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# VENUS

VOL. 1

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"Shapes of nightmare, beast and man like Centaurs, but without beauty! Crawling things with the eyes of madmen, creatures footed and horned and laughing, winged forms with taloned paws....."

# SHADOWS IN THE WOODS

by LEIGH BRACKETT

And I say unto you, Beware! For there are creatures in the new lands that you know not of; creatures whose dam was the Earth, whose sire was the storm-wind, who can never be brought beneath the yoke of man. They hate you, because you are wholly men, as they are neither beast nor man. They will fight you, because you destroy their freedom, which is to them as the worship of the Almighty is to us.

Beware the snares they will set for you! For as we have a soul-force which, as beasts, they lack, they have knowledge which, as men, we lack. They are powerful, for they are born of the primal forces of the earth. Again I say, Beware! lest you be overthrown, and the world forever lost.

from the sayings of the Prophet Cihw.

**A**TLA, THE MAYA prince, laughed aloud and flung his strength against the galley's bucking tiller.

"Land!" he shouted, "Look ahead there, you sons! Land!"

The drumbeat wavered, the rowers turned on their benches, letting the weary stroke go wild. Beyond the carved snake at the prow lay a long blue shadow, stretching north and south as far as the eye could see. Land! New land, where no human foot had trod since the Day of Creation.

Atla took one hand from the tiller to grasp the shoulders of the woman beside him, a tall woman one of the northern tribe, scaly-eyed and sun-haired, but Atla towered a full head above her. "We've come a long way, Hedi," he said. "The Mother land lies leagues of

ocean and a whole continent behind us, and ahead..." he laughed, boy-like. "Ahead there is a new Empire colony, and you, Hedi, shall plant the Sun of Ma upon it!"

Hedi drew his dark hawk head down to her lips. Beyond them, the drums were picking up the beat again, and the galley quivered to the swoops. Hedi's hands came down from Atla's wide shoulders to rest beside his on the tiller, and there was a sudden shadow across her face.

"What will we find there, in that new land, Atla? Not men, for the Sacred Writings teach us that no man walks, save where we of Ma have gone. But surely there must be something."

Atla's answer was slow in coming. It was as though he had heard something, far off, and was

listening for it again. Then he shrugged and laughed.

"There will be something. There always is! That is so that men may not grow soft, and forget what it is to come home to a woman. Smile, Hodi. Our sons will king it in that place.

But Hedi did not smile. She saw Atla quarter the wind like an eager hound, and there was a chill fog mist before her eyes.

It was noon before the galley slid to rest in a forest-circled harbor, and the boats put out to score the first human marks on virgin land. Atla sucked in the air, heavy with warm, green earth scents, shouting and laughing with the men in the other boats. Only Hedi was silent, holding a great silken banner with a flaming sun worked in gold threads on the blue.

The waves showed shallow water, Atla leaped impatiently overboard, caught Hodi in his arms and splashed ahead of the boats, wotting his scarlet kilt and his cuirass of shells and golden links, his black mane flopped with foam. He set Hodi gently on dry sand and stood back.

"Now," he said, and dropped to one knee. Men came splashing from the boats as Hodi raised the banner, and Atla's voice rang out clear and solemn to them.

"In the name of RA'MU, Lord of the Empire of the Sun, I claim this land for the Children of the Sun!"

A deep-voiced shout went up from the men. That meant that soon their women would come, and there would be new cities built in the wilderness. Then they broke, boisterously, to make camp against the night, and the weeks of exploration to come.

Atla rose slowly, turned toward the rich, brooding forest that hid the flat interior--all lands were flat in those ages before the mountains were born--and filled his great chest with the

fecund air. A strange fascination came to him with the breeze, so that he could not take his eyes away. So intense was he that he started when Hodi spoke beside him.

"You are drawn to the forest, Atla."

Unaccountably, her calm statement irritated him. "That world you have?" he demanded curtly. "Are you so used to finding new continents that you don't bother to look at them?"

