

## THE COLD GRAY GOD

Snow fell over Righa, pole city of Mats. Bitter snow, whirling in ice-hard particles on the thin, keen wind that always seems to blow through Righa's streets. These cobblestoned ways were nearly empty today. Squat stone houses crouched low under the assaults of that storm-laden wind, and the dry snow eddied in long gusts down the reaches of the Lakklan, Righa's central street. The few pedestrians along the Lakklan huddled collars high about their ears and hurried over, the cobbles.

But there was one figure in the street that did not hurry. It was a woman's figure, and by the swing of her gait and the high poise of her head one might guess that she was young, but it would be no more than a guess, for the fur cloak she clutched about her muffled every line of her body and the peaked hood of it hid her face. That fur was the sleek white hide of the almost extinct saltland snow-cat, so that one might presuppose her wealth. She walked with a swinging grace rarely encountered in Righa's streets. For Righa is an outlaw

city, and young women, wealthy and beautiful and unattended, are seldom seen upon the Lakklan.

She strolled slowly down the broad, uneven way, her long hooded cloak making a white enigma of her. But she was somehow alien to this bleak, bitter scene. That almost dancing litheness which attended her motion, eloquent even through the concealing folds of rich snow-cat fur, was not a characteristic of Martian women, even the pink beauties of the canals. Indefinably she was foreign—exotically foreign.

From the shadow of her hood an eager gaze roved the street, avidly scanning the few faces she passed. They were hard-featured faces for the most part, bleak and cold as the gray city about them. And the eyes that met hers boldly or slyly, according to the type of passer-by, were curiously alike in their furtiveness, their shadow of alert and hunted watching. For men came to Righa quietly, by devious ways, and dwelt in seclusion and departed without ostentation. And their eyes were always wary.

The girl's gaze flicked by them and went on. If they stared after her down the street she did not seem to know, or greatly to care. She paced unhurriedly on over the cobbles.

Ahead of her a broad, low door opened to a burst of noise and music, and warm light streamed briefly out into the gray day as a man stepped over the sill and swung the door shut behind him. Sidelong she watched the man as he belted his heavy coat of brown pole-deer hide and stepped briskly out into the street. He was tall, brown as leather, hard-featured under the pole-deer cap pulled low over his eyes. They were startling, those eyes, cold and steady, icily calm. Indefinably he was of Earth. His scarred dark face had a faintly piratical look, and he was wolfishly lean in his spaceman's leather as he walked lightly down the Lakklan, turning up the deer-hide collar about his ears with one hand. The other, his right, was hidden in the pocket of his coat.

The woman swerved when she saw him. He watched her subtly swaying approach without a flicker of expression on his face. But when she laid a milkily white hand upon his arm

he gave a queer little start, involuntarily, like a shiver quickly suppressed. A ripple of annoyance crossed his face briefly and was gone, as if the muscular start had embarrassed him. He turned upon her an absolutely

expressionless stare and waited.

"Who are you?" cooed a throatily velvet voice from the depths of the hood.

"Northwest Smith." He said it crisply, and his lips snapped shut again. He moved a little away from her, for her hand still lay upon his right arm, and his right hand was still hidden in the coat pocket. He moved far enough to free his arm, and stood waiting.

"Will you come with me?" Her voice throbbed like a pigeon's from the shadow of her hood.

For a quick instant his pale eyes appraised her, as caution and curiosity warred within him. Smith was a wary man, very wise in the dangers of the spaceways life. Not for a moment did he mistake her meaning. Here was no ordinary woman of the streets. A woman robed in snow-cat furs had no need to accost casual strangers along the Lakklan.

"What do you want?" he demanded. His voice was deep and harsh, and the words fairly clicked with a biting brevity.

"Come," she cooed, moving nearer again and slipping one hand inside his arm. "I will tell you that in my own house. It is so cold here."

Smith allowed himself to be pulled along down the Lakklan, too puzzled and surprised to resist. That simple act of hers had amazed him out of all proportion to its simplicity. He was revising his judgment of her as he walked along over the snow-dust cobbles at her side. For by that richly throaty voice that throbbed as colorfully as a dove's, and by the milky whiteness of her hand on his arm, and by the subtle swaying of her walk, he had been sure, quite sure, that she came from Venus. No other planet breeds such beauty, no other women are born with the instinct of seduction in their very bones. And he had thought, dimly, that he recognized her voice.

But no, if she were Venus-bred, and the woman he half suspected her of being, she would never have slid her arm through his with that little intimate gesture or striven to override his hesitation with the sheer strength of her own charm. His one small motion away from her hand on his arm would have warned a true Venusian not to attempt further intimacy. She would have known by the look in his still eyes, by the wolfish, scarred face, tight-mouthed, that his weakness did not lie along the lines she was mistress of. And if she were the woman he suspected, all this was doubly sure. No, she could not be Venus-bred, nor the woman her voice so recalled to him.

Because of this he allowed her to lead him down the Lakklan. Not often did he permit curiosity to override his native caution, or he would never have come unscathed through the stormy years that lay behind him. But there was something so subtly queer about this woman, so contradictory to his preconceived opinions. Very vital to Smith were his own quick appraisements, and when one went all awry from the lines he intuitively expected, he felt compelled to learn why. He went on at her side, shortening his strides to the gliding gait of the woman on his arm. He did not like the contact of her hand, although he could not have said why.

No further words passed between them until they had reached a low stone building ten minutes' walk on down the Lakklan. She rapped on the heavy door with a quick, measured beat, and it swung open upon dimness. Her bare white hand in the crook of Smith's arm pulled him inside.

A gliding servant took his coat and fur cap. Without ostentation, as he

removed the coat he slipped out the gun which had lain in his right hand pocket and upon which his hand had rested all the while he was in the street. He tucked it inside his leather jacket and followed the still cloaked woman down a short hallway and through a low arch under which he had to stoop his head. The room they entered was immemorially ancient, changelessly Martian. Upon the dark stone floor, polished by the feet of countless generations, lay the

furs of saltland beasts and the thick-pelted animals of the pole. The stone walls were incised with those inevitable, mysterious symbols which have become nothing more than queer designs now, though a million years ago they bore deep significance. No Martian house, old or new, lacks them, and no living Martian knows their meaning.

