

The Beast-Jewel of Mars

I

Burk Winters remained in the passenger section while the Starflight made her landing at Kahora Port. He did not think that he could bear to see another man, not even one he liked as much as he did Johnny Niles, handle the controls of the ship that had been his for so long.

He did not wish even to say goodbye to Johnny, but there was no avoiding it. The young officer was waiting for him as he came down the ramp, and the deep concern he felt was not hidden in the least by his casually hearty grin.

Johnny held out his hand. "So long, Burk. You've earned this leave. Have fun with it."

Burk Winters looked out over the vast tarmac that spread for miles across the ochre desert. An orderly, roaring confusion of trucks and flatcars and men and ships—ore ships, freighters, tramps, sleek liners like the Starflight, bearing the colors of three planets and a dozen colonies, but still arrogantly and predominantly Terran.

Johnny followed his gaze and said softly, "It always gives you a thrill, doesn't it?"

Winters did not answer. Miles away, safe from the thundering rocket blasts, the glassite dome of Kahora, Trade City for Mars, rose jewel-like out of the red sand. The little sun stared wearily down and the ancient hills considered it, and the old, old wandering wind passed over it, and it seemed as though the planet bore Kahora and its spaceport with patience, as though it were a small local infection that would soon be gone.

He had forgotten Johnny Niles. He had forgotten everything but his own dark thoughts. The young officer studied him with covert pity, and he did not know it.

Burk Winters was a big man, and a tough man, tempered by years of deep-space flying. The same glare of naked light that had burned his skin so dark had bleached his hair until it was almost white, and just in the last few months his gray eyes seemed to have caught and held a spark of that pitiless radiance. The easy good nature was gone out of them, and the lines that laughter had shaped around his mouth had deepened now into bitter scars.

A big man, a hard man, but a man who was no longer in control of himself. All during the voyage out from Earth he had chain-smoked the little Venusian cigarettes that have a sedative effect. He was smoking one now, and even so he could not keep his hands steady nor stop the everlasting tic in his right cheek.

"Burk." Johnny's voice came to him from a great distance; "Burk, it's none of my business, but . . ." He hesitated, then blurted out, "Do you think Mars is good for you, now?"

Quite abruptly, Winters said, "Take good care of the Starflight, Johnny. Goodbye."

He went away, down the ramp. The pilot stared after him.

The Second Officer came up to Johnny. "That guy has sure gone to pieces," he said.

Johnny nodded. He was angry, because he had come up under Winters and he loved him.

"The damn fool." he said. "He shouldn't have come here." He looked out over the mocking immensity of Mars and added, "His girl was lost out there, somewhere. They never found her body."

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A spaceport taxi took Burk Winters into Kahora, and Mars vanished. He was back in the world of the Trade Cities, which belong to all planets, and none.

Whia on Venus, N'York on Earth, Sun City in Mercury's Twilight Belt, the glassite refuges of the Outer Worlds, they were all alike. They were dedicated to the coddling of wealth and greed, little paradises where millions were made and lost in comfort, where men and women from all over the Solar System could expend their feverish energies without regard for such annoyances as weather and gravitation.

Other things than the making of money were done in the Trade Cities. The lovely plastic buildings, the terraces and gardens and the glowing web of moving walks that spun them together, offered every pleasure and civilized vice of the known worlds.

Winters hated the Trade Cities. He was used to the elemental honesty of space. Here the speech, the dress, even the air one breathed, were artificial.

And he had a deeper reason than that for his hatred.

Yet he had left N'York in feverish haste to reach Kahora, and now that he was here he felt that he could not endure even the delay caused by the necessity of crossing the city. He sat tensely on the edge of the seat, and his nervous twitching grew worse by the minute.

When finally he reached his destination, he could not hold the money for his fare. He dropped the plastic tokens on the floor and left the driver to scramble for them.

He stood for a moment, looking up at the ivory facade before him. It was perfectly plain, the epitome of expensive unpretentiousness. Above the door, in small letters of greenish silver, was the one Martian word: Shanga.

"The return," he translated. "The going-back." A strange and rather terrible smile crossed his face, very briefly. Then he opened the door and went inside.

Subdued lighting, comfortable lounges, soft music, the perfect waiting room. There were half a dozen men and women there, all Terrans. They wore the fashionably simple white tunic of the Trade Cities, which set off the magnificent blaze of their jewelry and the exotic styles in which they dressed their hair.

Their faces were pallid and effeminate, scored with the haggard marks of life lived under the driving tension of a super-modern age.

A Martian woman sat in an alcove, behind a glassite desk. She was dark, sophisticatedly lovely. Her costume was the artfully adapted short robe of ancient Mars, and she wore no ornament. Her slanting topaz eyes regarded Burk Winters with professional pleasantness, but deep in them he could see the

scorn and the pride of a race so old that the Terran exquisites of the Trade Cities were only crude children beside it.

"Captain Winters." she said. "How nice to see you again."

He was in no mood for conventional pleasantries. "I want to see Kor Hal," he said. "Now."

"I'm afraid . . ." she began. Then she took another look at Winters' face and turned to the intercom. Presently she said, "You may go in."

He pushed open the door that led into the interior of the building, which consisted almost entirely of a huge solarium. Glassite walls enclosed it. Around the sides were many small cells, containing only a padded table. The roofs of the cells were quartz, and acted as mammoth lenses.

Skirting the solarium on the way to Kor Hal's office, Winters' mouth twisted with contempt as he looked through the transparent wall.

An exotic forest blossomed there. Trees, ferns, brilliant flowers, soft green sward, a myriad of birds. And through this mock-primitive playground wandered the men and women who were devotees of Shanga.

They lay first on the padded tables and let the radiation play with them. Winters knew. Neuro-psychic therapy, the doctors called it. Heritage of the lost wisdom of old Mars. Specific for the jangled nerves and overwrought emotions of modern man, who lived too fast in too complex an environment.

You lie there and the radiation tingles through you. Your glandular balance tips a little. Your brain slows down. All sorts of strange and pleasant things happen inside of you, while the radiation tinkers with nerves and reflexes and metabolism. And pretty soon you're a child again, in an evolutionary sort of way.

Shanga, the going-back. Mentally, and just a tiny bit physically, back to the primitive, until the effect wore off and the normal balance restored itself. And even then, for a while, you felt better and happier, because you'd had one hell of a rest, from everything.

Their pampered white bodies incongruously clad in skins and bits of colored cloth, the Earthlings of Kahora played and fought among the trees, and their worries were simple ones concerning food and love and strings of gaudy beads.

Hidden away out of sight were watchful men with shock guns. Sometimes someone went a little bit too far down the road. Winters knew. He had been knocked cold himself, on his last visit here. He remembered that he had tried to kill a man.

Or rather, he had been told that he had tried to kill a man. One did not remember much of the interludes of Shanga. That was one reason people liked it. One was free of inhibitions.

Fashionable vice, made respectable by the cloak of science. It was a new kind of excitement, a new kind of escape from the glittering complexities of life. The Terrans were mad for it.

But only the Terrans. The barbaric Venusians were still too close to the savage to have any need for it, and the Martians were too old and wise in sin to use it. Besides, thought Winters, they made Shanga. They know.

A deep shudder ran through him as he thrust his way into the office of Kor Hal, the director.

Kor Hal was lean and dark and of no particular age. His national origin was lost in the anonymity of the conventional white tunic. He was Martian, and his courtesy was only a velvet sheath over chilled steel, but beyond that he was quantity X.

"Captain Winters," he said. "Please sit down."

Winters sat.

Kor Hal studied him. "You're nervous, Captain Winters. But I am afraid to treat you anymore. Atavism lies too close to the surface in you." He shrugged. "You remember the last time."

Winters nodded. "The same thing happened in N'York." He leaned forward. "I don't want you to treat me anymore. What you have here isn't enough now. Sar Kree told me that, in N'York. He told me to come to Mars."

Kor Hal said quietly, "He communicated with me."

"Then you will . . ." Winters broke off, because there were no words with which to finish his question.

Kor Hal did not answer. He reclined at ease against the cushions of his lounge chair, handsome, unconcerned. Only his eyes, which were green and feral, held a buried spark of amusement. The cruel amusement of a cat which has a crippled mouse under its paw.

"Are you sure," he asked finally, "that you know what you're doing?"

"Yes."

"People differ, Captain Winters. Those mannikins out there"—he indicated the solarium—"have neither blood nor heart. They are artificial products of an artificial environment. But men like you, Winters, are playing with fire when they play with Shanga."

