

The Treasure of Ptakuth

Terry Shane stood in his deserted camp and swore. To his left the red Martian desert stretched in waterless desolation to the horizon. To his right, perhaps fifty yards away, rose a range of barren hills, low and worn by the press of ages. And at his feet was all the equipment the deserting bearers had left him; a canteen that might, with careful nursing, take him across the desert to the oasis of Morn, whence he had just come.

"By the holy saints!" swore Terence Shane, in a fury as black as his hair; "I'll not be frightened from Ptakuth by any crawling scut that hides his face in the dark!"

The note in his hand mocked him. It had been pinned on his tent flap, and it said: "Your bearers have finally been persuaded to go home. Since you have proved obstinate, I can only say I hope you'll change your mind before you run into trouble. Having heard Terence Shane's boast that he never knows fear, I'm afraid you won't. But in all fairness, I warn you again: stay away from Ptakuth!"

It was signed Thaldrek of Ved. Shane knew of him. Everyone in the System knew of the Martian adventurer who sold valuable secrets to the highest bidder, and was never caught. Shane crumpled the paper in his great muscular hand and flung it away. Picking up the canteen, he swung off toward the hills which hid the lost city of Ptakuth from the world.

He found the place he was looking for: a gap where the mouth of a dry river joined the dry sea. Somewhere up the course of that dry river lay the cliff city of Ptakuth, cursed and lost for centuries that made Shane's head reel with the thinking of them. There were legends of Ptakuth on Mars as there were legends of Atlantis on Earth, and the gray-bearded men of the Martian Archeological Foundation had paid adventurer Terry Shane a goodly sum to find it for them.

The rock walls and the sand floor hurled the Martian sunlight on Shane until he was soaked with sweat and parched with thirst. He endured the thirst. There might be no water for miles, if at all.

"And if there is water," he reflected, "there'll surely be barbarians. Shunni, in this part of Mars, and tough lads in a fight. Well, I've been paid to find Ptakuth, and I've come too far to turn back now!"

In his heart he knew that wasn't the reason. The real reason was that someone wanted what he wanted, and dared him to come and get it.

He was climbing a narrow trail alongside the river bed when he heard the sound. It came from across the gorge, beating down from the rocky walls in broken, maddening echoes; a low, sonorous note like a bell clanging. Shane shook his dark head in pain. The sound set his eardrums to banging in and out, bemused his brain, enraged him, because he sensed a definite purpose behind it. There was nothing in these naked hills to make such a sound, except a man-made agency.

Furious, trembling with the pain of his ears, he put his hands over them and went on. Abruptly the sound stopped. His head vibrated dizzily for a moment. Then there was blessed silence. Frowning, Shane climbed on.

There was a faint noise high on the cliff top above him, and a pebble bounced

on the path at his feet. Someone was up there, climbing cat-footed over the rocks, spying on him. Shunni barbarians, or the man who had left that taunting note on his tent flap? Shane's gray eyes were keen, his hand ready on the butt of his proton gun. But there was nothing but empty silence.

The musical note came again, lower in pitch so that it took his very heartbeats and shook them. The vibrations hammered at him from the cliffs, from the rocks on the bottom of the gorge, from the trail at his feet, booming and thudding and setting every atom of his body and brain aquiver with them. Shane had heard of a similar thing; how certain Venusian tribes used musical notes to torture their victims, letting constant vibration send them mad after days of agony.

The very rock quivered under his feet; the cliff beside him, when he touched it, sent the low-pitched pulsing shooting through him. His jaws rang against one another like a tuning fork, and his brain was a darkened, shuddering anguish.

It stopped, and he was weak with the silence. Flexing his great shoulders, he bellowed defiance across the empty gorge, but there was no answer. And he wondered, if the sound came again, if he could fight ahead against it.

"Faith," he said suddenly, "that's it! A warning, to make me go back."

His jaw set to an ugly line, and he went on, speeding his pace in the blinding heat.