Remotely they must be bound up with the queer, cold darkness of that strange religion which once ruled Mars and which dwells still in the heart of every true Martian, though its shrines are secret now and its priests discredited. Perhaps if one could read those symbols they would tell the name of the cold god whom Mars worships still, in its heart of hearts, yet whose name is never spoken.

The whole room was fragrant and a little mysterious with the aromatic fumes of the braziers set at intervals about the irregularly shaped room, and the low ceiling pressed the perfume down so that it hung in smoky layers in the sweet, heavy air.

'Be seated,' murmured the woman from the depths of her hood.

Smith glanced about in distaste. The room was furnished in the luxuriant Martian style so at odds with the harsh characteristics of the Martian people. He selected the least voluptuous-looking of the couches and sat down, regarding the woman obliquely as he did so.

She had turned a little away from him now and was slowly unfastening her furs. Then in one slow, graceful motion she flung back the cloak.

Smith caught his breath involuntarily, and a little shiver rippled over him, like the queer shock which had shaken his usually iron poise in the street. He could not be certain whether it were admiration or distaste he felt more strongly. And this despite her breath-taking beauty. Frankly he stared.

Yes, she was Venusian. Nowhere save upon that sunless, mist-drenched planet are such milk-white women bred. Voluptuously slim she was, in the paradoxical Venusian way, and the sweet, firm curves of her under velvet were more

eloquent than a love-song. Her deeply crimson robe swathed her close in the traditional Venusian way, leaving one arm and rose-white shoulder bare and slit so that at every other step her milky thigh gleamed through. Heavy lids veiled her eyes from him as she turned. Unmistakably, exquisitely, she was Venusian, and from head to foot so lovely that despite himself Smith's pulses quickened.

He bent forward, eyes eager upon her face. It was flawlessly lovely, the long eyes subtly tilted, the planes of her cheekbones and the set of her chin eloquent of the beauty which dwelt in the very bones beneath her sweet white

flesh, so that even her skull must be lovely. And with an odd little catch in his breath, Smith admitted to himself that she was indeed the woman he had guessed. He had not mistaken the throbbing richness of her voice. But—he looked closer, and wondered if he really did catch some hint of—wrongness—in that delicately tinted face, in the oddly averted eyes. For a moment his mind ran backward, remembering.

Judai of Venus had been the toast of three planets a few years past. Her heart-twisting beauty, her voice that throbbed like a dove's, the glowing charm of her had captured the hearts of every audience that heard her sing. Even the far outposts of civilization knew her. That colorful, throaty voice had sounded upon Jupiter's moons and sent the cadences of Starless Night ringing over the bare rocks of asteroids and through the darkness of space.

And then she vanished. Men wondered awhile, and there were searches and considerable scandal, but no one saw her again. All that was long past now. No one sang Starless Night any more, and it was the Earth-born Rose Robertson's voice which rang through the solar system in lilting praise of The Green Hills of Earth. Judai was years forgotten.

Smith knew her in the first glimpse he had of that high-cheeked, rose-tinted face. He had felt before he saw her that surely no two women of the same generation could speak in a voice so richly colored, so throbblingly sweet. And yet there was a hint of something alien in those gorgeously rich tones;

something indefinably wrong in her unforgettable face; something that sent a little shock of distaste through him in the first glimpse he had of her beauty.

Yes, his ears and his eyes told him that she was Judai, but that infallible animal instinct which had saved him so often in such subtly warning ways told him just as surely that she was not—could not be. Judai, of all women, to make such un-Venusian errors of intuition! Feeling a little dizzy, he sat back and waited.

She glided across the floor to his side. The subtly provocative sway of her body as she moved was innately Venusian, but she moved to the couch beside him and allowed her body to touch his in a brushing contact that sent a little thrill through him involuntarily, though he moved away. No, Judai would never have done that. She would have known better.

"You know me—yes?" she queried, richly murmurous.

"We haven't met before," he said non-committally.

"But you know Judai. You remember. I saw it in your eyes. You must keep my secret, Northwest Smith. Can I trust you?"

"That—depends." His voice was dry.

"I left, that night in New York, because something called which was stronger than I. No, it was not love. It was stronger than love, Northwest Smith. I could not resist it."

There was a subtle amusement in her voice, as if she told some secret jest that had meaning to none but her. Smith moved a little farther from her on the couch.

"I have been searching a long while," she went on in her low, rich voice, "for such a man as you—a man who can be entrusted with a dangerous task." She

paused.

"What is it?"

' 'There is a man in Righa who has something I very much want. He lives on the Lakklan by that drinking-house they call The Spaceman's Rest."

Again she paused. Smith knew the place well, a dark, low-roofed den where the shadier and more scrupulously wary transients in Righa gathered. For the Spaceman's Rest

was owned by a grim-jawed, leathery old drylander named Mhici, who was rumored to have great influence with the powers in Righa; so that a drink in The Spaceman's Rest was safely taken, without danger of interruption. He knew old Mhici well. He turned a mildly inquiring eye upon Judai, waiting for her to go on.

Her own eyes were lowered, but she seemed to feel his gaze, for she took up her story again instantly, without lifting her lashes.

"The man's name I do not know, but he is of Mars, from the canal-countries, and his face is deeply scarred across both cheeks. He hides what I want in a little ivory box of drylander carving. If you can bring that to me you may name your own reward." «-

Smith's pale eyes turned again, reluctantly, to the woman beside him. He wondered briefly why he disliked even to look at her, for she seemed lovelier each time his gaze rested upon that exquisitely tinted face. He saw that her eyes were still lowered, the feather lashes brushing her cheeks. She nodded without looking up as he echoed,

"Any price I ask?"

"Money or jewels or-what you will."

' 'Ten thousand gold dollars to my name in the Great Bank at Lakkjourna, confirmed by viziphone when I hand you the box."

If he expected a flicker of displeasure to cross her face at his matter-of-factness, he was disappointed. She rose in one long gliding motion and stood quietly before him. Smoothly, without lifting her eyes, she said,

"It is agreed, then. I will see you here tomorrow at this hour."