"Listen," said Winters. "The girl I was going to marry took her flier out over the desert one day and never came back. God only knows what happened to her. You know better than I do the things that can happen to people in the dead sea bottoms. I hunted for her. I found her flier, where it had crashed. I never found her. After that nothing mattered much to me. Nothing but forgetting."

Kor Hal inclined his dark, narrow head. "I remember. A tragedy, Captain Winters. I knew Miss Leland, a lovely young woman. She used to come here."

"I know," said Winters. "She wasn't Trade City, really, but she had too much money and too much time. Anyway, I'm not worried about playing with your fire, Kor Hal. I've been burned too deep with it already. Like you say, people differ. Those lily-whites in their toy jungle, they have no desire to go back any farther. They haven't the guts or the passions to want to. I have."

Winters' eyes blazed with a peculiarly animal light. "I want to go back, Kor Hal. Back as far as Shanga will take me."

"Sometimes," said the Martian, "that's a long way."

"I don't care."

Kor Hal gave him an intent look. "For some, there is no return."

"I have nothing to return to."

"It is not easy, Winters. Shanga—the real Shanga, of which these solariums and quartz lenses are only a weak copy, was forbidden centuries ago by the City-States of Mars. There are risks, and discomforts, which means that the process is expensive."

"I have money." Winters leaped up suddenly, his control breaking. "Be damned to your arguments! They're all hypocrisy, anyway. You know perfectly well which ones are going to take to Shanga. You keep them coming until they're addicts, half crazy to feel the real thing, and you know damn well you're going to give them what they want as soon as they cross your dirty palm with silver."

He tossed a checkbook on Kor Hal's desk. The top one was blank, but signed.

"There," he said. "Anything up to a hundred-thousand Universal Credits."

"I would prefer," said Kor Hal, "that you draw your own check, to cash." He handed the checkbook back to Winters. "The full amount, in advance."

Burk Winters said one word. "When?"

"Tonight, if you wish. Where are you staying?"

"The Tri-Planet."

"Have dinner there as usual. Then remain in the bar. Sometime during the evening your guide will join you."

"I'll be waiting," Winters said, and went out.

Kor Hal smiled. His teeth were very white, very sharp. They had the hungry look of fangs.

II

Burk Winters got his bearings finally when Phobos rose, and he could guess where they were heading.

They had slipped quietly out of Kahora, he and the slender young Martian who had joined him unobtrusively in the Tri-Planet bar. A flier waited for them on a private field. Kor Hal waited also. They took off, with a fourth man, who looked to be one of the big barbarians from the northern hills of Kesh. Kor Hal took the controls.

Winters was sure now that they were bound for the Low Canals, the ancient waterways and the ancient wicked towns—Jekkara, Valkis, Barrakesh—outside the laws of the scattered City-States. Thieves' market, slave market, vice market of a world. Earthmen were warned to keep away from them.

Miles reeled behind them. The utter desolation of the landscape below got on Winters' nerves. The silence in the flier became unendurable. There was something menacing about it. Kor Hal and the big Keshi and the slim young man seemed to be nursing some common inner thought that gave them a peculiarly vicious pleasure. Its shadow showed on their faces.

Winters spoke finally, "Are your headquarters out here?"

No answer.

Winters said rather petulantly, "There's no need to be so secretive. After all, I'm one of you now."

The slim young man said sharply, "Do the beasts lie down with the masters?"

Winters started to bristle, and the barbarian put his hand on the wicked little sap he carried at his belt. Then Kor Hal spoke coolly.

"You wished to practice Shanga in its true form, Captain Winters. That is what you have paid for. That is what you will receive. All else is irrelevant."

Winters shrugged sulkily. He sat smoking his sedative tobacco, and he did not speak again.

After a long, long time the seemingly endless desert began to change. Low ridges rose naked from the sand and grew into a mountain range, of which nothing was left now but the barren rock.

Beyond the mountains lay a dead sea bottom. It stretched away under the moonlight, dropping, always dropping, until at last it became only a vast pit of darkness. Ribs of chalk and coral gleamed here and there, pushing through the lichens like bones through the dried skin of a man long dead.

Winters saw that there was a city between the foothills and the sea.

It had followed the receding water down the slopes. From this height, Winters could see the outlines of five harbors, abandoned one by one as the sea drew back, the great stone docks still standing. Houses had been built to fill their emptiness, and then abandoned in their turn for a lower level.

Now the straggling town had coalesced along the bank of the canal that drew what feeble life was left from the buried springs of the bottom. There was something infinitely sad about that thin dark line—all that was left of a blue and rolling ocean.

The flier circled and came down. The Keshi said something rapidly in his own dialect, from which Winters caught the one word, Valkis. Kor Hal answered him. Then he turned to Winters and said:

"We have not far to go. Stay close by me."

The four men left the flier. Winters knew that he was under guard, and felt that it was not entirely for the sake of protecting him.

The wind blew thin and dry. Dust rose in clouds around their feet. Valkis lay ahead, a stony darkness sprawling upward toward the cliffs, cold in the eerie light of the twin moons. Winters saw, high up on the crest, the broken towers of a palace.

They walked beside still black water, on paving stones worn hollow by the sandaled feet of countless generations. Even at this late hour, Valkis did not sleep. Torches burned yellow against the night. Somewhere a double-banked harp made strange music. The streets, the alley mouths, the doorways and the flat roofs of the houses rustled with life.

Lithe lean men and catlike women watched the strangers, hot-eyed and silent. And over all, Winters heard the particular sound of the Low Canal towns—the whispering and chiming of the wanton little bells that the women wear, braided into their dark hair, hanging from their ears, chained around their ankles.

Evil, that town. Ancient, and very evil, but not tired. Winters could feel the pulse of life that beat there, strong and hot. He was afraid. His own civilian garb and the white tunics of his companions were terribly conspicuous in this place of bare breasts and bright kilts and jeweled girdles.

No one molested them. Kor Hal led the way into a large house and shut the door of beaten bronze behind them, and Winters felt a great relief. He turned to Kor Hal.

"How soon?" he asked, and tried to conceal the trembling of his hands.

"Everything is ready, Winters. Halk, show him the way."

The Keshi nodded and went off, with Winters at his heels.

This was very different from the Hall of Shanga in Kahora. Within these walls of quarried stone, men and women had lived and loved and died in violence. The blood and tears of centuries had dried in the cracks between the flags. The rugs, the tapestries, and the furnishings were worth a fortune as antiques. Their beauty was worn, but still bright.

At the end of a corridor was a bronze door, pierced by a narrow grille.

Halk stopped. He said to Winters, "Strip."

Winters hesitated. He carried a gun, and he did not like to leave it behind. "Why out here? I'd rather have my clothes with me."

Halk said, "Strip here. It is the rule."

Winters obeyed.

He walked naked into the narrow cell. There was no comfortable table here, only a few skins thrown on the bare floor. A barred opening showed darkly in the opposite wall.

The bronze door rang shut behind him and he heard the great bar drop into place. It was completely dark. He was really afraid, now. Terribly afraid. But it was too late for that. It had been too late, for a long time.

Ever since Jill Leland was lost.

He lay down on the hides. High above, in the vault of the roof, he could make out a faint, vague shimmering. It grew brighter. Presently he saw that it was a prism set into the stone, rather large and cut from a crystalline substance that was the color of fire.

Kor Hal's voice reached him through the grille. "Earthman!"

"Yes?"

"That prism is one of the Jewels of Shanga. The wise men of Caer Dhu carved them half a million years ago. Only they knew the secret of the substance, and the shaping of the facets. There are only three of the jewels left."

Sparks that were more energy than light flickered on the stone walls of the cell. Gold and orange and greenish blue. Little flames, the fire of Shanga, to burn the heart.

Because he was afraid, Winters said, "But the radiation, the ray that comes through the prism. Is it the same as that in Kahora?"

"Yes. The secret of the projectors was lost also with Caer Dhu. Presumably they use cosmic rays. By substituting ordinary quartz for the prisms, we could make the radiation weak enough for our purpose in the Trade Cities."

"Who is 'we,' Kor Hal?"

Laughter, soft and wicked. "Earthman—we are Mars!"

Dancing fire, growing, growing, glinting on his flesh, darting through his blood, his brain. It was not like this in the solariums, with their pretty trees. It was pleasure there, tantalizing, heady pleasure. It was exciting, and strange. But this . . .

His body began to move, to arch itself into strong writhing curves. He thought he could not endure the lovely, lovely pain.

