

NYMPH OF DARKNESS

by C. L. Moore and Forrest J Ackerman

The thick Venusian dark of the Ednes waterfront in the hours before dawn is breathless and tense with a nameless awareness, a crouching danger. The shapes that move murkily thru its blackness are not daylight shapes. Sun has never shone upon some of those misshapen figures, and what happens in the dark is better left untold. Not even the Patrol ventures there after the lights are out, and the hours between midnight and dawn are outside the law. If dark things happen there the Patrol never knows of them, or desires to know. Powers move thru the darkness along the waterfront to which even the Patrol bows low.

Thru that breathless blackness, along a street beneath which the breathing waters whispered, Northwest Smith strolled slowly. No prudent man ventures out after midnight along the waterfront of Ednes unless he has urgent business abroad, but from the leisurely gait that carried Smith soundlessly thru the dark he might have been some casual sightseer. He was no stranger to the Ednes waterfront. He knew the danger thru which he strolled so slowly, and under narrowed lids his colorless eyes were like keen steel probes that searched the dark. Now and then he passed a shapeless shadow that dodged aside to give him way. It might have been no more than a shadow. His no-colored eyes did not waver. He went on, alert and wary.

He was passing between two high warehouses that shut out even the faint reflection of light from the city beyond when he first heard that sound of bare, running feet which so surprised him. The patter of frantically fleeing steps is not uncommon along the waterfront, but these were—he listened closer—yes, certainly the feet of a woman or a young boy. Light and quick and desperate. His ears were keen enough to be sure of that. They were coming nearer swiftly. In the blackness even his pale eyes could see nothing, and he drew back against the wall, one hand dropping to the ray gun that hung low on his thigh. He had no desire to meet whatever it was which pursued this fugitive.

But his brows knit as the footsteps turned into the street that led between the warehouses. No woman, of whatever class or kind, ventures into this quarter by night. And he became certain as he listened that those feet were a woman's. There was a measured rhythm about them that suggested the Venusian woman's lovely, swaying gait. He pressed flat against the wall, holding his breath. He wanted no sound to indicate his own presence to the terror from which the woman fled. Ten years before he might have dashed out to her—but ten years along the spaceways teaches a man prudence. Gallantry can be foolhardy sometimes, particularly along the waterfront, where any of a score of things might be in close pursuit. At the thought of what some of those things might be the hair prickled faintly along his neck.

The frantic footsteps came storming down the dark street. He heard the rush of breath thru unseen nostrils, the gasp of laboring lungs. Then those desperate feet stumbled a bit, faltered, turned aside. Out of the dark a hurtling figure plunged full-tilt against him. His startled arms closed about a woman—a girl—a young girl, beautifully made, muscular and firmly curved under his startled hands—and quite naked.

He released her rather quickly.

"Earthman!" she gasped in an agony of breathlessness. "Oh, hide me, hide me! Quick!"

There was no time to wonder how she knew his origin or to ask from what she

fled, for before the words had left her lips a queer, greenish glow appeared around the corner of the warehouse. It revealed a pile of barrels at Smith's elbow, and he shoved the exhausted girl behind them in one quick motion, drawing his gun and flattening himself still further against the wall.

Yet it was no nameless monster which appeared around the corner of the building. A man's dark shape came into view. A squat figure, broad and misshapen. The light radiated from a flash-tube in his hand, and it was an oddly diffused and indirect light, not like an ordinary flash's clear beam, for it lighted the man behind it as well as what lay before the tube, as if a greenish, luminous fog were spreading sluggishly from the lens.

The man came forward with a queer, shuffling gait. Something about him made Smith's flesh crawl unaccountably. What it was he could not be sure, for the green glow of the tube did not give a clear light, and the man was little more than a squat shadow moving unevenly behind the light-tube's luminance.

He must have seen Smith almost immediately, for he came straight across the street to where the Earthman stood against the wall, gun in hand. Behind the glowing tube-mouth Smith could make out a pale blur of face with two dark splotches for eyes. It was a fat face, unseemly in its puffy palor, like some grub that has fed too long upon corruption. No expression crossed it at the sight of the tall spaceman in his leather garb, leaning against the wall and fingering a ready gun. Indeed, there was nothing to arouse surprise in the Earthman's attitude against the wall, or in his drawn gun. It was what any nightfarer along the waterfront would have done at the appearance of such a green, unearthly glow in the, perilous dark.