Still he was conscious of watchers above him; faint clicks of metal on stone, a pebble dislodged from the crumbling rock. "Shunni," he decided, "because the notes came from across the gorge, and it's no barbarian making those."

Sound again, this time a high-pitched screaming that was just within hearing range. Shane cried out before he knew it. The sound was like a knife in his head, a thousand times worse than the low note. It sang itself into the very bones of his skull, piercing and shrilling, maddening him with the pain of it. Nothing would shut it out. Shane raged at his weakness; pain, privation, danger, he had stood without flinching. But this he couldn't fight; it got hold of his brain and sent him wild as a frantic horse.

He knew it was the last warning. He knew he wouldn't have obeyed it if he could. But he was frantic, insane, driven by the piercing shriek in his head.

He ran with all his strength, up the trail and through a sort of unroofed tunnel. And then, abruptly, he stopped. The agonizing shriek snapped off short. And Shane's hand dropped to his gun butt.

He had come out into what had once been a semicircular plateau, cupped in the wind-worn hills. Standing negligently at ease on the reddish earth were some two hundred Shunni warriors; great swarthy men in gaudy kilts and leather harness, bearing spears almost twice as long as Shane was high.

Shane's head turned quickly at a noise behind him. Then his hand dropped the half-drawn gun casually back in its holster. Tall warriors filled the tunnel back of him; he shrugged and followed their pointing spears out onto the plain.

Then, for the second time, he stopped.

"Faith," he murmured, "it's sun-stroke I have, and this a vision come to comfort me!"

The girl had come from behind the front rank of Shunni. She had sun-brown hair and hazel eyes and a queenly way about her, and the blue skirt and copper corselet she wore only made her gorgeousness a little more patently gorgeous. Shane set his thumbs in his belt and smiled, watching the glitter and swish of her as she came to stand in front of him.

In a minute he'd try the Martian dialects he knew. But now: "Girl, you're as pretty as Shaughnessy's little brown pig!"

"Thanks," said the girl, in perfect English. "You're not bad-looking yourself. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

She laughed as Shane's tongue tried to come out of the paralysis of surprise; the clear, merry sound brought a shamed flush to the man's cheeks.

"You make a man's tongue speak out of turn, girl. I'm Terence Shane, heading an expedition for the Martian Archeological Foundation."

The girl frowned. "Expedition?"

Shane nodded. "My bearers left me back on the desert. I'm hunting for Ptakuth; it's a lost city somewhere in these hills."

The girl's face darkened. "The city," she said slowly, "with the treasure."

"Treasure?" Shane shook his head. "Perhaps they mentioned one, along with the curse and the destruction, but it means little." He grinned, looking down at her. "Who are you?"

The girl met his eyes for a long minute. Then, "Zenda Challoner," she said, as though it meant a lot.

The name struck an echo way back in the hazy corridors of Shane's memory, but whatever it might have meant was sidetracked in a sudden clamor in back of him. Shane swung to follow the girl's gaze, and his bronzed face hardened.

A group of warriors had come through the tunnel, and they had a captive; a slight, fair man, dressed like Shane in spun-glass tunic and shorts. The Irishman, looking at the newcomer's high-boned, hawk-clean face, murmured: "Thaldrek of Ved, by the devil himself."

Zenda Challoner smiled, and Shane found it difficult to believe that an angel's face could produce such a hard, mirthless expression. It was like a bared and sharpened spear point.

"Where did you get this one?" she demanded.

The leader grinned.

"On the other side of the river, xanara, beside a spaceship. Will there be sport tonight?"

There was a nasty thought behind that last, Shane felt. Zenda shook her head, saying brusquely: "Are you an archaeologist, too?"

The stranger had an easy smile. "No, xanara. I am—" His eyes, long, cloud-colored Venusian eyes in a Martian face, caught Shane's with suppressed

laughter in them. "I'm Thaldrek of Ved, a dealer in--well, rare merchandise. My flier cracked up in the hills. Do I trespass?"

