

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET

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stories

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*Only one, a Convict, ever
escaped from Venus' evil
hearts—*

THE PIT OF NYMPHONS

by STANLEY MULLEN

SWORDSMAN of LOST TERRA

*Novel of an aged world
slipped back in Time...*

by POUL ANDERSON





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The PIT of NYMPHTHONS

by STANLEY MULLEN

Locked in the mutant jungle of Venus were the horror-secrets of the universe. Here, into these thousand deaths, with a Tihar-trotting convict to lead her, went luxury-soft Kial Nasron.

HAILARD, director of Venusian Exports, was not given to unnecessary elaborations or complexities of speech. He let his attention stray from the girl to a tiny scale-model of the first rocket ship to land on Venus, and reflected bitterly that after two hundred years the planet still held both problems and eery mysteries for the Earth colonists.

"But a convict," Kial Nasron protested.

She was the daughter of Torkeg Nasron, Martian politician and the largest single shareholder in VE. As such she felt entitled to make a nuisance of herself. However, she did have a tragic problem.

Hailard sighed. "A man without deviltry in him has little capacity for wisdom, or sainthood either. Convict or not, Craig Alston is the man for your job."

The sharp sound of her indrawn breath

puzzled Hailard. "I didn't know you knew him."

Kial shrugged. "I don't, personally. I've never seen him, though I know the name and remember something about the case. But we were talking about an expedition into the Tihar Forest to look for my sister."

Hailard studied her critically. "Yes, we were. But you don't really want my advice, and I doubt if you'll like it. Your request puts me in an awkward position."

"Be specific." Her expression was that of a woman used to having her own way. It reminded him of her father, and he had uneasy conviction that the interview was going to be difficult.

"All right, I will be. You don't understand Venus. If you were familiar with conditions here, you wouldn't need descriptions or explanations. This is a strange, savage planet, and the Tihar Forest is the most vicious part of it."

The girl stopped him scornfully. "But surely a well-equipped expedition . . ."

Hailard smiled. "There's no such thing as far as the Tihar Forest is concerned. After forty years on Venus I still know nothing about the interior. Nor does anyone else. The forests here are freaks. Ages ago, atomic holocaust got out of hand. In a few places certain forms of life survived. Nature went mad. The Tihar Forest is its laboratory of gibbering, unnatural experiments—half a million square miles of luxuriant, nightmarish wonderland. Not one living creature, plant or animal, is the product of sane, orderly evolution. Its an asylum for the cripples, freaks and lunatic-fringe of abnormal creation."

Hailard went on in his clear way. They claimed that once he had studied for the ministry. He had convictions and he knew what he was talking about.

"True, Venusian Exports holds a license for limited exploitation of its peculiar resources. But we nibble at the edges. We collect rare furs and leathers, some valuable hardwoods and minerals, but we don't even try to penetrate the forest depths, or develop any plantations there. Its too dangerous. There have been some hideously disturbing rumors recently, and a marked increase of casualties . . ."

"My sister is there," Kial Nasron said

stubbornly. "In this place of horror you describe. As long as we thought she had died in the crash of the *Krajulla*, we accepted the tragedy. But now that we have evidence she may be alive, neither my father nor I will rest until we locate the wreckage. She may be hurt or lost or a captive of savage natives. The Company assured us you would give us every possible aid in finding and rescuing her."

Hailard nodded wearily. "I have orders from the executive board to put all resources at your disposal. Our staff will give you every technical assistance, and a fast survey cruiser has been adapted for low-altitude scouting. I disapprove of the expedition, particularly of you or your father going along. It will be hard enough, and you are both rash, headstrong and inexperienced. And there'll be difficulty arranging for a crew."

"I don't understand. Aren't the men convicts?"

Hailard spoke angrily. "Convicts, yes—but not animals to be ordered around. They're paroled to the Company in my custody. I'm responsible, and I won't order anyone to take such risks. Your project is insane. If your sister is alive, after three months in the Tihar no one can help her and you probably couldn't recognize her. It would be cruel to bring her back. If she's dead, that's the best thing that could happen to her. Forget her. If she were my own daughter, my advice would be the same."

Kial Nasron was shocked. "You mean you won't help?"

"I didn't say that. I'll ask for volunteers. Your father's influence will help. If you're both determined to go, I can't stop you. In any case, you'll need Alston. He's just returned from Tihar and he knows more about it than anyone else. I'm waiting for his report. You can catch him at psycho, if you like. He'll be through soon."

She moved toward the door. "If I miss him there, I'll be back," she promised. "How'll I know him?"

"Ask anyone. Alston is well-known. But don't promise anything you can't make good. He's the most dangerous man on Venus."

"I believe you're afraid of him," Kial Nasron said, pausing at the door.

"I am," admitted Hailard.

THE cubicle was small, stifling hot in spite of air-conditioning. Alston remembered groping to a chair and sagging into it. Armrests came together like clamps, enforcing physical immobility. Men had been known to go mad in the psycho-laboratories, and such precaution was necessary. Invisible robot arms reached out to fit the plastic helmet tightly on his head. Other clamps and electrodes gripped wrists and ankle with inhumanly icy precision of contact.

There was always momentary impulse to resist, physically and mentally. One strained against the manacles and tried to darken brain horizons, both useless effort. But for a muted humming of tubes, the place was soundless. Lightless, save for the brief swirls of flaring color on the audio-screen. An illusion of infinite space built around him. Tension released suddenly. Involuntarily, Alston relaxed, became dreamily aware of the metallic voice of the machine starting its ritual of questions.

"Who are you?"

Alston responded with name and number.

"How long have you been on Venus?"

"Why were you sentenced?"

"How long does it usually take you to recuperate from the prescribed two months of timber-cruising?"

"Can you explain why your present venture was prolonged so far beyond the legal limit for exposure?"

Alston could and did. It was an elaborate lie, but he did not even remember that he lied. He was conscious that something was wrong with himself and his memories, but the false structure of his recent adventures and emotions flowed from his subconscious without wavering. Desperately he tried to erase all dangerous recollection from his mind. But his conscious mind was alert, wary, attempting by plausible lies, evasions and half-truths to defeat the purpose of the examination.

Detection was certain, sooner or later. The machine would realize the artificial nature of his memory blocks and trace them to their source. A battery of electronic brains has more efficiency than emotion. Even primed as he was by a visit to the outlawed

auto-hypnotic devices hidden in the old native quarter of Castarona, there was no real chance of deceiving the robot brains. He did not expect that, but he did hope to confuse the issue long enough, cause enough delay, to give him his one chance of escape. His plan was carefully worked out. Not foolproof, but a matter of extremely delicate timing. It could work. But now . . .

By a supreme effort, he tried to banish all thought of escape from his thought-patterns, tried to smudge-out the record of all recent emotion, tried to forget everything that had happened to him in the Tihar Forest. Especially . . .

At first Alston answered in words, speaking aloud from habit. Vocal response was not required, meant nothing to the machine. The sounds were noted and filed for future reference. Precise brain-wave pattern measurements and analysis of physiological reactions combined into far more exact information about him than any word or thought formed consciously by the subject. The robot psychograph was lie detector, encephalograph, and electronic calculator. Its prying fingers reached into the human soul and came forth with stark truth.

Sharp, incisive, implacable, the psychograph probed with its mechanical voice. Alston responded, his mind dulling, drifting on the vagaries of memory stream, lulled by the drone of heating tubes, the rustling hiss of his own breathing, the click of relays. Naked danger lay in this state for Alston, yet he dared not brace himself against the questioning. Synthetic memories would serve better if he yielded to his subconscious. His voice descended to wordless mumbling, then died away in cushioned silence.