Kor Hal's voice boomed down some huge fateful distance. "The wise men of Caer Dhu were not so wise. They found the secret of Shanga, and they escaped their wars and their troubles by fleeing backward along the path of evolution. Do you know what happened to them? They perished, Earthman! In one generation, Caer Dhu vanished from the face of Mars." It was getting hard to answer, hard to think. Winters said hoarsely, "Did it matter? They were happy, while they lived."

"Are you happy, Earthman?"

"Yes!" he panted. "Yes!"

The words were only half articulate. Twisting, rolling on the hide rugs, in the grip of such magnificent, unholy sensation as he had never dreamed of before, Burk Winters was happy. The fire of Shanga blazed down upon him like a melting away, and there was nothing left but joy.

Again, Kor Hal laughed.

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After that, Winters was not sure of anything. His mind rocked, and there were periods of darkness. When he was conscious, he knew only a feeling of strangeness. But he carried one memory with him, at least part way down that eerie road.

During a lucid period, a space of only a minute or two, he thought that one of the stones had rolled back to reveal a quartzite screen, and that through the screen a face looked at him, watching as he bathed naked in the beautiful flame.

A woman's face. Martian, highbred, with strong delicate bones and arrogant brows, and a red mouth that would be like a bittersweet fruit to kiss. Her eyes were golden as the fire, and as hot, and proud, and scornful.

There must have been a microphone in the wall, for she spoke and he heard her voice, full of a sweet cruel magic. She called his name. He could not rise, but he managed to crawl toward her, and to his reeling brain she was part of

the unearthly force that played with him. A destruction and a fascination, as irresistible as death.

To his alien eyes, she was not as lovely as Jill. But there was a power in her. And her red mouth taunted him, and the curve of her bare shoulders drove him to madness.

"You're strong," she said. "You will live, until the end. And that is well, Burk Winters."

He tried to speak, but he could no longer form the words.

She smiled. "You have challenged me, Earthman. I know. You've challenged Shanga. You're brave, and I like brave men. You're also a fool, and I like fools, because they give me sport. I'm looking forward, Earthman, to the moment when you reach the end of your search!"

He tried again to speak, and failed, and then the night and the silence came to stay. He took the sound of her mocking laughter with him into the dark.

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He did not think of himself now as Captain Burk Winters, but only by the short personal name of Burk. The stones upon which he lay were cold and hard. It was pitch-dark, but his eyes and ears were very keen. He could tell by the sound of his breathing that he was in a closed space, and he did not like it.

A low growl rumbled in his throat. The hairs stiffened at the back of his neck. He tried to remember how he had come here. Something had happened, something to do with fire, but he did not know what, or why.

Only one thing he knew. He was searching for something. It was gone, and he wanted it back. The wanting was a pain in him. He could not remember what the object was that he wanted, but the need for it was greater than any obstacle short of death.

He rose and began to explore his prison.

Almost at once he found an opening. Cautious testing told him that there was a passage beyond. He could see nothing, but the air that blew in to him was very heavy with strange smells. Instinct told him that it was a trap. He crouched resolute, his hands opening and closing in desire for a weapon. There was no weapon. Presently he went into the passage, moving without sound.

He went a long way, his shoulders brushing stone on either side. Then he saw light ahead, red and flickering, and the air brought him the taint of smoke, and the smell of man.

Very, very slowly, the creature called Burk padded toward the light.

He came close to the end of the tunnel, and suddenly a barred gate dropped behind him with a ringing clash. He could not go back.

He did not wish to go back. Enemies were in front of him, and he wished to fight. He knew now that he could not come upon them secretly. Flexing his great chest, he leaped out boldly from the tunnel mouth.

The tossing glare of torches dazzled his eyes, and a wild mob howl deafened him. He stood alone on a great block—the old slave block of Valkis, though he did not know that. They stared up, jeering at the Earthman who had tasted the forbidden fruit that even the soulless men of the Low Canals would not touch.

The creature called Burk was still a man, but a man already shadowed by the ape. During the hours he had bathed in the light of Shanga, he had changed physically. Bone and flesh had altered under the accelerated urging of glands and increased metabolism.

Already a big, powerful man, he had thickened and coarsened along the lines of brutish strength. His jaw and brow ridges jutted. Thick hair covered his chest and limbs and extended in a rudimentary mane down the back of his neck. His deep-set eyes had a hard and cunning gleam of intelligence, but it was the intelligence of the primitive mind that had learned to speak and make fire and weapons, and no more than that.

Half crouching, he glared down at the crowd. He did not know who these men were; he hated them. They were of another tribe, and their very smell was alien. They hated him, too. The air bristled with their enmity.

His gaze fell on a man who stepped out lightly and proudly into the empty space. He did not remember that this man's name was Kor Hal. He did not notice that Kor Hal had shed the white tunic of the Trade Cities for the kilt and girdle of the Low Canals, nor that he wore in his ears the pierced gold rings of Barrakesh, and was now honestly himself—a bandit, born and bred among a race of bandits who had been civilized for so long that they could afford to forget it.

Burk knew only that this man was his particular enemy.

"Captain Burk Winters," said Kor Hal. "Man of the tribe of Terra-Lords of the spaceways, builders of the Trade Cities, masters of greed and rapine."

His voice carried over the packed square, though he did not shout. Burk watched him, his eyes like blinking red sparks in the torchlight, weaving slightly on his feet, his hands swinging loose and hungry. He did not understand the words, but they were threat and insult.

"Look at him, Oh men of Valkis!" cried Kor Hal. "He is our master now. His government kings it over the City-States of Mars. Our pride is stripped, our wealth is gone. What have we left, oh children of a dying world?"

The answer that rang the walls of Valkis was soft and wordless, the opening chord of a hymn written in hell.

Someone threw a stone.

Burk came down off the slave block in a great effortless sprig and sped across the square, straight for Kor Hal's throat.

A laugh went up, mirth that was half a cat-scream of sheer savagery. Like one supple creature, the crowd moved. Torchlight flashed from knife-blade and jewels and eyes of glittering green and topaz, and the small chiming bells, and the points of the deadly spiked knuckle-dusters. Long black tongues of whips licked out with a hiss and a crack.

Kor Hal waited until Burk almost reached him. Then he bent and pivoted in the graceful Martian savatte. His foot caught Burk under the chin and sent him sprawling.

As he rolled half stunned, Kor Hal caught a whip from a man's hand.

"That's it, Earthman!" he cried out. "Grovel! Belly down, and lick the stones

that were here before the apes of Earth had learned to walk!"

The long lash sang and bit, lacing the hairy body with red weals, and the harsh mob scream went up—Drive him! Drive the beast of Shanga, as the invading beasts of old were driven by our forefathers!

And they drove him, with whip and knife and spike, through the streets of Valkis under the racing moons. Jeering they drove him.

He fought them. Mad with fury, he fought them, but he could not come to grips with them. When he lunged they melted before him, and each way he turned he was met by the lash and the blade and the crippling lick. Blood ran, but it was all his own, and the high shrill laughter of women pursued him as he went.

At last there was only fear and the desire to escape.

They let him run. Along the crumbling ways of Valkis, up and down the twisting alleys that reeked of ancient crime, they let him run. But not too far. They blocked him off from the canal and the freedom of the sea bottom beyond. Again and again they headed the panting, shambling creature that had been Burk Winters, captain of the Starflight, and drove it higher up the slope.

Burk moved slowly now. He snarled and his head wove blindly from side to side in a pathetic attempt at defiance. His blood dripped hot on the stones. And always the insolent stinging lashes drove him on.

Up and up. Past the great looming docks, with the bollards and the scars of moored ships still on them, and the dust of their own decay lapping dry around their feet. Four levels above the canal. Four harbors, four cities, four epochs written in fading characters of stone. Even the dawn-man Burk was oppressed and frightened.

There was no life here. There been no life for a long time, even in the lowest level. The wind had scoured and polished the empty houses, smoothing the corners to roundness, hollowing the doors and windows, until the work of man was almost erased. Only strange things were left, that looked as though the wind had made them by itself out of little mountain tops.

The people of Valkis were silent now. They drove the beast, and their hate had not abated, but was intensified.

They walked here upon the very bones of their world. Earth was a green star, young and rich. Here the Martians passed the marble pier where the Kings of Valkis had moored their galleys, and the very marble was shattered under the heel of time.

High on the ridge above the oldest city the palace of the kings looked down at the scourging of the interloper. And in all of Valkis now there was no sound but the whispering of little bells that was like the sigh of wind on another world, where the women ran on their small bare feet, ankle deep in dust.

