flung up his arm and shouted at the men, a long hail. He could see them clearly now. They were tall lean men with bodies tough as rawhide and strong bone in their faces and eyes like the eyes of eagles. They wore the white furs of beasts kilted about them, thrown loosely over their naked shoulders, and they were bareheaded and careless of the cold.

Their spears rose up and menaced him.

He stopped. Once again he cried out, a cry as wild and shrill as the martial pipes. Then he stood still, waiting.

Slowly behind him came Rohan and the others. They formed into a sort of knot around him. Some of the men reached nervously for their riot guns and Rohan spoke sharply. The pipes fell silent and the sounding horns. They waited, all of them.

There was movement on the wall and an old man came forward among the warriors, a cragged gnarled old man with a proud face and fierce eyes, standing strong as a granite rock.

He looked down at the alien men below him. His hair and his long beard blew in the bitter wind, and the white furs whipped around him, and for a long time he did not speak. His eyes met Conway's and there was hatred in them and deep pain.

Finally he said, very slowly, as though the words came haltingly from some long-locked vault of memory, "Men of Earth!"

Conway started. It had not occurred to him that his father might have left some knowledge of English behind him.

"Yes," he answered, holding out his empty hands. "Friends."

The old man shook his head. "No. Go, or we kill."

He looked again at Conway, very strangely, and a little chill ran through the Earthman. Was it possible that the old man saw in him some resemblance to the Conway he had known before? He and his father had not looked alike.

Esmond stepped forward. "Please," he said. "We mean you no harm. We only want to talk to you. We will obey you, we will bring no weapons—only let us in!"

He was very like a child pleading, almost on the verge of tears. It was unthinkable that he should be denied now.

The old man said again, "Go."

Rohan spoke. "We have gifts, many things for your people. We want nothing. We come as friends."

The old man flung up his head and laughed, and his mirth was like vitriol poured on the wind.

"*Friend!* Conna was my friend. In my house, as my own son, lived Conna, my friend!"

He cried out something in his own harsh tongue and Conway knew that it was a curse and he knew that Conna was his own name. They had not forgotten his father on Iskar, it seemed.

He was suddenly angry, more terribly angry than he had ever been in his life. Beyond the city, almost within reach, lay the valley of the Lake and nothing, not all their spears, not death itself, was going to stop now.

He strode up under the wall and looked at the old man with eyes as black and baleful as his own.

"We know nothing of this Conna," he said. "We come in peace. But if you want war we will make war. If you kill us others will come—many others. Our ship is huge and very terrible. Its fire alone can destroy your city. Will you let us in, old man, or must we . . ."

After a long time the other said slowly, "What is your name?"

"Rand," said Conway.

"Rand," repeated the old man softly. "Rand." He was silent for a time, brooding, his chin sunk on his breast. His eyes were hooded and he did not look again at Conway.

Abruptly he turned and issued orders in his own tongue. Then, to the Earthmen, he shouted, "*Enter!*"

The great stone was rolled away.

Conway went back to the others. Both Esmond and Rohan were furious.

"Who gave you the right—" Rohan began, and Esmond broke in passionately,

"You shouldn't have threatened them! A little more talk would have convinced them."

Conway looked at them contemptuously.

"You wanted in, didn't you?" he demanded. "All right, the gate's open and they'll think twice about getting tough with us after we're through it."

HE unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it, holster and all, to a man on the wall. It was a gesture and no more because he had hidden a small anaesthetic needle-gun under his coverall in case of need—but it would look good to the Iskarians.

"I'd do the same if I were you," he said to the others. "Also, I would send the men back. They're not going to do us any good inside the wall and they might do us harm. Tell them to bring the trade goods and one of the radios from the sledges and then return to the ship—and stand by."

Rohan scowled. He did not like having the command taken from him. But Conway's orders made sense and he relayed them. Then he tossed his own gun to one of the warriors. Esmond did not carry one. The men went away, back to the sledges.

"Remember," said Conway, "you never heard of 'Conna', or his son."

The others nodded. They turned then and went into the city and the stone gate was closed behind them.

The old man was waiting for them, and with him a sort of honor guard of fifteen tall fighting men.

"I am Krah," said the old patriarch. He waited politely until Esmond and Rohan had said their names and then he said, "Come."

The guard formed up. The Earthmen went—half guest, half captive—into the streets of the city.

They were narrow winding streets, rambling up and down over the broken ground. In some places they were scoured clean to the ice by the whistling wind, in others

they were choked by drifts. Conway could see now that the buildings were all of solid stone, over which the cold shining mail had formed for centuries, except where the openings were kept clear.

The people of the city were gathered to watch as the strangers went by.

It was a strangely silent crowd. Men, women and children, old and young, all of them as stalwart and handsome as mountain trees, with their wide black pupils and pale hair, the men clad in skins, the women in kirtles of rough woolen cloth. Conway noticed that the women and children did not mingle with the men.

Silent, all of them, and watching. There was something disquieting in their stillness. Then, somewhere, an old woman sent up a keening cry of lament, and another took it up, and another, until the eerie *ochone* echoed through the twisting streets as though the city itself wept in pain.

The men began to close in. Slowly at first, now one stepping forward, now another, like the first pebbles rolling before the rush of the avalanche. Conway's heart began to pound and there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

Esmond cried out to the old man, "Tell them not to fear us! Tell them we are friends!"

Krah looked at him and smiled. His eyes went then to Conway and he smiled again.

"I will tell them," he said.

"Remember," said Conway harshly. "Remember the great ship and its fires."

Krah nodded. "I will not forget."

He spoke to the people, shouting aloud, and reluctantly the men drew back and rested the butts of their spears on the ground. The women did not cease to wail.

Conway cursed his father for the things he had not written in his notes.

Quite suddenly, out of a steep side lane, a herd boy drove his flock with a scramble and a clatter. The queer

white-furred beasts milled in the narrow space, squealing, filling the air with their sharp, not unpleasant odor.

As though that pungency were a trigger, a shutter clicked open somewhere in Conway's mind and he knew that he had seen these streets before, known the sounds and smells of the city, listened to the harsh staccato speech. The golden wheeling of the stars overhead hurt him with a poignant familiarity.

Conway plunged again into that limbo between fact and dream. It was far worse this time. He wanted to sink down and cling to something until his mind steadied again but he did not dare do anything but walk behind the old man as though nothing on Iskar could frighten him.

Yet he was afraid—afraid with the fear of madness, where the dream becomes the reality.

Beads of sweat came out on his face and froze there. He dug his nails into his palms and forced himself to remember his whole life, back to his earliest memory and beyond, when his father must have talked and talked of Iskar, obsessed with the thought of what he had found there and lost again.

He had not spoken so much of Iskar when his son was old enough to understand. But it seemed that the damage was already done. The formative years, the psychologists call them, when the things learned and forgotten will come back to haunt one later on.

Conway was a haunted man, walking through that strange city. And old Krah watched him sidelong and smiled and would not be done with smiling.

The women wailed, howling like shewolves 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 smouldering 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 crosslegged, 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 Earthman 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.

"Marcial!" 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 heart 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 smiled. 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 smouldering anger she had in her. She was not patient like the other women of Iskar, for she had had a glimpse of something else. He remembered what Krah's son had said.

"Did Conna teach this?"

She nodded. "You take me?" she demanded. "You take me? I run away from Krah. Hide. You take me?"

Conway smiled. He liked her. They were the same kind, he and she—nursing a hopeless dream and risking everything to make it come true.

"Why not?" he said. "Sure, I'll take you."

Her joy was a savage thing. "If you lie," she whispered, "I kill you!" Then she kissed him.

He could tell it was the first time she had ever kissed a man. He could also tell that it was not going to be the last.

He thrust her away. "You must help me then. Take these." He handed her the bundle of his discarded clothing. "Hide them. Is there a back way from the house?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me. Then wait for me—and talk to no one. *No one*. Understand?"

"Where you go?" she asked him. The look of wonder came back into her eyes, and something of fear. "What you do, man of Iskar?"

He shook his head. "If you don't help me, if I die—you'll never see Earth."

"Come," she said, and turned.

Esmond and Rohan were still with Marcia, still full of their fears and angers—too full to worry about Conway, the outsider. The house of Krah was empty and silent except for the wind that swept through the embrasures with a shriek of laughter, like the laughter of wolves before the kill. Conway shivered, an animal twitching of the skin.

Ciel led him down a little stair and showed him a narrow passage built for the taking of offal from the slaughtering pen—woman's work, unfit for warriors.