Above all, no thought of escape, of dying or disappearance.

Alston was no different from other men except for the dogtag. He was cast in the same mold of common humanity, but the identification dogtag fastened on an impervium wire round his neck made the difference.

A man with the VE convict dogtag broadcasting its invisible and inaudible signal cannot escape, cannot merely disappear. At any time, wherever he was, its signal could be tuned in and his exact position located.

If the tag were forcibly removed by breaking the wire, almost an impossibility with impervium, the signal automatically became an alarm to summon patrol fliers from Castarona or Quanta City. The escapee would be picked up within a radius of five miles from the start of his break.

THE field staff of Venusian Exports were a tough, hard-bitten, reckless crew, consisting largely of convict labor recruited from Luna Prison or the mines of Callisto. After serving part of their terms, they were permitted to volunteer and be paroled in custody of the company. In most cases, it was an escape from the frying pan into the fire. One year in the deep mines and five years on Venus in constant danger and under intolerable living conditions, Alston had developed certain facets of his remarkable personality at the expense of social instincts which seemed of no further use to him.

Guilty or innocent, he had been sentenced and he was there. The abstract justice involved no longer mattered. He was vague about details that seemed several lifetimes ago, and six years of nursing a cumulative hatred of mankind had made him as wary, cunning and treacherous as any other wild beast.

The fact that his cage occupied over a million square miles of the northern hemisphere of Venus merely irritated him with the illusion of freedom. For a man serving an indeterminate sentence, legal release ceases to be even a vague dream. Except by death, few convict laborers left the company, legally or otherwise. The escape to actual outlawry might be another illusion, but Alston had worked out a plan which seemed a fair gamble. It hinged on three facts not known by the company, the most important of which was discovered by him on his recent expedition. And it began with his death, or with a reasonably exact facsimile of it. . . .

Always supposing that the psychograph examination did not nip his plan in the bud. An hour or two would be the most he could hope for, but it might be enough.

Among other fantastic mutant plants of the Tihar Forest is a giant-sized pitcher-plant, or fly-killer. From its aromatic juices

can be distilled a drug causing artificial catalepsy. Under proper dosage, the condition simulates death so convincingly as to defy medical detection. A microscopic overdose results in violent convulsions or actual death. But the real joker, as far as Alston was concerned, lay in the brevity of the cataleptic effect. Timing would be deadly important. His death must occur far enough from the incinerators to guarantee recovery before his body was burned; yet close enough so that his dogtag could be removed and sent to the central records office before his dreadful awakening.

Afterward, it might be rough, and someone was very likely to get hurt. But with careful timing there was an excellent chance that he would get free minus the tag, and be well on his way to the Tihar Forest before his deception was discovered.

A harsh burr of sound from the screen roused him. The psycho test was over. There was no indication of findings. He slumped in the chair while the machine clicked and hummed and blinked signals. Invisible robot hands released the clamps and removed the helmet. Weak and strained, Alston had to be helped to his feet and guided gently to the door.

Outside, he blinked while his eyes adjusted to the lighted corridor. After the gloom of the cubicle, normal illumination was blinding.

The next two hours would tell the tale. He hoped the coming interview with Hailard would be brief. Every minute counted. . . .

II

THE girl had obviously been waiting in the lobby for Alston to come from psycho. She intercepted him purposefully, but with odd hesitation.

"You're Alston."

It was statement, not question. For a nasty moment Alston was afraid that she belonged to his blanked-out memories. Eyes like cloudy gray ice stopped him with a shock like recognition, and there was something familiar about her voice. The momentary hesitation was a clue that she was not sure of him, and everything but the eyes and voice was a stranger. Relief made him weak.

Six years ago she would have been too

young for his notice, and nothing since then could be important. She was tall, slender but shapely, with an angular face and creamy tan skin coloring no one ever gets on eternally overcast Venus. Honey-blonde hair draped bare shoulders in a long bob, and the expensive gown of turquoise metal-cloth molded her body as if sprayed on. It was cut scant enough to show a lot of her skin, and a length of nyloned leg which might have stirred biological impulses in a man with less on his mind.

"People usually just point at me," he observed bitterly. "Yes, I'm Alston."

Tourists were always startled by the apparent freedom of the convict parolees on Venus. But this was no staring, curious tourist. She was somebody's spoiled darling, and her manner of casual arrogance grated on him. Rising irritation made him belligerent.

"Somebody just did, by request. I didn't want to miss you."

"All right," he snapped. "I'm one of the sights. Now that you've seen me, go away."

She stiffened, and the turquoise gown stiffened with her, but she deliberately ignored his rudeness. "Animals in cages don't interest me," she observed. "I'm Kial Nasron, if the name means anything to you."

Alston explored the temporarily limited range of his memory, drew blank. Until the hypnotic amnesia wore off, he was out-classed in guessing games. "Should it?" he asked cautiously.

"Perhaps not. Maybe it's better if you prefer to forget everything. Is there some place we can talk?"

Panic nagged Alston with the fleeting minutes. Just now any delay might be fatal to his plans. If he were nasty enough she might let him go. "Right here," he said viciously. "It's public enough so we won't run out of conversation too quickly."

She paled and sparks flickered in her eyes, but Kial Nasron controlled her anger and spoke swiftly. "Six years is not long enough for a man to forget my sister Annelle. They just don't. No matter. We'll talk about you. Director Hailard says you know more about the Tihar Forest than anyone else. He says you can help us, if you will. And I'm not asking favors for old times' sake. Whatever your personal feel-

ings may be, you've got to help us. We'll be very grateful. My father is more important now than he was before. He can do you a lot of good, and I know he'll do anything in his power."

Alston was cautious. "What is all this about?"

Her voice was low. "She was on her honeymoon. A passenger on the *Krajulla*. It was a luxury excursion liner which crashed on Venus three months ago, in case you've forgotten that too."

Memory jogged Alston. "I remember hearing of it."

"Search parties found scattered wreckage in the Tihar Forest. Landing was impossible, for some reason I don't understand, but low-flying helicopters examined the area thoroughly. There was no sign of life. It looked as if everyone on board was killed since even the wreckage was burned almost beyond recognition. Then recently some evidence has been found that suggests a few passengers may have survived, either lost in the wilds or prisoners of the natives. A native killed by a grull-cat hunter was wearing some jewelry we identified as my sister's. We believe that she's alive. Director Hailard says you know more about the Forest than any other living man. We want you to help find my sister."

Alston grunted. "Hailard knows better than that."

"He said you'd be difficult."

ALSTON shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean that. If he asks me to go, I haven't much choice. But the rescue party idea is insane. If there were survivors, they're dead now. It would take a large army to comb the Tihar, and even then, if the natives wanted to hide something, there are plenty of ratholes in the cities of the swamp area. You could never find anyone, except by accident. Aside from that, parts of the forest are deadly with radioactivity. You might not recognize your sister if you found her."

"But you will help us?" Kial Nasron pleaded.

Alston temporized. "I'll talk to Hailard." He brushed past the girl and reached the elevators.

A robot-attended elevator took him up.

Director Hailard's office was on one of the upper floors.

During the ascent, memory snapped back like a rubber band and flicked him viciously in the face. He turned sick and dizzy as six years unreeled backwards in his mind like a reversed reel of film. Memories of Annelle and her promises, her father and his glib treachery. The trial. His own indecision in the emergency, following orders until too late to save his shipmates.