"You do," said Zenda Challoner curtly, and turned away with a gesture to the waiting Shunni.

In another minute Shane and Thaldrek, disarmed, were marching across the plateau and into a narrow defile, closely guarded by strapping barbarians.

The Martian grinned crookedly. "Looks as though we're in a mess, Terence Shane."

Shane glared at him. Then, "I've been in tighter spots than this," he said, and his eyes went to Zenda Challoner.

Thaldrek grunted. "Some day," he said feelingly, "you'll meet something that'll throw the fear of God into you. And I hope I'm there to see it!"

The red Martian sunset was deepening when they reached the valley where the Shunni lived; a place of low cliffs honeycombed with caves, with little tilled fields along the course of a thin trickle of water. Shane noted the guards at the one entrance, and had to admit that leaving was going to be harder than getting in.

The two captives were permitted to wash and eat. Then, when full dark had fallen and there was a flare of torches and cooking fires in the chill air, they were taken to Zenda Challoner's cave.

A big cave, floored and cushioned with skins, with an incongruous metal lock box on a high shelf. Thaldrek of Ved saw it, and Shane noted the quick flame that burned and then was hidden in the Venusian's long, cloud-colored eyes.

Zenda Challoner watched them, lithe and lovely, from a couch of skins, their two guns under her hand, and her face was hard and troubled all at once.

"I don't know what to do with you," she said abruptly. "If I let you go, you'll come back with more men, and it will mean war. I don't wish to keep you prisoners here. And I don't want to kill you."

"Why, now," smiled Shane easily, "couldn't we just go on to Ptakuth as we planned, and nobody bother anybody?"

Thaldrek laughed. "Yes, xanara. Why not?"

Zenda Challoner frowned angrily. "Are you accomplices?"

Shane growled, and Thaldrek said quietly, "We know each other by reputation rather than acquaintance!"

"Then what is it? You're hiding something!"

"So are you." Shane moved closer to her. "Who are you? And why are you keeping us from Ptakuth?"

The brown-haired girl gave him a long, level look. "My father," she said quietly, "was a god."

For the second time Shane's tongue was enmeshed in startlement. "A god!"

Zenda nodded. "He was Harold Challoner, The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps. He came here from Outside, many years ago, and settled among the Shunni. They knew he was a god, because he never slept. He mated with a woman of the tribe, and when it came time for his body to go elsewhere, his soul entered my body, and I, his daughter, became goddess-queen in his place. He left a certain trust with me, a guardianship."

"Of Ptakuth " murmured Thaldrek. "Of course."

Again that nebulous tugging at Shane's memory. Somewhere before he had heard the name of Harold Challoner.

He said gently, "You're too pretty for a goddess, and too little for a queen. You sleep, don't you?"

"Of course. I have said my mother was a Shunni woman. Therefore I am only half god."

"But what of Ptakuth?" Thaldrek's face was keen as a questing wolf's.

The girl seemed perplexed for a moment; that look of troubled indecision came again to her face. "It is forbidden," she said at length, "even to me." And she made an imperious gesture to a warrior standing guard.

As Thaldrek and Shane were led out, she said, "I will decide in the morning what to do with you."

Shane shrugged. With a colleen like that to deal with, no great harm could befall Terence Shane. But Thaldrek's keen face was set, his eyes unseeing with intense concentration.

Back in their cave, alone except for half a dozen Shunni on guard around a fire on the ledge outside, Shane turned on the Martian.

"All right, Thaldrek, it's time now for speaking. What are you after?"

Thaldrek had come out of his thoughtful daze. There was a look about him as though he had made his decision, and the world lay at his feet. Again Shane noted the mingled strains in him: cloudy eyes of Venus, wiry liveness of Mars, and the fair hair some Earthman had given him, on a planet where the eternal sunlight makes most men dark. Shane could have broken Thaldrek's slim, supple body in his two hands, but he could not down a grudging respect.