"I wait," she said. Her fingers closed hard on the muscles of his arm. "Come back. Come soon!"

Her fear was not for him but for herself, lest now in this last hour her hope of freedom should be snatched away. Conway knew how she felt.

He bent and gave her a quick rough kiss. "I'll come back." Then he lifted the curtain of hide and slipped out into the darkness.

Chapter VI

Echoes of a Dream

THE city was alive and vocal with the storm. The narrow streets shouted with it, the icy turrets of the houses quivered and rang. No snow was falling but the thick brown whiteness drove and leaped and whirled, carried across half of Iskar in the rush of the wind. Above the tumult the stars burned clear and steady in the sky.

The cold bit deep into Conway's flesh, iron barbs reaching for his heart. He drew the warm furs closer. His heartbeats quickened. His blood raced, fighting back the cold, and a strange exaltation came over him,

something born out of the wild challenge of the wind. His pupils dilated, black and feral as a cat's. He began to walk, moving at a swift pace, setting his feet down surely on the glare ice and the frozen stones.

He knew the direction he must take. He had determined that the first time he saw the city and it was burned into his memory for all time.

The way to the Lake, the Lake of the Gone Forever.

There were not many in the streets and those he passed gave him no second look. The white wind laid a blurring veil over everything and there was nothing about Conway to draw attention, a lean proud-faced man bent against the wind, a solitary warrior on an errand of his own.

Several times he tried to see if he were being followed. He could not forget Krah's face with its look of secret joy, nor cease to wonder uneasily why the old man had so suddenly left the Earthfolk unwatched. But he could see nothing in that howling smother.

He made sure of the little gun and smiled.

He found his way by instinct through the twisting streets, heading always in the same direction. The houses began to thin out. Quite suddenly they were gone and Conway stood in the open valley beyond. High above he could distinguish the shining peaks of the mountains lifting against the stars.

The full sweep of the wind met him here. He faced it squarely, laughing, and went on over the tumbled rocks. The touch of madness that had been in him ever since he reached Iskar grew into an overwhelming thing.

Part of his identity slipped away. The wind and the snow and the bitter rocks were part of him. He knew them and they knew him. They could not harm him. Only the high peaks looked down on him with threatening faces and it seemed to him that they were angry.

He was beginning to hear the echoes of his dream but they were still faint. He was not yet afraid. He was, in

some strange way, happy. He had never been more alone and yet he did not feel lonely. Something wild and rough woke within him to meet the wild roughness of the storm and he felt a heady pride, a certainty that he could stand against any man of Iskar on his own ground.

The city was lost behind him. The valley had him between its white walls vague and formless now, closing in upon him imperceptibly beyond the curtain of the storm. There was a curious timelessness about his journey, almost a spacelessness, as though he existed in a dimension of his own.

AND in that private world of his it did not seem strange nor unfitting that Ciel's voice should cry out thinly against the wind, that he should turn to see her clambering after him, nimble-footed, reckless with haste.

She reached him, spent with running. "Krah," she gasped. "He go ahead with four. One follow. I see. I follow too." She made a quick, sharp gesture that took in the whole valley. "Trap. They catch. They kill. Go back."

Conway did not stir. She shook him, in a passion of urgency. "Go back! Go back now!"

He stood immovable, his head raised, his eyes questing into the storm, seeking the enemies he only half believed were there. And then, deep and strong across the wind, came the baying of a hunter's horn. It was answered from the other side of the valley. Another spoke, and another, and Conway counted them. Six—Krah and his five sons around and behind him, so that the way back to the city was closed.

Conway began to see the measure of the old man's cunning and he smiled, and animal baring of the teeth.

"You go," he said to Ciel. "They will not harm you."

"What I do they punish," she answered grimly. "No. You must live. They hunt you but I know trails, ways.

Go many times to Lake of the Gone Forever. They not kill there. Come."

She turned but he caught her and would not let her go, full of a quick suspicion.

"Why do you care so much about me?" he demanded. "Esmond or Rohan could take you to Earth as well."

"Against Krah's will?" She laughed. "They are soft men, not like you." Her eyes met his fairly in the gloom, the black pupils wide and lustrous, looking deep into him so that he was strangely stirred. "But there is more," she said. "I never love before. Now I do. And—you are Conna's son."

Conway said, very slowly, "How did you know that?"

"Krah know. I hear him talk."

Then it had been a trap all along, from the beginning. Krah had known. The old man had given him one chance to go from Iskar and he had not taken it—and Krah had been glad. After that he had withdrawn and waited for Conway to come to him.

The girl said, "But I know without hearing. Now come, son of Conna."

She led off, swift as a deer, her skirts kilted above her knees. Conway followed and behind and around them the horns bayed and answered with the eager voices of hounds that have found the scent and will never let it go.

All down the long valley the hunters drove them and the mountain walls narrowed in and in, and the ringing call of the horns came closer. There was a sound of joy in them, and they were without haste. Never once, beyond the white spume of the blowing snow, did Conway catch a glimpse of his pursuers. But he knew without seeing that old Krah's face bore a bleak and bitter smile, the terrible smile of a vengeance long delayed.

Conway knew well where the hunt would end. The horns would cry him into the throat of the cleft, and

then they would be silent. He would not be permitted to reach the Lake.

Again he touched the little gun and his face could not have been less savage than Krah's. He was not afraid of spears.

The girl led him swiftly, surely, among the tangled rocks and the spurs of ice, her skirt whipping like a grey flag in the wind. High overhead the cold peaks filled the sky, leaving only a thin rift of stars. And suddenly, as though they were living things, the walls of the valley rushed together upon him, and the shouting of the horns rose to an exultant clamor in his ears, racing, leaping toward him.

He flung up his head and yelled, an angry, defiant cry. Then there was silence, and through the driven veils of snow he saw the shapes of men and the dim glittering of spears.

He would have drawn the gun and loosed its bright spray of instant sleep into the warriors. The drug would keep them quiet long enough for him to do what he had to do. But Ciel gave him no time. She wrenched at him suddenly, pulling him almost bodily into a crack between the rocks.

"Hurry!" she panted. "*Hurry!*"

The rough rock scraped him as he jammed his way through. He could hear voices behind him, loud and angry. It was pitch dark, even to his eyes, but Ciel caught his furs and pulled him along—a twist, a turn, a sharp corner that almost trapped him where her smallness slipped past easily. Then they were free again and he was running beside her, following her urgent breathless voice.

For a few paces he ran and then his steps slowed and dragged at last to a halt. There was no wind here in this sheltered place. There were no clouds of blowing snow to blur his vision.

He stood in a narrow cleft between the mountains.

On both sides the cliffs of ice rose up, sheer and high and infinitely beautiful out of the powdery drifts. The darkling air was full of whirling motes of frost, like the dust of diamonds, and overhead the shining pinnacles stood clear against a sky of deepest indigo, spangled with great stars.

He stood in the narrow valley of his dream. And now at last he was afraid.

Truth and nightmare had come together like the indrawn flanks of the mountains and he was caught between them. Awake, aware of the biting cold and the personal sensation of his flesh, still the nameless terror of the dream beset him.

He could almost see the remembered shadow of his father weeping by the sheathed rocks that hid the end of the cleft, almost hear that cry of loss—*I can never go back to the Lake of the Gone Forever!*

He knew that now he was going to see the end of the dream. He would not wake this time before he passed the barrier rocks. The agonizing fear that had no basis in his own life stood naked in his heart and would not go.

He had known, somehow, all his life that this time must come. Now that it was here he found that he could not face it. The formless baseless terror took his strength away and not all his reasoning could help him. He could not go on.

And yet he went, as always, slowly forward through the drifting snow.

He had forgotten Ciel. He was surprised when she caught at him, urging him to run. He had forgotten Krah.

He remembered only the despairing words whispered back and forth by the cold lips of the ice. *Gone Forever . . . Gone Forever . . .* / He looked up and the golden stars wheeled above him in the dark blue sky. The beauty of them was evil and the shimmering turrets of the ice were full of lurking laughter.

Nightmare—and he walked in it broad awake.

It was not far. The girl dragged him on, drove him, and he obeyed automatically, quickening his slow pace. He did not fight. He knew that it was no use. He went on as a man walks patiently to the gallows.

He passed the barrier rocks. He was not conscious now of movement. In a sort of stasis, cold as the ice, he entered the cave that opened beyond them and looked at last upon the Lake of the Gone Forever.

