

CLASSICS TO GO

AMAZING

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VOLUME 23



LEIGH BRACKETT

Amazing Stories

Volume 23

Leigh Brackett

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Shannach—The Last

Even in this grip of alien horror a man could not throw away his lifetime goal ... not stand idly by as endless rows of alabaster shapes, seated in their chairs of stone, thought-ruled this gargoyle planet from the dead blackness of deep Mercurian caverns.

It was dark in the caves under Mercury. It was hot, and there was no sound in them but the slow plodding of Trevor's heavy boots.

Trevor had been wandering for a long time, lost in this labyrinth where no human being had ever gone before. And Trevor was an angry man. Through no fault or will of his own he was about to die, and he was not ready to die. Moreover, it seemed a wicked thing to come to his final moment here in the stifling dark, buried under alien mountains high as Everest.

He wished now that he had stayed in the valley. Hunger and thirst would have done for him just the same, but at least he would have died in the open like a man, and not like a rat trapped in a drain.

Yet there was not really much to choose between them as a decent place to die. A barren little hell-hole the valley had been, even before the quake, with nothing to draw a man there except the hope of finding sun-stones, one or two of which could transform a prospector into a plutocrat.

Trevor had found no sun-stones. The quake had brought down a whole mountain wall on his ship, leaving him with a

pocket torch, a handful of food tablets, a canteen of water, and the scant clothing he stood in.

He had looked at the naked rocks, and the little river frothing green with chemical poisons, and he had gone away into the tunnels, the ancient blowholes of a cooling planet, gambling that he might find a way out of the valleys.

Mercury's Twilight Belt is cut into thousands of cliff-locked pockets, as a honeycomb is cut into cells. There is no way over the mountains, for the atmosphere is shallow, and the jagged peaks stand up into airless space. Trevor knew that only one more such pocket lay between him and the open plains. If he could get to and through that last pocket, he had thought....

But he knew now that he was not going to make it.

He was stripped to the skin already, in the terrible heat. When the weight of his miner's boots became too much to drag, he shed them, padding on over the rough rock with bare feet. He had nothing left now but the torch. When the light went, his last hope went with it.

After a while it went.

The utter blackness of the grave shut down. Trevor stood still, listening to the pulse of his own blood in the silence, looking at that which no man needs a light to see. Then he flung the torch away and stumbled on, driven to fight still by the terror which was greater than his weakness.

Twice he struck against the twisting walls, and fell, and struggled up again. The third time he remained on hands and knees, and crawled.

He crept on, a tiny creature entombed in the bowels of a planet. The bore grew smaller and smaller, tightening around him. From time to time he lost consciousness, and it became increasingly painful to struggle back to an

awareness of the heat and the silence and the pressing rock.

After one of these periods of oblivion he began to hear a dull, steady thunder. He could no longer crawl. The bore had shrunk to a mere crack, barely large enough for him to pass through wormlike on his belly. He sensed now a deep, shuddering vibration in the rock. It grew stronger, terrifying in that enclosed space. Steam slipped wraithlike into the smothering air.

The roar and the vibration grew to an unendurable pitch. Trevor was near to strangling in the steam. He was afraid to go on, but there was no other way to go. Quite suddenly his hands went out into nothingness.

The rock at the lip of the bore must have been rotten with erosion. It gave under his weight and pitched him headfirst into a thundering rush of water that was blistering hot and going somewhere in a great hurry through the dark.

After that Trevor was not sure of anything. There was the scalding heat and the struggle to keep his head up and the terrible speed of the sub-Mercurian river racing on to its destiny. He struck rock several times, and once he held his breath for a whole eternity until the roof of the tunnel rose up again.

He was only dimly aware of a long sliding fall downward through a sudden brightness. It was much cooler. He splashed feebly, because his brain had not told his body to stop, and the water did not fight him.

His feet and hands struck solid bottom. He floundered on, and presently the water was gone. He made one attempt to rise. After that he lay still.