"It's more that that!" Hodi's eyes were wide, unseeing, staring past him at the cryptic trees. "The forest calls, and you will answer. Someone waits there. I see fires and strange shadows on the grass, and...." She brought her hands tightly to her breast. "Am danger... danger!"

Atla shivered and swore. "You northerners give a man the terror! I tell you, Hedi, it's only that.. would you have me turn my back upon my kingdom?" he finished in lame defiance.

Hedi's eyes met his, and he dropped his head and growled. His brain felt as though he had set all night drinking wine, and the sun was setting, the fumes afire. Hedi was right, and yet...

"You are a priest as well as a prince," Hedi was saying, "After the fashion of your tribe. You are not priestly, but your faith is strong. Stronger even than that is your love for me. These are your sword and shield. But the One in the forest has mighty weapons, and the Veil is drawn before the ending." She reached up and kissed his lips, in a way Atla had never known before, a way that was even stranger than her words.

"With this kiss, I give my soul to you, Atla, for as long as you need it. It will strengthen yours."

Atla saw her face, pale and set, like a thing of snow. Then, hardly knowing that he did so, he turned and strode toward the

trees. For a moment the snake on the golden diadem about his head shone like fire in the sun. Then the shadows dropped over him; hid him from Hedi, and the ship, from the world of men.

**T**HE WARM, rich breath of the forest surged through him, sent his feet striding faster and faster over the yielding earth. Dim sunbeams spilled down through the heavy green roof, and somewhere, far ahead, he heard a wild fluting. Several times he stopped to listen. Each time he plunged on again more furiously, aware that the sound was not in his ears but in his brain. Louder and louder it grew, until every nerve and muscle quivered with it; and faster and faster ran Atla, until his breath groaned in his throat, and his body gleamed with sweat.

For a sultry green eternity he ran. And then the piping rose to a crescendo that shook all the sense knowledge from his heart, so that he cried aloud..... Silence! a waiting, pregnant quiet.

Atla stopped. Ahead the trees opened to a grassy clearing, drenched with filtered, greenish sunlight. A broad stream ran between rushy banks, and standing waist-deep in the water....

A woman! Even in his strange chaotic state, Atla remembered the Sacred Writings, knew that Hedi was the first woman to walk this land. Yet there she stood, naked, sentient ivory, leaving her rounded arms and strong shoulders and her high little breasts. Atla felt something within him that Hedi's pale loveliness had never waked. A song, this woman was, a wild, pagan song fluted in a godless forest; a thing of sweeping ivory curves and black hair like a storm cloud down her back.

She turned her face to him and smiled, and her eyes were green and brown, like the forest. Atla knew, then, that she had been the fascination and the far off music,

the warm wind that called him on. He stepped closer, unsteadily, his mind in a crazy turmoil of emotion, and she laughed, a high, wild shrilling that struck through him like a silver sword.

Shining with water drops on her skin and her midnight hair, she came toward him through the stream with a strangely undulant gait, and the water rippled and shoaled as it never could with a human form. Black, glistening curves broke the surface, and there was a ring of hoofs on rock.

'Atla screamed and shrank away, sick with a cold, sudden fear. Yet there was a wild sweet piping in the air again, close now and indefinitely soft. His nerves quivered with the smell of danger; there was a sensation in his body as of light, strong bonds tightening and trapping him. As from the other side of the universe, he heard a voice, Hedi's voice, calling his name.

The piping drowned it out, and now there was another voice, a throaty sibilance like a summer wind. "I am Beudag, the Centauros."

"Demon's work!" whispered Atla hoarsely and sought to tear his eyes away from that ivory splendor that merged at the waist into the body of the beast; a beautiful, vital, satin-skinned beast, with a black banner of a tail that watched the scable cloud on the woman's head. A siltken mesh of wizardry mazed his brain, caught his gaze to the wonder of green-brown eyes and little pointed ears with silky black tufts at their tips. Again his foot bore him faltering forward.