Chapter VII

Black Lake

IT was black, that Lake. Utterly black and very still, lying in its ragged cradle of rock under the arching roof where, finally, the mountains met.

A strange quality of blackness, Conway thought, and shuddered deeply with the hand of nightmare still upon him. He stared into it, and suddenly, as though he had always known, he realized that the lake was like the pupil of a living eye, having no light of its own but receiving into itself all light, all impression.

He saw himself reflected in that great unstirring eye and Ciel beside him. Where the images fell there were faint lines of frosty radiance, as though the substance of the Lake were gravating upon itself in glowing acid the memory of what it saw.

Soft-footed from behind him came six other shadows—Krah and his five sons—and Conway could see that a great anger was upon them. But they had left their spears outside.

"We may not kill in this place," said Krah slowly, "but we can keep you from the thing you would do."

"How do you know what I mean to do?" asked Conway and his face was strange as though he lis-

tened to distant voices speaking in an unknown tongue.

Krah answered, "As your father came before you, so you have come—to steal from us the secret of the Lake."

"Yes," said Conway absently. "Yes, that is so."

The old man and his tall sons closed in around Conway and Ciel came and stood between them.

"Wait!" she said.

For the first time they acknowledged the presence of the girl.

"For your part in this," said Krah grimly, "you will answer later."

"No!" she cried defiantly. "I answer no! Listen. Once you love Conna. You learn from him good things. His mate happy, not slave. He bring wisdom to Iskar—but now you hate Conna, you forget.

"I go to Earth with Conna's son. But first he must come here. It is right he come. But you kill, you full of hate for Rand—so I come to save him."

She stood up to Krah, the little grey mouse transfigured into a bright creature of anger, blazing with it, alive with it.

"All my life—hate! Because of Rand you try to kill memory of Conna, you teach people hate and fear. But my mother learn from Conna. I learn from her—and I no forget! Rand happy, free. My mother know—and I no forget."

It came to Conway with a queer shock that she was not speaking of him but of another Rand. He listened to the girl and there was a stillness in him as deep and lightless as the stillness of the lake.

"You not kill, old man," Ciel whispered. "Not yet. Let him see, let him know. Then kill if he is evil."

She swung around.

"Son of Conna! Look into the Lake. All the dead of Iskar buried here. They gone forever but memory lives. All come here in life, so that the Lake remember. Look, son of Conna, and think of your father!"

Still with that strange quiet heavy on his heart Rand Conway looked into the Lake and did as Ciel told him to do. Krah and his sons looked also and did not move.

At first there was nothing but the black infinite depth of the Lake. *It is semi-liquid*, said his father's notes, the notes he had kept secret from everyone—and in this heavy medium are suspended particles of some transuranic element—perhaps an isotope of uranium itself that is unknown to us. Incalculable wealth—incalculable pain! My soul is there, lost in the Lake of the Gone Forever.

Rand Conway stood waiting and the thought of his father was very strong in him. His father, who had died mourning that he could never come back.

Slowly, slowly, the image of his father took shape in the substance of the lake, a ghostly picture painted with a brush of cold firs against the utter dark.

It was no projection of Rand Conway's own memory mirrored there, for this was not the man he had known, old before his time and broken with longing. This man was young, and his face was happy.

He turned and beckoned to someone behind him, and the shadowy figure of a girl came into the circle of his outstretched arm. They stood together, and a harsh sob broke from old Krah's throat. Conway knew that his father and the pale-haired lovely girl had stood where he stood now on the brink of the Lake and looked down as he was looking, that their images might be forever graven into the heart of the strange darkness below.

They kissed. And Ciel whispered, "See her face, how it shines with joy."

The figures moved away and were gone. Conway watched, beyond emotion, beyond fear. Some odd portion of his brain even found time to theorize on the electrical impulses of thought and how they could shape the free energy in the unknown substance of the Lake, so that it became almost a second subconscious mind for

everyone on Iskar, storehouse from which the memories of a race could be called at will.

The eye of the Lake had seen and now, at the urging of those intense minds, it produced the pictures it had recorded like the relentless unreeling of some cosmic film.

RAND CONWAY watched, step by step, the disintegration of a man's soul. And it was easy for him to understand, since his own life had been ruled by that same consuming greed.

Conna came again and again to the Lake, alone. It seemed to hold a terrible fascination for him. After all he was a prospector, with no goal before him for many years but the making of a big strike. Finally he brought instruments and made tests and after that the fascination turned to greed and the greed in time to a sort of madness.

It was a madness that Conna fought against and he had reason. The girl came again. With her this time were Krah and his sons, all younger and less bitter than now, and others whom Conway did not know. It was obviously a ritual visit and it had to do with the new-born 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 holstered 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

will 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 TRUANTS

Chapter I

Prelude to Nightmare

The farmhouse was tall and white. For eighty-three years it had stood in the green countryside where the shaggy Pennsylvania hills slope down to the meadows of Ohio. It was a wise house and a kindly one. It knew all there was to know of the wheeling seasons, birth and death, human passion, human sorrow.

But now something had come into the night that it did not know. From the starry sky it came, a sound and presence not of the Earth. The house listened and was afraid . . .

PRELUDE to nightmare. Hugh Sherwin was to remember very clearly, in the days that followed every second of those last calm precious minutes before his familiar world began to fall about him.

He sat in the old farmhouse living room, smoking and drowsily considering the pages of a dairy equipment catalogue. From outside in the warm May night came a chorus of squeals, yelps and amiable growlings where Janie played some complicated game with the dogs.

He remembered that the air was soft, sweet with the smell of the rain that had fallen that afternoon. He remembered the chirping of the crickets. He remembered thinking that summer was on its way at last.

Lucy Sherwin looked up from her sewing. "I swear," she said, "that child grows an inch every day. I can't keep her dresses down to save me."

Sherwin grinned. "Wait another five years. Then you can really start worrying about her clothes."

His pipe had gone out. He lit it again. Janie whooped with laughter out on the lawn. The dogs barked. Lucy went on with her sewing.

Sherwin turned the pages of the catalogue. After a time he realized, without really thinking of it, that the sounds from outside had stopped.

The child, the dogs, the shrilling crickets, all were silent. And it seemed to Sherwin, in the stillness, that he heard a vast strange whisper hissing down the sky.

A gust of wind blew sharp and sudden, tearing at the trees. The frame of the old house quivered. Then it was gone and Lucy said, "It must be going to storm."

Janie's voice lifted up in a sudden cry. "Daddy! Daddy! Come quick!"

Sherwin groaned. "Oh, Lord," he said. "What now?" He leaned over and called through the open window. "What do you want?"

"Come here, Daddy!"

Lucy smiled. "Better go, dear. Maybe she's found a snake."

"Well, if she has she can let it go again." But he rose, grumbling, and went out the door, snapping on the yard light.

"Where are you, Janie? What is it?"

He heard her voice from the far side of the yard, where the light did not reach. He started toward her. The dogs came running to him, a brace of lolling spaniels and a big golden retriever. They panted happily. Sherwin called again.

"Jane!"

She did not answer. He had passed out of the light now but there was part of a moon and presently he saw her, a thin intense child with dark hair and very blue eyes, standing perfectly still and staring toward the west.

She said breathlessly, "It's gone now, down in the woods."

Sherwin followed her intent gaze, across the little creek that ran behind the house and the great white dairy barn, across the wide meadow beyond it, and farther still to the woods.

The thick stand of oak and maple and sycamore covered acres of marshy bottomland too low for pasture. Sherwin had never cleared it. The massed darkness of the trees lay silent and untroubled in the dim moonlight. The crickets had begun to sing again.

"What's gone?" demanded Sherwin. "I don't see anything."

"It came down out of the sky," Janie said. "A big dark thing, like an airplane without any wings. It went down into the woods."

"Nonsense. There haven't been any planes around and if one had crashed in the woods we'd all know it."

"It didn't crash. It just came down. It made a whistling noise." She all but shook him in her excitement. "Come on! Let's go see what it is!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Janel! That's ridiculous. You saw a cloud or a big bird. Now forget it."

HE started back to the house. Janie danced in the long grass, almost weeping.

"But I saw it! I saw it!"

Sherwin said carelessly, "Well, it'll keep till tomorrow. Go down and make sure the gate's locked where the new calf is. The cow has been thinking about getting back to the pasture."

He had locked the gate himself but he wanted to get Janie's mind off her vision. She could be very insistent at times.