Her voice dropped with a note of finality and dismissal. Smith glanced up into her face, and at what he saw there started to his feet in an involuntary motion, staring undis-guisedly. She was standing quite still, with downcast eyes, and all animation and allure were draining away from her

face. Uncomprehending, he watched humanity fading as if some glowing inward tide ebbed away, leaving a husk of sweet, inanimate flesh where the radiant Judai had stood a moment before.

An unpleasant little coldness rippled down his back as he watched. Uncertainly he glanced toward the door, feeling more strongly than ever that inexplicable revulsion against some inner alienness he could not understand. As he hesitated, "Go, go!" came in an impatient voice from between her scarcely moving lips. And in almost ludicrous haste he made for the door. His last

glance as it swung to of its own weight behind him revealed Judai standing motionless where he had left her, a still figure silhouetted white and scarlet against the immemorial pattern of the wall beyond. And he had a curious impression that a thin gray fog veiled her body in a lowly spreading nimbus that was inexplicably unpleasant.

Dusk was falling as he came out into the street again. A shadowy servant had given him his coat, and Smith departed so quickly that he was still struggling into the sleeves as he stepped out under the low arch of the door and drew a deep breath of the keen, icy air in conscious relief. He could not have explained, even to himself, the odd revulsion which Judai and her house had roused in him, but he was very glad to be free of them both and out in the open street again.

He shrugged himself deep into the warm fur coat and set off with long strides down the Lakklan. He was headed for The Spaceman's Rest. Old Mhici, if Smith found him in the right mood and approached him through the proper devious channels, might have information to give about the lovely lost singer and her strange house—and her credit at the Great Bank of Lakkjourna. Smith had small reason to doubt her wealth, but he took no needless chances.

The Spaceman's Rest was crowded. Smith made his way through the maze of tables toward the long bar at the end of the room, threading the crowd of hard-faced men whose wide

diversity of races seemed to make little difference in the curious similarity of expression which dwelt upon every face. They were quiet and watchful-eyed and wore the indefinable air of those who live by their wits and their guns. The low-roofed place was thick with a pungent haze from the nuari which nearly all were smoking, and that in itself was evidence that in Mhici's place they considered themselves secure, for nuari is mildly opiate.

Old Mhici himself came forward to the voiceless summoning in Smith's single pale-eyed glance as it met his in the crowd about the bar. The Earthman ordered red segir-whisky, but he did not drink it immediately.

"I know no one here," he observed in the drylander idiom, which was a flagrant misstatement, but heavy with meaning. For the hospitable old saltlands' custom demands that the proprietor share a drink with any stranger who comes into his bar. It is a relic from the days when strangers were rare in the saltlands, and is very seldom recalled in populous cities like Righa, but Mhici understood. He said nothing, but he took the black Venusian bottle of segir by the neck and motioned Smith toward a corner table that stood empty.

When they were settled there and Mhici had poured himself a drink, Smith took one gulp of the red whisky and hummed the opening bars of Starless Night, watching the old drylander's pointed, leathery features. One of Mhici's eyebrows went up, which was the equivalent of a start of surprise in another man.

"Starless nights," he observed, "are full of danger, Smith."

"And of pleasure sometimes, eh?"

"Ur-r! Not this one."

"Oh?"

"No. And where I do not understand, I keep away."

"You're puzzled too, eh?"

"Deeply. What happened?"

Smith told him briefly. He knew that it is proverbial never to trust a drylander, but he felt that old Mhici was the

exception. And by the old man's willingness to come to the point with a minimum of fencing and circumlocution "he knew that he must be very perturbed by Judai's presence in Righa. Old Mhici missed little, and if he was puzzled by her presence Smith felt that his own queer reactions to the Venusian beauty had not been unjustified.

' 'I know the box she means,' Mhici told him when he had finished. "There's the man, over there by the wall. See?"

Under his brows Smith studied a lean, tall canal-dweller with a deeply scarred face and an air of restless uneasiness. He was drinking some poisonous green concoction and smoking nuari so heavily that the clouds of it veiled his face. Smith grunted contemptuously.

' 'If the box is valuable he's not putting himself into any shape to guard it," he said. "He'll be dead asleep in half an hour if he keeps that up."

"Look again," murmured Mhici. And Smith, wondering a little at the dryness of the old man's voice, turned his head and studied the canal-dweller more carefully.

This time he saw what had escaped him before. The man was frightened, so frightened that the nuari pouring in and out of his lungs was having little effect. His restless eyes were hot with anxiety, and he had maneuvered his back to the wall so that he could command the whole room as he drank. That in itself, here in Mhici's place, was flagrant. Mhici's iron fist and ready gun had established order in The Spaceman's Rest long ago, and no man in years had dared break it. Mhici commanded not only physical but also moral respect, for his influence with the powers of Righa was exerted not only to furnish immunity to his guests but also to punish peace-breakers. The Spaceman's Rest was sanctuary. No, for a man to sit with his back to the wall here bespoke terror of something more deadly than guns.

"They're following him, you know," Mhici murmured over the rim of his glass. 'He stole that box somewhere along the canals, and now he's afraid of his shadow. I don't know what's in the box, but it's damn valuable to someone and they're out to get it at any cost. Do you still want to relieve him of it?"

Smith squinted at the drylander through narrowed eyes. How old Mhici learned the secrets he knew, no one could guess, but he had never been caught in error. And Smith had little desire to call down upon himself the enmity of whatever perils it was which kindled the fear of death in the canal-dweller's eyes. Yet curiosity rode him still. The puzzle of Judai was a tantalizing mystery which he felt he must solve.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I've got to know."

"I'll get you the box," said Mhici suddenly. "I know where he hides it, and there's a way between here and the house next door that will let me at it in five minutes. Wait here."

"No," said Smith quickly. "That's not fair to you. I'll get

it."

Mhici's wide mouth curved.

"I'm in little danger," he said. "Here in Righa no one would dare—and besides, that way is secret. Wait."

Smith shrugged. After all, Mhici knew how to take care of himself. He sat there gulping down segir as he waited, and watching the canal-dweller across the room. Terror played in changing patterns across the scarred face.

When Mhici reappeared he carried a small wooden crate labeled conspicuously in Venusian characters. Smith translated, "Six Pints Segir, Vanda Distilleries, Ednes, Venus."

"It's in this," murmured Mhici, setting down the box. "You'd better stay here tonight. You know, the back room that opens on the alley."