The past faded from his mind, assumed its relation to present realities. For four years he had planned escape, schooling himself to bleak patience, disciplining himself into an automaton, so that he would execute the necessary motions blindly. Now was the time, his last chance. The Nasrons and their problems did not exist for him any more. Forget them. Nothing was changed. His margin was dangerously thin. See Hailard, quickly. Get it over. His fingers toyed with the tube of extract in his pocket. Then—

Hailard was busy on the visiphone as Alston knocked and entered. He nodded grimly. Alston settled himself in the victim's chair and waited. Evidently the report was not up from psycho.

The office was no different from a thousand others on Venus; decorated in tasteless, exotic luxury, it was meant to impress the important tourists or visiting Company officials. Alston was not impressed, but he liked the man enthroned like an idol behind a desk of chromium and magnificent Kru-leather. Older than he looked, the director had been a man of action, one of the real explorers of Venus after he had turned from the putty-soft civilization of Earth. Hailard clung to the reins of power and enjoyed contact with his dangerous charges. Alston half-sensed a secret sympathy for his own bleak anger.

Hailard rang off quickly and glowered at Alston. "That was Kial Nasron. She says you claim to have forgotten all connection with her family in the past. Is that correct?"

"That's what I told her," Alston fenced warily. "Sometimes a convict prefers to forget his past contacts. Besides, after four months in Tihar, a man is entitled to a convenient fit of amnesia."

Hailard classified and accepted the implied possibilities. "If you mean that it's

wiser to overlook remembered grudges, you may be right. I'm not sure her father will want your help. Kial was away at school when you got into trouble, and knew very little about it or you. Her father's memory may be longer. I didn't realize any connection until I checked your files, or I'd never have suggested you. Either way, you're still the only man for the job. If they ask for you, what will you do?"

"You're asking me?"

"You don't have to answer. I can't order you to go. Neither can Torkeg Nasron. I want you to know your rights, that's all."

Alston was painfully aware of passing time. In imagination he could see the gigantic robot calculators at work in the psychograph laboratory, adding up his brain-wave patterns and collating other evidence to a danger-red question mark.

"I'll decide after they've asked me," he said hurriedly. "Now do you want my report on Tihar?"

Hailard studied him shrewdly. "Forget it. Kial Nasron will be here in a couple of minutes. I'd better tell her more about you, in case she prefers to make other arrangements."

"Good," Alston laughed. "I need some rest. Four months in Tihar is too long. I've felt ill. Nearly passed out in the psycho room. . . ."

Then he was out the door and on his way to the elevators. It was now or never. The tube was in his fingers; a quick jab with the built-in hypo needle. His thumb pressed the plunger and the job was done. Forcing open the elevator door, he tossed the empty tube down the echoing shaft. A car was coming up, but it might not stop on this floor. It was essential that his body be discovered at once. Waves of whirling black nausea roared through him. His last conscious act was to smash an automatic thermocouple fire alarm.

The elevator door was opening. Kial Nasron stood framed against the interior of the car. Her mouth was open in a scream.

Alston's body crumpled suddenly. Light exploded into intolerable bright fragments in his brain. Darkness, endless, complete. . . .

Sharp awake, naked, covered with rough canvas, Alston lay on a slab. Conscious-

ness had returned suddenly. By instinct, fingers reached for his dogtag. It had been removed. His death had been accepted.

Bewildered, he evaluated his surroundings. This was not the vault for bodies consigned to the incinerator. Something had gone wrong.

Explanation came to him. His lips twisted in wry grimace. Of course, all bodies were tested for radioactivity, especially those of convicts who worked in the Tihar Forest. Prolonged exposure had caused pathological change in his body. Enough to arouse clinical curiosity. He had been brought to the dissecting laboratory. This was an unlooked for development. It complicated his escape plan.

It was a large, bare room. Around him were other slabs set on trestles, each occupied by a covered, shapeless form. At the far end, in an alcove were curious flickering lights. Patterns of movement resolved into figures cowed and draped in radiation proof armor. It was easy to guess at their tasks.

A figure moved toward him through the labyrinth of benches and slabs. At intervals the attendant paused over an uncovered body, extending a hand-sized radiation detector over the lump of cold flesh. After each test, the robed and hooded attendant made a notation in his notebook and marked the chart on each slab. In breathless strain, Alston watched the man's progress toward him.

From the alcove came the whine of an atomic bone-saw, nagging Alston's nerves.

The attendant was close. Alston's turn was next. Eyes closed, he lay still, taking one deep breath and holding it till his brain neared bursting. He sensed physical nearness. A shadow crossed his eyelids. The attendant bent above him, extending the detector. Its buzzer snarled angrily. Canvas rustled, was withdrawn.

Alston moved. His arm curved in one slashing arc. It was a trick blow learned in his space academy days. One swift slash with the edge of a hand could paralyze a man, stun him for hours. Alston caught the falling body and rolled with it to the tiles.

In silence he dragged the unconscious man under the slab and rapidly stripped off his robes. Swiftly, quietly, Alston donned

the radiation-proof garments. The body was hard to lift, but with a minimum of noise and bustle, he got it to the slab, replaced the canvas covering. For jewelled seconds, he waited to see if this disturbance had been noted from the alcove.

Steeling himself to patience, Alston pretended to continue the task of the attendant, working his way from slab to slab and slowly edging toward the swing doors at the end of the loft. It was a grueling, nerve-tightening process. At the last slab he paused, darting a quick survey at the activities within the far alcove. Attention there seemed to be focused upon an immense vat in which flickering lights played. Boldly, Alston stepped through the door.

From a small landing a spiral ramp descended. It was the one visible exit.

As he remembered, the clinical laboratories and dissecting rooms occupied the two top floors, beneath the landing stages on the roof of the VE Building. Apparently there was no direct outlet to the roof from this landing. He would have to risk a descent to the office-floors below. It was a long chance, garbed as he was, but there seemed no help for it. His robes and cowl might disguise him but they were sure to attract attention. He must get other clothes somehow before making his break.

His previous escape plan dealt with the underground tunnels connecting the various buildings. Now a new plan must be made up as he went along, grasping whatever opportunity arose. Probably the best trick would be to reach the roof-landings by elevator and try to steal a 'copter.

Down the ramp he went, abandoning stealth. The first landing he reached was empty, but seemed to open into laboratory rooms. Down again. The ramp opened into a corridor leading to a central landing. Alston tried to remember if Hailard's office were on the floor just under the lofts. At any rate, there were elevators here.

Pressing a stud, he waited for the whine of the car. One was ascending, but he could not guess how close it was.

Waiting, he pressed close against the wall, out of vision range of the opening door. A weapon would be a help, but he might as well wish for the moon.

A hiss of releasing air announced the ele-

vator cage. Silently the door opened, and a humanoid robot emerged. Blank but sensitive metallic eyes fixed on Alston.

SUDDENLY alarms rang through the echoing corridors. A blinker red signal flashed in the cage, its reflection a splash of blood on the polished frame. The robot hesitated, reaching for the portable transmitter to report below for instructions. Alston barked quick command. Half-turned, the robot touched the transmitter. Alston struck.

His fist crashed into the face plate, numbing his arms to the elbow. A jingle of small mechanical parts rained inside the robot, but the automaton caught at the man. Man and machine fell in a loud tangle, locked in savage, struggling embrace. Alston broke free and smashed in the face plate with a series of blows. His fingers clawed at intricacies of wiring inside. Acrid smoke and a smell of scorched insulation spiraled forth. The robot sprawled in weirdly human attitude of death.