Neither spoke. After a single long glance at the silent Smith, the newcomer began to switch his diffused light to and fro about the street in obvious search. Smith listened, but the girl had stilled her sobbing breath and no sound betrayed her hiding place. The sluggish searcher went on slowly down the street, casting his foggy light before him. Its luminance faded by degrees as he receded from view, a black, misshapen shadow haloed in unholy radiance.

When utter dark had descended once more Smith holstered his gun and called to the girl in a low voice. The all but soundless murmur of bare feet on the pavement heralded her approach, the hurrying of still unruly breath.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I—I hope you need never know what horror you have saved me from."

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you know me?"

"They call me Nyusa. I did not know you, save that think you are of Earth, and perhaps—trustworthy. Grea Shar must have guided my flight along the streets tonight, for I think your kind is rare by the sea edge, after dark."

"But—can you see me?"

"No. But a Martian, or one of my own countrymen, would not so quickly have released a girl who dashed into his arms by night—as I am."

In the dark Smith grinned. It had been purely reflexive, that release of her when his hand realized her nudity. But he might as well take credit for it.

"You had better go quickly now," she went on, "there is such danger here that—"

Abruptly the low voice broke off. Smith could hear nothing, but he sensed a

tensing of the girl by his side, a strained listening. And presently he caught a far away sound, a curious muffled wheezing, as if something shortwinded and heavy were making laborious haste. It was growing nearer. The girl's caught breath was loud in the stillness at his elbow.

"Quick!" she gasped. "Oh, hurry!"

Her hand on his arm tugged him on in the direction the squat black searcher had taken. "Faster!" And her anxious hands pulled him into a run. Feeling a little ridiculous, he loped thru the dark beside her with long, easy strides, hearing nothing but the soft fall of his own boots and the scurrying of the girl's bare feet, and far behind the distant wheezing breath, growing fainter.

Twice she turned him with a gentle push into some new byway. Then they paused while she tugged at an unseen door, and after that they ran down an alley so narrow that Smith's broad shoulders brushed its walls. The place smelled of fish and decayed wood and the salt of the seas. The pavement rose in broad, shallow steps, and they went thru another door, and the girl pulled at his arm with a breathed,

"We're safe now. Wait."

He heard the door close behind them, and light feet pattered on boards.

"Lift me," she said after a moment. "I can't reach the light."

Cool, firm fingers touched his neck. Gingerly in the dark he found her waist and swung her aloft at arm's length. Between his hands that waist was supple and smoothly muscled and slim as a reed. He heard the fumble of uncertain fingers overhead. Then in an abrupt dazzle light sprang up about him.

He swore in a choked undertone and sprang back, dropping his hands. For he had looked to see a girl's body close to his face, and he saw nothing. His hands had gripped—nothing. He had been holding aloft a smooth and supple—nothingness.

He heard the fall of a material body on the floor, and a gasp and cry of pain, but still he could see nothing, and he fell back another step, lifting an uncertain hand to his eyes and muttering a dazed Martian oath. For look tho he would, he could see no one but himself in the little bare room the light had revealed. Yet the girl's voice was speaking from empty air.

"What—why did—Oh, I see!" and a little ripple of laughter. "You have never heard of Nyusa?"

The repetition of the name struck a chord of remote memory in the Earthman's mind. Somewhere lately he had heard that word spoken. Where and by whom he could not recall, but it aroused in his memory a nebulous chord of night peril and the unknown. He was suddenly glad of the gun at his side, and a keener awareness was in the pale gaze he sent around the tiny room.

"No," he said. "I have never heard the name before now."

"I am Nyusa."

"But—where are you?"

She laughed again, a soft ripple of mirth honey sweet with the Venusian woman's traditionally lovely voice.