The great mountains leaned away from the Sun. Night came, and with it violent storm and rain. Trevor did not

know it. He slept, and when he woke the savage dawn was making the high cliffs flame with white light.

Something was screaming above his head.

Aching and leaden still with exhaustion, he roused up and looked about him.

He sat on a beach of pale grey sand. At his feet were the shallows of a grey-green lake that filled a stony basin some half-mile in breadth. To his left the underground river poured out of the cliff face, spreading into a wide, riffling fan of foam. Off to his right, the water spilled over the rim of the basin to become a river again somewhere below, and beyond the rim, veiled in mist and the shadow of a mountain wall, was a valley.

Behind him, crowding to the edge of the sand, were trees and ferns and flowers, alien in shape and color but triumphantly alive. And from what he could see of it, the broad valley was green and riotous with growth. The water was pure, the air had a good smell, and it came to Trevor that he had made it. He was going to live a while longer, after all.

Forgetting his weariness, he sprang up, and the thing that had hissed and screamed above him swooped down and passed the clawed tip of a leathery wing so close to his face that it nearly gashed him. He stumbled backward, crying out, and the creature rose in a soaring spiral and swooped again.

Trevor saw a sort of flying lizard, jet black except for a saffron belly. He raised his arms to ward it off, but it did not attack him, and as it swept by he saw something that woke in him amazement, greed, and a peculiarly unpleasant chill of fear.

Around its neck the lizard-thing wore a golden collar. And set into the scaly flesh of its head—into the bone itself, it

seemed—was a sun-stone.

There was no mistaking that small vicious flash of radiance. Trevor had dreamed of sun-stones too long to be misled. He watched the creature rise again into the steamy sky and shivered, wondering who, or what, had set that priceless thing into the skull of a flying lizard—and why.

It was the *why* that bothered him the most. Sun-stones are not mere adornments for wealthy ladies. They are rare, radioactive crystals, having a half-life one third greater than radium, and are used exclusively in the construction of delicate electronic devices dealing with frequencies above the first octave.

Most of that relatively unexplored super-spectrum was still a mystery. And the strangely jewelled and collared creature circling above him filled Trevor with a vast unease.

It was not hunting. It did not wish to kill him. But it made no move to go away.

From far down the valley, muted by distance to a solemn bell note that rolled between the cliffs, Trevor heard the booming of a great song.

A sudden desire for concealment sent him in among the trees. He worked his way along the shore of the lake. Looking up through the branches he saw the black wings lift and turn, following him.

The lizard was watching him with its bright, sharp eyes. It noted the path of his movements through the ferns and flowers, as a hawk watches a rabbit.

He reached the lip of the basin where the water poured over in a cataract several hundred feet high. Climbing around the shoulder of a rocky bastion, Trevor had his first clear look at the valley.

Much of it was still vague with mist. But it was broad and deep, with a sweep of level plain and clumps of forest, locked tight between the barrier mountains. And as he made out other details, Trevor's astonishment grew out of all measure.

The land was under cultivation. There were clusters of thatched huts among the fields, and in the distance was a rock-built city, immense and unmistakable in the burning haze of dawn.

Trevor crouched there, staring, and the winged lizard swung in lazy circles, watching, waiting, while he tried to think.

A fertile valley such as this was rare enough in itself. But to find fields and a city was beyond belief. He had seen the aboriginal tribes that haunt some of the cliff-locked worlds of the Twilight Belt—sub-human peoples who live precariously among the bitter rocks and boiling springs, hunting the great lizards for food. None of this was ever built by them.

Unless, in this environment, they had advanced beyond the Age of Stone....

The gong sounded again its deep challenging note. Trevor saw the tiny figures of mounted men, no larger than ants at that distance, come down from the city and ride out across the plain.

Relief and joy supplanted speculation in Trevor's mind. He was battered and starving, lost on an alien world, and anything remotely approaching the human and the civilized was better luck than he could have dreamed or prayed for.

