

more spectacular than the object he held in his palm.

It was a lens, some four inches across—man-made, and made with great skill, but still only a bit of crystal. Turning it about, Stark saw that it was not a simple lens, but an intricate interlocking of many facets. Incredibly complicated, hypnotic if one looked at it too long.

“What is its use?” he asked of Camar.

“We are as children. We have forgotten. But there is a legend, a belief—that Ban Cruach himself made the talisman as a sign that he would not forget us, and would come back when Kushat is threatened. Back through the Gates of Death, to teach us again the power that was his!”

“I do not understand,” said Stark. “What are the Gates of Death?”

Camar answered, “It is a pass that opens into the black mountains beyond Kushat. The city stands guard before it—why, no man remembers, except that it is a great trust.”

His gaze feasted on the talisman.

Stark said, “You wish me to take this to Kushat?”

“Yes. Yes! And yet...” Camar looked at Stark, his eyes filling suddenly with tears. “No. The North is not used to strangers. With me, you might have been safe. But alone... No, Stark. You have risked too much already. Go back, out of the Norlands, while you can.”

He lay back on the blankets. Stark saw that a bluish pallor had come into the hollows of his cheeks.

“Camar,” he said. And again, “Camar!”

“Yes?”

“Go in peace, Camar. I will take the talisman to Kushat.”

The Martian sighed, and smiled, and Stark was glad that he had made the promise.

“The riders of Mekh are wolves,” said Camar suddenly. “They hunt these gorges. Look out for them.”

“I will.”

Stark’s knowledge of the geography of this part of Mars was vague indeed, but he knew that the mountain valleys of Mekh lay ahead and to the north, between him and Kushat. Camar had told him of these upland warriors. He was willing to heed the warning.

Camar had done with talking. Stark knew that he had not long to wait. The wind spoke with the voice of a great organ. The moons had set and it was very dark outside the tower, except for the white glimmering of the snow. Stark looked up at the brooding walls, and shivered. There was a smell of death already in the air.

To keep from thinking, he bent closer to the fire, studying the lens. There were scratches on the bezel as though it had been held sometime in a clamp, or setting, like a jewel. An ornament, probably, worn as a badge of rank. Strange ornament for a barbarian king, in the dawn of Mars. The firelight made tiny dancing sparks in the endless inner facets. Quite suddenly, he had a curious feeling that the thing was alive.

A pang of primitive and unreasoning fear shot through him, and he fought it down. His vision was beginning to blur, and he shut his eyes, and in the darkness it seemed to him that he could see and hear...

He started up, shaken now with an eerie terror, and raised his hand to hurl the talisman away. But the part of him that had learned with much pain and effort to be civilized made him stop, and think.

He sat down again. An instrument of hypnosis? Possibly. And yet that fleeting touch of sight and sound had not been his own, out of his own memories.

He was tempted now, fascinated, like a child that plays with fire. The talisman had been worn somehow. Where? On the breast? On the brow?

He tried the first, with no result. Then he touched the flat surface of the lens to his forehead.

The great tower of stone rose up monstrous to the sky. It was whole, and there were pallid lights within that stirred and flickered, and it was crowned with a shimmering darkness.

He lay outside the tower, on his belly, and he was filled with fear and a great anger, and a loathing such as turns the bones to water. There was no snow. There was ice everywhere, rising to half the tower's height, sheathing the ground.

Ice. Cold and clear and beautiful—and deadly.

He moved. He glided snakelike, with infinite caution, over the smooth surface. The tower was gone, and far below him was a city. He saw the temples and the palaces, the glittering lovely city beneath him in the ice, blurred and fairylike and strange, a dream half glimpsed through crystal.

He saw the Ones that lived there, moving slowly through the streets. He could not see them clearly, only the vague shining of their bodies, and he was glad.

He hated them, with a hatred that conquered even his fear, which was great indeed.

He was not Eric John Stark. He was Ban Cruach.

The tower and the city vanished, swept away on a reeling tide.

He stood beneath a scarp of black rock, notched with a single pass. The cliffs hung over him, leaning out their vast bulk as though to crush him, and the narrow mouth of the pass was full of evil laughter where the wind went by.

He began to walk forward, into the pass. He was quite alone.

The light was dim and strange at the bottom of that cleft. Little veils of mist crept and clung between the ice and the rock, thickened, became more dense as he went farther and farther into the pass. He could not see, and the wind spoke with many tongues, piping in the crevices of the cliffs.

All at once there was a shadow in the mist before him, a dim gigantic shape that moved toward him, and he knew that he looked at death. He cried out...