"Here. I am not visible to men's eyes. I was born so, was born—" Here the rippling voice sobered, and a tinge solemnity crept in. "—I was born of a strange mating, Earthman. My mother was a Venusian, but my father—my father was Darkness. I can't explain . . . But because of that strain of Dark in me, I am invisible. And because of it I—I am not free."

"Why? Who holds you captive? How could anyone imprison an invisibility?"

"The—Nov." Her voice was the faintest breath of sound, and again, at the strange word, a prickle of nameless unease ran thru Smith's memory. Somewhere he had heard that name before, and the remembrance it roused was too nebulous to put into words, but it was ominous. Nyusa's breathing whisper went on very softly at his shoulder. It was a queer, unreal feeling, that, to be standing alone in a bare room and a girl's sweet, muted murmur in his ears from empty air.

"The Nov—they dwell underground. They are the last remnant of a very old race. And they are the priests who worship That which was my father. The Darkness. They prison me for purposes of their own.

"You see, my heritage from the lady who bore me was her own lovely human shape, but the Thing which was my father bequeathed to his child stranger things than invisibility. I am of a color outside the range of human eyes. And I have entry into—into other lands than this. Strange lands, lovely and far—Oh, but so damnably near! If I could only pass by the bars the Nov have set to shut me away. For they need me in their dark worship, and here I must stay, prisoned in the hot, muddy world which is all they themselves can ever know. They have a light—you saw it, the green glow in the hands of the Nov who pursued me thru the dark tonight—which makes me visible to human eyes. Something in its color combines with that strange color which is mine to produce a hue that falls within man's range of vision. If he had found me I would have been—punished—severely, because I fled tonight. And the Nov's punishments are—not nice.

"To make sure that I shall not escape them, they have set a guardian to dog my footsteps—the thing that wheezed on my track tonight—Dolf. He sprang from some frightful union of material and immaterial. He is partly elemental, partly animal. I can't tell you fully. And he is cloudy, nebulous—but very real, as you would have discovered had he caught us just now. He has a taste for human blood which makes him invaluable, tho I am safe, for I am only half human, and the Nov—well, they are not wholly human either. They—"

She broke off suddenly. Outside the door Smith's keen ears had caught a shuffle of vague feet upon the ground, and thru the cracks came very clearly the snuffle of wheezing breath. Nyusa's bare feet pattered swiftly across the boards, and from near the door came a series of low, sibilant hissings and whistlings in a clearer tone than the sounds the great Dolf made. The queer noise crescendoed to a sharp command, and he heard a subdued snuffling and shuffling outside and the sound of great, shapeless feet moving off over flagstones. At his shoulder Nyusa sighed.

"It worked that time," she said. "Sometimes I can command him, by virtue of my father's strength in me. The Nov do not know that. Queer, isn't it—they never seem to remember that I might have inherited more from their god than my invisibility and my access to other worlds. They punish me and prison me and command me to their service like some temple dancing girl—me, the half divine!
I

think—yes, I think that someday the doors will open at my own command, and I shall go out into those other worlds. I wonder—could I do it now?"

The voice faded to a murmurous undertone. Smith realized that she had all but forgotten his presence at the realization of her own potentialities. And again that prickle of unease went over him. She was half human, but half only. Who could say what strange qualities were rooted in her, springing from no human seed? Qualities that might someday blossom into—into—well, he had no words for what he was thinking of, but he hoped not to be there on the day the Nov tried her too far.

Hesitant footsteps beside him called back his attention sharply. She was moving away, a step at a time. He could hear the sound of her bare feet on the boards. They had almost reached the opposite wall now, one slow step after another. And then suddenly those hesitating footfalls were running faster, faster, diminishing in distance. No door opened, no aperture in the walls, but Nyusa's bare feet pattered eagerly away. He was aware briefly of the vastnesses of dimensions beyond our paltry three, distances down which a girl's bare feet could go storming in scornful violation of the laws that held him fast. From far away he heard those steps falter. He thought he heard the sound of fists beating against resistance, the very remote echo of a sob. Then slowly the patter of bare feet returned. Almost he could see a dragging head and hopelessly slumped shoulders as the reluctant footfalls drew nearer, nearer, entered the room again. At his shoulder she said in a subdued voice,

"Not yet. I have never gone so far before, but the way still barred. The Nov are too strong—for a while. But know, now. I know! I am a god's daughter, and strong too. Not again shall I flee before the Nov's pursuit, or fear because Dolf follows. I am the child of Darkness, and they shall know it! They—"

Sharply into her exultant voice broke a moment of blackness that cut off her words with the abruptness of a knife stroke. It was of an instant's duration only, and as the light came on again a queer wash of rosy luminance spread thru the room and faded again, as if a ripple of color had flowed past. Nyusa sighed.