Beudag laughed, and the eerie sound drained all strength from him. The world fled away on a midnight tide, and Atla pitched heavily forward, the wild mirth of the boast-thing ringing in his ears.

**I**T WAS night, and fires flared in the clearing, so that the stream was a running flame.

Atla sat up and stared about, all the madness burned out of his brain, leaving him weary and a little afraid. Hedi's words came back to him-- "I see fires, and danger!"

The place was full of shadows; leaping, whirling shadows made by the creatures who danced to the music of a pagan flute. The flames made an arabesque of gleaming motion against the forest. Human faces, human shoulders swaying, sleek beast-bodies rearing and prancing to the heady song; bronze and ivory and sorrel, white and bay and cinnabar. In spite of himself, Atla's breath quickened. He half rose, looking for Beudag.

Black and beautiful, she came between the trees. Atla leaped up, his heart thudding to a well-remembered pulsing in his veins. But even as his pulses quickened, Hedi's face came unbidden to his mind. A swift revulsion shook him. The curve of Beudag's sleek flank in the fireglow was suddenly repugnant to him, and he cried "Beast!" and stepped back, grasping his sword.

The creature laughed, high and shrill, and abruptly the flute was silent and the dancer's hoofs were still. Mighty, vital bodies closed in around the Maya. Atla threw his head back and met the challenge of forest-colored eyes.

"Come, Man," whispered a voice like wind in the branches, "I would show you my kingdom," white arms reached out, and in Atla's mind the image of Hedi swirled in a tide of magic strangeness. Almost without volition he stepped forward, and suddenly he was lifted, sent bodily through the air.

Warm satin hide was under his bare knees, and a sense of wild, magnificent strength. Again he heard the shrilling laugh, and great smooth muscles leaped into life beneath him. He clutched frantically for support, found naked shoulders beyond a whipping cloud of hair. The clearing was

gone, the forest fled by them into darkness. Ahead was a moon-drenched faery maze, and Atla found himself laughing aloud into the wind.

He did not know how long he rode. Only he remembered secret glades and still pools that caught the moonbeams, silver mists and leafy darkness all a-rustle with hidden life, and most of all, the wild, unfettered splendor of the life that thrilled under his hands and knees. Something of the alien entered his soul. Life surged in his veins, a free, mad ferment like fire running through wine. A glamour'd vision spread before him, an enchanted dream that had no place for Hedi or the men or the Banner of the Sun.

To race the warm wind down the glades; to dive for moonbeams in a hidden pool; to lie in bondless, timeless freedom on a mossy bank of turf, with a pair of ivory arms about his shoulders and a pair of leaf-green eyes laughing down from a tumbled storm-cloud of ebon hair. There was a kingdom a man might give his soul for!

Maddeningly, unwanted, Hedi's face rose before him, shattering the vision. The wind beat mockingly in his ears: "With this kiss-- give my soul---as long as you need it."

Bewildered, boy-like, Atla cried out. And then they were back in the clearing with the fires and the running stream, and the still, waiting creatures that ringed him round. He slid from the black withers, suddenly cold and trembling, afraid as he had never been in his life before. The hilt of his sword under his hand steadied him. He braced his feet, and knew that he was saying, over and over again, "Hedi... Hedi..."

Forest-colored eyes blazed into his, full of a hate that shocked his brain like an axe-blow. Hate and rage, an elemental spate of them, pouring out of her pagan being. For one dizzy, awful moment Atla saw the abyss that had

been open beneath his feet, realized how close he had come to falling into it. That mad ride through the forest—bait for the trap! A soul-trap, baited with life and glorious freedom, but leading in the end to horror and everlasting death.

"The pale woman!" The voice was like the sliding of a serpent over grass. "We shall see, Man, whether the pale witch in your heart is stronger than I!"

The taut circle drew in closing solid ranks behind the wicked black-and-ivory beauty of the Centauress. Atla's blade hissed from its scabbard, and she laughed.