"All right," she answered sulkily. "But you wait. You'll see!"

She went off toward the pen. Sherwin returned to his catalogue and his comfortable chair.

An hour later he called her to go to bed and she was gone.

He hunted her around the barn and outbuildings, thinking she might have fallen and been hurt, but she was not there. The dogs too were missing.

He stood irresolute and then a thought occurred to him and he looked toward the woods. He saw a tiny gleam of light—a flashlight beam shining through the black fringes of the trees.

Sherwin went down across the creek into the meadow. The dogs met him. They were subdued and restless and when he spoke to them they whined and rubbed against him.

Janie came out from the pitch darkness under the trees. She was walking slowly and by the torchbeam Sherwin saw that her face was rapt and her eyes wide and full of wonder. There was such a queer breathless hush about her, somehow, that he checked his first angry words.

She whispered, "They came out of the ship, all misty and bright. I couldn't see them very well but they had wings, beautiful fiery wings. They looked like angels."

Her gaze turned upon him, not really seeing him. She asked, "Do you think they could be angels truly?"

"I think," said Sherwin, "that you're going to get a thrashing, young lady." He caught her arm and began to march her back across the meadow. "You know perfectly well that you're forbidden to go into the woods after dark!"

She wasn't listening to him. She said, in the same odd distant voice, "Do you think they could be, Daddy?"

"What are you talking about?"

"*Them*. Could they be angels?"

"*Angels!*" Sherwin snorted. "I don't know why angels

should turn up in our woods and if they did they wouldn't need a ship to fly around in."

"No," said Janie. "No, I guess they wouldn't."

"Angels! If you think you can excuse yourself with a story like that you're mistaken." He quickened the pace. "March along there, Miss Janel! My palm is itching."

"Besides," murmured Janie, "I don't think angels laugh—and they were laughing."

Sherwin said no more. There seemed to be nothing more to say.

He was still baffled at the end of a stormy session in the living room. Jane clung stubbornly to her story, so stubbornly that she was on the verge of hysterics, and no amount of coaxing, reasoning or threatened punishment could shake her. Lucy sent her sobbing off to bed.

"I can't understand the child," she said. "I've never seen her like this before."

Sherwin shrugged. "Oh, kids get funny streaks sometimes. She'll forget it."

He had forgotten it himself by morning. He saw Janie go off to school with Richard Allerton, the boy from the neighboring farm. They always walked together, trudging the half mile into the village. Janie was chattering sixteen to the dozen and now and again she whirled about in a sort of dance, holding out her arms like wings.

Toward noon Lucy called him in from the barn. "Miss Harker just phoned," she told him. "She wanted to know if Janie had come home."

Sherwin frowned. "You mean she isn't in school?"

"No—not after recess. Miss Harker said a number of children were missing. Hugh, I'm worried. You don't suppose—?"

"Nonsense. The little devil's playing hooky, that's all." He said angrily, "What's got into the kid all of a sudden, anyway? All that cutting up last night—*hey!*" He turned and looked at the woods.

After a moment he said, "I'll bet that's it, Lucy. I'll bet she's taken her pals down to look at the 'angels'."

Lucy said anxiously, "I wish you'd go and see."

"That," said Sherwin, "is exactly what I'm going to do—right now!"

THE dogs came with him, chasing each other merrily after imaginary rabbits. But when he reached the edge of the wood they stopped and would come no farther.

He remembered that they had not gone in with Janie the night before and he could not understand what was the matter with them. The woods were full of small game and normally the dogs spent half their time there, hunting by themselves.

He called, whistled and swore but they hung back, whimpering. Finally he gave up and went on alone, shaking his head.

First his child, now his dogs—everything seemed to have gone queer at once.

The day was leaden, heavy with the threat of rain. Under the thick-laced branches of the trees it was almost as dark as though it were night. The air was moist, dank with the smell of the marshes. Sherwin forced his way through the undergrowth. From time to time he shouted Janie's name.

Once, some distance away, he thought he heard a chorus of voices, the shrill laughter of a number of children. But the trees clashed and rustled in the wind so that he could not be sure—and Janie did not answer his call.

Gradually, creeping in some secret way along the channels of his nerves, the realization came to him that he was not alone.

He began to move more slowly, looking about him. He could see nothing and yet his heart pounded and the sweat turned cold on his body. Presently he stopped.

The dark woods seemed to close around him, a smothering weight of foliage. He called again once or twice, quite sharply. And then he caught a flicker of motion among the trees.

He thought at first that it was the child, hiding from him, and that he had glimpsed her dress moving. But as he went toward it there was a subtle stirring in the underbrush that was never made by human feet. And as the green fronds were disturbed he saw a muted flash of fire and *something*, large and misty and glowing bright, darted swiftly through the lower branches. The leaves were shaken and there was a sound as of the beating of wings.

He caught only the briefest glimpse of it. He was not sure of anything about it, its shape, size or substance. He knew only that it was not Earthly.

Sherwin opened his mouth but no cry came. Speechless, breathless, he stood for a moment utterly still. Then he turned and bolted.

Chapter II

Nightmare by Daylight

SHERWIN had not gone very deep into the woods. Within a few minutes he came plunging out into the open meadow and fetched up in the midst of part of his dairy herd. The cows went lumbering away in alarm and Sherwin stopped, beginning to be ashamed of himself.

He turned to look back. Nothing had followed. The dogs sighted him—he had come out of the trees lower down, toward Allerton's land—and ran to greet him. He patted their rough reassuring bodies with a shaking hand and as his brief panic left him he became angry.

"It was only a trick of light among the trees," he told himself. "A wisp of ground fog, with the sun touching it."

But there was no sun, no fog either.

He had seen something.

He would admit that. His pride forced him to admit it. That he should take to his heels in his own woods . . . ! But his mind, which he had found adequate for forty years of successful living, began to function normally, to reject the impossible thing it had thought such a short time before.

The thing had startled him, the stealthy movement, the sudden glowing flash. That was why he had—imagined. Some great tropical bird, strayed far north, hiding frightened in the unfamiliar woods, rocketing away at his approach. That was what he had seen. That had been Janie's 'angel.' A big, strange bird.

His mind was satisfied. And yet his body trembled still and some inner sense told him that he lied. He ignored it. And he started only slightly when a man's voice hailed him loudly from across the meadow.

He turned to see Allerton approaching. The man was like a large edition of his son, stocky, sunburned, with close-cropped head. Sherwin could see on his face all the signs of a storm gathered and ready to break.

"Saw you down here, Hugh," said Allerton. "Is Rich at your place? The teacher says he's cut school."

Sherwin shook his head. "Jane's up to the same tricks. I'm pretty sure they're in the woods, Sam. Jane found something there last night—"

He hesitated. Somehow his tongue refused to shape any coherent words.

Allerton demanded impatiently, "Just what do you mean, she found something?"

"Oh, you know how kids are. They run a high fever over a new kind of bird. Anyway, I'm sure they're in there. I heard them awhile ago."

"Well," said Allerton, "what are we waiting for? That boy of mine has got some questions to answer!"

He started off immediately. Sherwin fought down a great reluctance to go again into the shadows under the trees and followed.

"Which way?" asked Allerton.

"I don't know," Sherwin said. "I guess we'll just have to call them."

He called. Both men called. There was no answer. There was no sound at all except the wind in the treetops.

Shouting at intervals the names of their children the men went deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. In spite of himself Sherwin started nervously now and again when the branches were shaken by a sharper gust, letting the gray daylight flicker through. But he saw nothing.

After a long time they splashed through an arm of the swamp and scrambled up onto a ridge covered with a stand of pines. Allerton halted and would go no farther.

"Blast it, Hugh, the kids aren't in here! I'm going back."

But Sherwin was bent forward, listening. "Wait a minute. I thought I heard—"

The tall pines rocked sighing overhead. And then, through the rustle and murmur of the trees there came a burst of laughter and the cries of children busy with some game.

Sherwin nodded. "I know now where they are. Come on."

He scrambled down the far side of the ridge, heading south and west. There was a knoll of higher ground where some ancient trees had fallen in a winter's storm, carrying the lighter growth with them. The children's voices had come from the direction of the clearing.

He went perhaps a hundred yards and then paused, frowning. He began to work back and forth in the

undergrowth, growing more and more perplexed and somehow frightened. The heavy gloom melted away oddly between the trees and his vision seemed blurred.

"I can't find the clearing," he said.

"You've missed it. You took the wrong direction."