No use now to descend. Hope of bypassing the guarded lower floors to the tunnels must be abandoned. And unarmed, he could not hope to get past the guards on the roof landings. The alarm was out.

Inside the cage, he jammed the controls on nonstop descent and sprang back to the landing. Forcing shut the safety door released the car for a shrieking express drop. Uncontrolled, it would crash into fearful wreckage at the tunnel levels.

It would confuse the search momentarily while the debris was examined for his body.

He looked quickly around the landing, found a tablet numbering the rooms and giving directions. He was on the floor of Hailard's office. It gave him an idea. Perhaps he could hold the director as hostage for his escape. At least it would be no worse than his present predicament. Hailard's office would be the last place they would expect him.

He hurried down the corridor.

Hailard's door was closed. Alston flung it open and leaped inside. Kial Nasron and the director faced each other across the desk. Both faces froze, staring at the intrusion. Hailard's hand dipped toward an open drawer.

In tigerish movement, Alston scooped

girl and chair from the floor and flung them over the desk into Hailard's lap. The heat gun flamed at random, melting a section of plastic wall. Alston sprang, went over the desk top into a belly-slide. All three of them crashed in a squirming heap on the floor.

Alston wrenched free first and came up with the heat gun in his hand. Pale and furious, Kial Nasron writhed back to the wall, glaring at the man. Hailard sat up, staring in dazed fixation at the pointing gun.

"It won't do you any good, Alston," he said. "Security police are searching the building."

"We'll see about that," Alston grinned at the girl. "Mr. Hailard and I are exchanging clothes."

After the exchange, Alston smashed the visiphone and inter-office communicator.

"The lady is leaving with me," he warned the director. "So use judgment. If anything happens to me, it happens to her. If anyone gets in my way, I'll blast through. Is that clear?"

Hailard nodded. "Clear to me. Maybe not to the guards on the roof."

Alston's face lighted savagely. "You can come along and explain it to them."

Herding his prisoners before him, Alston marched to the elevator-landing. Hailard pressed the stud for the surviving cage. The car stopped, its door slid open.

Alston gestured toward the transmitter. "Give them your orders and make it good."

Hailard shrugged. . . .

III

FIVE hours and approximately 1,800 airline miles from Quanta City, Alston switched back from rocket power to the atomic motors. Not daring to use radar for navigation or altitude soundings, he was not certain exactly where he was. Climbing swiftly into the murk, he flew blindly by dead reckoning, and most of the journey was accomplished in or above the miles-deep canopy of dust and vapor which eternally shrouds Venus from all view of other worlds.

On the silver, skimming over the limitless expanse of cloud banks, rainbow-tinted with reflected light, the ship had a view of breathtaking extent. They were somewhere over

the Tihar Forest, he knew, and within striking distance of his destination. But until he descended below the obscurity of unbroken mist-seas, the exact position was guesswork. Blades flailing in the thin, stratospheric air, the 'copter slanted downward, settling swiftly. It hovered for seconds above a roil surface of blinding brilliance, then churning grayness enveloped them, limiting vision to a few yards radius.

Temptation to use the sounding device was overwhelming, but he knew that hundreds of spotters were tuning detectors eagerly, hoping for just such a lapse, to triangulate his position. With muttered profanity, he restrained the impulse.

Sparing a moment from peering anxiously below, he eyed Kial Nasron resentfully.

"You should have 'chuted down when I gave you the chance," he told her morosely. "It was a better risk than this."

"I wanted to come," she replied, with a toss of head. "This is the Tihar Forest, isn't it?"

He grinned. "I think so. We'll know in a few minutes if the ceiling is high enough to give me a chance to pull this crate out of the fall. If not, I don't think we'll care."

"I'm an easy pick-up, but hard to shake. Since we're landing, you might untie my hands."

"And have you get foolish notions of grabbing the controls?"

"What good would that do me? I can't fly a 'copter."

Alston stared through the viewports. The ship appeared to be descending a well of infinite depth with featureless gray walls in which flickered eery light.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," he admitted. "I had a vague idea of turning you loose with the ship, later on, after I'd smashed the radar and wireless. How d'you expect to get back?"

"We'll figure that out when we come to it," the girl said confidently. "Maybe we can still make a deal. If we find my sister and take us both back, you'll have something to bargain with. My father will make them meet any terms you say."

Alston disillusioned her brutally. "Don't count on it, sister. I'm on a one-way ticket. The penalty for attempted escape is death,

in the disintegrators. I've added kidnapping, stealing a ship, and some assorted violence to my record. The least I'd get is life in the deep mines, and I'd prefer the disintegrators to that. You'll have to find yourself another hero."

Kial Nasron fell silent while Alston returned his attention to the controls. Dark rifts appeared in the grayness, became restless mobile patterns, like smoke swirling in a glass. The rotating blades overhead caught denser air and set up curious disturbance areas in the mist. Except for the lessened gravity, like the first moments in a rapidly descending elevator, there was no sense of motion at all. The ship might have been suspended in a dim, mist-shrouded pocket of space.

Tense at the controls, Alston did not turn as she spoke again.

"Perhaps, then, I can make contact with the searching parties, and bargain with them. You don't know my father's influence. He can protect you."

Alston grunted savagely. "No, thanks. I've had dealings with your father. Maybe you don't remember. You were just a kid, away at school on Earth. He helped railroad me. Figured I was not good enough for Annelle, and that was one way to be rid of me. As if I had a chance, anyhow. That was the joke. They called it sabotage, when the charge should have been negligence under extenuating circumstances. Annelle stood by and let him do it."

HE WAS conscious of her voice, but it sounded distant, unreal.

"Then you did remember. I didn't know much about it. You were a forbidden topic in the house. But you're wrong about Annelle. She cried a lot before she forgot, and even Father talked of having the case reopened. Nothing came of it. I supposed you were guilty."

"I was. There was a choice of following orders or saving the ship. I waited too long to decide. Men died. They were my friends. That was important, the rest isn't. You're welcome to both your father and your sister. I could even enjoy your predicament if I cared. But I'm past that, long ago. None of you even exist to me."

"Then you won't mind if I try to reach

the searching parties? They could take me back—"

He laughed grimly. "And have you lead them to me? I'd be a fool to trust you. Besides, none of them will get this far. None on the surface. And the air patrols can't land. You're stuck with me, sister. And don't expect any favors. I'm not in the mood."

Dark curtains parted suddenly below.

Immensity of somber desolation spread in all directions. The scene was savage, monstrous, rich in vegetation, fitfully lighted by distant volcanic flares. Jungle had stormed and over-run the visible countryside. Like a vast green map it unrolled below them. Directly beneath the plunging 'copter, and perilously close at hand, was a jagged up-thrust of bare rock, miles-high, towering almost into the gray ceiling of mist.

Frantically, Alston worked at the controls. Airscrews whined, shrilled, blasted. The muted thunder of atomic engines rose into deafening crescendo. The blades overhead vibrated in frenzy of rotation.

The 'copter pulled from its steep fall, jerked forward like a startled animal, then hesitated. One of the blades grazed the high pinnacle of rock with a jarring crash. The ship rebounded, poised like a dancer, then fell away, floundering in a crazy rhythm.

Fighting the wheel and stick, Alston was wrenched from his strapped pilot-seat and wedged violently among the control bars.