Burk climbed apelike up the history of Mars. His belly was cold with a terror of these dark places that smelled of nothing, not even of death.

He passed a place where houses had been built within the curve of a coral reef. He clambered over the reef, and saw above him a sloping face of rock with gaping holes that the sea had made. He climbed that, not knowing or caring what it was.

On the level space above he passed the broken quays that had once made safe

mooring in the bay, and stopped to look back.

They were still hunting him. His flanks heaved and his eyes were desperate. He went on, scrambling up steep narrow streets where the paving blocks had fallen out and the houses had come down in shapeless heaps, and his hands and feet left red prints where he put them down.

Then, at last, he was at the top of the ridge.

The great bulk of the palace loomed above him against the sky. Primitive wisdom told him the place was dangerous. He skirted the high wall of marble that ringed it, and suddenly his twitching nostrils caught the scent of water.

His tongue was swollen in his mouth, his throat choked with dust. His need was so great, with the salt bleeding and the fever of his wounds, that he forgot his enemies and the menace of the mountain-thing behind the wall. Breaking into a ragged lope, he went forward along the cliff top until he came to a gateway, and plunged through it, and suddenly there was turf under his feet, soft and cool. There were shrubs, and flowers pale in the moonlight, heavily sweet, and dark branches against the sky.

The gate closed silently behind him. He did not see it. He ran down a grassy ride between rows of trees trimmed into fantastic shapes, guided by the smell of water. Here and there were strange gleams and glints of statuary, wrought in marble and semiprecious stones. Burk's skin crawled with an awareness of danger, but he was too weary and too mad with thirst to care.

The ride ended. Beyond was an open space, and in the center of it was a great sunken tank, carved and ornamented. The water in it was like polished jet.

Nothing stirred in the open. A wing of the palace rose beyond the tank like a black wall, and it seemed that nothing lived there, but Burk's hair-trigger nerves told him otherwise. He stopped in the shelter of the trees, sniffing the air and listening.

Nothing. Darkness and silence. Burk looked at the waiting water. It filled all his senses. Suddenly he ran toward it.

He flung himself belly down on the slabs of turquoise that paved the brink and buried his face in the icy water and drank. Then he lay there panting, utterly spent.

Still nothing moved.

Then, all at once, a long howl rose on the night, from somewhere beyond the palace wing. Burk stiffened. He got to his hands and knees, every hair on his body bristling with fear.

The howl was answered by a strange reptilian scream.

Now that he had satisfied his thirst, the night wind brought him many odors. They were too numerous and tangled to be identified, except for a strong musky taint that made his flesh crawl with instinctive loathing. He did not know what sort of creature gave off that taint, but it filled him with horror, because it seemed that he almost knew—and did not want to.

He wanted only to get away from that place, that was so full of secret life and hidden menace and silence.

He began to move toward the trees, back the way he had come. Slowly, because

he was wounded and very weak. And then, quite suddenly, he saw her.

She had come without sound into the open space, out of the shelter of huge flowering shrubs. She stood not far away, in the shifting glow of the little racing moons, watching him. She was shy and large-eyed, poised for flight. The hair that hung down her back and the shining down that covered her body were the color of the moonlight.

Burk stopped. A tremor went through him. All his sense of loss and his desperate searching came back to him, and with them a desire to be closer to this slender she.

A name spoke itself from some dim chamber of his soul "Jill?"

She started. He thought she was going to run away, and he cried out again, "Jill!" Then, step by step, uncertainly, she came nearer, lovely as a fawn in spring.

She made a questioning sound, and he answered. "Burk." She stood still for a moment, repeating the word, and then she whimpered and began to run toward him, and he was filled with a great joy. He laughed and mouthed her name over and over, and there were tears in his eyes. He reached out toward her.

A spear flashed and fell quivering between them.

She gave him a cry of warning and fled, vanishing into the shrubbery. Burk tried to follow, but his knees gave under him. He turned, snarling.

Tall Keshi guards in resplendent harness had come out of the trees, circling behind him. They carried spears and a net of heavy ropes. In a moment he was surrounded! The spear-points pricked him back until the net was thrown and he went down helpless.

As they carried him away, he heard two things. The wail of the silver she, and from somewhere nearby, a woman's mocking laughter.

He had heard that laughter before. He could not remember where, or how, but it filled him with such fury that he was finally knocked over the head with a spear-butt, to keep him quiet.

III

He came to himself—the self that was Captain Burk Winters—in a room that was much like the one he last remembered, in Valkis, except that the walls were of a dark green rock and there was no prism.

Winters could not remember anything of what had happened since that last room, except that he knew he had had a strong emotional shock. Jill's name was uppermost in his mind. He began to tremble with a deep excitement. He got to his feet, and it was then that he realized he was shackled. Chains ran from cuffs on his wrists to similar cuffs on his ankles, passing through rings on a metal belt around his waist. These constituted his entire clothing. He saw also that there were freshly healed scars on his body. The heavy door was opened for him before he could begin to pound on it. Four tall barbarians, their harness magnificent with jewels and wrought metal, formed up a guard around him, and an officer led the way. They did not speak to Winters, and he knew the uselessness of trying to get anything out of them.

He had not the faintest idea where he was, or how he had come there, beyond a

vague memory of pain and flight that was like something he had dreamed.

And somewhere, during that dream, he had seen Jill, spoken to her. He was as certain of that as he was of the weight of his chains.

He stumbled, because his sight was blurred with tears. Up to then, he had not been sure. He had seen the twisted wreck of her flier, and while he did not believe it, there was always the chance that she might really be dead, and lost to him beyond all hope.

Now he knew. She was alive, and if Winters had been alone he would have wept like a child.

Instead, he studied the corridors and the great halls through which the guard took him. From the size and the splendor of them he knew that he was in a palace, and guessed that it might be the one he had seen on the cliffs above Valkis. This was confirmed when he caught a glimpse of the town through a window embrasure.

The palace was older than anything he had seen on Mars, except for the buried ruins of Lhak in the northern deserts. But this was no ruin. It had grown old in somber beauty. The patterns of the mosaic floors were blurred, the precious stones worn thin as porcelain. The tapestries, preserved by the wonderful Martian formula that had been lost for centuries, like everything else on Mars, had grown frail and brittle, their colors all softened to faint glows, infinitely sad and lovely.

Here and there, on the walls or the soaring vault of a roof, were murals—magnificent pageants of lost glory, dim as an old man's memory. The seas they pictured were deep and blue, and the ships were tall, and the mail of the warriors was set with gems, and the captive queens were beautiful as dusky pearls.

Proud architecture, mating beauty with strength, and showing that strange blend of culture and barbarism that is so typically Martian. Winters reflected on how long ago these stones had been quarried, and went on to reflect that at that time civilization had already destroyed itself in a series of atomic wars, and the proud Kings of Valkis were only bandit chieftains in a world that was slipping downward toward the night.

They came at length to doors of beaten gold that were more than twice Burk's six-foot height. The Keshi guards who stood there pushed them wide, and Burk saw the throne room.

Westering sunlight slanted in from the high embrasures, falling across the pillars and the tessellated floor. The pale light touched vagrant glints from the shields and the weapons of dead kings, warmed the old banners to brief life. Everywhere else in that vast place was a brooding darkness, full of whispers and small faint echoing.

A shaft of cool gold fell directly upon the throne at the far end of the room.

The high seat itself was cut from a single block of black basalt, and as Winters approached it, his swinging chains making a loud sound in the silence, he saw that the stone had been already half shaped by the sea. It was very worn and smooth with the patient sanding of the tides, and where hands had lain on the armpieces there were deep hollows, and on the basalt step below.

An old woman sat upon the throne. She was wrapped in a black cloak, and her hair wound into a sort of white crown on her head, braided with jewels. She

stared with half-blind eyes at the Earthman, and suddenly she spoke, in sonorous High Martian, a tongue as antique on Mars as Sanskrit is on Earth. Winters could not understand one word of it, but he knew from her tone and expression that she was quite mad.

Someone sat in the heavy shadows by her feet, outside the shaft of sunlight, and veiled by it from Winters' sight. He could catch only a vague pallor of ivory-tinted flesh, but for some reason his nerves tingled with premonition.

As he neared the high seat, the old woman rose and stretched out her arm toward him, a wrinkled Cassandra crying doom upon his head. The wild echoes of her voice rolled from the vaulted roof, and her eyes were full of a blazing hate.

