

# THE COURTS OF JANISHYD

*They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep*

—*The Rubdiydt*

THE DUST-REDDENED SUN was low in the west when the tribe filed down from the fissured foothills to the sea. The women spread out along the beach to gather driftwood, while the men took over the task of setting up the rain-catch.

Ryan could tell from the haggard faces around him that there would be a dance that night. He knew his own face must be haggard too, haggard and grimed with dust, the cheeks caved in, the eyes dark with hunger shadows. The dogless days had been many this time.

The rain-catch was a crazy quiltwork pattern of dogskins laboriously sewn together into a makeshift tarpaulin. Ryan and the other young men held it aloft while the older men set up the poles and tied the dog-gut strings, letting the tarp sag in the middle so that when it rained the precious water would accumulate in the depression. When the job was done, the men went down to the beach and stood around the big fire the women had built.

Ryan's legs ached from the long trek through the hill country and his shoulders were sore from packing the dog-skin tarp over the last five miles. Sometimes he wished he was the oldest man in the tribe instead of the youngest; then he would be free from the heavy work, free to shamble along in the rear on the marches, free to sit on his haunches during stopovers while the younger men took care of the hunting and the love-making.

He stood with his back to the fire, letting the heat penetrate his dogskin clothing and warm his flesh. Nearby, the women were preparing the evening meal, mashing the day's harvest of tubers into a thick pulp, adding water sparingly from their dogskin waterbags. Ryan glimpsed Merium out of the corner of his eye, but the sight of her thin young face and shapely body did not stir his blood at all, and he turned his eyes miserably away.

He remembered how he had felt about her at the time of the last dog kill—how he had lain beside her before the roaring fire, the aroma of roasted dog flesh still lingering in the night air. His belly had been full and he had lain beside her half the night, and he had almost wanted her. She had seemed beautiful then and for many days afterward; but gradually her beauty had faded away and she had become just another drab face, another listless figure stumbling along with the rest of the tribe, from oasis to oasis, from ruin to ruin, in the eternal search for food.

Ryan shook his head. He could not understand it. But there were so many things that he could not understand. The Dance, for instance. Why should the mouthing of mere words to the accompaniment of rhythmic movements give him pleasure? How could hatred make him strong?

He shook his head again. In a way, the Dance was the biggest mystery of all. . . .

Merium brought him his supper, looking up at him shyly with her large brown eyes. Illogically, Ryan was reminded of the last dog he had killed and he jerked the earthen pot out of her hands and walked down to the water's edge to eat alone.

The sun had set. Streaks of gold and crimson quivered in the wind-creased water, slowly faded away. Darkness crept down from the gullied foothills to the beach, and with it came the first cold breath of night.

Ryan shivered. He tried to concentrate on his food, but the memory of the dog would not go away.

It had been a small dog, but a very vicious one. It had bared its teeth when at last he had cornered it in the little rocky cul-de-sac in the mountains, and as further evidence of its viciousness it had wagged its ridiculous tail. Ryan could still remember the high-pitched sound of its growl—or was it a whine?—when he advanced on it with his club; but most of all he remembered the way its eyes had been when he brought the club down on its head.

He tried to free himself from the memory, tried to enjoy his tasteless meal. But he went right on remembering. He remembered all the other dogs he had killed and he wondered why killing them should bother him so. Once, he knew, dogs had run with the hunters, not from them; but that was long before his time—when there had been something else besides dogs to hunt.

Now it was different. Now it was dogs—or death. . . . He finished his meatless stew, swallowing the last mouthful grimly. He heard a soft step behind him, but he did not turn around. Presently Merium sat down beside him. The sea glinted palely in the light of the first stars. 'It's beautiful tonight,' Merium said.

Ryan was silent.

"Will there be a Dance?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"I hope there is."

"Why?"

"I—I don't know. Because everyone's so different afterward, I suppose—so happy, almost."