"Thanks," said Smith in some embarrassment. He was wondering why the old drylander had taken such pains in his behalf. He had expected no more than a few words of warning. "I'll split the money, you know."

Mhici shook his head.

"I don't think you'll get it," he said candidly. "And I don't think she really wants the box. Not half so much as she wants you, anyhow. There were any number of men who

could have got the box for her. And you remember how she said she'd been looking a long time for someone like yourself. No, it's the man she wants, I think. And I can't figure out why."

Smith wrinkled his brows and traced a design on the tabletop in split segir.

"I've got to know," he said stubbornly.

' 'I've passed her in the street. I've felt that same revulsion, and I don't know why. I don't like this, Smith. But if you feel you have to go through with it, that's your affair. I'll help if I can. Let's drop it, eh? What are you doing tonight? I hear there's a new dancer at the Lakktal now."

Much later, in the shifting light of Mars' hurrying moons, Smith stumbled up the little alley behind The Spaceman's Rest and entered the door in the rear of the bar. His head was a bit light with much segir, and the music and the laughter and the sound of dancing feet in the Lakktal's halls made an echoing beat through his head. He undressed clumsily in the dark and stretched himself with a heavy sigh on the leather couch which is the Martian bed.

Just before sleep overtook him he found himself remembering Judai's queer little quirking smile when she said, "I left New York because something called—stronger than love. . . ." And he thought drowsily, "What is stronger than love?..." The answer came to him just as he sank into oblivion. "Death."

Smith slept late the next day. The tri-time steel watch on his wrist pointed to Martian noon when old Mhici himself pushed open the door and carried in a tray of breakfast.

"There's been excitement this morning," he observed as he set down his burden.



Smith sat up and stretched luxuriously.

"What?"

"The canal man shot himself."

Smith's pale eyes sought out the case labeled "Six Pints Segir" where it stood in the corner of the room. His brows went up in surprise.

"Is it so valuable as that?" he murmured. "Let's look at it."

Mhici shot the bolts on the two doors as Smith rose from the leather couch and dragged the box into the center of the floor. He pried up the thin board that Mhici had nailed down the night before over the twice-stolen box, and pulled out an object wrapped in brown canvas. With the old drylander bending over his shoulder he unwound the wrappings. For a full minute thereafter he squatted on his heels staring in perplexity at the thing in his hands. It was not large, this little ivory box, perhaps ten inches by four, and four deep. Its intricate drylander carving struck him as remotely familiar, but he had been staring at it for several seconds before it dawned upon him where he had seen those odd spirals and queer twisted characters before. Then he remembered. No wonder they looked familiar, for they had stared down upon him bafflingly from the walls of countless Martian dwellings. He lifted his eyes and saw a band of them circling the walls above him now. But they were large, and these on the box intricately tiny, so that at first glance they looked like the merest waving lines incised delicately all over the box's surface.

Not until then, following those crawling lines, did he see that the box had no opening. To all appearances it was not a box at all, but a block of carved ivory. He shook it, and something within shifted slightly, as if it were packed in loose wrappings. But there was no opening anywhere. He turned it over and over, peering and prying, but to no avail. Finally he shrugged and wrapped the canvas back about the

enigma.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Mhici shook his head.

' 'Great Shar alone can tell," he murmured half in derision, for Shar is the Venusian god, a friendly deity whose name rises constantly to the lips of the Hot Planet's dwellers. The god whom Mars worships, openly or in secret, is never named aloud.

They discussed the puzzle of it off and on the rest of the afternoon. Smith spent the hours restlessly, for he dared not

smoke nuari nor drink much, with the interview so close ahead. When the shadows were lengthening along the Lakklan he got into his deerhide coat again and tucked the ivory box into an inner pocket. It was bulky, but not betrayingly so. And he made sure his flame-gun was charged and ready.

In the late afternoon sun that sparkled blindingly upon the snow crystals blowing along the wind', he went down the Lakklan again with his right hand hi his pocket and his eyes raking the street warily under the shadow of his cap. Evidently the pursuers of that box had not traced it, for he was not followed.

Judai's house squatted dark and low at the edge of the Lakklan .Smith fought down a rising revulsion as he lifted his hand to knock, but the door swung open before his knuckles had touched the panel. That same shadowy servant beckoned him in. This time he did not put his gun away when he shifted it from his coat pocket. He took the canvas-wrapped box in one hand and the flame-pistol in the other, and the servant opened the door he had passed last night upon the room where Judai was waiting.

She 'stood exactly as he had left her in the center of the floor, white and scarlet against the queer traceries on the wall beyond. He had the curious notion that she had not stirred since he left her last night. She moved a little sluggishly as she turned her head and saw him, but it was a lethargy which she quickly overcame. She motioned him toward the divan, taking her seat at his side with the flowing, feline ease of every true Venusian. And as before, he shrank involuntarily from the contact of that fragrant, velvet-sheathed body, with an inner revulsion he could not understand.

She said nothing, but she held out her two hands cupped up in entreaty, and she did not lift her eyes to his face as she did so. He laid the box in her upturned palm. At that moment for the first time it occurred to him that not once had he met her eyes. She had never lifted those veiling lashes and looked into his. Wondering, he watched.

She was unwrapping the canvas with quick, delicate motions of her pink-stained fingers. When the box lay bare in her

hands she sat quite motionless for a while, her lowered eyes fixed upon the carven block of the thing which had cost at least one life. And her quiet was unnatural, trance-like. He thought she must have ceased to breathe. Not a lash fluttered, ; not a pulse stirred in her round white wrists as she held the little symbol-traced box up. There was something indescrib- ^ ably horrid in her quiet as she sat and stared, all her being centered in one vast, still concentration upon the ivory box. jj Then he heard such a deep breath rush out through her 3 nostrils that it might have been life itself escaping, a breath that thinned into a high, shuddering hum like the whine of wind through wires. It was not a sound that any human creature could make.