Besides, there were sun-stones in this place. He looked hungrily at the head of the circling watcher, and then began to scramble down the broken outer face of the bastion.

The black wings slipped silently after him down the sky.

About a hundred feet above the valley floor he came to an overhang. There was no way past it but to jump. He clung to a bush and let himself down as far as he could, and then dropped some four or five yards to a slope of springy turf. The fall knocked the wind out of him, and as he lay gasping a chill doubt crept into his mind.

He could see the land quite clearly now, the pattern of the fields, the far-off city. Except for the group of riders, nothing stirred. The fields, the plain were empty of life, the little villages still as death. And he saw, swinging lazily above a belt of trees by the river, a second black-winged shadow, watching.

The trees were not far away. The riders were coming toward them and him. It seemed to Trevor now that the men were perhaps a party of hunters, but there was something alarming about the utter disappearance of all other life. It was as though the gong had been a warning for all to take cover while the hunt was abroad.

The sharp-eyed lizards were the hounds that went before to find and flush the game. Glancing up at the ominous sentinel above his own head, Trevor had a great desire to see what the quarry was that hid in the belt of trees.

There was no way back to the partial security of the lake basin. The overhang cut him off from that. The futility of trying to hide was apparent, but nevertheless he wormed in among some crimson ferns. The city was at his left. To the right, the fertile plain washed out into a badland of lava and shattered rock, which narrowed and vanished around a shoulder of purple basalt. This defile was still in deep shadow.

The riders were still far away. He saw them splash across a ford, toy figures making little bursts of spray.

The watcher above the trees darted suddenly downward. The quarry was breaking cover.

Trevor's suspicions crystallized into an ugly certainty. Horror-struck, he watched the bronzed, half-naked figure of a girl emerge from the brilliant undergrowth and run like an antelope toward the badland.

The flying lizard rose, swooped, and struck.

The girl flung herself aside. She carried a length of sapling bound with great thorns, and she lashed out with it at the black brute, grazed it, and ran on.

The lizard circled and came at her again from behind.

She turned. There was a moment of vicious confusion, in which the leathery wings enveloped her in a kind of dreadful cloak, and then she was running again, but less swiftly, and Trevor could see the redness of blood on her body.

And again the flying demon came.

The thing was trying to herd her, turn her back toward the huntsmen. But she would not be turned. She beat with her club at the lizard, and ran, and fell, and ran again. And Trevor knew that she was beaten. The brute would have the life out of her before she reached the rocks.

Every dictate of prudence told Trevor to stay out of this. Whatever was going on was obviously the custom of the country, and none of his business. All he wanted was to get hold of one of these sun-stones and then find a way out of this valley. That was going to be trouble enough without taking on any more.

But prudence was swept away in the fury that rose in him as he saw the hawk swoop down again, with its claws outspread and hungry for the girl's tormented flesh. He sprang up, shouting to her to fight, to hang on, and went running full speed down the slope toward her.

She turned upon him a face of such wild, fierce beauty as he had never seen, the eyes dark and startled and full of a terrible determination. Then she screamed at him, in his own tongue, "*Look out!*"

He had forgotten his own nemesis. Black wings, claws, the lash of a scaly tail striking like a whip, and Trevor went down, rolling over and staining the turf red as he rolled.

From far off he heard the voices of the huntsmen, shrill and strident, lifted in a wild halloo.

II

For some reason the assault steadied Trevor. He got to his feet and took the club out of the girl's hands, regretting the gun that was buried under a ton of rock on the other side of the mountains.

"Keep behind me," he said. "Watch my back."

She stared at him strangely, but there was no time for questions. They began to run together toward the badland. It seemed a long way off. The lizards screamed and hissed above them. Trevor hefted the club. It was about the size and weight of a baseball bat. He had once been very good at baseball.

"They're coming," said the girl.