The guards set the butts of their spears into his back so that he was thrown face down before the basalt step. A low, sweet, mocking laugh came out of the shadows, and he felt the pressure of a little sandaled foot on his neck.

He knew the voice that said, "Greeting, Captain Winters! The throne of Valkis welcomes you."

The foot was withdrawn from his neck. He rose. The old woman had fallen back onto the throne. She was intoning what sounded like a church litany, and her upturned face had an exalted look.

The remembered voice said out of the dimness, "My mother is repeating the coronation rites. Presently she will demand the year's tribute from the Outer Islands and the coastal tribes. Time and reality do not bother her, and it pleases her to play at being queen. Therefore, as you see, I, Fand, rule Valkis from the shadow of the throne."

"Sometimes," Winters said, "you must come into the light."

"Yes."

A soft, quick rustle and she was standing there in the shaft of sunlight. Her hair was the color of night after moonset, intricately coiled. She was dressed in the old, arrogant fashion of the bandit kingdoms—the long full skirt slit to the waist at the sides, so that her thighs showed when she moved, the wide jeweled girdle, collar of golden plaques. Her small, high breasts were bare and lovely, her body slender, with a catlike grace.

Her face was as he remembered it. Proud and fine, golden-eyed, a mouth like a red fruit that mingled honey and poison, a lazy, slumberous power behind the beauty, the fascination of all things that are at once beautiful and deadly.

She looked at Winters and smiled. "So at last you have reached the end of your search."

He looked down at his chains and his nakedness. "A strange way to reach it. I paid Kor Hal well for this privilege." He gave her a searching glance. "Do you rule Shanga, as well as Valkis? If so you're not very courteous to your guests."

"On the contrary, I treat them very well—as you shall see." Her golden eyes taunted him. "But you didn't come here to practice Shanga, Captain Winters."

"Why else would I have come?"

"To find Jill Leland."

He was not really surprised. Subconsciously he had known that she knew. But he managed a look of blank amazement.

"Jill Leland is dead."

"Was she, when you saw her in the garden, and spoke to her?" Fand laughed. "Do you think we're such fools? Everyone who comes to the Hall of Shanga in the Trade Cities is carefully checked and examined. We were particularly careful with you, Captain Winters, because psychologically you were the wrong type to be drawn to Shanga. Men like you are too strong to need escape.

"You knew, of course, that your fiancée had taken up the practice. You didn't like it, and tried to make her stop. Kor Hal said that she was terribly upset about it on several occasions. But Jill had gone too far to stop. She begged to be allowed the full power, the real Shanga. She helped us plan her supposed death in the sea bottom. We would have done that anyway, for our own protection, since the girl has influential connections and we can't afford to have people hunting for our clients. But she wanted you to believe that she was dead, so that you would forget her. She felt she had no right to marry you, that she would ruin your life. Doesn't that touch you, Captain Winters? Doesn't that bring tears to your eyes?"

It brought more than that to Winters. It brought an overpowering urge to take this lovely she-devil between his hands and break her and then stamp the pieces into the earth.

His chains made one harsh jangling sound, and then the spears came up and touched his flesh with sharp red kisses. He stood still and said, "Why have you done this? Is it for money, or for hate?"

"For both, Earthman! And for something more important than either of them." Her lips curved in brief amusement. "Besides, I've done nothing to your people. I built the Halls of Shanga, yes. But the men and women of Earth degrade themselves of their own free will. Come here."

She motioned him to follow her to the window. As she crossed the vast room, she said, "You have seen part of the palace. Earth credits have rebuilt and restored the house of my fathers. The credits of apelings who wish to return to their normal state because the civilization they have forced themselves is too much for them. Look out there. Earth money has done that, too."

Winters looked out upon a sight that had almost vanished from the face of Mars. A garden, the varied and jewel-bright garden that would have belonged with a palace like this. Broad lawns of bronze green turf, formal plantings, statuary . . .

For some reason he could not quite remember, that garden gave Burk Winters a cold shuddering chill.

But the garden itself was only a part of what he saw. A small part. Beneath the window the ground sloped away into a vast bowl-shaped depression, perhaps a quarter-mile away, and Winters looked down into an amphitheater. Ruined as it was, it was still magnificent, with tiers of seats rising like steps of hewn stone from the inner walls. He thought of how it must have looked when the games were held in the old days, with all of those thousands of places filled.

Now, in the arena, there was another garden. A wild and tangled garden, closed in by the high protective walls that had kept the beasts from the spectators.

There were trees in it, and open spaces, and he could make out moving forms among the shadows, strange forms. He could not see them clearly for the distance and the slanting light, but a chill pang struck through him, a cold breath of foreboding.

In the center of the arena was a lake. Not a large one, and probably not deep, but there were creatures splashing in it, and he caught the faint echo of a reptilian scream. An echo he had heard before. . . .

Fand was looking outward to the amphitheater, with an odd, slow smile. Winters saw that there were people already in the lower tiers of the seats, and more of them gathering.

"What is this thing," he asked her, "that is more important than money or your hatred for the men of Earth?"

All the ancient pride of her race and house flashed out in her eyes as she answered him. He forgot his loathing of her for a moment, in his respect for her deep sincerity.

She said only one word. "Mars."

The old woman heard her and cried out from the throne. Then she flung the corner of her black mantle over her head and was silent.

"Mars," said Fand quietly. "The world that could not even die in decency and honor, because the carrion birds came flying to pick its bones, and the greedy rats suck away the last of its blood and pride."

Winters said, "I don't understand. What has Shanga to do with Mars?"

"You'll see." She turned on him suddenly. "You challenged Shanga, Earthman, just as your people have challenged Mars. We'll find out which is the stronger!"

She motioned to the officer of the guard, who went away. Then she said to Winters, "You wanted your girl back. You were willing to go through the fire of Shanga for her, though you abhorred it. You were willing to risk your identity through the changes of the ray—which after a while, Earthman, never go away. And all for Jill Leland. Do you still want her back?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of that."

"Yes."

"Very well." Fand glanced over his shoulder and nodded. "There she is."

For a long moment, Burk Winters did not turn around. Fand moved away a little, watching with a cruel, amused interest. Winters' back stiffened. He turned.

She was there, standing in the sunlight, bewildered, frightened, a wild and shining creature out of the dawn of the world, with a rope around her neck. The guards were laughing.

Winters thought desperately, She has not changed too much. Back to the primitive, but not yet to the ape. There is a soul still in her eyes, and the light of reason.

Jill, Jill! How could you have done this thing?

But he understood now how she could have done it. He remembered how bitterly he had quarreled with her over Shanga. He had thought it a stupid and childish thing, far beneath her intelligence and as degrading as any other drug. But he had not understood.

He did now. And he was filled with a deadly fear, because he understood so well.

Because he himself was now numbered among the beasts of Shanga. And beneath his horror as he looked at the creature that was Jill and yet not Jill, he was aware that in some unholy way he found her more beautiful and more alluring than he ever had before. Stripped of all the shams and the studied unconvensions of society, freed of all complexity, her body strong and fleet as a doe's quivering with sensitive life . . .

It would take two of a kind. Dawn-woman, dawn-man. Strong sinew, strong passion, the guts that cities stole away . . .

Fand said, "She can still be saved, if you can find a way to do it." Then she added shrewdly, "Unless you now need someone to save you, Captain Winters!"

A strong shock of revulsion rocked him, but his eyes still held a strange light.

The silver she was coming toward him. Her gaze was fixed upon him. He saw that she was drawn to him, and struggling to understand why. She did not speak, and somehow Winters' throat closed on an aching lump, so that he too was dumb.

The guard who held her rope let her move as she would. She came close to Winters, hesitantly, as an animal does. Then she stopped and looked up into his face. Tears gathered in her wide dark eyes. Presently she whimpered, very softly, and went down on her knees at his feet.

The old woman let out a shrill cackling. Fand's eyes were like cups of molten gold.

Winters bent over and caught Jill in his arms. He lifted her to her feet and stood holding her to him, in a fury of protective possessive love. He said very softly to Fand, "You've seen it all now. Can we go?"

She nodded. "Take them to the garden of Shanga," she said, and added, "It is almost time."

The guards took them, Burk Winters and the woman he had lost and found again, out through the great echoing halls of the palace and down the long slope of lawn to the amphitheater.

A barred gate of heavy metal covered the mouth of a tunnel. The guards unlocked it and took off Winters' chains and thrust him inside with Jill. The gate was locked again behind them.

Holding Jill tightly by the hand, Winters went down the tunnel and came presently into the arena—into the garden of Shanga.