"I am," smiled Thaldrek of Ved, "doing exactly what you're doing—looking for Ptakuth."

Shane grunted. "I'm getting paid for it, though. You'll not be taking up archaeology this late in life, will you?"

"Have you heard mention of a treasure?"

"So that's it!" Shane let go a roar of laughter. "Yes, and I've heard of a curse and a destruction, too. All legendary bosh, Thaldrek!"

"The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps isn't legendary bosh, Shane; his daughter sits there, ruling these barbarians, believing she's a goddess, and guarding the door to Ptakuth. There must be a reason."

"Challoner. Harold Challoner. Got it! He headed an expedition in search of Ptakuth about twenty years ago. Did it with his own money, tried to keep it a secret. Disappeared, along with his three companions. He lived his life out here, of course. Wonder why he didn't come back when he failed?"

"He didn't fail," said Thaldrek slowly. "Remember, he was The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps."

Shane stood over the Martian, and there was no humor in his face. "What is the treasure of Ptakuth, that you're so anxious to get it? And what's all this talk of Challoner never sleeping?"

Thaldrek smiled at Shane, his hands folded on his belt. There was something dangerous in his smile.

"The gods didn't give me the body of a bull," he said, "so I've been forced to develop brains. The first law of a full brain is a close tongue."

He glanced at the skin-curtained entrance. Then, quietly, he asked, "How would you like to escape?"

Shane glared at him. "I could probably kill those six guards, but it's very angry the rest of the Shunni would be! Surely you know our escape lies through Zenda."

"Dealing with women, eh?" The Martian's veiled eyes held a malicious amusement. "I've heard your boast, Terence Shane. Are you afraid?"

His laugh stopped the Irishman's angry roar, but his hands were still at his belt.

"Why, now," snarled Terry Shane, "is it an angel you'll bring from heaven to carry us off, or himself from down below?"

Thaldrek snapped the zipper of his tunic down to the belt. Strapped tight against his muscular body was a web belt bearing two little square boxes, hidden by the blouse of the loose garment.

"An electro-vibrator," said Thaldrek. "Operates on tiny storage batteries, sending vibrations of ultra-sonic perception over a beam with a six-foot range. Really a miniature of the tonal apparatus I used on you back in the gorge. Small, but powerful. Watch."

He stood by the skin curtain, within four feet of the guards outside, manipulating the dials. As Shane listened, the talk and laughter died away. There was a clatter as someone's spear dropped. Then silence.

Thaldrek grinned. "Brains, Shane. Thought is electrical in principle; telepathy depends on electrical vibrations from one mind impinging on another. The ultra-sonic vibrations blank the conscious mind so that I can exercise complete control of anyone under its influence, provided I make the vibrations of my own mind strong enough through concentration. I told the guards to go to sleep."

"You win," grunted Shane. "But the holy saints keep me from tearing you apart before it's time!"

Phobos shot up out of the west as they stepped out onto the ledge among the sleeping guards, casting an ink-black shadow under the western wall of the valley. It was late, and the cooking fires had smoldered to ashes. What folk were still awake were in their caves, for the night was cold.

Prowling silently as cats down the well-worn trail in the moon-cast dark, Shane and Thaldrek made for Zenda's cave.

"How long will the guards sleep?" whispered Shane.

"About four hours," answered Thaldrek.

There were three guards on Zenda's ledge; the sonic-vibrator put them to sleep without trouble. Zenda slept alone, lying like a child, with her honey-brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. Thaldrek made sure, with the little box at his waist, that she slept soundly.

They retrieved the weapons Zenda had taken from them, and Shane turned to go. Thaldrek stopped him with a whispered, "Wait!"

"We have what we came for," Shane snapped.

Thaldrek shook his head impatiently. "You're taller. Reach me that lock box from the shelf."

Shane hesitated. "You want to find Ptakuth, don't you?" demanded Thaldrek. Shane shrugged and lifted down the heavy box, muscles coiling, along the one naked arm he deigned to use.