"Listen, these are my woods. I know them." He pointed. "The clearing should be ahead there but I can't see it. Look at the tree trunks, Sam. Look how they shimmer."

Allerton grunted. "Just a trick of the light."

Sherwin had begun to shiver. He cried out loudly, "Jane! Jane, answer me!"

HE began to thrash about in the underbrush and as he approached the strangely shimmering trees he was overcome by dizziness and threw his arm across his eyes.

He took a step or two forward blindly. Suddenly almost under his feet there was a crackle and a swish of something moving in haste, a sharp, breathless giggle.

"Hey!" said Allerton. "Hey, that's Rich!"

He plunged forward angrily now, yelling, "Richard! Come here, you!" As he came up beside Sherwin he too was stricken with the queer giddiness. The two men clung to each other a moment and there came a squeal of laughter out of nowhere and the voice of a little girl whispering.

"They look so *funny*!"

Sherwin moved back carefully until he and Allerton were out of the space where the light seemed so oddly distorted. The dizziness left him immediately and he could see clearly again. A sort of desperate calm came over him.

"Jane," he called. "Will you answer me? Where are you?"

He heard her voice—the teasing impish voice of a child having a wonderfully good time.

"Come and find me, Daddy!"

"All right," he said. "I will."

There began an eerie game of hide and seek.

The children were close at hand. The men could hear them plainly, the giggling and muffled whispers of a number of boys and girls, but they were not to be seen or found.

"They're hiding behind the trees in the undergrowth," said Allerton. He was angry now, thoroughly angry and baffled. He planted his feet, refusing to hunt any more. He began to roar at Richard.

"You've got to come out sometime," he shouted, "and the sooner you do, the better it'll be for you." He held up his wristwatch. "I'll give you just two minutes to show up!"

He waited. There was a great whispering somewhere. A small boy's voice said scornfully, "All right, scairdy-cat! Go on."

Richard's voice mumbled something in answer and then Richard himself appeared, oddly as though he had materialized out of the empty space between two maples. He shuffled slowly up to his father.

Allerton grabbed him. "Now, then, young man! What are you up to?"

"Nothing, Pa."

"What's going on here? Who's with you?"

"I don't know. I was just—playing."

"I'll teach you to play games with me," said Allerton and laid on. Richard howled.

Without warning, from out of nowhere, terrifyingly bright and beautiful in the shadowy darkness, two misty shapes of flame came rushing.

Sherwin caught a glimpse of Allerton's face, stark white, his mouth fallen open. Then the men were enveloped in a whirling of fiery wings.

This time there was no doubt. The creatures were not birds. They were not anything Sherwin had ever seen or dreamed of before. They were not of this world.

A chill of absolute horror came over him. He flung up his hands to ward the things away and then the buffeting of the flaring pinions drove him to his knees. The wings were neither flame nor fire but flesh as solid as his own. The brightness was in their substance, a shining of inner light. But even now, close as they were, he could not see the creatures clearly, could not tell exactly the shape of their bodies.

Tiny lightnings stabbed from them at the men. Allerton yelled in mingled pain and panic. He let go of Richard and the boy fled away into the undergrowth. A chorus of frightened cries rose out of the blankness among the trees and Janie's voice screamed, "Don't you hurt my Daddy!"

A last rough thrashing of the wings, a final warning thrust of the queer small lightnings and the things were gone. A great silence descended on the woods, broken only by furtive rustlings where the unseen children crept away. Allerton stared at his hand, which showed a livid burn across the back.

Presently he raised his head. Sherwin had never seen a man so utterly shaken.

"What were they?" he whispered.

SHERWIN drew a deep, unsteady breath. The beating of his heart rocked him where he stood. He tried several times before he could make the words come.

"I don't know. But they want the kids, Sam. Whatever they are they want the kids."

"Richard," said Allerton. "My boy!" He caught Sherwin's arm in a painful grasp. "We've got to stop those things. We've got to get help!"

He went away, crashing like a bull through the underbrush, tearing at the branches that impeded him. Sherwin followed. After what seemed an eternity he saw gray daylight ahead and the open field.

"Sam," he said, "wait a minute. Who are we going to ask for help? Who's going to believe us?"

"I'm going to call the sheriff and he blasted well better believe me!"

"He won't," said Sherwin heavily. "He'll laugh in your face. What are you going to tell him, Sam? Are you going to say you saw angels or devils or things that came out of the sky in a ship you can't find and can't see?"

Allerton's jaw set hard. "I'm going to try anyway. I'm not going to let *Them* get hold of my kid!"

"All right," Sherwin said. "My place is closer. Use my phone."

He ran beside Allerton across the meadow but he was dreadfully afraid and without hope.

Lucy was waiting in the yard. She gave a little scream when she saw their faces and Sherwin said sharply, "Jane's all right. Go ahead and make your call, Sam. I'll wait here."

He put his arm around Lucy. "The kid's perfectly safe this time. But—"

How to say it, even to your own wife? How to tell her, without sounding insane even to yourself?

"Listen, Lucy, there's some kind of—animal in the woods. I don't know what it is yet. Something mighty queer. Janie mustn't go in there again, not for one minute. You've got to help me watch her."

He was still evading her questions when Allerton came out again, red-faced and furious.

"He didn't believe a word of it. He told me to get off the bottle." Something desperate came into Allerton's eyes. He sat down on the steps. "We've got to think, Hugh. We've got to think what we're going to do. If it was fall we could burn the woods."

"But it isn't fall," said Sherwin quietly, "it's spring. The kids are coming now. I'm going to talk to them."

A raggle-taggle of small forms had appeared among the fringe of trees. They dispersed in various directions and Richard and Jane came on alone toward the house. They walked very close together, bent over some object that Jane held in her hands.

"Yes," said Sherwin, "they're the only ones that can help us. Let me handle this. I don't want them frightened off."

The children came on, slowly and reluctantly now that they saw their parents waiting. They had straightened up rather guiltily and stepped apart a little and Sherwin noticed that Janie now held one hand behind her back.

Her face had a peculiar expression. It was as though she looked with pity upon adults, who had got somehow far beneath her—so far that even their laws and punishments could not affect her much. "What have you got there, Jane?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"May I have it, please?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated, her chin set stubbornly, and then she said, "I can't, Daddy. *They* made it for me, for my very special own. It won't even work unless I want it to."

Sherwin felt a chill contraction of the nerves. He held his voice steady.

"Who are *They*?"

"Why, *Them*," she said, and nodded toward the woods. "I found *Them*, you know. I was first. That's why *They* gave me the present." Suddenly she burst out, "Daddy, *They* didn't mean to frighten you just now. They're sorry *They* burned Mr. Allerton's hand. *They* thought he was hurting Richard."

Lucy, whose face had grown quite pale, was on the verge of speaking. Sherwin gave her a stern look and said to the child, "That's all right, Janie. May I see your present?"

Still doubtful, but very proud, she extended her hand. In it was a flat smooth oval of the clearest crystal Sherwin had ever seen.

"Lean over, Daddy. There, like that. Now watch. I'm going to make it work."

She placed her hands in a certain way, holding the crystal between them.

At first he could see nothing but the reflection of the cloudy sky. Then, slowly, the crystal darkened, cleared . . .

Chapter III

Terror from Outside

THE Ohio farmland vanished, forgotten. Sherwin bent closer over the uncanny thing held in the hands of his child.

He was looking at another world.

Pictured small and far-away in the tiny oval, he glimpsed a city built all of some glassy substance as pure and bright as diamond, half veiled in a misty glory of light.

The high slim towers swam in a sort of lambent haze, catching soft fire from the clouds that trailed their low-hung edges over them, rose and purple and burning gold. Above in the glowing sky two suns poured out muted, many-colored lights as of an eternal sunset.

And through that shining city that was never built for human kind shackled to the land, flame-winged creatures soared—creatures large and small, coming and going between the diamond spires.

As from a remote distance Sherwin heard Janie's voice, wistful and eager. "It's where They live, Daddy, way off in the sky. Isn't it just like fairyland? And look at this!"

The scene shifted as she spoke. Sherwin looked into a nightmare gulf of black and utter emptiness. He seemed to be racing through it at incredible speed, watching the red and green and yellow stars go plunging and streaming past.

"It's what They saw on Their way! Oh, Daddy, isn't it beautiful?"

It was the tone of the child's voice, far more than the unearthly vision in the crystal, that sent the pang of fear like a knife into Sherwin's heart. He reached out and struck the thing from her hands, and when it fell he kicked it away in the long grass. Before she could cry out her anguish he had caught her fast.