It was Stark who yelled in blind atavistic fear, and the echo of his own cry brought him up standing, shaking in every limb. He had dropped the talisman. It lay gleaming in the snow at his feet, and the alien memories were gone—and Camar was dead.

After a time he crouched down, breathing harshly. He did not want to touch the lens again. The part of him that had learned to fear strange gods and evil spirits with every step he took, the primitive aboriginal that lay so close under the surface of his mind, warned him to leave it, to run away, to desert this place of death and ruined stone.

He forced himself to take it up. He did not look at it. He wrapped it in the bit of silk and replaced it inside the iron boss, and clasped the belt around his waist. Then he found the small flask that lay with his gear beside the fire and took a long pull, and tried to think rationally of the thing that had happened.

Memories. Not his own, but the memories of Ban Cruach, a million years ago in the morning of a world. Memories of hate, a secret war against unhuman beings that dwelt in crystal cities cut in the living ice, and used these ruined towers for some dark purpose of their own.

Was that the meaning of the talisman, the power that lay within it? Had Ban Cruach, by some elder and forgotten science, imprisoned the echoes of his own mind in the crystal?

Why? Perhaps as a warning, as a reminder of ageless, alien danger beyond the Gates of Death?

Suddenly one of the beasts tethered outside the ruined tower started up from its sleep with a hissing snarl.

Instantly Stark became motionless.

They came silently on their padded feet, the rangy mountain brutes moving daintily through the sprawling ruin. Their riders too were silent—tall men with fierce eyes and russet hair, wearing leather coats and carrying each a long, straight spear.

There were a score of them around the tower in the windy gloom. Stark did not bother to draw his gun. He had learned very young the difference between courage and idiocy.

He walked out toward them, slowly lest one of them be startled into spearing him, yet not slowly enough to denote fear. And he held up his right hand and gave them greeting.

They did not answer him. They sat their restive mounts and stared at him, and Stark knew that Camar had spoken the truth. These were the riders of Mekh, and they were wolves.

Chapter II

Stark wanted, until they should tire of their own silence.

Finally one demanded, “Of what country are you?”

He answered, “I am called N’Chaka, the Man-Without-a-Tribe.”

It was the name they had given him, the half-human aboriginals who had raised him in the blaze and thunder and bitter frosts of Mercury.

“A stranger,” said the leader, and smiled. He pointed at the dead Camar and asked, “Did you slay him?”

“He was my friend,” said Stark, “I was bringing him home to die.”

Two riders dismounted to inspect the body. One called up to the leader, “He was from Kushat, if I know the breed, Thord! And he has not been robbed.” He proceeded to take care of that detail himself.

“A stranger,” repeated the leader, Thord. “Bound for Kushat, with a man of Kushat. Well. I think you will come with us, stranger.”

Stark shrugged. And with the long spears pricking him, he did not resist when the tall Thord plundered him of all he owned except his clothes—and Camar’s belt, which was not worth the stealing. His gun Thord flung contemptuously away.

One of the men brought Stark's beast and Camar's from where they were tethered, and the Earthman mounted—as usual, over the violent protest of the creature, which did not like the smell of him. They moved out from under the shelter of the walls, into the full fury of the wind.

For the rest of that night, and through the next day and the night that followed it they rode eastward, stopping only to rest the beasts and chew on their rations of jerked meat.

To Stark, riding a prisoner, it came with full force that this was the North country, half a world away from the Mars of spaceships and commerce and visitors from other planets. The future had never touched these wild mountains and barren plains. The past held pride enough.

To the north, the horizon showed a strange and ghostly glimmer where the barrier wall of the polar pack reared up, gigantic against the sky. The wind blew, down from the ice, through the mountain gorges, across the plains, never ceasing. And here and there the cryptic towers rose, broken monoliths of stone. Stark remembered the vision of the talisman, the huge structure crowned with eerie darkness. He looked upon the ruins with loathing and curiosity. The men of Mekh could tell him nothing.

Thord did not tell Stark where they were taking him, and Stark did not ask. It would have been an admission of fear.

In mid-afternoon of the second day they came to a lip of rock where the snow was swept clean, and below it was a sheer drop into a narrow valley. Looking down, Stark saw that on the floor of the valley, up and down as far as he could see, were men and beasts and shelters of hide and brush, and fires burning. By the hundreds, by the several thousand, they camped under the cliffs, and their voices rose up on the thin air in a vast deep murmur that was deafening after the silence of the plains.

A war party, gathered now, before the thaw. Stark smiled. He became curious to meet the leader of this army.