The lock was tight. Thaldrek turned to Zenda, lifting back the curtain of her hair with strangely gentle fingers. There was a twisted thong about her neck. The Martian loosed it, grasping the key that hung from it.

The opened box yielded a metal-leaf notebook, written close with acid-etched lines. Thaldrek opened it, taut with suppressed eagerness. "Harold Challoner's diary," he murmured. "The secret of Ptakuth!"

Shane's patience had reached the snapping point. Distrust of Thaldrek, perplexity over his reason for aiding his, Shane's, escape when he might have gone alone, dislike of the uninvited trespassing in Zenda Challoner's boudoir, combined to set an ugly temper rising in him.

Thaldrek's low voice stopped his half-defined impulse toward violence. Almost as though he were thinking aloud, the Martian stared at the notebook and spoke.

"He found the city, and the treasure. His three friends died there, realizing too late. When he understood his own condition he destroyed the entrance to the cliff city of Ptakuth and came here. Of course! Zenda has the only key."

"Zenda?" Shane was very close to him, his face hard.

Thaldrek met Shane's gaze. "The girl goes with us, Shane. She's the only one who can find Ptakuth for us. There's a hidden way that Challoner left, not quite daring to hide the treasure completely from the world. You only want the city; you're welcome to it. But I want the treasure!"

There was eager laughter under his words. "Ptakuth was cursed and destroyed

because of that treasure, Shane. Challoner became a god because of it—and killed himself ten years ago. But there's a place for that treasure in the world, Shane, and I want it!"

Shane sensed danger very close. His gun was half out of its holster, but Thaldrek's hand was quicker on the dial. The tall man's eyes glazed, his face went slack, and he slid the gun back.

Thaldrek smiled and shook his head. "I don't know why I bother with you, Terence Shane, except that I had a hunch it would be like this. My sources of information are better than yours. The Shunni are going to be annoyed when they find their goddess gone—and being torn to pieces is such a messy death."

Tucking the notebook in his belt-pouch, Thaldrek turned to his prisoners. "Walk ahead of me, to the valley entrance. Zenda, you will handle anyone who gets in our way. I'll fix the guards."

A quarter of an hour later they were far beyond the valley, leaving half a dozen Shunni sleeping peacefully at their posts. Thaldrek spoke briefly but earnestly with Zenda, listening intently to her mechanical answers. When another half-hour of brisk walking across the barren, tumbled rocks was past, Thaldrek halted his strange little cavalcade.

A narrow cleft was driven into a low cliff nearby. Shane, obeying like an automaton, walked into it and lay down, falling instantly into a deep sleep.

"For three hours," ordered Thaldrek. "That's about the best I can do for you. The Shunni will be coming along here eventually; that should give them time to get past you. They won't see you, you have your gun, and you can suit yourself from there on." He grinned. "You should be duly grateful, but I suppose you'll only swear."

Thaldrek sealed the end of the cleft with a boulder, thinking over his plan. "It's cut rather fine, but I don't see why it won't work. The Shunni will be between me and Shane. I should be through and away before they get to Ptakuth, but in case they trap me there—they won't come in after me because the place is taboo—I've got Zenda to get me out. And I'll give the bomb plenty of time."

He turned to Zenda, still quiescent under the spell of the sonic hypnotism, and there was something sad and wistful in his long gray eyes as he looked at her.

"Take me to the secret entrance of Ptakuth, Zenda," he said quietly, and sighed.

Shane woke abruptly to the fading scuff of many sandaled feet and a muffled clank of weapons. Springing up, dazed and angry with half-remembered things, he climbed the concealing boulder in time to see the last of a band of Shunni warriors vanish into a tangle of naked tors. Phobos was low in the east, Deimos rising slowly over it to cast a jumble of conflicting shadows. A word came to Terry Shane's lips, and the word was "Zenda!" Thaldrek had taken her, to find the hidden way to Ptakuth and the treasure. What would he do, or had he done, to her afterward?