"Lie down flat," he told her, and went on, more slowly. She dropped behind him in the grass, her fingers closing over a fragment of stone. The wide wings whistled down.

Trevor braced himself. He could see the evil eyes, yellow and bright as the golden collars, and the brilliant flash of the sun-stones against the jetty scales of the head. They were attacking together, but at different angles, so that he could not face them both.

He chose the one that was going to reach him first, and waited. He let it get close, very close, diving swiftly with its scarlet tongue forking out of its hissing mouth and its sharp claws spread. Then he swung the club with all his might.

It connected. He felt something break. The creature screamed, and then the force of its dive carried it on into him and he lost his footing in a welter of thrashing wings and floundering body. He fell, and the second lizard was on him.

The girl rose. In three long strides she reached him and flung herself upon the back of the scaly thing that ravaged him. He saw her trying to pin it to the ground, hammering methodically at its head with the stone.

He kicked off the wounded one. He had broken its neck, but it was in no hurry to die. He caught up the club and presently the second brute was dead. Trevor found it quite easy to pick up the sun-stone.

He held it in his hand, a strange, tawny, jewel-like thing, with a scrap of bone still clinging to it. It glinted with inner fires, deep and subtle, and an answering spark of wild excitement was kindled in Trevor from the very touch and feel of it, so that he forgot where he was or what he was doing, forgot everything but the eerie crystal that gleamed against his palm.

It was more than a jewel, more even than wealth, that he held there. It was hope and success and a new life.

He had thrown years away prospecting the bitter Mercurian wastes. This trip had been his last gamble, and it had ended with his ship gone, his quest finished, and nothing to look forward to even if he did get back safely, but to become one of the penniless, aging planet-drifters he'd always pitied.

Now all that was changed. This single stone would let him go back to Earth a winner and not a failure. It would pay off

all the dreary, lonesome, hazardous years. It would....

It would do so many things if he could get out of this God-forsaken valley with it! *If!*

The girl had got her breath again. Now she said urgently, "Come! They're getting near!"

Trevor's senses, bemused by the sun-stone, registered only vaguely the external stimuli of sight and sound. The riders had come closer. The beasts they rode were taller and slighter than horses. They were not hoofed, but clawed. They had narrow, vicious-looking heads with spiny crests that stood up erect and arrogant. They came fast, carrying their riders lightly.

The men were still too far away to distinguish features, but even at that distance Trevor sensed something peculiar about their faces, something unnatural. They wore splendid harness, and their half-clad bodies were bronzed, but not nearly so deeply as the girl's.

The girl shook him furiously, stirring him out of his dream. "Do you want to be taken alive? Before, the beasts would have torn us apart, and that is quickly over. But we killed the hawks, don't you understand? Now they will take us alive!"

He did not understand in the least, but her obvious preference for a very nasty death instead of capture made him find reserves of strength he thought he had lost in the underground river. There was also the matter of the sun-stone. If they caught him with it they would want it back.

Clutching the precious thing he turned with the girl and ran.

The lava bed was beginning to catch the sun now. The splintered rock showed through, bleak and ugly. The badland and the defile beyond seemed like an entrance into hell, but it did offer shelter of a sort if they could make it.

The drumming of padded feet behind was loud in his ears. He glanced over his shoulder, once. He could see the faces of the huntsmen now. They were not good faces, in either feature or expression, and he saw the thing about them that he had noticed before, the unnatural thing.

In the center of each forehead, above the eyes, a sun-stone was set into flesh and bone.

First the hawk-lizards, and now these....

Trevor's heart contracted with an icy pang. These men were human, as human as himself, and yet they were not. They were alien and wicked and altogether terrifying, and he began to understand why the girl did not wish to come alive into their hands.

Fleet, implacable, the crested mounts with their strange riders were sweeping in upon the two who fled. The leader took from about his saddle a curved throwing stick and held it, poised. The sun-stone set in his brow flashed like a third, and evil eye.