He stopped, blinking in the sudden light. Jill's hand tightened on his. She quivered with a tense expectancy, and her head was tilted in an attitude of listening.

He had only a moment before the gong sounded, the mellow sonorous notes that might have been calling some evil priesthood to its dark prayers. Only a moment to glimpse the trees and the shambling anthropoid forms that moved among them, to catch the rank beast taint in the air, to hear the splashing and the hissing screams from the hidden pool.

Only a moment to be filled with horror and a sick fear, to deny to himself the reality of this nightmare garden, to wish that he were blind and deaf, or better than that, dead.

In the seats above the protecting wall, rows of Martian faces looked down. They were the faces of men and women who watch the antics of creatures in a zoo—destructive creatures for which they have a personal hatred.

Then the gong called out, and Jill leaped away, pulling him by the hand. All over the garden there was a moment of intense silence, and then there rose a devil's chorus of roaring and screaming in voices that were horribly human and even more horribly not, and close to him Jill's voice chimed in, saying over and over, "Shanga! Shanga!"

It came to Winters in a flash, then, what Fand had meant about Mars. As Jill pulled him headlong between the trees and across the open grassy spaces, he realized that this garden of Shanga was in fact a zoo, an exhibit, where the people of Mars might come to see what manner of beast their economic conquerors were. A hot and dire shame rose in him. Apeling, running naked through the trees, a slave to the fire of Shanga!

He yelled at Jill to stop!

She only plunged on the harder, so that he had to fight her, setting his heels in the earth. And she turned on him snarling, saying, "Shanga!"

A great anthropoid male came rushing toward them. He had slipped back beyond speech, but ecstatic noises came out of his throat. Behind him were others, males, females, and young on the same evolutionary level. Winters and the silver she that was Jill were caught up and carried on in their tribal rush. Winters fought to get away, but it was hopeless. The wild hairy bodies walled him in.

As they approached the center of the garden they were joined by more and more, all apparently summoned by the sound of the gong. Looking at them, Winters' stomach turned over. This was Walpurgis Night, a festival of blasphemies. And he was trapped in it, inextricably joined to destruction.

The ones like Jill, who had only gone a little way as yet, were not so bad. They were human. Winters knew that he himself had been like that, and he felt no particular horror of them. But there were others. Back through all the stages of the primitive, beyond the Neanderthal, beyond Pithecanthropus Erectus, beyond the missing link, back to the common ancestor.

Shapeless, shambling, hairy brutes, deformed skulls and little red cunning eyes, bared teeth grinning yellow. Things that even the anthropologist had never seen or dreamed of. Things that were not human, or ape, nor any form of life that had ever been classified.

All the dark secrets of Terran evolution were laid bare in this garden, for the Martians to see. It made even Winters, the Earthman, flinch to think that bodies like that had given ultimate birth to him. What respect could the Martians have for such a race, that was still so close to its beginnings?

But he was to see more, much more, of those beginnings.

The gong struck a last booming summons. The tide of bowed hairy shoulders and flat brows and ugly things that went on all fours swept Winters and Jill out into the clearing at the center, where from the palace window he had seen the lake. A strong musky reek hung in the air. It had the same sickly taint that a snake-house does. And Winters saw that the lake was agitated by the creatures who lived there, and who were swarming out to answer the gong.

Back to the common ancestor, and beyond. Beyond the mammal, back to the gill and the scale, to the egg laid in the warm mud, to the hissing, squirming, utterly loathly ultimate!

Jill panted, "Shanga! Shanga!" looking up, and Winters felt a darkness swimming in his brain. A cold wet thing slithered between his legs, and he swayed, retching. The surface of the lake rippled, but he could not look. He could not.

Grasping Jill, he tried to batter his way through the crowd, but it was hopeless. He was caught, trapped.

Looking up, he saw the prisms that were set high overhead on long booms. He saw them start to glow, with the remembered flame.

He had reached the end, now. The end of his search for Jill Leland, the end of everything. The first sweet deadly thrill of the ray touched his flesh. He felt the waking hunger in him, the deep lust, the stirring of the beast that lay so close under his own skin. He thought of the lake, and wondered how it would be to lie in its wetness, breathing through the gill slits that had once opened in his own flesh when he was an embryo in his mother's womb.

Because that is where I shall be, he thought. In the lake. Jill and I. And beyond the lake, what? The amoeba, and then . . . ?

He saw the royal box, whence the Kings of Valkis had watched the gladiators and the flowing blood. Fand sat there now. She leaned her slender elbows on the stone and watched, and it seemed to Winters that even at this distance he could see the smile and the scorn in her golden eyes. Kor Hal sat beside her, and the old woman, a muffled shape of black.

The fires of Shanga burned and brightened. There was a silence on the clearing now. The sounds that came, the moanings and the little whimpers, did not touch the silence. They only made it deeper. The warm glints danced on the upturned faces, glowed in the staring eyes. Each scaled or shaggy body bore a nimbus of beauty. He saw Jill standing there, reaching up toward the twin suns, a slim shaft of silver flame.

The madness already in his blood. Muscle and sinew taut with it, arching, curving. Brain clouding with a bright soft veil, forgetfulness, release. Jill and Burk, dawn-man, dawn-woman, happy while they lived, done with everything but their own love, their own satisfaction. Why not? They were both in it now, both marked with the same stamp.

Then he heard the laughter and the jeering of the Martians who were gathered to watch the shame of his world. He tore his gaze away from the wicked light and looked again into the face of Fand of Valkis, and then at Kor Hal and the thousand other faces, and a bleak and terrible expression came into his eyes.

The ranks of the crowd had broken. The beast-shapes lay upon the turf, writhing in the ecstasy of Shanga. Jill was on her hands and knees. Winters

felt the strength going out of him. The lovely pain, the beautiful, wild, exultant pain . . .

He grasped Jill and began to drag her, back toward the trees, out of the circle of light.

She did not want to go. She screamed and tore his face with her nails and kicked him, and he struck her. After that she lay limp in his arms. He kept on, stumbling over the twitching bodies, falling, crawling at last on his hands and knees. Only one thing kept him going on. Only one thing made him undergo the tortures of the damned, fighting Shanga.

That thing was the scornful, smiling face of Fand.

The touch of the ray weakened and was gone. He was safe, beyond the circle. He dragged the girl farther into the shrubbery and turned his back on the clearing because he wanted more than any drug addict could conceive of wanting to go back into the light, and he dared not look at it.

Instead, he pulled himself erect and faced the royal box. It was only pride that kept him standing. He looked straight into the distant eyes of Fand, and her clear silvery voice carried to him.

"You will go back into the fire of Shanga, Earthman. Tomorrow, or the day after—you will go."

Complete assurance there, as one is sure of the rising of the sun.

Burk Winters did not answer. He stood a moment longer, his gaze level with Fand's. Then, even pride failed. He fell and lay still.

The last conscious thought of his mind was that Fand and Mars together had challenged Earth, and that it was no longer merely a matter of saving a girl from destruction.

IV

When he came to, it was night. Jill sat patiently beside him. She had brought him food, and while he wolfed it down she went away to fetch water in a broad cupped leaf.

He tried to talk to her, but there was a gulf between them too wide to be bridged. She seemed subdued and brooding, and would not come close to him. He had robbed her of the fire of Shanga, and she had not forgotten it.

The futility of trying to escape with her was obvious. After a while he rose and left her, and she did not try to follow.

The garden was still under the light of the low moons. Apparently the beasts of Shanga, true to their ape heritage, were sleeping. Moving with infinite caution, Winters prowled the arena in search of a way out. A plan had taken shape in his mind. It was not much of a plan, and he knew that very probably he would be dead before morning, but he had nothing to lose. He did not even particularly care. He was a man, an Earthman, and there was an anger in him that was deeper than any fear.

The walls of the arena were smooth and high. Even an ape could not have climbed them. All the tunnels were blocked off except the one by which they had entered. He crept down it and found the barred gate impenetrable. Beyond

it was a little guard fire, and two sentries. Winters went back to the arena.

He could see no sign of a guard in the empty tiers of seats. There was no reason for one. In itself, the amphitheater was a perfect prison, and the creatures of the garden had no wish to escape from the besotting joys of Shanga.

Whipped before he started, Winters stood glaring bitterly at the walls that held him fast. Then he caught sight of the booms from which the Shanga prisms were suspended.

Going to the nearest one, he studied it. It was high out of reach, a long metal pole that stretched from the side of the arena above the wall and, with the other one, centered the Shanga-rays over the clearing.