He could guess where the Shunni were going. Thaldrek and the girl must have left a trail that these hillmen could follow in the dark, and they wanted their goddess back.

Half wonderingly, Shane found his gun safe in his holster. Like a black bull he took the trail of the Shunni.

He had no notion of time. But suddenly, as he topped what had been in distant ages a wooded peak overlooking the river, he saw his goal. To his left the river widened to a great inland harbor; there were crumbling stone quays still jutting into dry red sand, but the cliffs behind them had fallen in ruin. Man-made ruin.

"Challoner destroyed the entrance," grunted Shane. "And that must be the one he left!"

Five hundred Shunni warriors squatted in a grim semicircle about a crack in a cliff some fifty yards to his right. Thaldrek and the girl were still in there, then. Shane nodded. Then a sudden icy question flashed in his brain. "What's taking him so long?"

There was just one way to get into that crack—from the top. The guarding Shunni would kill him in sheer rage if they caught him. Driven by haste that had something strange and disquieting in it, Shane skirted the cliff, climbed its wind-pitted surface at a safe distance, wormed his way silently back, and lowered himself into the narrow crack.

A man of lesser strength would have fallen. Shane, knees and elbows scraped raw, fingers bleeding, drenched with sweat, came safely to the bottom and turned down the low tunnel that opened into the heart of the cliff, drawing an atomic torch from his belt pouch.

The white beam showed him mighty buildings hewn out of the living rock, rearing up to hold the stony sky; great shadowy doorways and the marks of countless sandals in the stone floor underfoot. On all sides, branching away in every direction, were high-arched corridors broad as city streets, spanned at many levels by metal bridges. Shane stopped, uncertain.

From somewhere, thinned by distance and the winding of the maze-like galleries, came a voice, calling.

"Thaldrek!" grated Shane and started off, guided by that voice that called and called. The rocky walls picked up his footsteps, threw them from side to side, hurled them back at him from metal doorways.

New footsteps echoed abruptly, coming nearer. Around a carved corner came Thaldrek, his hawk face strained with a deadly urgency, and he was calling, "Zenda! Zenda Challoner!"

Torches made crazy patterns on the carved walls as Shane caught the running Martian by the shoulders, shook him savagely.

"Where is Zenda?"

"Lost," said Thaldrek, in a flat, quiet voice. "Lost in the dark in these corridors. And unless I find her and get us out of here within twenty minutes, we'll both die. You, too, Shane, since you somehow blundered in here."

"I didn't blunder," said Shane grimly. "And why will you die in twenty minutes?"

"I set the bomb forty minutes ago, to destroy the cyclotron. When I went back for Zenda, she was gone. It was my fault; in my excitement I forgot to give her a time command, and as soon as the sonic beam was off her, she regained

consciousness. She ran away, of course, and I've been hunting her ever since."

There was much that Shane didn't understand, but there was just one thing now that mattered.

"Can I get to the bomb in time to disconnect it?" he asked, and Thaldrek's eyes widened slowly at the tone of his voice.

"You think I'm afraid to go back, don't you?" Thaldrek laughed suddenly. "And I am. Not of dying—but of living!"

His eyes fastened on Shane's. "Yes, you can get there. Perhaps you can disconnect it in three minutes, though I don't see how. But if you stay more than three minutes under the ray, you'll get what Challoner got. Immortality!

"I've already stayed the limit, making calculations and setting the bomb. And I don't want immortality at the price Ptakuth paid!"

Shane shook his head. "I don't understand. But I'll disconnect that bomb if—Wait!" His hand caught the neck of Thaldrek's tunic in a strangling grip. "What are you trying to pull? If the bomb goes off, it'll only destroy the cyclotron."

"Look." Thaldrek kicked the nearby wall, looked at Shane as a trickle of dust cascaded to the floor. "Mars is old. The water is gone from these rocks, the iron rusted out. The shock of that atomic bomb in the heart of the city will bring Ptakuth down in fragments."