Without realizing that he had moved, Smith leaped. Of their own volition his muscles tensed into a spring of animal terror away from that high-whining thing on the couch. He j ground himself half crouched a dozen paces away, his gun ' steady in a lifted hand and his hair stiffening at the roots as he i faced her. For by the thin, high, shuddering noise he knew \ surely that she was not human. <

For a long instant he crouched there, taut, feeling his scalp , crawl with a prickling terror as his pale eyes searched for < some reason in this madness which had come over them both. ^ She still sat rigid, with lowered eyes, but though she had not "• stirred, something told him unerringly that his first instinct « had been right, his first intuitive flinching from her hand on :) his arm—she was not human. Warm white flesh and fragrant •"; hair and subtle, curving roundness of her under velvet, all this was camouflage to conceal—to conceal—he could not i guess what, but he knew that loveliness for a lie, and all down j his back the nerves tingled with man's involuntary shudder from the unknown.

She rose. Cradling the ivory box against the sweet high curve of her bosom, she moved slowly forward, her lashes making two dim crescents on her exquisitely tinted cheeks. He had never seen her lovelier, or more hideously repulsive. For in some obscure part of his brain he knew that the humanity which she had clutched like a cloak about her was being dropped. In another instant . . .

She paused before him, very near, so near that the muzzle of his half-forgotten gun was pressed against the velvet that sheathed her body, and the fragrance of her rose in a vague cloud to his nostrils. For one tense instant they stood so, she with lowered lashes, cradling her ivory box, he rigid with prickling revulsion, gun nosing her side, pale eyes set in a narrow-lidded stare as he waited shudderingly for what must i ome next. In the split second before her eyelids rose, he wanted overwhelmingly to fling up a hand and shut out the sight of what lay behind them, to run blindly out of the room and out of the house and never stop until the doors of The Spaceman's Rest closed shelteringly upon him. He could not stir. Caught in a frozen trance, he stared. The lashes fluttered. Slowly, very slowly, her lids rose.

The cold shock that jolted him into incredulity then made every detail of the picture so clear that he was never to forget, no matter how hard he tried, the vividness of that first glimpse into Judai's eyes. Yet for a full minute he did not realize what he saw. It was too incredible for the brain to grasp. With thickly beating heart he stood rigid, staring into (he weird face turned to his.

From under those deep-curved lashes looked out no such luminous depths of darkness as he had expected. There were no eyes behind Judai's creamy lids. Instead he was looking into two lash-fringed, almond-shaped pits of gray smoke, smoke that seethed and shifted and boiled within itself, unresting as smoke from the fires of hell. He knew then that there dwelt in the curved and milk-white body which had been Judai's a thing more evil than any devil hell's fire ever spawned. How it came into that body he never knew, but he did know that the real Judai was gone. Looking into that restlessly seething smoky blindness, he was sure of that, and revulsion surged through him as he strained at his own body for the will to blast this hell-tenanted beauty into nothingness, and could not stir. Helpless in the frozen grip of his own horror, he watched.

She—it stood straight before him, staring blankly. And he was aware of a slow seepage from the < gray pits of the eyes. Smoke was curling out into the room in

delicate whirls and

plumes. Sickness came over him as he realized it, and an extravagant terror, for it was not the sweet-smelling, clean smoke of fire. There was no physically perceptible odor to it, but from the unspeakably evil stench his very soul shuddered away. He could smell evil, taste it, perceive it with more senses than he knew he possessed, despite the intangibility of the swirling stuff that billowed now in deepening waves from under the lash-fringed lids that once had been Judai's. Once before he had been dimly aware of this, when he had looked back as he left, the night before, to see that vague gray veiling a woman's milk-whiteness in obscurity that was somehow-unpleasant. Even that remote hinting at what he saw now in full strength had been enough to send a warning shudder through him. But now-now it billowed about him in thickening deeps through which he could scarcely make out the pale shape of the figure before him, and the grayness was seeping through his body and mind and soul with a touch more dreadful than the touch of every ugly thing in creation. It was not tangible, but it was slimier and more unclean than anything he could have named. Not upon his flesh but upon his soul that wet slime crawled.

Dimly through the swirl of it he saw the lips of Judai's body move. A ghost of a voice fluted into the grayness, a sweet, rich, throbbing thread of sound. So lovely had been Judai's voice that even the horror which stirred it now into speech could not evoke discords from a throat that had never uttered any sound but music.

"I am ready to take you now, Northwest Smith. The time has come to discard this body and these ways of seduction! and put on a man's strength and straightforwardness, so that I may complete what I came to do. I shall not need it long, but your force and vitality I must have before I surrender them up to mighty—. And then I may go forth in my true form to bring the worlds under great—'s reign."

Smith blinked. There had been a gap in her words where he should have heard a name, but it had not been a gap of silence. Her lips had moved, though no sound came forth, and the air shook with a wordless cadence so deeply stirring

that he felt involuntary awe—if it were possible to feel awe at the utterance of a word without sound.

That sweetly murmurous voice was whispering through the fog that had thickened now until he could scarcely see the outlines of the figure before him.

"I have waited so long for you, Northwest Smith—for a man with a body and a brain like yours, to serve my needs. I - take you now, in great—'s name. In that name, I bid you surrender your body. Go!"

The last word cracked through the mist, and abruptly blindness swept over him. His feet no longer pressed the floor. He was wallowing in a fog of such revolting horror that his very soul writhed within him for escape. Slimily the gray stuff seeped through his being, crawling and sliding and oozing, and the touch of it upon his brain was a formless madness, so that the soul which shuddered from such indescribable dreadfulness would have fled into hell itself to escape.

Dimly he knew what was happening. His body was being made untenable to force his consciousness to leave it. And knowing this, realizing what its portent was, yet he found himself struggling desperately for release. The crawling ooze was a slime upon his very soul. There could be no alternative so frightful as this sickening reality. Madness was in the frightened writhing of

self to escape the horror that enfolded him. Frantically he fought for release.

It came, suddenly. He was aware of a distinct snapping, as of something tangible, and then freedom. On the instant those gray, crawling swaths of revulsion ceased to be. He floated free and light and impalpable in a void without light or dark, conscious of nothing but the blessed release from torment.

Gradually realization came back to him. He had no form or substance now, but he was aware. And he knew that he must seek his body again; how, he did not know, but the thought of it was a poignant longing, and his whole intangible being so concentrated upon that thought that in a moment or two the room he had left began to take shape about him, and his own

tall figure swam hazily through the veiling fog. With a mighty effort he bent his thoughts upon that figure, and at last began to understand what was taking place.