"That is what I fled," she confided. "I am not afraid now—but I do not like it. You had best go—or no, for Dolf still watches the door I entered by. Wait—let me think."

Silence for a moment, while the last flush of rose faded from the air, to be followed by a ripple of fresh color that faded in turn. Three times Smith saw the tide of red flow thru the room and die away before Nyusa's hand fell upon his arm and her voice murmured from emptiness,

"Come. I must hide you somewhere while I perform my ritual. That color is the signal that the rites are to begin—the Nov's command for my presence. There is no escape for you until they call Dolf away, for I could not guide you to a door without having him sense my presence there and follow. No, you must hide—hide and watch me dance. Would you like that? A sight which no eyes that are wholly human have ever seen before! Come."

Invisible hands pushed open the door in the opposite wall and pulled him thru. Stumbling a little at the newness of being guided by an unseen creature, Smith followed down a corridor thru which waves of rosy light flowed and faded. The way twisted many times, but no doors opened from it nor did they meet anyone in the five minutes or so that elapsed as they went down the hallway thru the pulsing color of the air.

At the end a great barred door blocked their passage. Nyusa released him for an instant, and he heard her feet whisper on the floor, her unseen hands fumbled with something metallic. Then a section of the floor sank. He was

looking down a shaft around which narrow stairs spiraled, very steeply. It was typically a Venusian structure, and very ancient. He had descended other spiraled shafts before now, to strange destinations. Wondering what lay in store for him at the foot of this, he yielded to the girl's clinging hands and went down slowly, gripping the rail.

He had gone a long way-before the small, invisible hands plucked at his arm again and drew him thru an opening in the rock thru which the shaft sank. A short corridor led into darkness. At its end they paused, Smith blinking in the pale darkness which veiled the great cavern that lay before them.

"Wait here," whispered Nyusa. "You should be safe enough in the dark. No one ever uses this passage but myself. I will return after the ceremony."

Hands brushed his briefly, and she was gone. Smith pressed back against the wall and drew his gun, flicking the catch experimentally to be sure it would answer any sudden need. Then he settled back to watch.

Before him a vast domed chamber stretched. He could see only a little of it in the strange dark pallor of the place. The floor shone with the deep sheen of marble, black as quiet water underground. And as the minutes passed he became aware of motion and life in the pale dark. Voices murmured, feet shuffled softly, forms moved thru the distance. The Nov were taking their places for the ceremony. He could see the dim outlines of their mass, far off in the dark.

After a while a deep, sonorous chanting began from nowhere and everywhere, swelling and filling the cavern an echoing from the domed ceiling in reverberant monotone. There were other sounds whose meaning he could not fathom, queer pipings and whistlings like the voice in which Nyusa had commanded Doff, but invested with a solemnity that gave them depth and power. He could feel fervor building up around the dome of the cavern, the queer, wild fervor and ecstasy of an unknown cult for a nameless god. He gripped his gun and waited.

Now, distantly and very vaguely, a luminance was forming in the center of the arched roof. It strengthened and deepened and began to rain downward toward the darkly shining floor in long streamers like webs of tangible light. In the mirrored floor replicas of light reached upward, mistily reflecting. It was a sight of such weird and enchanting loveliness that Smith held his breath, watching. And now green began to flush the streaming webs, a strange, fog green like the light the Nov had flashed thru the waterfront streets in pursuit of Nyusa. Recognizing the color, he was not surprised when a shape began to dawn in the midst of that raining light. A girl's shape, half transparent, slim and lovely and unreal.