The lava and the fangs of rock shimmered in the light. Trevor yearned toward them. The brown girl running before him seemed to shimmer also. It hurt very much to breathe. He thought he could not go any farther. But he did, and when the girl faltered he put his arm around her and steadied her on.

He continued to keep an eye out behind him. He saw the curved stick come hurtling toward him and he managed to let it go by. The others were ready now as they came within range. It seemed to Trevor that they were watching him with a peculiar intensity, as though they had recognized him as a stranger and had almost forgotten the girl in their desire to take him.

His bare feet trod on lava already growing hot under the sun. A spur of basalt reared up and made a shield against

the throwing sticks. In a minute or two Trevor and the girl were hidden in a terrain of such broken roughness as the man had seldom seen. It was as though some demoniac giant had whipped the molten lava with a pudding-spoon, cracking mountains with his free hand and tossing in the pieces. He understood now why the girl had waited for daylight to make her break. To attempt this passage in the dark would be suicidal.

He listened nervously for sounds of pursuit. He could not hear any, but he remained uneasy, and when the girl flung herself down to rest, he asked,

"Shouldn't we go farther? They might still come."

She did not answer him at once, beyond a shake of the head. He realized that she was looking at him almost as intently as the riders had. It was the first chance she had had to examine him, and she was making the most of it. She noted the cut of his hair, the stubble of beard, the color and texture of his skin, the rags of his shorts that were all he had to cover him. Very carefully she noted them, and then she said in an odd slow voice, as though she were thinking of something else,

"Mounted, the Korins are afraid of nothing. But afoot, and in here, they are afraid of ambush. It has happened before. They can die, you know, just the same as we do."

Her face, for all its youth, was not the face of a girl. It was a woman who looked at Trevor, a woman who had already learned the happy, the passionate, and the bitter things, who had lived with pain and fear and knew better than to trust anyone but herself.

"You aren't one of us," she said.

"No. I came from beyond the mountains." He could not tell whether she believed him or not. "Who, or what, are the Korins?"

"The lords of Korith," she answered, and began to tear strips from the length of white linen cloth she wore twisted about her waist. "There will be time to talk later. We still have far to go. Here, this will stop the bleeding."

In silence they bound each other's wounds and started off again. If Trevor had not been so unutterably weary, and the way so hard, he would have been angry with the girl. And yet there was nothing really to be angry about except that he sensed she was somehow suspicious of him.

Many times they had to stop and rest. Once he asked her, "Why were they—the Korins—hunting you?"

"I was running away. Why were they hunting *you*?"

"Damned if I know. Accident, perhaps. I happened to be where their hawks were flying."

The girl wore a chain of iron links around her neck, a solid chain with no clasp, too small to be pulled over the head. From it hung a round tag with a word stamped on it. Trevor took the tag in his hand.

"Galt," he read. "Is that your name?"

"My name is Jen. Galt is the Korin I belong to. He led the hunt." She gave Trevor a look of fierce and challenging pride and said, as though she were revealing a secret earldom, "I am a slave."

"How long have you been in the valley, Jen? You and I are the same stock, speaking the same language. Earth stock. How does it happen, a colony of this size that no one ever heard of?"

"It's been nearly three hundred years since the Landing," she answered. "I have been told that for generations my people kept alive the hope that a ship would come from Earth and release them from the Korins. It never came. And, except by ship, there is no way in or out of the valley."

Trevor glanced at her sharply. "I found a way in, all right, and I'm beginning to wish I hadn't. And if there's no way out, where are we going?"

"I don't know myself," said Jen, and rose. "But my man came this way, and others before him."

She went on, and Trevor went with her. There was no place else to go.

The heat was unbearable, and they crept in the shadows of the rocks wherever they could. They suffered from thirst, but there was no water. The shoulder of purple basalt loomed impossibly tall before them, and seemed never to grow nearer.