He could see now with clear, unhampered vision around all points of the compass at once. Floating in nothingness, he watched the room. It was a little difficult at first to see any one thing, for he no longer had the focus of eyes to help him and the room was a wide panorama without center. But after a while he learned the trick of concentration, and saw clearly | for the first time his own relinquished self, broad and tall and s leather-brown, standing rigid in the midst of a sliding fog that curled about it in thick, slimy glidings which brought back memories of sickening vividness. At the feet of that brown, fog-veiled shape lay the body of Judai. Exquisitely graceful, it stretched in a glimmer of white and scarlet across the dark floor. He knew she was dead now. The breath of alien life which had been infused into her was withdrawn. Death's curious flatness was eloquent in the piteously lovely body rounding under the velvet robe. The Thing was done with her.

He turned his attention again to his own body. That horri--bly alive fog had thickened still more, into heavy, half-palpable robes of sliding slime that crawled unceasingly over and around the tall figure. But it was disappearing. It was seeping slowly, remorselessly, into the flesh he had vacated. Now it was more than half gone, and into that frozen body a semblance of life was stealing. He watched while the last of the gray stuff which was the Thing took possession of his lost self, waking it into a cold and alien life. He saw it seize upon the nerves and muscles he had trained, so that its first motion was the familiar quick gesture to slip the flame-gun into its holster under his arm. He saw his own broad shoulders shrug unconsciously to be sure the strap was in place. He watched himself crossing the room with the long, light steps that had once been his. He saw his own hands pick up the ivory box from the slim, pink-stained fingers of Judai.

Not until then did he realize that thoughts were open to his reading now, as clearly as words had been before. The only

thoughts in the room had been the alien ones of the Thing!

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and until this moment they had not taken forms human enough to have meaning to him. But now he began to understand many things, and the strangeness of them whirled through his consciousness in half-incomprehensible patterns.

Then abruptly a name flashed through those thoughts, and the power of it struck him with such force that for an instant his hold upon the scene slipped

and he whirled back into that void again where neither light nor darkness dwelt. As he fought his way back into the room his unbodied mind was struggling to put together the pieces of newly acquired knowledge, in which that name flamed like a beacon, the center and focus for all the patterns of the knowledge.

It was the name his ears had not been able to hear when Judai's lips spoke it. He knew now that though human lips could frame its syllables, no brain that was wholly human could send the impulses for that framing; so that it could never be spoken by a sane man, nor heard or understood by him. Even so, the wordless vibrations of it had eddied through his brain in waves of awe. And now, when its unveiled force struck full upon his unprotected consciousness, the mightiness of that name was enough to send him reeling all out of focus and control.

For it was the name of a Thing so powerful that even in his unreality he shuddered at the thought; a thing whose full might no flesh-veiled consciousness could grasp. Only in his disembodied awareness could he realize it, and he turned his mind away from that awful name even as he delved deeper into the alien thoughts that flashed before him from the creature which wore his semblance.

He knew now why the Thing had come. He knew the purpose of that which bore the name. And he knew why the men of Mars never spoke their cold god's title. They could not. It was not a name human brains could grasp or human lips utter without compulsion from Outside. Slowly the origins of that curious religion took shape in his mind.

The name had dwelt like some vast, brooding shadow among the earliest ancestors of Martian men, millions upon millions of years ago. It had come from its lair Outside, and dwelt dreadfully among mankind, sucking life from its wor-

shippers and reigning with such awe and terror that even now, after countless eons had gone by, though its very existence was forgotten, that terror and awe lived yet in the minds of these remote descendants.

Nor was the name wholly gone, even now. It had withdrawn, for reasons too vast for comprehension. But it had left behind its shrines, and each of them was a little doorway into that presence, so that the priests who tended them furnished tribute. Sometimes they were possessed by the power of their god, and spoke the name which their devotees could not hear, yet whose awful cadences were a storm of power about them. And this was the origin of that strange, dark religion which upon Mars has been discredited for so long, though it has never died in the hearts of men.

Smith understood now that the Thing which dwelt in his body was a messenger from Outside, although he could never quite grasp in what capacity. It might have been a part of that vast composite power which bore the name. He never knew. Its thoughts when they wandered in that direction were too alien to carry any meaning into his mind. When it even turned those thoughts backward toward its origin, and the might of the name flashed through them, Smith quickly learned to shrink within himself, withdrawing his consciousness until that thought had passed. It was like gazing through an opened door into the furnaces of hell.

He watched himself turn the box slowly over between his hands, while his own pale eyes searched its surface. Or were they his eyes? Did there dwell now under his own lids the grayness of the Thing? He could not be sure, for he could not bring himself to concentrate directly upon that foggy dweller within

his body. Its touch was so alien, so repulsive.

Now his hands had found some hidden opening. He could not tell exactly what happened, but suddenly he saw himself wrenching at the ivory box, with a queer, twisting motion, and the two halves of it fell apart along an uneven line of cleavage. Out of it a thick mist rose, a heavy, semitangible stuff in which the hands of his body groped as if through folds of cloth.

Sluggishly the mist spilled floorward, while from the bo|||

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he saw himself drawing a thing which cleared away a little of the mystery that shrouded so much of what had happened. For he recognized the curious symbol that had lain in the mist-filled box. It was wrought from a substance which has no duplicate anywhere on the three worlds, a translucent metal through whose depths a smoky dimness was diffused in vague curls and plumes. And its shape was the duplicate of a symbol repeated often in the wall-carvings of every Martian house. Smith had heard whispers of this talisman passed from mouth to mouth in the secrecy of space-pirates' rendezvous. For its very existence was a secret to all save those rovers of the space ways from whom nothing is wholly hidden.

The symbol, so those whispers said, was a talisman from the old religion, used in the worship of the nameless god in the ages before discredit had forced the worship into secrecy—a thing of terrible power had any living man known how to use it. It was said to be kept in inviolable hiding somewhere in one of the canal cities. He understood now in what terror the canal-dweller with the scarred face must have gone, knew why he had not dared face the consequences of his own theft. The priests of the name were held in the more terror for the darkness of their calling.

The story behind that theft he was never to know. It was enough that the Thing had the priceless talisman now. Through his own efforts that immemorial symbol had fallen into the only hands which would know how to wield it: paradoxically, the hands that had once been his. Helplessly he watched.