The damaged blade broke loose and beat itself to exploding tatters on the fuselage cabin. Gyrating, plunging end over end, the ship was tearing itself to pieces. Extricating himself, the man shut off the motors and switched to rocket power. Jets flamed and sputtered. Ground, like a solid green wall, rose up toward the stricken ship. Thundering jets painted a crazy pattern of brilliant crimson.

Righting the ship, Alston tried vainly to jettison the blades, but they were lodged fast in the keys: Banshee wail of tortured brace wires rose shrill and thin. In a sickening glide, the ship struck. By instinct, Alston cut the power. Then, darkness. . . .

Green, roaring avalanches engulfed the hurtling ship, wiped away the landing gear. Upper branches grasped at the breaking fuselage, ground at its metal plates with

tearing force. Twice it broke clear, bounded high in the air, and struck again. In a high tangle of treetops, it lodged for seconds, then toppled and fell a sheer hundred feet before coming to rest in a snarled webbing of vines and main limbs. Like a broken moth, twitching and swaying, it hung there.

A band of natives found the wreckage. Like agile monkeys they swarmed up the trees, found the occupants still unconscious, and lowered them gently to the forest floor. The native leader solved this problem with primitive directness. Taking a large mouthful of water from his snakeskin canteen, he blew hard, spraying Alston's face liberally, then repeating the process with the girl.

Water showering Alston jerked him instantly awake. Dazed and bruised, he raised himself on one elbow and looked about. It was impossible that he had survived the crash, but he seemed painfully alive. He sat up, blinking.

A group of fox-headed natives surrounded him, their large ears flapping excitedly. They waved spears and danced, chirping noisily, faceted eyes on stalks protruding from their foreheads writhing and flickering with curiosity and interest. Alston spoke to them in their own language of weird, chirping monosyllables.

KIAL NASRON was rousing. She showed less signs of battering than he did, but evidently her return to consciousness was not an unmixed blessing. Her cultured voice made unladylike comments.

Suddenly aware of the natives, Kial leaped to her feet and started running like a frightened *yarnab*. The native leader hurled a spear-shaft between her legs and brought her down heavily. His followers carried her back.

"What will they do to us?" she wailed, shuddering as she looked at the half-human creatures.

"Shut up," he ordered. "These are friends."

He addressed the leader and the chirping discussion went on. Partially reassured, the girl examined the eery beings with curiosity which they openly returned, picking at her garments, touching her skin, laughing among themselves and making comments which she could not understand.

Vaguely manlike in form, the inhabitants of Tihar were spindly and barrel-chested, with long, multiple-jointed limbs. Their slate gray skin, covered with fine golden down, blended easily with the ocher moss of the forest.

"Something is wrong," Alston told her finally. "These people are badly frightened. They're leaving the forest and heading west into unknown country. I don't understand it, and Tuluk is vague about the actual danger. He's warning us to leave at once. And Tuluk doesn't scare easily, so it must be something out of the ordinary."

The leader glanced apprehensively about as he talked, his voice rising and falling in the birdlike cadences of his speech. Alston gestured toward the wrecked ship, then the girl, shook his head in negation, and shrugged eloquently.

Gesticulating, chirping wildly, the native chief rounded up his followers and melted swiftly into the shadowed gloom of the forest.

"What was that all about?" asked Kial uneasily.

Alston snorted. "I still don't know. I explained that we could not go in the ship. He wanted us to come with him. I told him that was equally impossible, that you wouldn't last ten miles the way they travel. Don't worry about it. There's danger, but we knew that. Besides, these natives don't always make sense. They've different mental processes from ours. Not quite human. What scared them might mean nothing to us. Volcano, earthquake, food shortage. They're superstitious, too. Maybe a god growled at them."

"What are we going to do?"

Alston grinned. "Hole up. I know where I am now. I hoped to get guide service, but we won't need it. Tuluk told me how to get where we're going. I spotted the place a while back on one of my survey trips. Seems like a good place to hide for a while. I have a cache of supplies there. Three hours of rough going, though. One hour, Tuluk said, but that means three for us. Messy job, pawing through this muck."

Alston climbed into the trees and rummaged in the shattered 'copter for usable equipment. His total find amounted to a pair of radilume flashbeams, some tablets of

food concentrate, water in a self-cooling canteen and his heat gun. He scrambled back to the ground and struck out boldly through the jungle.

It was Kial Nasron's first experience of Venusian forest. She wondered how Alston could keep his directions at all. To her it was a vast nightmare, staggering, impressive, but without order or definite form. Here was nothing of the cultivated parklands of Earth. Titanic trees towered upward and lost themselves in gloom, their knotted trunks like the columns of a giant's temple. Overhead was a blank mass of foliage so dense that practically no light filtered down from the uneasy gray glare of sky.

Colossal tree-ferns and gigantic mushroom-like goblin aspects, like the background of some sinister fairy-tale, and underfoot the ground moved queasily as if she trod upon the crust of quagmire. Coarse, thorny scrub and a moldering confusion of rotting tree trunks blocked the aisles, and higher up interwoven vines and trailing beards of moss knotted together the dense growth of trees in complex tapestries of shadow. Footing was treacherous, although a luminosity hovered above the sinks of decaying vegetation, and by this tricky light, they made frequent detours to avoid bogholes and the bubbling sinks of steaming-hot water. The air was thick, moist and nauseous with the foulness of gas rising from the layers of mold. Each step was an adventure.

After two hours of tramping and stumbling through choked aisles of sodden jungle, Kial Nasron was out on her feet.

FORTUNATELY, they had reached higher ground. Outcroppings of lichen-crust rock broke the morass of soft, unsteady ground, and she fell less often. Alston paid no heed to her or her difficulties. He marched steadily on, and, gasping and perspiration-soaked, she made shift to keep up. A terror of being abandoned in the awesome wilderness urged her faltering muscles.

They climbed a rise and came out on a flat, shelving rock at the top of a watershed.

On the far side, the ledge overlooked a circular depression miles in extent. Here, Alston halted. The strength went out of Kial, and she collapsed weakly on the bare

rock. Alston gave her food and water and seemed bitterly amused by her plight.

"We're almost there," he said. "Better get used to it. We're home."

On the near side, the hollow was rimmed by sheer cliffs, across its expanse, perhaps fifty miles away, was a chain of high, smoking volcanoes, their red glare reflected from the overcast, drenching the plain with hellish light. Hundreds of feet below was the pit floor, fairly level and carpeted with flowing grass or the ocherous moss.

Before them, sloping from a wedge-like salient of the precipice, a stone-flagged pathway lay straight across the plain toward the city!

At first, in the crimson splendor, it seemed less like a man-made fabric than some curious natural formation rising from the rust-tinted grasslands. In shape it was like a tangle of oddly regular hills and the vegetation swarming over it added to the illusion. But a closer look showed too much geometry for accidental weathering.

Gradually the outlines assumed form. City-size, it seemed to be the complex ramifications of a single building, terraced, overgrown with a thick matting of vines until the place resembled a hanging garden.

Kial Naron suppressed a shiver, for there was an utterly alien quality about the megalithic structure that both depressed and frightened her. Over both city and hollow rose an aura of something dreadful and unholy, as if the ghosts of some ancient dwellers brooded in forgotten solitudes within.

As they descended the rough pathway and moved along the stone flagging toward the abandoned megalopolis, both man and girl were conscious of a quiver which ran through ground and air. Stopping, Alston knelt and placed a hand flat on the ground. Even through the thick moss, a vibration was perceptible, and something like a weak electric shock ran up his arm, numbing wrist, elbow and the shoulder joint. Now he was aware of a muted throbbing, like the beat of a heavy, steady pulse.