High out of reach. But if a man had a rope . . . Winters went in among the trees. He found vines and creepers, and tore them away, and knotted them together. He found a small log in a deadfall, big enough to weight one end but light enough for throwing. Then he returned to the boom.

On the third cast the log went over. He drew his flimsy rope down, making a double strand. Hand over hand, praying that the vines would hold, he began to climb.

It seemed like a long way up. He felt very naked and exposed in the moonlight.

The vines held, and no challenging voice shouted at him. He clung to the boom and worked his way along it, first dropping the telltale rope. Presently he was safe among the tiered seats.

Avoiding the guard by the tunnel, he made his way out of the amphitheater and circled out across the slope, keeping to cover where there was cover, crawling on his belly where there was none. The shifting moon-shadows helped him, because they made visibility a treacherous thing. The palace loomed above him, huge and dark, crushed under the weight of time.

Only two lights showed. One, on the ground floor, he guessed would be the guard room. The other, on the third level, was dim as though made by a single torch. That, he hoped, would be the apartment of Fand.

Up the slope and into the shelter of the palace garden, and then into the palace itself. The great half-ruined pile could not have been guarded, even if there had been reason to guard it. Padding silently on naked feet, Winters glided through the vast empty halls, trying to keep a plan of the place straight in his mind.

His eyes were accustomed to the dark, and enough moonlight fell through the embrasures to let him see where he was going. Room and hall and corridor, smelling of dust and death, dreaming over their faded flags and broken trophies, remembering glory. Winters shivered. Something of the cold breath of eternity lived in this place.

He found a ramp, and then another, and at last on the third level he saw light, the weak flicker of it from the crack of a door.

There was no guard. That was a break. Not only because it was a difficulty eliminated, but because it confirmed his guess that Fand was a person who would want no check on her comings and goings. From the standpoint of safety in this place, a guard would be only a useless adornment. Fand was on her own ground here. There were no enemies.

Save one.

Winters opened the door without sound. A maid slept on a low couch. She did not stir as he passed. Beyond an open arch hung with heavy curtains he found the lady Fand.

She slept in a huge carved bed, the bed of the Kings of Valkis. She looked like a child lost in its hugeness. She was very beautiful. Very wicked, and most damnably beautiful.

Winters struck her, quite ruthlessly. Sleep became unconsciousness. There was no outcry. With silks and girdles he found in the room he bound and gagged her, and flung her light weight over his shoulder. Then he went back the way he had come, silently out of the palace.

It was as easy as that. He had not thought it would be easy, but it was. After all, he thought, men seldom guard against the impossible.

Phobos had gone on its careening flight around Mars, and Deimos was too low to give much light. Now carrying the unconscious Fand, now dragging her across the open spaces, Winters made his way back to the amphitheater. In and across the tiered seats to the wall. It was a twenty-foot drop, but he made it as easy as he could on her. He didn't want her dead. Then he slid over, himself, hung briefly by his fingertips, and fell into cushioning brush.

When he got his breath back he made sure that Fand was not hurt. Then he carried her swiftly into the shelter of the unholy garden. Remembering a particularly dense patch of shrubbery near the central clearing, he made for it and crept thankfully into concealment with the heir of all the Kings of Valkis.

Then he waited.

* * *

Her eyes were looking up at him in the dim light, bitter gold above the gag of scarlet silk.

"Yes," he said, "you're here, in the garden of Shanga. I brought you here. We have a bargain to talk about, Fand."

He undid the gag, keeping his hand close over her mouth lest she should cry out.

She said, "There will be no bargain between us, Earthman."

"Your life, Fand. Your life for mine, and Jill's and the others here who can still be saved. Destroy the prisms, stop this madness, and you can live to be as old and crazy as your mother."

There was no fear in her. Unbending pride, and hatred, but no fear. She laughed.

He put his hand on her throat, his fingers reaching iron-strong around her neck. "Slim," he said. "Soft, and tender. It would snap so easily."

"Break it, then. Shanga will go on without me. Kor Hal will take over. And you, Burk Winters—you can't escape." Her teeth showed white in a taunting smile. "You'll run with the beasts. No man can break free from Shanga."

Winters nodded. "I know that," he said quietly. "Therefore I must destroy Shanga before it destroys me."

She looked at him, naked and unarmed, crouching in the brush. Once more, she laughed.

He shrugged. "Perhaps it is impossible. I won't know that until it's too late, anyway. It isn't really me I'm worried about, Fand. I could be perfectly happy running on all fours through your garden. Probably I would be perfectly happy hissing and wallowing in the lake. Now the idea sickens me, but after a touch of Shanga it would be all right. No. It isn't me that matters, nor even Jill."

"What, then?"

"Earth has its pride, too," he told her gravely, "It's a younger and cruder pride than yours. It can become pretty ruthless and obnoxious at times, I'll admit. But on the whole, Earth is a good planet, and her people are good people, and she's done more to advance the Solar System than all the other worlds put together. As an Earthman, I don't like to see my world disgraced."

He glanced up and around the amphitheater. "I think," he went on, "that Earth and Mars can learn a lot from each other, if the fanatics on both sides will stop making trouble. You're the worst one I've ever heard of, Fand. You go even beyond fanaticism." He looked at her speculatively. "I think you're as mad right now as your mother."

She did not flare up at that, which convinced him that she was not mad at all, only twisted by the way she lived and the things she had been taught.

She said, "What do you plan to do about all this?"

"Wait. Until dawn, or perhaps later. Anyway, until you've had time to think. Then I shall give you a last chance. After that, I shall kill you."

She was smiling when he replaced the gag, and her eyes did not waver.

The hours passed. Darkness into dawn, and then into full daylight. Winters sat unmoving, his head bowed over his knees. Fand's eyes were closed, and it seemed that she slept.

The garden woke to life with the sun, and all around the dense thicket Winters heard the padding footsteps and the growling of the beasts of Shanga. The things in the shallow lake cried out, and their musky taint soured the wind. Winters shivered like a man with fever and his brooding eyes were haunted.

After a while Jill came. Animal-like she had found him, animal-like she came slipping without sound through the brush. She would have cried out at the sight of Fand, but he silenced her. She crouched beside him, watching him. She was afraid of him and yet she could not stay away. He stroked her shoulder. It was soft and strong and trembling under his hand. Her gaze was doe-like, full of sadness and a bewildered yearning.

Winters' face became as bleak and pitiless as the barren stars that watch from outer space.

The time grew very short. Jill began to look upward toward the prisms. Winters sensed in her a growing nervousness.

He shook Fand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, and he knew what her answer would be before he asked the question.

"Well?"

She shook her head.

For the first time, Winters smiled. "I have decided," he said, "not to kill you, after all."

What he did after that was done quickly and efficiently, and there was no one to see but Jill and Fand. Jill did not understand; the heiress of the Kings of Valkis understood too well.

People began to drift into the amphitheater. Martians, coming to see a show, coming to learn contempt and loathing for the men of Earth. Winters watched them. He was still smiling.

Suddenly he turned to Jill. When he rose a few minutes later, scratched and panting, she was securely bound with strips torn from bonds of Fand. This time she would not bathe so helplessly in the fire of Shanga.

The Martians gathered. Kor Hal came into the royal box, bringing the old woman, who leaned on his arm.

The gong sounded.

V

Once again, Winters watched the gathering of the beasts of Shanga. Hidden in the thicket, beyond the reach of the rays, he saw the hairy bodies rush and jostle toward the central clearing. He saw the shining of their drugged eyes. He heard them moan and whimper, and all over the garden the mouthing whisper went—"Shanga! Shanga!"

Jill writhed and thrashed in the agony of her desire, her cries muffled by the wad of silk he had thrust into her mouth. Winters could not bear to look at her. He knew how she was suffering. He was suffering too.

He saw that Kor Hal was leaning forward over the edge of the wall, searching the garden. He knew what the Martian was looking for.

The last notes of the gong rang out. A silence fell on the clearing. Hairy anthropoid, shambling brutes that ran on all fours, nameless creatures beyond the ape, crawling things with wet and shining scales—all silent, all waiting.

The prisms began to glow. The beautiful wicked fire of Shanga filled the air. Burk Winters set his hand between his teeth and bit until the blood ran.

It seemed to him that he could hear a faint thin screaming, rising out of the flowering shrubs by the lake. Low, tough-stemmed shrubs that lay under the full rays of the prisms.

Shanga! Shanga!

He had to go, into the clearing, into the fiery light. He could not stand it. He must feel again the burning touch on his flesh, the madness and the joy. He could not stay away.