In the dark pallor of the cavern, under the green luminance of the circling light, she lifted her arms in a long, slow, sweeping motion, lighter than smoke, and moved on tiptoe, very delicately. Then the light shimmered, and she was dancing. Smith leaned forward breathlessly, gun hanging forgotten in his hand, watching her dance. It was so lovely that afterward he could never be sure he had not dreamed.

She was so nebulous in the streaming radiance of the light, so utterly unreal, so fragile, so exquisitely colored in the strangest tints of violet and blue and frosty silver, and queerly translucent, like a moonstone. She was more unreal now, when she was visible, than she had ever seemed before his eyes beheld her. Then his hands had told him of her firm and slender roundness—now she was a wraith, transparent, dream-like, dancing soundlessly in a rain of lunar color.

She wove magic with her dancing body as she moved, and the dance was more intricate and symbolic and sinuous than any wholly human creature could have trod. She scarcely touched the floor, moving above her reflection in the polished stone like a lovely moonlight ghost floating in mid-darkness while green moon-fire rained all about her.

With difficulty Smith wrenched his eyes away from that nebulous creature treading her own reflection as she danced. He was searching for the sources of those voices he had heard, and in the green, revealing light he saw them ringing the cavern in numbers greater than he had dreamed. The Nov, intent as one man upon the shimmering figure before them. And at what he saw he was glad he could not see them clearly. He remembered Nyusa's words, "-the Nov are not wholly human either." Veiled tho they were in the misty radiance and the pallor of the dark, he could see that it was so. He had seen it, unrealizing, in the face of that squat pursuer who had passed him in the street.

They were all thick, shapeless, all darkly robed and white-faced as slugs are white. Their formless features, intent and emotionless, had a soft, unstable quality, not shaped with any human certainty. He did not stare too long at any one face, for fear he might make out its queer lack of contour, or understand the portent of that slug-white instability of feature.

Nyusa's dance ended in a long, floating whirl of unhuman lightness. She sank to the floor in deep obeisance, prostrate upon her own reflection. From the front ranks the assembled Nov a dark figure stepped with upraised arm. Obediently Nyusa rose. From that dark form, from the slug-like, unfeatured face, a twittering whistle broke, an Nyusa's voice echoed the sounds unerringly, her voice blending with the other's in a chant without words.

Smith was so intent upon watching that he was not aware of the soft shuffling in the dark behind him until the wheeze of labored breath sounded almost upon his neck. The thing was all but on him before that sixth sense which had saved him so often before now shrieked a warning and he whirled with a choked oath of surprise and shock, swinging up his gun and confronting a dim, shapeless immensity out which a dull glow of greenish light stared at him. His gun spat blue flame, and from the imponderable thing a whistling scream rang quaveringly, echoing across the cavern and cutting short that wordless chant between the Nov and the girl.

Then the dark bulk of Dolf lurched forward and fell smotheringly upon Smith. It bore him to the floor under engulfing weight which was only half real, but chokingly thick in his nostrils. He seemed almost to be breathing Dolf's substance, like heavy mist. Blinded and gasping, he fought the curiously nebulous thing that was smothering him, knowing he must win free in a few seconds' time, for Dolf's scream must bring the Nov upon him at any moment now. But for all his efforts he could not break away, and somethin indescribable and nauseous was fumbling for his throat. When he felt its blind searching his struggles redoubled convulsively, and after a frantic moment he staggered free gulping in clean air and staring into the dark with wide eye trying to make out what manner of horror he had grappled with. He could see nothing but that dull flare, as of a single eye, glowing upon him from an imponderable bulk which blended with the dark.

Dolf was coming at him again. He heard great feet shuffling, and the wheezing breath came fast. From behind the shouts of the Nov rose loud, and the noise of running men, and above all the high, clear call of Nyusa, screaming something in a language without words. Dolf was upon him. That revolting, unseen member fumbled again at his throat. He thrust hard against the yielding bulk and his gun flared again, blue-hot in the dark, full into the midst of Dolf's unstable blackness.