Ryan looked at her. Starlight lay gently on her childlike face, hiding the thinness of her cheeks, softening the hunger shadows beneath her eyes. Again he remembered the night he had almost wanted her and he wanted it to be the same again, only all the way this time. He wanted to want to take her in his arms and kiss her lips and hold her tightly to him, and when desire refused to rise in him, shame took its place, and because he couldn't understand the shame, he supplanted it with anger.

"Men have no happiness!" he said savagely.

"They did once—a long time ago."

"You listen too much to the old women's tales."

"I like to listen to them. I like to hear of the time when the ruins were living cities and the earth was green—when there *was an* abundance of food and water for everyone ... Surely you believe there was such a time. The words of the Dance—"

"I don't know," Ryan said "Sometimes I think the words of the Dance are lies."

Merium shook her head. "No. The words of the Dance are wisdom. Without them we could not live."

"You talk like an old woman yourself!" Ryan said. Abruptly he stood up. "You are an old woman. An ugly old woman!" He strode across the sand to the fire, leaving her alone by the water.

The tribe had broken up into groups. The old men huddled together in one group, the younger men in another. The women sat by themselves near the wavering perimeter of the firelight, crooning an ancient melody, exchanging an occasional word in low tones.

Ryan stood by the fire alone. He was the youngest male of the tribe. He and Merium had been the last children to be born. The tribe had numbered in the hundreds then, and the hunting had been good, the dogs still tame and easy to find. There had been other tribes too, wandering over the dust-veiled land. Ryan wondered what had become of them. But he only pretended to wonder. In his heart, he knew.

It was growing colder. He added more driftwood to the fire and watched the flames gorge themselves. Flames were like men, he thought. They ate everything there was in sight, and when there was nothing more to eat, they died. Suddenly a drum throbbed out and a woman's voice chanted: "What is a tree?"

A voice answered from the group of old men: "A tree is a green dream."

"What has become of the living land?"

"The living land is dust!"

The drum beat grew louder. Ryan's throat tightened. He felt the refreshing warmth of anger touch his face. The opening phase of the Dance always affected him, even when he was expecting it.

One of the old men was moving out into the firelight, shuffling his feet to the beat of the drum. The light reddened the wrinkles on his thirty-year-old face, made a crimson washboard of his forehead. His thin voice drifted on the cold night air:

*"The living land is dust, and those who turned it into dust are dust themselves—"*

A woman's voice took up the chant:

*"Our ancestors are dust:  
dust are our gorged ancestors—"*

There were other figures shuffling in the firelight now, and the beat on the dogskin drumhead was sharper, stronger. Ryan felt the quickening of his blood, the surge of newborn energy.

Voices blended:

*"Dust are our gorged ancestors,  
our ancestors who raped the fields and ravished the hills,  
who cut the forest chains and set the rivers free;  
our ancestors who drank deep from the well of the world  
and left the well dry—"*

Ryan could contain himself no longer. He felt his own feet moving with the vindictive beat of the drum. He heard his own voice take up the chant:

*'Let us take the memory of our ancestors  
and tear it open, rend its vitals,  
throw its entrails on the fire:  
our ancestors, the eaters,  
the putrefiers of the lakes and the rivers;  
the consumers, the destroyers, the murderers of the living land;  
the selfish, the obese, the great collectors,  
who tried to devour the world—"*

He joined the stomping mass of the tribe, his hands going through the mimic motions of killing; rending, throwing. Strength flowed into his emaciated limbs, pulsed through his undernourished body. He glimpsed Merium across the fire and he caught his breath at the beauty of her animated face. Again he almost wanted her, and for a while he was able to convince himself that some day he *would* want her; that this time the effect of the Dance would not wear off the way it always had before and he would go on feeling strong and confident and unafraid and find many dogs to feed the tribe; then, perhaps, the men would want the women the way they used to, and he would want Merium, and the tribe would increase and become great and strong—

He raised his voice higher and stomped his feet as hard as he could. The hatred was like wine now, gushing hotly through his body, throbbing wildly in his brain. The chant crescendoed into a huge hysterical wail, a bitter accusation reverberating over the barren hills and the dead sea, riding the dust-laden wind—

*"Our ancestors were pigs!  
Our ancestors were pigs! . . ."*