They found their way single file along a winding track that dropped down the cliff face. The wind stopped abruptly, cut off by the valley walls. They came in among the shelters of the camp.

Here the snow was churned and soiled and melted to slush by the fires. There were no women in the

camp, no sign of the usual cheerful rabble that follows a barbarian army. There were only men—~~hillmen and warriors all, tough-handed killers with no thought but battle.~~

They came out of their holes to shout at Thord and his men, and stare at the stranger. Thord was flushed and jovial with importance.

“I have no time for you,” he shouted back. “I go to speak with the Lord Ciaran.”

Stark rode impassively, a dark giant with a face of stone. From time to time he made his beast curvet and laughed at himself inwardly for doing it.

They came at length to a shelter larger than the others, but built exactly the same and no more comfortable. A spear was thrust into the snow beside the entrance, and from it hung a black pennant with a single bar of silver across it, like lightning in a night sky. Beside it was a shield with the same device. There were no guards.

Thord dismounted, bidding Stark to do the same. He hammered on the shield with the hilt of his sword, announcing himself.

“Lord Ciaran! It is Thord—with a captive.”

A voice, toneless and strangely muffled, spoke from within.

“Enter, Thord.”

Thord pushed aside the hide curtain and went in, with Stark at his heels.

The dim daylight did not penetrate the interior. Cressets burned, giving off a flickering brilliance and a smell of strong oil. The floor of packed snow was carpeted with furs, much worn. Otherwise there

was no adornment, and no furniture but a chair and a table, both dark with age and use, and a pallet of skins in one shadowy corner with what seemed to be a heap of rags upon it

In the chair sat a man.

He seemed very tall, in the shaking light of the cressets. From neck to thigh his lean body was cased in black link mail, and under that a tunic of leather, dyed black. Across his knees he held a sable axe, a great thing made for the shearing of skulls, and his hands lay upon it gently, as though it were a toy he loved.

His head and face were covered by a thing that Stark had seen before only in very old paintings—the ancient war-mask of the inland Kings of Mars. Wrought of black and gleaming steel, it presented an unhuman visage of slitted eyeholes and a barred slot for breathing. Behind, it sprang out in a thin, soaring sweep, like a dark wing edge-on in flight.

The intent, expressionless scrutiny of that mask was bent, not upon Thord, but upon Eric John Stark.

The hollow voice spoke again, from behind the mask. “Well?”

“We were hunting in the gorges to the south,” said Thord. “We saw a fire...” He told the story, of how they had found the stranger and the body of the man from Kushat.

“Kushat!” said the Lord Ciaran softly. “Ah! And why, stranger, were you going to Kushat?”

“My name is Stark. Eric John Stark, Earthman, out of Mercury.” He was tired of being called stranger. Quite suddenly, he was tired of the whole business.

“Why should I not go to Kushat? Is it against some law, that a man may not go there in peace without being hounded all over the Norlands? And why do the men of Mekh make it their business? They have nothing to do with the city.”

Thord held his breath, watching with delighted anticipation.

The hands of the man in armor caressed the axe. They were slender hands, smooth and sinewy—small hands, it seemed, for such a weapon.

“We make what we will our business, Eric John Stark.” He spoke with a peculiar gentleness. “I have asked you. Why were you going to Kushat?”

“Because,” Stark answered with equal restraint, “my comrade wanted to go home to die.”

“It seems a long, hard journey, just for dying.” The black helm bent forward, in an attitude of thought. “Only the condemned or banished leave their cities, or their clans. Why did your comrade flee Kushat?”

A voice spoke suddenly from out of the heap of rags that lay on the pallet in the shadows of the corner. A man’s voice, deep and husky, with the harsh quaver of age or madness in it.

“Three men beside myself have fled Kushat, over the years that matter. One died in the spring floods. One was caught in the moving ice of winter. One lived. A thief named Camar, who stole a certain talisman.”

Stark said, “My comrade was called Greshi.” The leather belt weighed heavy about him, and the iron boss seemed hot against his belly. He was beginning, now, to be afraid.

The Lord Ciaran spoke, ignoring Stark. “It was the sacred talisman of Kushat. Without it, the city is like a man without a soul.”

As the Veil of Tanit was to Carthage, Stark thought, and reflected on the fate of that city after the Veil was stolen.

“The nobles were afraid of their own people,” the man in armor said. “They did not dare to tell that it was gone. But we know.”

“And,” said Stark, “you will attack Kushat before the thaw, when they least expect you.”