He felt the mass of the half-seen monster jerk convulsively. A high, whistling scream rang out, shrill and agonized, and the sucking organ dropped from his throat. The dim glow of vision dulled in the shape's cloudy midst. Then it tuckered, went out. Somehow there was a puff of blackness lig dissolved into misty nothing all about him, and the dark shape that had been Dolf was gone. Half elemental, he had gone back into nothingness as he died.

Smith drew a deep breath and swung round to front the first of the oncoming Nov. They were almost upon him, and I heir numbers were overwhelming, but his flame-gun swung its long arc of destruction as they swarmed in and almost a dozen of the squat, dark figures must have fallen to that dcadly scythe before he went down under the weight of them. Pudgily soft fingers wrenched the gun from his hand, and he did not fight hard to retain it, for he remembered the blunt-nosed little flame-thrower in its holster under his arm And was not minded that they should discover it in any body-to-body fight.

Then he was jerked to his feet and thrust forward toward he pale radiance that still held Nyusa in its heart, like a anslucent prisoner in a cage of light. A little dazed by the swiftness of events, Smith went on unsteadily in their midst. He towered head and shoulders above them, and his eyes were averted. He tried not to flinch from the soft, fish-white hands urging him forward, not to look too closely into the faces of the squat things swarming so near. No, they were not men. He knew that more surely than ever from this close sight of the puffy, featureless faces ringing him round.

At the brink of the raining light which housed Nyusa the Nov who had led the chanting stood apart, watching impassively sively as the tall prisoner came forward in his swarm captors. There was command about this Nov, an air of regality and calm, and he was white as death, luminous as a corpse in the lunar reflections of the light.

They halted Smith before him. After one glance into the moveless, unfeatured face, slug pale, the Earthman did not look again. His eyes strayed to Nyusa, beyond the Nov w fronted him, and at what he saw took faint hope again. There was no trace of fear in her poise. She stood straight and quiet, watching, and he sensed a powerful reserve about her. She looked the god's daughter she was, standing there in the showering luminance, translucent as some immortal.

Said the leader Nov, in a voice that came deeply from somewhere within him, though his unfeatured face did not stir,

"How came you here?"

"I brought him," Nyusa's voice sounded steadily across the space that parted them.

The Nov swung round, amazement in every line of his squatness.

"You?" he exclaimed. "You brought an alien to witness the worship of the god I serve? How dared—"

"I brought one who had befriended me to witness my dance before my father," said Nyusa in so ominously gentle a tone that the Nov did not realize for a moment the significance cane of her words. He spluttered Venusian blasphemy in a choked voice.

"You shall die!" he yelled thickly. "Both of you shall die by such torment—"

"S-s-s-zt!"

Nyusa's whistling hiss was only a sibilance to Smith, but it cut the Nov's furious flow abruptly short. He went dead quiet, and Smith thought he saw a sicker pallor than before spreading over the slug face turned to Nyusa.

"Had you forgotten?" she queried gently. "Forgotten that my father is That which you worship? Dare you raise your voice to threaten Its daughter? Dare you, little worm-man?"

A gasp ran over the throng behind Smith. Greenish anger suffused the pallid face of the priest. He spluttered wordlessly and surged forward, short arms clawing toward the taunting girl. Smith's hand, darting inside his coat, was quicker than the clutch of his captors. The blue flare of his flame-thrower leaped out in a tongue of dazzling heat to lick at the plunging Nov. He spun round dizzily and screamed once, high and shrill, and sank in a dark, puddly heap to the floor.

There was a moment of the deepest quiet. The shapeless faces of the Nov were turned in one stricken stare to that oddly fluid lump upon the floor which had been their leader. Then in the pack behind Smith a low rumble began to rise, the mutter of many voices. He had heard that sound before—the dawning roar of a fanatic mob. He knew that it meant death. Setting his teeth, he spun to face them, hand closing firmer about the butt of his flame-thrower.

The mutter grew deeper, louder. Someone yelled, "Kill! Kill!" and a forward surge in the thick crowd of faces swayed the mass toward him. Then above that rising clamor Nyusa's voice rang clear.