In desperation he flung himself down beside Jill and clung to her, shuddering in torment.

He heard Kor Hal's voice, calling his name.

He steadied himself and rose, stepping out into the full sight of the royal box. The Martians ranged on either side watched him with interest, turning their attention momentarily from the orgy of the beasts of Shanga.

Winters said, "I'm here, Kor Hal."

The man of Barrakesh looked at him and laughed. "Why fight it, Winters? You can't keep away from Shanga."

Winters asked, "Where is your high priestess? Has she wearied of the sport?"

Kor Hal shrugged. "Who knows the mind of the Lady Fand? She comes and goes as she will." He leaned forward, "Go on, Winters! The fire of Shanga is waiting. Look how he sweats there, trying to be a man! Go on, apeling—join your brothers!"

The shrill jeering laughter of the Martians fell upon Winters with the sharpness of spears.

He stood there, naked in the sunlight, his head held stubbornly erect, and he did not move. He could not control the trembling of his limbs nor the harshness of his breathing. The sweat ran in his eyes and blinded him, and the fire of Shanga danced on the writhing bodies, and he thought he would go mad with torment, but he stood there and would not move. He thought he was going to die, but he would not move.

And the Martians watched.

Kor Hal said, "Tomorrow, then. Perhaps the next day—but you'll go, Earthman."

Winters knew that he would. He could not go through this again. If he were still alive in the garden of Shanga the next time the gong sounded, he would go with his brothers.

The fire of Shanga died at last from the prisms, and the creatures of its making lay still on the ground. The Martians sighed. The first stir of departure ran through them. Burk Winters cried out, "Wait!"

His voice rang back from the empty upper tiers, and it brought every eye upon him. There was desperation in it, and triumph, and the anger of a man driven beyond the bounds of reason.

"Wait, you men of Mars! You came to see a show. Very well, I'll give you one. You, Kor Hal! You told me something, down there in Valkis. You told me of the men of Caer Dhu who first made Shanga, and how in one generation they were destroyed by it. One generation."

He stepped forward, finding release for his tortured nerves in this denunciation.

"We of Earth are a young race. We're still close to our beginnings, and for that you hate and mock us, calling us apes. Very well. But that youth gives us strength. We go very slowly down the road of Shanga.

"But you of Mars are old. You have followed the circle of time a long way around, and the end is always close to the beginning. In one generation the men of Caer Dhu were gone. Our fibers are iron, but theirs were only straw.

"That's why no Martian will practice Shanga—why it was forbidden by the City-States. You don't dare to practice it, because it hurls you headlong down that road—toward your end or your beginning, who knows? But you haven't the strength to take it, and you're afraid."

A jeering, angry howl rose from the crowd.

Kor Hal shouted, "Listen to the ape. Listen to the beast we drove through the streets of Valkis!"

"Yes, listen to him!" Winters cried. "Because the Lady Fand is gone, and only the ape knows where she is!"

That silenced them, and in the quiet Winters laughed.

"Perhaps you don't believe me. Shall I tell you how I did it?" He told them, and when he was through telling he listened, while they called him liar, and he jeered in Kor Hal's face.

"Wait," he shouted. "Wait, and I'll bring her to you."

He turned and went toward the clearing. He went fast, because the beasts were already beginning to stir and rouse from their temporary stupor. He remembered from his own experience with Shanga that before consciousness returned there was a period of delirium, so that even in the Trade City solariums the people were not turned loose until it had passed.

Threading his way between the brutish bodies, leaping over them, avoiding the touch of the scaly things, he came to the clump of flowering shrubs by the lake and crawled in among them.

He had not known. He had guessed from Kor Hal's statement that the metamorphosis was swift, but he had not known. There were some things that a man could not even guess at.

In spite of himself, he cried out. He did not want to look at the thing that lay there, did not even want to know that such a form of life had existed, or could exist. But he had to look at it. He had to go close to it, so that he might undo the silken bonds that held it to the roots of the shrubs. He had to touch it. He had to lay his hands upon its softness, lift its flaccid weight, hold its slippery squirming against his own body.

It had eyes. That was the worst of it. It had eyes, and it looked at him.

He went away from the thicket, carrying his burden. Back across the clearing, where two great males were already fighting over a she, out into the open space before the royal box, where all could plainly see.

He lifted the thing over his head, high into the sunlight.

"Here!" he shouted. "Don't you recognize her? Last of the royal house of Valkis—the Lady Fand!"

Around a portion of the wriggling anatomy that might once have been a neck, the collar of golden plaques swung, shining.

For a moment he held her so, while the faces of the Martians stared like the masks of dead men and Kor Hal rose and gripped the edges of the stone. Then he laid his burden down and stepped back from it where it moved horribly across

the turf.

"Look there, you Martians," he said. "That is your own beginning."

In the utter, stricken silence the old woman rose. She stood for a moment, looking down, and it seemed that she was about to speak or cry out, but no sound came. Then she fell, out over the wall and down the sheer drop into the arena. She did not move again.

As though she had led them, the Martians rose with one low terrible cry and followed her. Not to death, as they dropped over the wall, but to vengeance.

Winters ran. He had Jill free in a minute, dragging her away into denser cover. The mouth of the tunnel was not far distant.

The Martians swarmed in upon the clearing, and then the beasts of Shanga saw them. With roars and screams, they surged out to meet their attackers.

Knife and short sword and spiked brass knuckles against fang and claw and the powerful muscles of the brute. The scaly creatures darted here and there, hissing, slashing with their rows of needle-sharp reptilian teeth. Great hands ripped and tore, snapping bones like matchsticks, cracking skulls. And the slim blades flickered in the sunlight, bright tongues speaking death.

Vengeance was done that day in the garden of Shanga. The vengeance of Earth on Mars, and the vengeance of men upon the shame of their heritage.

Winters saw Kor Hal run his sword through the creeping horror that had been Fand, through and through again until all motion stopped. Then he shouted Winters' name.

Winters went to him.

Neither spoke. There was nothing more to say. Bare-handed, Winters went against the Martian's sword. With the nightmare carnage of the battle going on around them, they two were alone. They two had a special score to settle.

Winters took one long gash above the heart before he caught Kor Hal's arm and broke it. The Martian never whimpered. With his left hand he reached for the knife at his girdle, but it never left the sheath. Winters laid Kor Hal backward across his knee and placed one thigh across his loins and an elbow across his throat. After a moment he dropped the broken body and went away, taking the sword.

The guards came running into the arena through the tunnel.

The fight was spreading outward from the lake. Locked in struggling, swaying knots, the beasts of Shanga slew the Martians and were slain. The waters of the lake were stained red, and the corpse of a Martian was being dragged stealthily into it from the mud of the bank. There was something hidden below the surface, something that could no longer fight on land, but only lay quietly in wait, and fed.

Now the guards had come with their long spears, and Winters knew that in the end there would not be one creature left alive in the garden. And it was well.

He took Jill's hand and led her toward the tunnel, running in the shelter of the trees. The fight was occupying everyone's attention. The brute males were hard to kill, and they fought for the love of it. The tunnel was empty, the gate open, the guards inside the arena, hard at work. Winters and the girl

fled through it, taking cover outside the amphitheater just before another group of guards came down from the palace.

From there, with infinite haste and caution, they made their way down the cliffs through the dead ruins of Valkis, and then out across the desert, skirting the living town by the canal. Kor Hal's flier was on the field where Winters remembered it.

He thrust Jill inside, and as he followed her he saw the angry mob start to pour out of Valkis, where word of his crime and his escape had been brought, a little too late.

He took the flier up, setting a course for Kahora. And now that it was all over, he felt a great weariness and an overwhelming desire to forget the very name of Shanga.

But he knew that he could never forget. The golden fire had burned too deep. He knew that he would always be haunted by the beautiful face of Fand as it had looked when he shackled her in the clearing, and by the memory of the high thin screaming as the light poured down from the prisms. Even the psychos could never make him forget.

The governments of Earth and Mars would see to it now that Shanga was stamped out forever. He was glad, and a little proud, because it had been his doing. But even so . . .

He looked over at Jill. Someday, he prayed, she would be herself again. The taint of Shanga would pass her, and she would once more be the Jill Leland he had given his heart to.

But will it pass entirely? For a moment it seemed that he heard the mocking voice of Fand, speaking in his soul. Will it pass from you, Burk Winters? Can one who has run with the beasts of Shanga ever be the same again?

He did not know. Looking back, he saw the smoke rising from the unholy garden—and he did not know.