“You have a sharp mind, stranger. Yes. But the great wall will be hard to carry, even so. If I came, bearing in my hands the talisman of Ban Cruach...”

He did not finish, but turned instead to Thord. “When you plundered the dead man’s body, what did you find?”

“Nothing, Lord. A few coins, a knife, hardly worth the taking.”

“And you, Eric John Stark. What did you take from the body?”

With perfect truth he answered, “Nothing.”

“Thord,” said the Lord Ciaran, “search him.”

Thord came smiling up to Stark and ripped his jacket open.

With uncanny swiftness, the Earthman moved. The edge of one broad hand took Thord under the ear, and before the man’s knees had time to sag Stark had caught his arm. He turned, crouching forward, and pitched Thord headlong through the door flap.

He straightened and turned again. His eyes held a feral glint. “The man has robbed me once,” he said “It is enough.”

He heard Thord's men coming. Three of them tried to jam through the entrance at once, and he sprang at them. He made no sound. His fists did the talking for him, and then his feet, as he kicked the stunned barbarians back upon their leader.

"Now," he said to the Lord Ciaran, "will we talk as men?"

The man in armor laughed, a sound of pure enjoyment. It seemed that the gaze behind the mask studied Stark's savage face, and then lifted to greet the sullen Thord who came back into the shelter, his cheeks flushed crimson with rage.

"Go," said the Lord Ciaran. "The stranger and I will talk."

"But Lord," he protested, glaring at Stark, "it is not safe..."

"My dark mistress looks after my safety," said Ciaran, stroking the axe across his knees. "Go." Thord went.

The man in armor was silent then, the blind mask turned to Stark, who met that eyeless gaze and was silent also. And the bundle of rags in the shadows straightened slowly and became a tall old man with rusty hair and beard, through which peered craggy juts of bone and two bright, small points of fire, as though some wicked flame burned within him.

He shuffled over and crouched at the feet of the Lord Ciaran, watching the Earthman. And the man in armor leaned forward.

"I will tell you something, Eric John Stark. I am a bastard, but I come of the blood of kings. My name and rank I must make with my own hands. But I will set them high, and my name will ring in the Norlands!"

“I will take Kushat, Who holds Kushat, holds Mars—and the power and the riches that lie beyond the Gates of Death!”

“I have seen them,” said the old man, and his eyes blazed. “I have seen Ban Cruach the mighty. I have seen the temples and the palaces glitter in the ice. I have seen Them, the shining ones. Oh, I have seen them, the beautiful, hideous ones!”

He glanced sidelong at Stark, very cunning. “That is why Otar is mad, stranger. He has seen.”

A chill swept Stark. He too had seen, not with his own eyes but with the mind and memories of Ban Cruach, of a million years ago.

Then it had been no illusion, the fantastic vision opened to him by the talisman now hidden in his belt. If this old madman had seen...

“What beings lurk beyond the Gates of Death I do not know,” said Ciaran. “But my dark mistress will test their strength—and I think my red wolves will hunt them down, once they get a smell of plunder.”

“The beautiful, terrible ones,” whispered Otar. “And oh, the temples and the palaces, and the great towers of stone!”

“Ride with me, Stark,” said the Lord Ciaran abruptly. “Yield up the talisman, and be the shield at my back. I have offered no other man that honor.”

Stark asked slowly, “Why do you choose me?”

“We are of one blood, Stark, though we be strangers.”

The Earthman’s cold eyes narrowed. “What would your red wolves say to that? And what would Otar

say? Look at him, already stiff with jealousy, and fear lest I answer, 'Yes'."

"I do not think you would be afraid of either of them."

"On the contrary," said Stark, "I am a prudent man." He paused. "There is one other thing. I will bargain with no man until I have looked into his eyes. Take off your helm, Ciaran—and then perhaps we will talk!"

Otar's breath made a snakelike hissing between his toothless gums, and the hands of the Lord Ciaran tightened on the haft of the axe.

"No!" he whispered. "That I can never do."

Otar rose to his feet, and for the first time Stark felt the full strength that lay in this strange old man.

"Would you look upon the face of destruction?" he thundered. "Do you ask for death? Do you think a thing is hidden behind a mask of steel without a reason, that you demand to see it?"

He turned. "My Lord," he said. "By tomorrow the last of the clans will have joined us. After that, we must march. Give this Earthman to Thord, for the time that remains—and you will have the talisman

The blank, blind mask was unmoving, turned toward Stark, and the Earthman thought that from behind it came a faint sound that might have been a sigh.

Then...

"Thord!" cried the Lord Ciaran, and lifted up the axe.

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