"Stop!" she called. In sheer surprise the murderous mob paused, eyes turning toward the unreal figure in her cage of radiance. Even Smith darted a glance over his shoulder, flame gun poised in mid-air, his finger hesitating upon the catch. And at what they saw the crowd fell silent, the Earthman froze into stunned immobility as he watched what was happening under the rain of light.

Nyusa's translucent arms were lifted, her head thrown back. Like a figure of triumph carved out of moonstone she stood poised, while all about her in the misty, lunar colors of the light a darkness was forming like fog that clung to her outstretched arms and swathed her half real body. And it was darkness not like any night that Smith had ever seen before. No words in any tongue could describe it, for it was not a darkness made for any vocal creature to see. It was a blasphemy and an outrage against the eyes, against all that man hopes and believes and is. The darkness of the incredible, the utterly alien and opposed.

Smith's gun fell from shaking fingers. He pressed both hands to his eyes to shut out that indescribably awful sight, and all about him heard a long, soft sighing as the Nov sank to their faces upon the shining floor. In that deathly hush Nyusa spoke again, vibrant with conscious godhood and underrun with a queer, tingling ripple of inhumanity. It was the voice of one to whom the unknown lies open, to whom that utterly alien and dreadful blackness is akin.

"By the Darkness I command you," she said coldly. "Let this man go free. I leave you now, and I shall never return. Give thanks that a worse punishment than this is not visited upon you who paid no homage to the daughter of Darkness."

Then for a swift instant something indescribable happened. Remotely Smith was aware that the Blackness which had shrouded Nyusa was spreading thru him, permeating him with the chill of that blasphemous dark, a hideous pervasion of his innermost being. For that instant he was drowned in a darkness which made

his very atoms shudder to its touch. And if it was dreadful to him, the voiceless shriek that rose simultaneously from all about him gave evidence how much more dreadfully their god's touch fell upon the Nov. Not with his ears, but with some nameless sense quickened by that moment of alien blackness, he was aware of the scream of intolerable anguish, the writhing of extra human torment which the Nov underwent in that one timeless moment.

Out of his tense awareness, out of the spreading black, he was roused by a touch that startled him into forgetfulness of that dreadful dark. The touch of a girl's mouth upon his, a tingling pressure of sweet parted lips that stirred delicately against his own. He stood tense, not moving a muscle, while Nyusa's mouth clung to his in a long, close kiss like no kiss he had ever taken before. There was a coldness in it, a chill as alien as the dark that had gathered about her translucency under the light, a shuddering cold that struck thru him in one long, deep-rooted shock of frigid revulsion. And there was warmth in it, headily stirring the pulse which that cold had congealed.

In the instant while those clinging lips melted to his mouth, he was a battleground for emotions as alien as light and dark. The cold touch of Darkness, the hot touch of love. Alienity's shuddering, frozen stab, and humanity's blood strring throb of answer to the warm mouth's challenge. It was a mingling of such utter opposites that for an instant he was racked by forces that sent his senses reeling. There was danger in the conflict, the threat of madness in such irreconcilable forces that his brain blurred with the effort of compassing them.

Just in time the clinging lips dropped away. He stood alone in the reeling dark, that perilous kiss burning upon his memory as the world steadied about him. In that dizzy instant he heard what the rest, in their oblivious agony, could not have realized. He heard a girl's bare feet pattering softly along some incline, up and up, faster and faster. Now they were above his head. He did not look up. He knew he would have seen nothing. He knew Nyusa walked a way that no sense of his could perceive. He heard her feet break into an eager little run. He heard her laugh once, lightly, and the laugh cut off by the sound of a closing door. Then quiet.

Without warning, on the heels of that sound, he felt a tremendous release all about him. The darkness had lifted. He opened his eyes upon a dimly lighted cavern from which that rain of light had vanished. The Nov lay in quivering windows, about his feet, their shapeless faces hidden. Otherwise the whole vast place was empty as far as his eyes could pierce the dark.

Smith bent and picked up his fallen gun. He kicked the nearest Nov ungently.

"Show me the way out of this place," he ordered, sheathing the flame-thrower under his arm.

Obediently the sluggish creature stumbled to his feet.