For most of the day they toiled across the lava bed, and at last, when they had almost forgotten that they had ever dreamed of doing it, they rounded the shoulder and came staggering out of the badland into a narrow canyon that seemed like the scar of some cataclysmic wound in the mountain.

Rock walls, raw and riven, rose out of sight on either side, the twisted strata showing streaks of crimson and white and sullen ochre. A little stream crawled in a stony bed, and not much grew beside it.

Jen and Trevor fell by the stream. And while they were still sprawled on the moist gravel, lapping like dogs at the bitter water, men came quietly from among the rocks and stood above them, holding weapons made of stone.

Trevor got slowly to his feet. There were six of these armed men. Like the girl, they wore loin cloths of white cotton, much frayed, and like her they were burned almost black by a lifetime of exposure to a brutal sun. They were all young, knotted and sinewy from hard labor, their faces grim beyond their years. All bore upon their bodies the scars of talons. And they looked at Trevor with a cold, strange look.

They knew Jen, or most of them did. She called them gladly by name, and demanded, "Hugh. Where is Hugh?"

One of them nodded toward the farther wall. "Up there in the caves. He's all right. Who is this man, Jen?"

She turned to study Trevor.

"I don't know. They were hunting him, too. He came to help me. I couldn't have escaped without him. He killed the hawks. But...." She hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "He says he came from beyond the mountains. He knows of Earth and speaks our tongue. And when he killed the hawks he smashed the skull of one and took the sun-stone."

All six started at that. And the tallest of them, a young man with a face as bleak and craggy as the rocks around them, came toward Trevor.

"Why did you take the sun-stone?" he asked. His voice held an ugly edge.

Trevor stared at him. "Why the devil do you suppose? Because it's valuable."

The man held out his hand. "Give it to me."

"The hell I will!" cried Trevor furiously. He backed away, just a little, getting set.

The young man came on, and his face was dark and dangerous.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen.

Saul didn't wait. He kept right on coming. Trevor let him get close before he swung, and he put every ounce of his strength behind the blow.

The smashing fist took Saul squarely in the belly and sent him backward, doubled up. Trevor stood with hunched

shoulders, breathing hard, watching the others with feral eyes.

"What are you?" he snarled. "A bunch of thieves? All right, come on! I got that stone the hard way and I'm going to keep it!"

Big words. A big anger. And a big fear behind them. The men were around him in a ring now. There was no chance of breaking away. Even if he did he was so winded they could pull him down in minutes. The stone weighed heavy in his pocket, heavy as half a lifetime of sweat and hunger and hard work, on the rockpiles of Mercury.

Saul straightened up. His face was still gray, but he bent again and picked up a sharp-pointed implement of rock that he had dropped. Then he moved forward. And the others closed in, at the same time, quite silently.

There was a bitter taste in Trevor's mouth as he waited for them. To get his hands on a sun-stone at last, and then to lose it and probably his life too, to this crowd of savages! It was more than anybody ought to be asked to bear.

"Saul, wait!" cried Jen again, pushing in front of him. "He saved my life! You can't just...."

"He's a Korin. A spy."

"He can't be! There's no stone in his forehead. Not even a scar."

Saul's voice was flat and relentless. "He took a sun-stone. Only a Korin would touch one of the cursed things."

"But he says he's from outside the valley! From Earth, Saul. From *Earth*! Things would be different there."

Jen's insistence on that point had at least halted the men temporarily. And Trevor, looking at Saul's face, had suddenly begun to understand something.

"You think the sun-stones are evil," he said.

Saul gave him a sombre glance. "They are. And the one you have is going to be destroyed. Now."

Trevor swallowed the bitter anguish that choked him, and did some fast thinking. If the sun-stones had a superstitious significance in this benighted pocket of Mercury—and he could imagine why they might, with those damned unnatural hawks flying around with the equally unnatural Korins—that put a different light on their attitude.