"Yes, Man, a battle. But not with swords." The fires painted her naked body, put lambent flames in her eyes. "The battle of the Half-world with the world of Man, the struggle of the Shadows with the Light."

She moved forward. "You know nothing of the three Worlds, do you, Man? The World of Darkness, where the evil things flap and crawl; the World of Light, which is your own; and the World of Shadows, which is ours? We live in a place of our own, taking something from both Light and Darkness but belonging to neither. We are not born as you are, but as the beasts are, from the raw life-stuff of the maiden earth. What prank of the gods it was that gave us our form, I know not; but they gave us also a love of life that is a flame within us. We are brothers to the wind, sisters to the lightning! And we are not alone. There are the Satyr-folk, and the winged men of Kaaron, and the beings that swim in the sea.

"We are alike in this; we must be free!"

Beudag's breath was hot on Atla's cheek, her white breast heaving.

"You men, you Children of the Sun, you crowd us from all sides. You build cities and roads, and fence the free land. You crowd us

to our death. We fight you, but we are driven ever back, because you of the Light have something we lack. A nameless thing, a soul-force that conquers those who will be slaves, and destroys those who will not. Half the world belongs to you. The other half shall not!"

"You cannot stop us," Atla said quietly. Beudag laughed.

"But we can! You are the symbol, the first human to set foot on this land. If we can conquer you...."

Atla shook his head. "Others will come. The Children of the Sun are men, and they will come."

Beudag's eyes burned into his. "You do not understand. I said men had a soul-force that we lack, a spark of the Light that created you different from all other creatures. If we of the Shadows can once tap that force, can once capture that spark, to kindle as we will; if we can place the soul of a human symbol in bondage, Man can never quite overwhelm us! That much we have learned from the Darkness.

"For the mystic forces would be a sword in our hands, a sword that could pierce any armor Man might wear. The Darkness has taught us how to strengthen that sword, how to sharpen it and forge it to an arm of might. until it is destructive lightning!"

She drew back a bit and smiled, her lips red as cinnamon in the firelight. "That is why I tempted you with my kingdom. I want your soul, to build a wall against your fellows! The white witch has saved you so far. Let us see if she can match my power now!"

Atla threw his dark head erect and smiled. The fear had left him now. There was something open to fight, and he knew where he stood. With a sudden motion he drew the point of his sword in a circle about him, baring raw earth under the grass, and gashed a simple cross within it.



"The Sun-disc," he said, "The symbol of the Almighty, and the sign of His Four Great Forces. They are my shield, and Hedi is my sword." He flung his blade high. "I am ready!"

The green eyes darkened fleetingly, and Atla laughed. A point lost, a point gained. The circled cross was under his feet, his sword was in his hand, and somewhere by the sea Hedi waited for him. He laughed again, and whirled the glinting blade.

**F**ROM BEYOND the new-gashed circle, beyond the ring of waiting creatures, beyond the fires and the darkling trees, came a moaning rush of wind. No leaf stirred, no flame bent aside, yet the clearing was suddenly full of a roaring surge of force that walled Atla in a vortex of blackness. No further than the circle it came, but the sense of its being, the sound of its mighty spiral rushing shutting him in, dazed and shook him. Everything was blotted from his sight; everything but Beudag's wild, passionate face and burning eyes set against a spinning blackness.

The ground dropped suddenly from under him, leaving him hanging giddily over an unimaginable abyss. Though Atla knew it for a trap set for his mind, though he saw the cross and circle still outlined against the void, he was assailed by a nauseous fear. His head spun, his knees were water-weak.

Emptiness above and below, walled in by a howling cyclone....

Atla grasped his sword and shouted defiance. Blazing green eyes stared into his, stared and deepened and grew, spreading wider and wider until they were great bottomless lakes. His mind was caught, his mazed sight went probing deeper and deeper into an elderich world. Labyrinthine vistas opened before him, queer twisting places shrouded in a leaf-green mist.