Shane let him go. "Where is the bomb?"

Thaldrek turned. "This way. And hurry!"

Ringling, shadowy corridors reeled behind them. And abruptly Thaldrek snapped off his torch. "The treasure of Ptakuth, Shane."

Light filtered into the darkness, growing as they approached its source. A massive archway opened, and beyond it was a square, spreading away in majestic simplicity to a raised platform. On the platform, under banked generators and transformer tubes, hemmed in by screens of unfamiliar metal, towered a great machine; a vacuum tube standing between poles of an electro-magnet that must have generated twenty million volts. There was a sort of shimmering all through the square, as though there were colored light just beyond seeing range.

"It draws power from the heart of Mars itself," murmured Thaldrek. "A power that has never weakened." He stiffened suddenly. "Zenda!"

Walking slowly through the shimmer, her bronzed slimness undulant, her arms raised as though in adoration, Zenda Challoner came from around the circular platform. Shane gasped. He had not remembered she was so beautiful. She was transfigured, filled with a joyous vitality as a glass is filled with wine.

"Zenda!" shouted Thaldrek, and there was tragedy in his voice. The girl paid no attention. Thaldrek caught Shane's arm in a grip that made him wince. "Get her, Shane! Get her, before it's too late! Unless it is already—"

Shane didn't understand, but he caught the deadly terror in Thaldrek's voice. Terror not for himself, but for Zenda. Shane started forward, into the square.

There was a mild electric shock, a surging in his blood as though all the life processes were being speeded up. He could understand Zenda's worship of the strange force.

"The bomb!" he said, stopping suddenly. "What about the bomb, Thaldrek?"

The Martian groaned. "Get Zenda! Never mind—oh, my God! There won't be time afterward. Five minutes left. And you'll have used at least half of your three minutes of safety!"

Terry Shane swore. "What is this talk of three minutes'?"

"The limit of safety under the ray. At three minutes the radiations make a definite impression on the body. At five you have immortality. At six, death!

"Get Zenda before you're both lost!"

Shane turned and ran toward the girl. The ray was like strong sunshine on him; he felt vitalized and invincible, afraid of nothing. Thaldrek was a quivering coward—

Harold Challoner stayed too long under the ray. He killed himself. He was The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps.

Something strange and cold caught Shane by the throat. Blood beat in his ears, his heart thundered, his knees bent under him. Ptakuth was cursed and lost, Challoner died by his own hand, and he, Terry Shane, was soaking in the same ray that caused it all.

He stopped, and a strange, incredulous look came over his face. "Faith," he whispered. "Faith, and I'm afraid!"

Thaldrek's voice spurred him. "Hurry, Shane, hurry!"

The Irishman shook his head to clear it. Zenda Challoner wavered in the misty radiance, utterly uncaring. Shane felt a surge of pity rise in him; pity, and something else. He grinned crookedly as he broke into a desperate run.

"And," he muttered, "I'm thinking I'm in love also!"

The girl was warm and light in his arms. He shielded her with his body, not knowing that the rays went through him unchecked. And, while he ran with all the strength that was in him, he kissed the soft hollow of her throat where it lay under his lips.

"Three minutes left," said Thaldrek tightly as he caught the girl from Shane. "And only a minute and a half left for you, if you go back."

"Can a man be in love and afraid at the same time?" wondered Shane, and turned back into the shimmering square.

Across the sandal-hollowed stones, running like a deer with the new power that was in him from the ray. Up the steps of the circular dais, searching, searching. Then he saw it, a little globe like a big marble, with a timing device set clockwise atop it in a strong metal case.

Shane had seen bombs like that before. Once they were set there was no stopping them, unless one had time and the proper tiny tools. And again fear

gripped Terry Shane as he thought of the seconds ticking away, felt the ray beating its wonderful, horrible strength into him, thought of those artificially unstabilized atoms ready to blow Ptakuth and everyone in it to powder. Fear, and a humble realization that there were bigger things in the world than Terence Shane.