"What do They want with you?" he demanded. "Why do They give you things to tempt you? *What do They want with you?*"

"They only want to be friends!" She pulled free of his grasp, her eyes blazing with tears and anger. "Why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to spoil everything? They haven't hurt anybody. They haven't done a thing wrong. They gave me a better present than anybody *ever* gave me before and now you've gone and broken it!"

She would have hunted for the crystal but Sherwin stopped her. "Go to your room, Jane. Lucy, go with her. Try to get her calmed down."

Looking at his daughter's white rebellious face, Sherwin felt that he had blundered badly. He had roused her antagonism where he wanted to help. But the unhealthy excitement in her voice had frightened him. He had not realized that Their hold on her was already so strong.

With full force the realization of what he had seen in the evil little toy came over him. He was not an imaginative man. He had never before looked up at the sky and shuddered, thinking what lay beyond it. He felt suddenly naked and defenseless, very small before huge

unknown powers. Even the green familiar land did not comfort him. *They* were in the woods. And if *They* could come, then there were no barriers against anything.

He saw Allerton scuffling about in the grass. Presently he found what he was looking for and stamped it methodically to bits under his heavy boots.

"I saw into it too," he said, "over your shoulder. I don't know what kind of devilment it is but it's no fit thing to have around."

Thud, thud, went the great earth-caked boots. Richard was crying.

"They thought pictures into it," he said. "They were going to make me one too." He glared at his father, and at Sherwin. "Janie's right. You just want to be mean."

Allerton finished his task and went to Richard. There was something almost pathetic in his expression.

"Rich," he said, "did *They* promise you anything else? Did *They* ask you to do anything?"

Richard shook his head, looking sulky and mulish, and Sherwin could not tell whether or not the boy was holding back.

"Can *They* talk to you, Rich?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

"I don't know. You can hear *Them*, sort of, inside your head. *They* can make you see pictures too, anything *They* want you to see. Stars and comets and all kinds of funny places with funny-looking people and animals and sometimes no people at all."

His round tear-streaked face was taking on that same remote, rapt look that had upset Sherwin so in Janie. He whispered, "I'd sure like to ride in that ship, right across the sky. I'll bet it goes faster than a jet plane. I'd go to all those places and get a lot of things nobody ever saw before and then I'd—"

He broke off in the middle of a dream. Allerton had caught him by the arm.

"You're not going anywhere but home," he said. "And I'll lock you in, if I have to, to keep you there." His eyes met Sherwin's. "See you later, Hugh."

He took the boy away down the road. Sherwin went into the house. He locked the door behind him and loaded his shotgun and set it by. then he sat down and put his head in his hands and listened dully to the beating of his own heart and wondered.

LUCY came downstairs. "I gave her some aspirin," she said. "She's sleepy now." She sat on the floor at Sherwin's feet and put her arms around his waist. "Hugh, you've got to tell me what's going on!"

He told her slowly, past caring whether she believed him or not.

"Sam and I both saw Them. I thought They were going to kill us, but They only burned Sam's hand. That's why the kids played truant today, to go to Them. There was a whole bunch there, laughing—"

He did not tell Lucy that somehow They had made the children, Themselves and the clearing invisible. Her face was white enough already.

She did not say much. She rose and stood for a moment with her hands clasped hard together. Then she ran back up the stairs and Sherwin heard the door of Janie's room open and then shut tight.

Toward evening he called Allerton. "I gave Rich a good thrashing," Allerton said. "He's shut in his room and his mother's with him. They'll be all right, Hugh. As long as we watch them the kids will be all right."

His voice did not carry much conviction. Sherwin hung up. He sat in the big chair in the bay window overlooking the woods. He did not turn on the lights. The clouds had broken under the rising wind and the moon threw a pale beam into the high-ceilinged room, touching the ivy wallpaper and the tall white doors. Sherwin waited, as a man waits in dubious refuge, crouched in

the chair, trembling from time to time. The silence of the old house was painful in his ears.

He must have dozed, for when suddenly he started up in alarm the moon was gone. And *They* had come out of the woods.

Even through his hatred and his fear Sherwin sensed that *They* were glad to be free of the confinement of the trees. The wind swept strong across the open meadow and *They* rose and swooped upon it, a number of *Them*, their cloudy wings streaking across the rifted stars in wheeling arcs of fire.

He took the shotgun across his knees. His hands were quite steady, but very cold. He watched *Them* and he could not help thinking, *How beautiful They are!*—and he loathed *Them* for their beauty because it was luring his child away from him.

His child, Allerton's child—the children of the farms, the village, the other ones who had gone secretly into the woods. What could *They* want with the human children, these creatures from outside? What dreadful game were *They* playing, the bright-winged demons with *Their* hellish toys?

You can hear them talking inside your head. They can make you see pictures too—anything They want you to see.

Suppose *They* could control the minds of the children? What would you do then? How would you fight it?

Tears came into Sherwin's eyes. He sat with the shotgun in his lap and watched *Them* frolic with the dark sky and the wind and he waited. But *They* did not come near the house. Suddenly *They* darted away, high up, and were gone. He did not see *Them* again that night.

He debated in the morning whether to send Jane to school at all. Then he thought that she would be better there than cooped up brooding in the house, within sight of the woods. He drove her in himself—a silent,

resentful little girl with whom he found it difficult to speak—and passed Allerton's car on the road. Both men were taking the same precautions.

They took the children into the small white schoolhouse and spoke to Miss Harker about keeping a careful eye on them. Then the men went home to their work. The day was oppressive and still with great clouds breeding ominously in the sultry air. Sherwin's uneasiness increased as the hours went by. He called the school twice to make sure Jane was there and he was back again a full hour before the last bell, waiting to take her home.

He sat for a time in the car, growing more and more nervous. The leaves of the trees hung utterly motionless. He was drenched with sweat and the heavy humid air was stifling.

A thunderhead gathered in the west, pushing its boiling crest with terrible swiftness across the sky. He watched it spread and darken to the color of purple ink and then the little ragged wisps of dirty white began to blow underneath its belly and the wind came with sudden violence across the land.

He knew it was going to be a bad one. He left the car and went into the schoolhouse. It was already too dark to see inside the building and the lights came on as he pushed open the door to Janie's classroom. Miss Harker glanced up and then smiled.

"It's going to storm," he said rather inanely. "I thought I'd wait inside."

"Why of course," she answered and pointed out a chair. He sat down. Miss Harker shook her head, remarking on the blackness of the sky. Two boys were shutting the windows. It was very hot and close. Richard and Janie sat in their places but Sherwin noticed that several seats were empty.

"More truancy?" he asked, trying to be casual.

Miss Harker peered sternly at the class.

"I'm ashamed of them. They've spoiled a perfect record for attendance and they seem to have infected the whole school. There are several missing from other classes today. I'm afraid there's going to be serious trouble unless this stops!"

"Yes," said Sherwin. "Yes, I'm afraid there is."

THE first bolt of lightning streaked hissing out of the gloom with thunder on its heels. The little girls squealed. Rain came in a solid mass and then there was more lightning, coming closer, the great bolts striking down with a snarl and a crack. Thunder shook the sky apart and abruptly the lights went out.

Instantly there was turmoil in the dark room. Miss Harker's voice spoke out strongly. The children quieted somewhat. Sherwin could see them dimly, a confusion of small forms milling about, gathering toward the windows. There was a babble of excited whispering and all at once a smothered but triumphant laugh that he knew came from Janie.

Then a positive fury of whispers out of which he heard the words, "Billy said he'd tell Them we couldn't come!"

Sherwin rose. He looked over the crowding heads out the window. A blue-white flare, a crash that made the walls tremble and then he saw shapes of fire tossing and wheeling in the sky.

They had come into the village under cover of the storm. They were circling the schoolhouse, peering in, and the children knew it and were glad.

"What strange shapes the lightning takes!" said Miss Harker's cheerful voice. "Come away from the windows, children. There's nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

She marshalled them to their seats again and Sherwin clung to the window frame, feeling a weakness he could

not control, watching the bright wings play among the blazing bolts.

They did not try to enter the school. They moved away as the storm moved, swooping and tumbling along the road and across the fields, overturning hayricks, putting the frightened cows to flight, ripping slates from the roofs of houses and whirling them on the wind. Even Miss Harker watched, fascinated, and he thought surely she must realize what They were.

But she only said in a rather shaken voice, "I never saw lightning behave like *that* before!"