Shapes of nightmare, -beast and man like centaurs, but without beauty. Crawling things with the eyes of madmen, creatures hoofed and horned and laughing, winged forms with taloned paws and cruel, beaked faces, and the breasts of lovely women.

Up from the green depths they flapped and crawled and pranced, finding a bridge within Atla's mind to cross the barrier of the circle.

Chilled and sick in every muscle, his breath ragged in his throat, Atla swung his blade against them. They came in a surging, endless horde, filling the bounds of the green horizon. They chuckled and mouthed and pawed at him, and their stench choked him like a heavy smoke. He stood alone in a swarming, yeasty mass, and there was no clean human thing in the universe.

Moist warm bodies hugged his legs, so that he was bogged as in mire. The horned and laughing creatures capered and sang, a high wordless shrilling that beat against his soul like lashes on raw flesh. Great brazen pinions beat the air above his head, blinding him, crushing his eardrums with their thunder. Taloned paws rent his flesh, hideous faces shrieked demonic rage against him.

Again and again the blade of his mighty broadsword sheered through bone and feather, through flesh and viscera. But the things came on, spawning up out of the mad green depths, endless, invincible.

"Hedi," he moaned. "Hedi...." One more blow of his heavy arm against a full-breasted demon who tore at his eyes with her beak... then he must fall, down and down... into horror and obscenity.

Perhaps Hedi would know that his last thought was of her.

**T**HE FOUL things before him wavered suddenly and blurred. A mist had come between them, something nebulous and thin as

cloud at sunrise, touched golden by the light. It grew and thickened, and the Things beat and lurched frantically against it. A whiteness, like the sea foam, blue eyes and hair like pale candles burning in the dawn.

"Hedi," he whispered, "Hedi!" and clear through the unclear noises came a voice:

"I give you my soul, for as long as you need it."

The chilling sickness left him, and there was strength again in his body. He shouted aloud, and sprang forward, sword raised high, to drive the swarming horrors back whence they came.

He stopped, amazed. They were gone, and there was no mark upon his flesh to show where they had torn him.

Hedi's vision faded, and there was Boudag's face, the green eyes narrowed and dark with the anger of defeat.

"She stronger than I," the best-woman whispered, "Stronger because of what you make of her, Man. I do not understand. My enchantment woke a flame in you, but it died. She kindles a light that lives and does not waver.

"I see a strange world within your heart. It rises from the symbol on the ground. What is it? Love?"

"Love...." The word shook through the Shadow-people like wind in tall grass. Very softly,



the voice of Boudag whispered through it.

"I see now. Love is of the Light itself, the strongest Force of all. Passion is but the moon-beam to the light of the sun, and we are the Shadow-folk, who will die when the full light strikes us."

Her wild head sank forward, the black cloud of her hair hiding her face, her ivory body. Slowly, slowly she turned away, her fellows at her heels, their hoofs soundless on the velvet turf. One by one, sad and silent, they mingled with the shadows of the trees, and were lost.

HERE WAS no life in the forest, no sound but a sorrowing breeze that wept in the branches. Atla went heavily down the empty glades, trailing his naked sword unnoticed in his hand. Some latent instinct led him aright, for the trees thinned to stunted scrub, and there came a smell of salt in the air.

Atla raised his head and stopped. The beach was before him, and there was a fragrance of cooking in the air. A new camp lay under the dawn sun; Hedi stood before one of the tents, tending a big iron pot.

Atla smiled abruptly, and shook the shadows from his heart. His blade clanged home in the scabbard as he ran across the sand.

He squatted boylike beside the pot, holding out his hand for the bowl Hedi gave him. As he took it she bent low and kissed him tenderly on the mouth, and suddenly, remembering, Atla flushed and dropped his head so that he would not meet her eyes.

"Come, love, eat," Hedi said and laughed, "All our kingdom lies waiting. Remember, Atla? And our sons shall king it here and its name shall be Atla'n'tis, after their sire!"

FINIS