His own fingers lifted it up familiarly. It was not more than twelve inches long, a thing of subtle curves and arcs. Suddenly he knew what the symbol meant. From the cloudy alienness of the mind which dwelt where his mind had dwelt, he drew the certainty that the talisman had been wrought into the shape of the written name: that unspeakable word, crystallized into nameless metal. The Thing handled it with a sort of unhuman awe.

He watched himself turning slowly round as if in an effort to orient his body with some unknown point at a measureless distance. His hand, holding the symbol, rose high. The room

was full of a tense solemnity, an unbreathing hush, as if some long-awaited moment of tremendous awe and portent had been reached at last. Slowly, with stiff steps, his lost body paced toward the eastern wall, the symbol held rigidly before

it.

At that tracery-incised wall it stopped, and with a gesture full of ritualistic slowness lifted the talisman and set its curved apex against an identical symbol on the wall, the carven counterpart of the name. And from that point it drew the talisman down and crosswise as if it were painting an unseen curve on the wall. As he watched that moving apex Smith realized what

was happening. Invisibly, with the metal-wrought talisman following lines in the symbols on the wall, it was tracing that name. And the ritual was invested with a depth of power and a nameless portent that sent sudden terror thrilling through him. What was the meaning of it? Cold with a bodiless chill of foreboding, he watched the rite to its close. The talisman sketched the last lines of that pattern upon the wall, completely enclosing a space that covered perhaps six square feet of tracery. And then his own tall body flourished the metal symbol like one who welcomes a caller through an opened door, and dropped to its knees before the outlined pattern.

For a minute—for two minutes—nothing happened. Then, watching the wall, Smith thought he could discern the shape of the symbol that had been traced. Somehow it was becoming clear among the painted characters. Somehow a grayness was spreading within the outlines he had watched his own hands trace, a fogginess that strengthened and grew clearer and clearer, until he could no longer make out the traceries enclosed within its boundaries, and a great, misty symbol stood out vividly across the wall.

He did not understand for a moment. He watched the grayness take on density and grow stronger with each passing moment, but he did not understand until a long curl of fog drifted lazily out into the room, and the grayness began to spill over its own edges and eddy and billow as if that wall were afire. And from very far away, over measureless voids, he caught the first faint impact of a power so great that he

knew in one flash the full horror of what he watched.

The name, traced upon that wall with its own metal counterpart, had opened a doorway for the Thing which bore the name to enter. It was coming back to the world it had left millions of years ago. It was oozing through the opened door, and nothing he could do would stop it.

He was a bodiless awareness drifting through voids that held neither light nor dark—he was a nothingness, and he must watch his own body bring down the destruction of the worlds he had dwelt in without any strength to oppose a feather's weight of resistance.

Despairingly he watched a long plume of the dawning terror brush his body's bent head. At the contact that body rose stiffly, as if in answer to a command, and backed slowly across the room to where the body of Judai lay sprawled upon the floor. It stooped like an automaton and lifted her in its arms. It came forward again, walking mechanically, and laid her down under the billowing symbol that was a gateway into deeper depths than hell. The smoke wreathed downward hungrily, hiding the white and scarlet of her from view.

For an instant it writhed and boiled about the spot where she had been engulfed, and the impact of greater force struck in one mighty blow against Smith's consciousness. For across the measureless gulfs the power of the name was nearing. Whatever of energy it had absorbed from the body of Judai had brought it nearer with a long leap, so that now the might of it echoed round and round the symbol-walled room like the beat of drums. There was triumph in that beating. Remotely, in the recurrent waves of thunderous power, he understood at last the purpose of those symbols.

All this had been planned eons ago, when the Unnamable One departed from Mars. Perhaps the ages had been no more than a moment to its timeless might. But it had left with full meaning to return, and so had given more deeply than time could erase on the minds of its worshippers the need for those symbols upon their walls. Only the need; not the reason. They were to make full access into this world possible again. The remote touch which its priests kept through



their shrines to the Nameless One were like tiny windows, but here,

hidden among the traceries, opened a mighty gateway through which all that measureless power could sweep irresistibly when the hour came. And it had come.

Dimly he caught a vision of triumph from the mind of the Thing which stood rigid in his body before the billowing wall, a vision of other worlds wherever the symbols were graven opening like doors for the great gray surges to come flooding through, a vision of worlds engulfed and seething in one unbroken blanket of gray that writhed and eddied and sucked avidly at the bodies and souls of men.

Smith's consciousness shuddered in the void where it drifted, raged against its own helplessness, watched in horror-struck fascination the surges of billowing gray that rolled slowly into the room. The body of Judai had wholly vanished now. And the long fog-fingers were groping blindly as if in search for other food. In a swimming horror he :> watched his own tall body stumble forward and sink to its J knees under the plumes of ravenous gray. i

Somehow the vivid despair of that moment was strong enough to do something which nothing that preceded it had accomplished. The prospect of the world's destruction had made him sick with a hopeless dread; but the thought of his own body offered up as a sacrifice to the flooding gray, leaving him to drift for eternity through voids, cracked like a whiplash against his consciousness in one flash of hot rebellion that jerked him all out of focus to the scene he watched. Violent revolt surged up in him against the power of the Thing and the awful force of that which bore the name.

How it happened he did not know, but suddenly he was no longer floating disembodied through nothingness. Suddenly he was bursting the bonds that parted him from reality. Suddenly he was violently back again into the world from which he had been thrust, fighting desperately to gain access once more into his body, struggling in panic terror to force an entry against the thick grayness of what dwelt there now. It was a nauseous and revolting struggle, so close to the slimy presence of the Thing, but he scarcely heeded its nearness in his frenzy to save the body that was his.

For the moment he was not striving for full possession, but

he pushed and raged and fought to seize his own muscles and drag his body back from the billows that were rolling hungrily toward it. It was a more desperate struggle than any hand-to-hand combat, the struggle of two entities for a single body.