Nearer the city, ground tremors were stronger, and his ears caught a clearly audible echo from the vibrating air. Had he been wrong in believing the city was deserted? On the previous visit he had seen

nothing nor felt any awareness of an alien presence.

Before them, the path shone in the rubrous light, and the city wall rose like a sheer cliff, casting a black shadow toward them like a reaching hand.

Now the ruin seemed more complete than before, and a vanguard of the forest reached out a dark arm, encircling the edifice.

"Looks as if the previous tenants had been careless with the fixtures," Kial Naron said in mock bravado. "At least they did not forget the red carpet."

"Quiet neighborhood," Alston echoed her thought. Suddenly he knew what was different.

The silence. This time there was no hum of insect life, no rustling as the wind moved through the grass. No sense of movement as the wild things prowled at will within the dark labyrinths of the ancient city. There was silence, complete, profound, blanketing and smothering every sound save one, the muted throbbing.

Penetrating deeply into the shadow, they stood at last before a tall gateway. As they hesitated, a long green snake of vine-creeper writhed down from the stone frame, darting, coiling, lashing at them like a living serpent.

Alston struck at it, then whipped out the heat gun and pressed the stud. A pencil beam of dazzling brilliance leaped out. With a scorched stench the tentacle withdrew, squirming hideously.

"Watch those things," he warned Kial Naron. "Some of them are dangerous. Their poison is a swift corrosive."

Inside the gateway was both sound and movement. A convulsive stirring ran along the vine-covered walls, and a sound between a hiss and a soft rustling struck their ears. Here, too, the pulsing throb was more pronounced. It was as if the plant-things of the deep jungle had over-run and conquered the city, turning it to some evil purpose of their own. The city might be dead, but the forest was alive, watching, waiting. Every wall and column was encrusted with dark masses of greenery, every avenue an alley garlanded with vines and moss. Ugly, twisting fungi and monstrous tree ferns grew from the broken pavement. Sinister ripples

of movement coursed the man and girl. The city reeked with fear.

IV

SECURITY POLICE turned Hailard's fast cruiser back at the last barrier before the Tihar Forest—the Holy Mountains. The patrols had failed to head off the fugitive Alston before he had reached the forest, and the effort had now become a complex operation of combing the Tihar area in scout planes in the faint hope of discovering the missing 'copter and its occupants. Therefore, after putting the machinery in readiness for the job ahead, Hailard had awaited the arrival of Torkeg Nasron before taking an active part in the search.

Responding to the Security Patrol signals, he leapt to the visiphone transmitter and angrily demanded explanations. A stormy interview with Nasron had done nothing for his patience.

"Top priority," Hailard shouted into the transmitter, heedless of amplifiers.

"All priorities are cancelled," an imperturbable junior officer told him coldly. "General Emergency. Contact Central Security in Castarona for instructions. At once. That is all."

Hailard dialed the Castarona wavelength.

A thin, recorded voice was broadcasting, half-newscast, half-official pronouncement. As soon as the message was finished, it was repeated for the benefit of new listeners.

"—Believed that an unheard-of mutation has taken place on a large scale. No precedent. Action will be taken as soon as the full extent and nature of this fantastic development can be determined. The disturbance is of a nature both electromagnetic and atomic, and seems to be centered in the swampy districts of the extreme western range of the Tihar Forest, approximately 1,300 miles from Castarona. Little is known of this area, and the few explorations which have been attempted in the past met with disaster.

"Landings will be difficult, and surface penetration is not to be considered. However, suicide squads are now being recruited among the convict laborers most familiar with conditions in the Tihar Forest with full pardon as reward, and an expedition

will be launched for the purpose of mapping and reconnoitering the locale. If possible, landings are to be made and the menace run to earth, although not much is hoped for in this line since the terrain is swampy and practically impassable on foot. Bulletins will be issued as further material becomes available.

"Repeat—

"General alarm! Warning, do not enter the Tihar Forest area for any reason.

"Within the past two months a startling change has been taking place in the Tihar vegetation. It was noted weeks ago in the outer trading posts and most advanced weather stations. Experts sent to the spot have made their reports, and the story can now be told.

"Three small villages and one sizable town have been utterly destroyed. Refugees have begun to drift in with tales of massacre and destruction. Piecing together their stories, and giving a new consideration to the reports by plant experts, we can quickly understand what has happened. A pattern becomes apparent.

"It is general knowledge that the Tihar Forest is unique, even on Venus. Its plant life is all mutant and practically unclassified. This mutant vegetation, isolated as it is and not under observation by qualified scientists, continued its variant development. Now, the whole forest, with all its manifold life forms, has suddenly become symbiotic. Plants, animals, and possibly other life-forms totally unfamiliar to us, are now united in one communal, interdependent life. The forest is functioning as a gigantic organism with each of its previous entities as a single shell.

"Not only is this gigantic organism a functioning entity, but it is intelligent, malignant, ambitious. We must not fall into the pitfall of considering this monstrous entity merely a gigantic plant or community. There is much more behind such a development than a mere changed relationship between the life entities involved. The forest has come to life, become a sentient, functioning, thinking, mobile monster.

"It is on the move, conquering, killing, destroying everything that stands in its way. Plants that were earth-bound by complicated root-systems are developing new forms and

members, and becoming mobile. The larger forms, such as the ancient trees, in which such rapid evolution is impossible, are functioning as a supply house for the more quickly adaptable forms. The whole being becomes an army, backed by an alert, efficient industry, converting the chemical and nuclear treasure-house of Tihar into a formidable war machine.

"This is a challenge which may not be denied. We must revise our whole approach to the colonization and re-civilizing of Venus, even our habits of thought. Plants, hitherto the docile or helpless servants of mankind, have become a deadly enemy and a threat to our very survival as a dominant life-form. Clouds of spores descended on the unsuspecting inhabitants with an effect similar to that of poison gas. A grull-cat hunter gives an account of being pursued by a variety of plants and wild animals, acting in concert as if directed by a master brain.

"This is just a sample. More will come. If the mutation continues and spreads, even our domesticated plants and animals may turn and rend us like a pack of wolves. We are living on borrowed time, and some kind of decisive action must be taken.

"Recent recordings taken by various weather stations indicate emanations of some unusual force within the forest as if power were being generated on a large scale. We now believe that these readings and the mutations are related. Authorities admit that it is believed—"

Hailard clicked off the switch, and gave orders to change the course to Castarona. His eyes met those of Torkeg Nasron and locked. Armored silence sprang between them. Nasron broke it.

"Does this mean that you are abandoning the attempt to rescue my daughter from this madman?"

Hailard shook his head sadly. "There is nothing we can do at the moment. We can accompany the suicide squads, perhaps learn something. From the broadcast, I surmise that Kial is dead. And Alston, too."

"You said the same thing about Annelle. We have reason . . ."

Hailard interrupted. "This situation is different. Worse. Annelle was living on borrowed time, even if she survived the wreck of the *Krajulla*. I feel much worse about

Kial. I liked her. For that matter, Alston too. Rotten bad luck that he chose such a time for his break, and the girl got in his way. I doubt if he'd have harmed her deliberately. The man was desperate, bitter, even crazy angry, but he's no natural killer. It was just his way of hitting back at you. Making you sweat a little."