The flashes grew more distant, the thunder lessened and she sighed. "My, I'm glad *that's* over."

She went back to her desk and began to straighten up the ends of the day's schoolwork. Even the rain had stopped when Sherwin took Janie and Richard out to the car and drove them both home. But the sky was still leaden and fuming and all that afternoon and evening distant storms prowled on the horizon and the air was heavy with thunder.

Sherwin watched his daughter. His nerves were drawn unbearably taut as by long tension growing toward a climax. He smoked his pipe incessantly and started at every flicker of far-off lightning.

Shortly after nine, from the village, there came a sound like the final clap of doom and immediately afterward the trees and even the house itself seemed to be pulled toward the source of the sound by a powerful suction of air.

It was all over in a minute or two. Sherwin ran outside but there was nothing to see except a violent boiling of the clouds.

He heard the phone ring and then Lucy cried out, "Hugh, there's been a tornado in the village!"

Sherwin hesitated briefly. Then he returned to the house and locked Janie carefully in her room and gave Lucy instructions about the doors.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told her. "I've got to see what's happened."

He was thinking of Them, playing in the heart of the storm.

Before he could get his own car out he heard Allerton sound his horn from the road.

"Tornado, huh?" said Allerton. "What it looked like, all right. I figured they might need help. Climb in."

They had no trouble finding the center of damage. There was a crowd already there and growing larger every second, shouldering, staring, making a perfect explosion of excited talk.

The schoolhouse was gone, lifted clean from the foundations.

Sherwin felt a cold and heavy weight within him. He looked at Allerton and then he began to question the men there.

Nothing else had been touched by the freak tornado—only the schoolhouse and that was not wrecked but gone. Several people had seen what they took to be lightning striking all around the building just before it vanished with the clap of thunder and the violent sucking of air.

Sherwin took Allerton by the arm and drew him aside. He told him what he had seen that afternoon.

"*They* didn't like the school, Sam. It kept the kids away from Them." He stared at the bare foundations, the gaping hole of the cellar. "*They* didn't like it, so it's gone."

A MAN came running up to the crowd. "*Hey!*" he yelled. "*Hey*, my wife just got a call from her sister down by the state line. You know what that wind did? It took the schoolhouse clear down there and sat it on a hill, just as clean as a whistle!"

A chill and desperate strength came to Sherwin. "This has got to be stopped, Sam. The devil alone knows what

They're up to but it'll be the kids next. I'm going to try something. Are you with me?"

"All the way."

Sherwin fought his way through the crowd. He got to the center of it and began to yell at the men and women until they turned to look at him. A story had come into his head—a wild one but less wild than the truth and he told it to them.

"Listen, while you're all here together! This doesn't have anything to do with the tornado but it's more important. How many of you have had kids playing hooky out of school?"

A lot of them had and said so.

"I can tell you where they're going," Sherwin said. "Down in my woods. There's somebody hiding out in there. Escaped convicts maybe, or men running from the law. They've got the kids bringing them food, helping them out. That's why they're ducking school. Isn't that so, Sam?"

Allerton took his cue. "It sure is! Why, my boy's locked up in his room right now to keep him out of trouble."

The crowd began to mutter. A woman cried out shrilly. Sherwin raised his voice. There was a deadly earnestness about him that carried more conviction than any mere words.

"I'm afraid for my daughter," he said. "I'm afraid for all our children unless we clean those—those criminals out of the woods! I'm going home and get my gun. Do any of you men want to come with me?"

They roared assent. They forgot the freak wind and the vanished schoolhouse. This was something that threatened them and their homes and families, something they could understand and fight.

"Call the sheriff!" somebody yelled. "Come on, you guys! I'm not going to have my kids murdered."

"We'll use my house as a starting point," Sherwin told them. "Come as soon as you can."

The men of the village and the nearby farms dispersed, calming their women. Sherwin wondered how they would feel when they learned the truth. He wondered if bullets would kill Them. At any rate, it was something to try, a hope.

Allerton drove him home, racing down the dark road. He dropped Sherwin off and went on to his own place to get his rifle. Sherwin ran into the house. He found Lucy sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Her eyes had a dreadful vacant look. He shook her and it was like shaking a corpse.

"Lucy!" he cried. "*Lucy!*" He began to slap her face, not hard, and plead with her.

After a bit she saw him and whispered, "I heard a little noise, just a little noise, and I went upstairs to Janie's room . . ."

Tears came then. He left her crying and went with great strides up the stairs. The door to Janie's room was open. He passed through it. The room was in perfect order, except that the northwest corner had been sheared clean away, making a narrow doorway into the night.

The child was gone.

Chapter IV

Truant's Reckoning

HE had looked for Janie's body on the ground below her room. He had not found it. He had known it would not be there. He had given Lucy sedatives and talked her into quietness with words of reassurance he did not feel himself.

Now the men from the village were coming. The cars blocked the drive, formed long lines on the road. The men themselves gathered on the lawn, hefting their rifles

and their shotguns and their pistols, talking in undertones that held an ugly note, looking toward the black woods.

Some of them were afraid. Sherwin knew they were afraid but they were angry too and they were going. They had a peaceful lawful place to live and they were willing to go into the woods by night with their guns to keep it so.

He came out on the steps and spoke to them. "They've taken my daughter," he said. "They came and took her from the house."

They looked at his face in the glare of the yard light and after their first outraged cry they were silent. Presently one said, "I called my kid but I couldn't find him."

There was more than one father then who remembered that he had not seen his child at home. And now they were all afraid but not for themselves. Sherwin went down the steps. "Let's go."

He was halfway across the little bridge when Allerton came running, crying Sherwin's name. "They took Richard," he said. "My boy is gone."

The men poured out across the meadow, going like an army on the march, running in the long grass—running to where the cloudy moon was lost beneath the branches of the trees.

"Head toward the knoll," cried Sherwin. He told them the direction. "I think that's where They are. And be careful of the swamp."

They went in among the close-set trees, laboring through the undergrowth, the beams of their flashlights leaping in the utter dark. Sherwin knew the woods. He rushed on ahead and Allerton clung close behind him. Neither man spoke. Lightning still danced faintly on the horizon and now and again there was a growl of thunder. The mists were rising from the marsh.

Abruptly Sherwin stopped. From behind him came a yell and then the crash and roar of a falling tree. There

was silence then and he shouted and a distant voice answered.

"Tree struck by lightning, right in front of us. No one hurt!"

He could hear them thrashing around as they circled the fallen tree. And then there was a second crash, and another, and still another.

Sherwin said, "It's Them. They're trying to block the way."

Muffled voices swore. The men were trying to scramble out of the trap that had been made for them. Sherwin hurried on, Allerton panting at his side. He could not wait for the men. He could not wait now for anything.

A swoop and a flash of light, an ominous cracking—and ahead a giant maple toppled to the earth, bearing down the younger trees, creating an impassable barrier.

"All right," said Sherwin to an unseen presence. "I know another way."

He turned aside toward the river. In a minute or two he was ankle deep in mud and water, splashing heavily along an arm of the swamp. Reeds and saplings grew thick but there were no trees here to be thrown down against them.

The men went fast, careless of how they trod, and all at once Allerton cried out and fell. He floundered in the muck, trying to rise. Sherwin lifted him up and he would have gone on but he went to his hands and knees again, half fainting.

"I've hurt my ankle. A loose stone—it turned!"

He had lost his rifle. Sherwin got an arm around him and held him up. He was a big man and heavy. It was hard going after that and very slow. Sherwin would have left him but he was afraid that Allerton might faint and drown in the inches of sour water.

The ridge loomed up before them, the tall pines black against a brooding sky. The men staggered out onto hard ground and Sherwin let his burden drop.

"Wait here, Sam. I'm going on alone."

Allerton caught at him. "*Look!*"

Cloudy wings soared above them, swift as streaming fire and one by one the tall pines went lordly down, struck by the lightning They carried in Their hands.

The ridge was blocked.

When the night was still again, and empty, Allerton said, "I guess that does it, Hugh. We're licked."

Sherwin did not answer. He remained motionless, standing like an old man, his shoulders bent, his head sunk forward on his breast.

THE earth began to vibrate underneath his feet. A sound, more felt than heard, went out across the woods—deep, powerful throbbing that entered Sherwin's heart and shook it and brought his head up sharply.

"You hear that, Sam?"

"What is it? Thunder?"

"It's machinery," Sherwin whispered. "Motors, starting up."