The Thing that opposed him was strong, and firmly entrenched in the nerve-centers and brain-cells that had been his, but he was fighting the more hotly for the familiarity of the field he sought to win. And slowly he won entrance. Perhaps it was because he was not striving at first for full possession. In its struggles to cling fast to what it held, the Thing could not oppose his subtle sliding in among the centers that controlled motion, and by jerky degrees he dragged his own body to its feet and backward, step by hotly contested step, away from the seething pattern that oozed upon the wall. Sick to the very soul with the closeness of the Thing, he fought.

He was struggling now to force it wholly out, and if he was not driving it away, at least he held his own. It could not dislodge him from the foothold he had won. There were flashes when he saw the room through his own eyes again, and felt the strength of his body like a warm garment about the nakedness of the self which strove for its possession, yet a body through which crawled and

slid the dreadfulness of that sickening fog-fluid which was a slime upon his innermost soul.

But the Thing was strong. It had rooted its tendrils deep in the body he fought for, and would not let go. And through the room in recurrent thunders beat the might of the coming name, impatient, insistent, demanding sustenance that it might pass wholly through the gateway. Its long fog-fingers stretched clutchingly out into the room. And in Smith a faint hope was growing that it must have his body before it could come farther. If he could prevent that, perhaps all was not yet lost. If he could prevent it—but the Thing he struggled with was strong. . . .

Time had ceased to have meaning for him. In a dream of horror he wallowed amid the thick and sickening slime of his enemy, fighting for a more precious thing than his own life.

He fought for Death. For if he could not win his body, yet he knew he must enter it long enough to die somehow, by his own hand, cleanly; else he would drift through eternity in the void where neither light nor darkness dwelt. How long it went—on he never knew. But in one of those moments when he had won a place in his own body again, and perceived with its senses, he heard the sound of an opening door.

With infinite effort he twisted his head around. Old Mhici stood in the opening, flame-gun in hand, blinking bewilderedly into the fog-dim room. There was a dawning terror in his eyes as he stared, a terror deep-rooted and age-old, heritage from those immemorial ancestors upon whose minds the name had been graven too deeply for time to efface. Half comprehending, he stood in the presence of the god of his fathers, and Smith could see a paralyzing awe creeping slowly across his face. He could not have known from the sight of that fog-oozing wall what it was he looked upon, but an inner consciousness seemed to make clear to him that the thing which bore the name was a presence in the room. And it must have realized Mhici's presence, for about the walls in tremendous beats of command roared the thunderous echoes of that far-away might, ravenous to feed again upon man. Old Mhici's eyes glazed with obedience. He stumbled forward one mechanical step.

Something cracked in Smith's consciousness. If Mhici reached the wall, all his struggles would be for nothing. With that nourishment the name might enter. Well, at any rate he could save himself—perhaps. He must die before that happened. And with all the strength that was in him summoned up in one last despairing surge he crowded the Thing that dwelt with him momentarily out of control, and fell upon Mhici with clawed hands clutching for his throat.

Whether the old drylander understood or not, whether he could see in the pale eyes that had been his friend's the slow writhing of the Thing, Smith could not guess. He saw the horror and incredulity upon the leathery features of the Martian as he lunged, and then, in blessed relief, felt wiry fingers at his own neck. Yet he knew that Mhici was striving not to injure him, and he struggled in desperation to lash the old

drylander into self-defensive fury. He struck and gouged and tore, and felt in overwhelming relief the old man's strong grip tighten at last about his neck.

He relaxed then in the oncoming oblivion of those releasing fingers.

From very far away a hoarse voice calling his name dragged Smith up through layer upon layer of cloudy nothingness. He opened heavy eyes and stared. Gradually old Mhici's anxious face swam into focus above him. Segir was burning in his mouth. He swallowed automatically, and the pain of his bruised

throat as the fiery liquid went down roused him into full consciousness. He struggled to a sitting position, pressing one hand to his reeling head and blinking dazedly about.

He lay upon the dark stone floor where oblivion had overtaken him. The patterned walls looked down. His heart suddenly leaped into thick beating. He twisted round, seeking that wall which had oozed grayness through a door that opened upon Outside. And with such relief that he sank back against Mhici's shoulder in sudden weakness, he saw that the Unnamable One no longer billowed out into the room. Instead, that wall was a cracked and charred ruin down which long streams of half-melted rock were congealing. The room was pungent and choking with the odor of a flame-gun's blast.

He turned questioning eyes to Mhici, croaking something inarticulate in the depths of his swollen throat.

"I—I burnt it," said Mhici in a strange half-shame.

Smith jerked his head round again and stared at the ruined wall, a hot chagrin flooding over him. Of course, if the pattern were destroyed, that door would close through which the One which bore the name was entering. Somehow that had never occurred to him. Somehow he had wholly forgotten that a flame-gun was sheathed under his arm during all the long struggle he had held with the Thing co-dwelling in his body. He realized in a moment why. The awful power which in his bodiless state had thundered about him from that infinity of might which bore the name was so measureless that the very thought of a flame-gun seemed too futile to dwell upon. But Mhici had not known. He had never felt that

vast furnace-blast of force beating about him. And quite simply, with one flash of his ray-gun, he had closed the door to Outside.'

His voice was beating insistently in Smith's ears, shaking with emotion and reaction, and cracking a little now and then like the voice of an old man. For the first time old Mhici was , showing his age.

"What happened? What in your own God's name—no, don't tell me now. Don't try to talk. I—I—you can tell me later." And then rapidly, in disjointed sentences, as if he were talking to drown out the sound of his own thoughts, 'Perhaps I can guess—never mind. Hope I haven't hurt you. You must have been crazy, Smith. Better now? After you— you—when I saw you on the floor, there was a—well, a fog, I guess—thick as slime, that came rolling up from you like—I can't say what. And suddenly I was mad. That awful gray, rolling out of the wall—I don't know what happened. First I knew I was blazing away into the depths of it, and then the wall beyond cracked and melted, and the whole fog mass was fading out. Don't know why. Don't know what happened then. I must have been—out—a little while myself. It's gone now. I don't know why, but it's gone. . . .

"Here, have some more segir."

Smith stared up at him unseeingly. A vague wonder was circling in his mind as to why the Thing that had tenanted his body surrendered. Perhaps Mhici had choked life out of that body, so that the Thing had to flee and his own consciousness could enter unopposed. Perhaps—he gave it up. He was too tired to think about it now. He was too tired to think at all. He sighed deeply and reached for the segir bottle.