Torkeg Nasron smiled sardonically and sadly, musing to himself that no man ever beats the game. The price of a six-year-old treachery had finally caught up with him and he was paying in the biggest coin he owned.

In Castarona, three fast VE survey ships were being hastily armed. Files of convict volunteers ceased work to watch a squadron of six battleships lift from their cradles and head for the remote fastnesses of the Tihar in ragged, irregular formation. Within minutes, a flight of G-class rocket scouts blasted off to follow the cumbersome battlewagons.

Signals shrilled. Convicts who had volunteered for the suicide squads went aboard and waited. Blinker lights winked on and off in color codes. At the last moment, Hailard and Nasron climbed into the pilot's quarters, with new bulletins and final calculations from the detectors locating the trouble center. It should not take long for the suicide command to overtake and pass the heavily armored military aircraft. Within two hours, three at the most if headwinds were strong, or if storms were encountered over the forest, the ships should reach the target area.

Field sirens moaned and the jets let go with a staggered roar.

DEEP within the city, before an oval pierced through an immense wall of squared and jointed megaliths, Alston paused. Huddled close beside him, like a dog or a terrified child, the girl drew comfort from the man's physical nearness.

Kial Nasron could not afterwards remember how they had come to the place. There was confused impression of moving through a labyrinth of endless, winding, dark avenues. The ruddy glare made but a feeble glimmering upon monstrous colonnades or touched with vague mystery the hideous reliefs carved upon titanic walls. Above, towered the bulking mass of a shat-

tered citadel. On either hand, sheer as the cliffsides of a narrow canyon, walls rose in terraced setbacks to the gloomy arch of sky. Everywhere was mute, colossal evidence of alien evolutions, and everywhere the rank, bloated growth of unnatural vegetation.

Guarding the portal were gigantic effigies in stone of gods vanished and forgotten when the universe was young. From outside, nothing of the building's interior could be made out, for a screen of dense shadow blocked the oval opening. Kial hung back, shivering, as Alston strode to the doorway.

"Wait here if you like," he said. "At least till I look around inside. There have been changes since I was last here. All this growth is new. . . ."

Panic shrilled through her as she glanced about at the grotesque shadow-shapes.

"I'll go with you," she said quickly. "I'm afraid to stay out here alone."

Alston nodded, with a surge of rough sympathy. "Suit yourself. But stick close in case of trouble. We may be just imagining things."

Her voice was hollow and awoke strange echoings among the dry, murmurous rustling of the vines. "How dared you ever come here before, alone? There is something dreadful. . . ."

"It was different, then."

Alston plunged boldly into the shadow, the girl following reluctantly.

Inside, the air was warm, humid, stifling, full of the fetid odors of a hothouse. Silence stunned the ears. Even the restless stirring sounds of the vines faltered and died away. There was complete absence of sound as different from ordinary stillness as death is from life. Something tangible was gone from the very air. Withdrawn. Breathless, waiting hush, lifeless as a shroud, pervaded the somber interior.

There was light of an eery sort, a flickering play of shadows shot with pearly ghosts, lambent as moonflames, which hung in thick layers like drifting smoke or moved in shifting planes like faintly glowing draperies.

Slowly their eyes became accustomed to the dimness and they perceived the dimensions of the place. It was a vast circular space, like some tremendous hall that might have been a temple, above soared vague immensities of a vaulted dome, and the paved

floor was strewn with the rubble of titanic collapse. Before them, in terraced crescents, like a giant's staircase crumbling into ruin, the flooring fell away into a central depression.

Here were rank on rank of noxious, ugly tree-growths, jutting from displaced paving blocks—each plant a gnarly, jointed trunk crowned with clusters of motionless tentacles. Ranged about the terraces, they parodied the attitudes of worshippers within some unholy temple. Each massive wall was thickly tapestried in matted hangings of the ophidian vines, but here their unceasing undulations were stilled, frozen into rigid immobility.

Hovering about the central depression was a zone of denser shadow, obscuring and distorting vision. What light existed in this core of darkness was troubled, uncertain. The spot attracted Alston's interest, but he could see nothing clearly.

In the deathlike hush, their footsteps made no whisper of sound and the man and girl descended the broken terraces among moving planes of light and shadow to the rim of darkness. Down the ruinous steps, their progress was sluggish as if they drifted bodiless in some exasperating dream fabric.

There came a flurry of disturbance in the shadowy zone, a wan, uneasy flickering glow, as if light flares struggled through thick, resisting slabs of murky crystal. Steadily it grew, quickening, mounting, flaming into raw emerald brilliance. Taller it soared, spreading, dispersing the murk, beating back the fanes of darkness, revealing the temple in all its monstrous size, its splendor, and its crumbling ruin. Revealing—

The Pit!

AT THE heart of the place, sunk into the pave, was a deep round pit, brimming with fiery liquescence. It swam with light, with color and movement, boiling like a wizard's cauldron. The disturbed surface heaved and frothed, churned, rose and fell in slow rhythmic pulsing. Above it hovered myriad tongues of darting argent flame. From it light foamed upward, showers of luminous bubbles rose and danced and shattered in clouds of radiance as diffuse as a mist of pearls.

Here was the source of that strange en-

ergy, that throbbing force which vibrated through the ground and air outside, for as the substance of the pit rose and fell in its rhythmic cycle, so did the sound and vibration swell and diminish, so did the light flare and fade.

From a curb of carved and figured stone a sculptured ramp swept up and out and down in graceful arch onto an island of black rock set within the pit. Harshly outlined, its detailed fretwork sharp and clear, the island rose solidly from the pool of glittering light.

But on the island was sheer madness. From a pedestal block of faceted stone thrust upward two mighty curved horns of fluted jade resembling the frames of an ancient lyre. Thirty feet in the air they soared, and pendant between them was a sparkling veil, gossamer as the finest spider-silk, dusted with incandescent moonfire. Meshed in this sheer fabric, prisoned like a silvery moth caught upon a great spiderweb, was a figure of terrible beauty.

Seething in witchflames, netted in a tumult of frosted lightnings, was the white, graceful body of a woman. Naked in body and stripped of soul, limbs and trunk rigid, her figure was tortured into the attitude of a hieratic symbol. The face was bowed but calm, blending sinister serenity with an expression of impassive anguish. Staring, the eyes were chill with some unholy suspension between death and life. Soft glory of hair flowed upward to mingle inextricably in the weave of silvered veiling, and the slender arms stretched up and outward, cruciform, as if to suggest a hideous sacrifice. A beautiful soulless nymphon!

"Annelle!"

He cried aloud, stared in wildest frenzy, shouted her name, shook his fist in impotent fury at the dead gods set about in their sculptured niches.

Light gathered in awesome brilliance on the ledge about the pit, thickening like a solid substance, so that the pit, the island, with its great curving horns, and the prisoner upon the draping silvery veil seemed frozen within glittering crystal. The scene was fantastic nightmare ensorcelled into hideous permanence.

One sharp glimpse, then scurrying shadows flowed upward from the pool, dim,

shapeless beings in mad conflict with the flooding splendors of alien quicksilver.

Alston was barely conscious of Kial's screaming. Tranced, he stumbled down the remaining steps to the ledge. He was dimly aware of Kial's voice, her hands clawing at him, restraining. Then he was beside the pit, standing, staring up the ramp. In his arms was a limp body—Kial's. A faintly glowing nimbus outlined her features, congealed them into an echo of that same unearthly coldness, that same calm horror and impassive anguish of the other's.