He knew just by looking at their faces that it was "give them the sun-stone or die." Dying at the hands of a bunch of wild fanatics didn't make sense. Better let them have the stone and gamble on getting it back again later. Or on getting another one. They seemed plentiful enough in the valley!

Sure, let's be sensible about it. Let's hand over a lifetime of hoping to a savage with horny palms, and not worry about it. Let's.... Oh, hell.

"Here," he said. "All right. Take it."

It hurt. It hurt like giving up his own heart.

Saul took it without thanks. He turned and laid it on a flat surface of rock, and began to pound the glinting crystal with the heavy stone he had meant to use on Trevor's head. There was a look on his lined, young, craggy face as though he was killing a living thing—a thing that he feared and hated.

Trevor shivered. He knew that sun-stones were impervious to anything but atomic bombardment. But it made him a little sick, none the less, to see that priceless object being battered by a crude stone club.

"It won't break," he said. "You might as well stop."

Saul flung down his weapon so close to Trevor's bare feet that he leaped back. Then he picked up the sun-stone and hurled it as far as he could across the ravine. Trevor heard it clicking faintly as it fell, in among the rocks and rubble at the foot of the opposite cliff. He strained to mark the spot.

"You idiot!" he said to Saul. "You've thrown away a fortune. The fortune I've spent my life trying to find. What's the matter with you? Don't you have any idea at all what those things are worth?"

Saul ignored him, speaking bleakly to the others. "No man with a sun-stone is to be trusted. I say kill him."

Jen said stubbornly, "No, Saul. I owe him my life."

"But he could be a slave, a traitor, working for the Korins."

"Look at his clothes," said Jen. "Look at his skin. This morning it was white, now it's red. Did you ever see a slave that color? Or a Korin, either. Besides, did you ever see him in the valley before? There aren't as many of us as that."

"We can't take any chances," Saul said. "Not us."

"You can always kill him later. But if he *is* from beyond the mountains, perhaps even from Earth—" She said the word hesitantly, as though she did not quite believe there was such a place. "He might know some of the things we've been made to forget. He might help us. Anyway, the others have a right to their say before you kill him."

Saul shook his head. "I don't like it. But—" He hesitated, scowling thoughtfully. "All right. We'll settle it up in the cave. Let's move." He said to Trevor, "You go in the middle of us. And if you try to signal anyone...."

"Who the devil would I signal to?" retorted Trevor angrily. "Listen, I'm sorry I ever got into your bloody valley."

But he was not sorry. Not quite.

His senses were on the alert to mark every twist and turn of the way they went, the way that would bring him back to the sun-stone. The ravine narrowed and widened and twisted, but there was only one negotiable path, and that was beside the stream bed. This went on for some distance, and then the ravine split on a tremendous cliff of bare rock that tilted up and back as though arrested in the act of falling over. The stream flowed from the left-hand fork. Saul took the other one.

They kept close watch on Trevor as he slipped and clambered and sprawled along with them. The detritus of the primeval cataclysm that had shaped this crack in the mountains lay where it had fallen, growing rougher and more dangerous with every eroding storm and cracking frost.

Above him, on both sides, the mountain tops went up and still up, beyond the shallow atmosphere. Their half-seen summits leaned and quivered like things glimpsed from under water, lit like torches by the naked blaze of the sun. There were ledges, lower down. Trevor saw men crouched upon them, among heaps of piled stones. They shouted, and Saul answered them. In this narrow throat no man could get through alive if they chose to stop him.

After a while they left the floor of the ravine and climbed a path, partly natural and partly so roughly hewn that it seemed natural. It angled steeply up the cliff face, and at its end was a narrow hole. Saul led the way through it. In single file the others followed, and Trevor heard Jen's voice echoing in some great hollow space beyond, calling Hugh.

There was a cave inside, a very large cave with dim nooks and crannies around its edges. Shafts of sunlight pierced it here and there from cracks in the cliff face high above, and far at the back of it, where the floor tipped sharply down, a flame burned. Trevor had seen flames like that before on