Unfamiliar motors, so strong and mighty that they could shake the ground and still be silent. *Their* motors. *Their ship!*

"They're getting ready, Sam. They're going to leave. But what about the kids? Sam—*what about Janie and the kids?*"

He turned and fled back into the swamp, along the ridge and around it, and faced a wide expanse of stinking mud and mist. He started out across it.

The marsh quaked beneath him. Going slowly and by day he would have been afraid, wary of the bog-holes and the sucking sands. He did not think of them now. He could not think of anything but that vast and evil thrumming that filled the air, of what it meant to his child—his child, that might have died already, or might be . . .

He did not know. That was the worst of it. He did not know.

He took a straight line toward the knoll, slipping, floundering, falling now and again and scrambling up, wet to the skin and foul with ooze, but going on, always going on, and at last there was solid ground under his feet and only a belt of trees between him and the clearing.

They were not looking for him now. They thought he was trapped and helpless, back on the ridge. At least They did not try to stop him. He forced himself to go quietly.

This time he could see the clearing. It crossed his mind that whatever trick They had used before to bend and twist the light-rays around that space so that it could not be seen had depended on some mechanism in the ship, that now They could not spare the power for it.

A dark and monstrous bulk filled more than half the opening. The moon had broken clear, and by its light he could see the metal sheathing of the ship, scored and pitted and worn by unimaginable voyages. The mighty throb of its motors gave it an illusion of life, as though it were anxious to be away again. Sherwin remembered the crystal and the glimpse of streaming Suns and he shuddered, thinking of where this ship had been.

They were hovering around an open hatch in the belly of the ship and the children were there also—Janie, Richard, a half dozen more, grouped beside the doorway.

And Jane was climbing in.

Sherwin screamed. He screamed her name and ran out across the clearing. He dropped his gun. He could not use it anyway for fear of harming the children and this had gone beyond such things as guns. The child turned and looked at him and then *They* came.

They did not harm him. They held him fast and even

now, with Their solid strength binding him, he could see Them only as misty shapes with wings of cloudy fire spread against his struggles.

Perhaps the light was different on Their world. Perhaps in the glow of those twin suns They would be as real as he was. But here They were like ghosts, alien phantoms that made him cold with horror.

"Jane!" he cried, "come back! *Come back!*"

Reluctantly she came toward him. "They won't hurt you, Daddy. Don't be scared. Daddy, I want to go with Them. Just for a little while! They'll bring us back. They promised. And I want to go with them—out *there*."

She pointed to where the stars burned clear in the valleys between the clouds.

"I didn't mean to sneak away, Daddy, but I knew you wouldn't let me go and I have to—oh, I *have* to! They came and got me, so I could."

"No," he said. "Oh, *no!*" They were not words so much as a groan of agony. "Listen, Janie, please listen. I'll give you anything you want. I'll buy you a pony, I'll take you clear around the world, I'll do anything."

"But I don't want any of those things, not now."

"Jane," he said, "don't you care anything about your mother and me at all? Do you want to, kill us both?"

"I don't see why everybody has to die just because I want to go somewhere!" But she began to cry a little and he shouted to the other children, pleading with them, telling them how their parents felt, trying to make them understand the danger, the enormity of the thing that they were about to do.

Richard looked stubbornly at the ground and said, "We'll never have a chance again. We'll never see those other places out there if we don't go now. I don't care what my father says. I'm going."

One of the little girls said doubtfully, "I'm scared. I think I want to go home."

Some of them began to waver, thinking of the things

Sherwin had said. And then Sherwin heard a silent voice speaking within his mind.

He knew that the children could hear it far more clearly than he. Their minds were young and plastic, open wide to all things. But he could hear it well enough.

What are you afraid of? it said. Come on! There are all sorts of worlds beside this one. We'll show them to you. We'll show you how the stars look, out beyond your sky. We'll teach you how to run the ship. Think of the fun we can have together, all across the galaxy!

OTHER voices joined in, telling of colored Suns and bright strange planets, of toys and pets and treasures, of adventures unthinkable. Child's talk, couched in the language of children—cunningly wrought to lure them on with promises that set their heads whirling with wonder and delight.

Suppose you do get punished when we bring you back? Are you going to miss it all just because you're afraid of a little punishment?

"That's right," said Janie, turning to the others. "Think what *They're* going to catch when *They* get home and *They're* not afraid. They didn't let *Their* parents stop them!"

"No sir!" said Richard. "*They* weren't scared."

Slowly, very slowly, Sherwin said, "Their parents? Jane, did you say —*Their* parents?"

"Yes, Daddy. *They* ran away and *They've* had all kinds of fun and haven't got hurt a bit and *They* weren't any older than we are. And if *They* can do it, so can we!"

Parents!

They ran away, and They aren't any older than we

...

Sherwin said nothing for a long moment.

At last he whispered, "Do you mean that *They* are children, too?"

"Why, of course," she answered. "I thought you knew."

Sherwin began to laugh. It was not healthy laughter and he made himself stop it at once.

Children!

The fright, the anguish, the pain of the past two days and nights—a whole village in arms, terrified parents combing the woods for the missing, the awful dread of the unknown that had beset him and Allerton!

Children. Children had done all this!

He looked at Them and he could not believe it. "It's a lie," he said. "It's a lie They've told you to lead you on."

Jane said impatiently, "Don't be silly, Daddy. Why would They want to play with us if They were grown up?"

He remembered the winged creatures, large and small, going between the diamond towers of the city he had glimpsed on the world of a distant star.

Large and small, old and young . . .

Why not?

A race that could build such ships to ply between the Suns, a race that could put thought into crystals and make themselves unseen, that could cause whole buildings to vanish and topple trees at will—would not their young be children still in spite of a vaster knowledge?

He heard Them laugh, soundless gleeful laughter, as though They had played an excellent trick upon him to frighten him so, and he knew that it was true.

Children—these unhuman creatures with all their unholy powers. Truant children, like his own!

A queer sort of anger came to Sherwin then and with it a faint and desperate hope. He straightened up and turned to face the two that held him. He told Them sternly, "Let me go!"

They relaxed their grasp but the others had come closer now and were around him, mingled with the children of Earth.

Sherwin was thinking, *The species doesn't matter, even a lion cub will obey. Maybe—Maybe!*

He spoke to Them. "You're telling our children not to be afraid of punishment. What are your own elders going to say to you when you get back?"

They rustled Their wings and did not answer. "You're being very brave, aren't you? You're just going to go on having fun. Well, I know kids, and I know different. You're afraid. You're afraid to go home!"

Their voices reached him in defiant chorus.

No! We are not afraid!

"Oh, yes you are. You're scared stiff. You've stolen a ship and run away and there'll be the devil to pay about it and you know it."

He stepped toward Them, forcing himself to be stern and assured, the single adult among a group of children, the angry adult asserting his authority. He hoped They could not read the fear that threatened to choke the words in his throat.

"If I were you," he told Them, "I'd get home and face the music before you make things any worse. The longer you stay away, the harder it'll be for you. And you might as well know right now, nobody's going with you!"

He turned to his own. "Come here to me, Jane. The rest of you, get home as fast as you can make it. Your fathers are coming and you know what you'll get if they catch you here!"

He waited. There was nothing more to do but wait. For a moment no one moved nor spoke. The children hung their heads and looked at each other sidelong and it seemed to Sherwin that the wings of the strangers drooped a little.

Imperceptibly the two groups began to draw apart.

The little girl who had spoken before ran suddenly into the woods, crying. And They commenced to mutter among Themselves.

They were speaking only to each other now and Sherwin could not hear Their thoughts but it seemed that They were quarreling, some hanging back, others arguing with flashing motions of Their wings.

Jane came slowly and stood beside Sherwin. Her eyes were on the earth. She did not raise them.

They began to drift toward the ship. They were not talking now.

They stopped beside the hatchway and looked back. Most of the human children had already melted into the darkness between the trees. Sherwin took Jane's hand and held it. They must have called to her, for she said good-by and They went slowly and gloomily into the ship. The hatchway closed.

Sherwin took his daughter into his arms and carried her away.

Behind him the heavy throbbing deepened and then seemed to rise and fade. Looking upward through a rift in the branches he saw a dark shape sweep out across the stars and vanish, bearing those other children to their homeplace far across the sky.

Janic was crying, her head pressed hard against his shoulder.


A little later he met the other men.

"Whoever was in the woods has gone away," he said. "Everything's all right now and the truants—*all* of them—are going home."

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