There was just one thing he could try. Kneeling, he caught the timing device between thumb and forefinger, set the thumb and forefinger of his other hand over those. And he pressed.

Veins swelled in his forehead, his face drew into a tight mask of agonized effort. The thing was so tiny, his strength baffled by its very smallness. He lost track of time, of everything except that stubborn bit of metal between his fingers. Perhaps he was already a "god" like Challoner. Perhaps the bomb would go off in his hand. Perhaps there was no use of anything, because Zenda was already cursed with the curse of Ptakuth.

Blood spurted from his fingertips as the flesh split under the pressure. One more effort, and he must stop.

Like a sweating colossus he poured every last ounce of his strength into his crushing fingers. And the metal gave, bent inward, split away with a tiny jangle of ruptured instruments.

Shane sagged, his cramped hands cushioning the fall of the bomb. He would have lain there and slept, but that a voice kept shouting his name. "Thirty seconds, Shane. Run!"

Blindly he rose and ran across the wide and empty square, hardly knowing it when he was safe in the corridor, not knowing it at all when ultra-sonic waves blanked what was left of his conscious mind, set him walking toward the entrance where the Shunni sat.

He came to with his head pillowed in Zenda's lap. They were atop the hill from which he had first seen Ptakuth, and where the cliffs had risen beside the dead sea, there was now only a vast rubble-choked hollow. Ptakuth was gone, the treasure with it.

Shane struggled up, questions coming to his lips. A change came suddenly over Zenda; her eyes glazed, and when she spoke it was not with her voice.

"This is post-hypnotic command, Shane," she said. "Don't worry, Zenda is quite safe. Her body displays none of the symptoms of immortality; she had probably been there only a minute or so.

"I went back, after Zenda got us through and sent her warriors away, and set another bomb near the entrance. The secret of the cyclotron is too big and dangerous, I realize now, to loose upon the world, no matter how much money it might bring me. That's my business, as you know; selling secrets to the highest bidder. I set the first bomb, of course, to avoid any competition. The second was to destroy all my notes as well as the 'treasure' itself.

"This much I can say, Shane; tell it to the men of the Martian Foundation, and let them make what good they can of it. The cyclotron fired hydrogen bullets against a screen of yttrium. Using rubidium filters, the scientists of Ptakuth generated a ray with a wonderful property; the property of making the human bloodstream radio-active with a gamma-principle. This gamma element in the blood gave a power of regeneration to the body cells, but most of all, being in itself a germ-destroying element, it made the human body immune to all disease. You can see how this would extend the life span.

"The tragedy was that the ray destroyed whatever mysterious center of the brain it is that controls sleep. Imagine, Shane; a lifetime of several centuries, with never a moment's relaxation in sleep, never a quiet time of darkness and rest. Every second of every day lived to the uttermost. Ptakuth went mad! Like Challoner, it destroyed itself, and the rest of the world said it was cursed. Ptakuth was shunned.

"Yet there may still be good in the secret. Let modern scientists build what they can from the scraps of knowledge you have; they may find a safer way.

"We may meet again somewhere. If we do, remember that I know your secret. You were afraid twice on the same night!

"Good-by, and good luck to you and Zenda. May your daughters be as lovely, your sons as brave!"

Abruptly, as though it had never been, the post-hypnosis was gone. Zenda smiled, half shyly. Shane stretched out his arms, cradled her face between hands bandaged with strips of her blue skirt. "Thaldrek told me what you did," whispered Zenda. "At least I know."

Miles away on the other side of the dry river, a small spaceship roared up and drew a streak of vanishing flame against the paling sky. Shane looked after it with an odd little grin. Then he bent toward Zenda.

He stopped, chuckling. "Faith, girl," he murmured, "I'm afraid again!"

But not for long.