Something had flowed from her, withdrawn, and the shell that remained was not Kial. Alive, she had meant nothing to him, but dead, or worse, she became a symbol of the tortured loneliness and frustration of his life.

She was dead. This thing in his arms was no more Kial than that other being was—

Annelle! White agony of memories burned through his veins, became a madness. His sense of double loss was unbearable. He dropped the limp thing in his arms.

THE temple stirred, became suddenly sensible of his human presence. Whispered murmurings rose in volume, became a tide of slithering sound. The ranks of greenery moved toward him.

Unheeding, Alston staggered to the soaring ramp. Ahead, he sensed vaguely the figure of radiance, rags of stolen moonsilver flowing from it. Caught by some unholy lure, he forced a way toward it, moving slowly, sluggishly as if the very air grew dense and sought to impede him.

At the pedestal, knees buckled under him. His knees scraped jagged stone. He floundered, recovered, stared upward, reaching.

Infernal glory lit the face. Nearer, he could see that it bore less resemblance to humanity than to the half-open, convoluted petals of a strange flower. Within its muted planes were the soft, chill delicacies of an orchid, the flushed, still colors of a rose in moonlight. About her hovered a funereal fragrance, sickeningly sweet, like the perfume of no blossom of Earth or Mars.

Flowerlike, she stirred, eyelids twitched and lifted, petal-white lips moved.

In dread miracle, she spoke. Articulation was difficult and the sound seemed to come

from immense distances. The tones were soulless, a rippling sibilance of sounds and half-accented syllables, the words a meaningless babel upon his ears. She spoke in whispers, softly murmuring, ecstatic. . . .

In his brain images formed, alien, untranslatable.

He saw the ancient city at the height of its power. Streets thronged with a strange people, in form the product of a variant evolution. This was their city, their temple. Here they housed a god-thing, slimy, monstrous, a being of their own creation, blending within itself something of both protoplasmic matter and living energy. Here in the temple it lived and was worshipped by strange rites and awful sacrifice.

Then came a whirlwind of war. The race of creators and worshippers vanished, destroyed with their enemies when the atomic weapons of both races burst the bounds, sweeping in fiery wrath over seas and continents until the planet lay bare and smoldering. The race died, but their god-thing lived.

Deep within the sacred fountain of its temple, the slime-being lay dormant. But the ravening atomic fires had touched off a vein of almost pure uranium beneath the city. Something of that atomic fire still lingered, spreading slowly through the mass, reacting like a slow pile, half-alive, partially radioactive. Through the ages, the element fissioned, emitting low-degree heat and some radiant energy. In its pit of slow incubation, the god-thing developed, wakened to new life, grew in strength and diabolical intelligence.

In time it wearied of passive existence, hungered after more power and freedom of movement. Bursting its bonds, it rose into the well, whence it hurled forth impulses, urgent, hypnotic, angry and summoning. With promises and deceptions it lured the forest, called to itself the more mobile plants, enslaved the green living things.

Of itself, it gave to them new strength and intelligence, made of them more mobile beings. It roused them to fantastic development and stirred to life their latent dreams of green conquest. By complex symbiosis, it bound them to itself, made willing servants and worshippers of them. The forest had become a vast, single, interdependent community.

The woman-thing—its voice—had strayed within the precincts of its dread power. She, also, had been lured, overpowered, enslaved. Partially absorbed by the god-being, wholly dependent, the woman had become a nymphon, a temple handmaiden, little more than a decoration, existing solely by its whim.

The voice died away. Unconscious of sound, Alston sensed the images fading from his mind.

Standing boldly on the pedestal, Alston reached upward to tear and strike at the horror on the veil. Shrieking, he assailed the monstrous thing which was neither plant nor woman, alternating words and blows. Hate seethed in his brain, hate and pain and grief. He cried out and hurled himself savagely, lusting to destroy.

It was the last thing he remembered clearly. From the depths below came a throb of fearful power. The pool churned. Lightnings raved about the suspended veil, the netted figure. The woman-thing writhed piteously in the tumult of energy. Alston's upreaching arms carried the current to his body. The shock stunned, paralyzed.

Then came momentary impression of vegetation surging toward him in dark billows. Hellish tendrils dragged him down. Great, leathery leaves enfolded him, lifting his numbed body high. He was hurled bodily across the shimmering well, caught up again and juggled with heedless violence. Lashing, steely tentacles played with him and passed him swiftly through dim spaces. Flesh cringed from the cloying contact of the vines. Battered, nauseated, half-unconscious, he felt the touch of abysmal horror.

Then, contemptuously, he was flung in a grotesque sprawl of arms and legs, spurned through the gateway of the outer wall.

OUTSIDE the city, lines of battle were drawn up across the valley. On one side, squads of the convict volunteers held back green waves of plant-life with batteries of flame-throwers, heat rays, grenades and poison gas bombs. Ranged against them were the unlimited numbers of the forest folk, plants and animals alike thrusting in a dark salient from the thickly grown slopes. Near the city was a clear space, but ragged

knots of combatants were locked in deadly struggle, contending for the approach.

Flame-throwers bit deep indentations in the massed plant-things, and an acrid stench of charred greenery rose in choking clouds. The green armies struck back viciously with flights of venomed thorns and a barrage of spore-cases which burst with startling force and showered the humans with corrosive dust. It was deadlock, a determined, murderous see-saw with advantage to neither.

A scouting party brought Alston to the ships.

"We knew that you and Kial Nasron were inside the city," Hailard said grimly. "A native chieftain, Tuluk, told us how you came here. We've delayed flattening the city with atomics in the faint hope you might come out alive."

His gesture indicated the circling warships overhead, which occasionally swooped down to take a hand in the conflict with sticks of dropped bombs.

"How did you dare land your ships here?" Alston asked. "From the air this plain looks like a swamp, the city just a strangely shaped hill."

"Convicts dropped first, by parachute. They signalled to come in."

Nasron clutched desperately at Alston. "Kial?" he queried hopelessly.

"She's still in there."

"Alive?"

"I don't know. Unconscious or dead. But you can't use the bombs in any case. That thing—whatever it is—feeds on atomic energy. It would be immune to radiation and heat, and the rubbish of the temple would protect it from the blast."

Hailard gestured wearily. "What can we do, then?"

Alston hesitated. "You can't do much. If you'll trust me, there's something I'd like to try. It may not work, but you'll be no worse off. I'll need a small, fast plane and a pilot with guts. Also a flame-thrower and some grenades, both incendiary and explosive. A parachute—"

Hailard's eyes met Alston's in understanding. He nodded, shouting orders.

Rocket tubes blasting, the tiny plane drew a trail of fire through the gray sky. Over the city it nosed into a steep power dive, bored down in thunder, skimming walls and ter-

aces. Over the shadowy courtyard of the temple enclosure, it pulled out, zoomed swiftly, topped the near buildings and vanished. Behind it a parachute burst open in white flowering.

Burdened with the carrying case of grenades and a portable flame-thrower, Alston dropped like a plummet. Pressing a release, he slipped from the harness before his feet touched the ground. He landed, running.

Before him, the flame-thrower belched its roaring scimitar, and snarls of the knotted greenery withered from his path. Half a moment brought him to the oval portal. Gouts of fire washed it clear of the tangling obstructions.

Choking, he kicked through the smoking ashes and burst into the temple's gloom. The place was alive with menace. Murmurings built into shrill tumult.

Down the crumbling terraces he stumbled, cutting a wide swath with the swishing flame. The temple buzzed like an angry beehive. At the pit's edge, the flame-thrower's reservoir ran dry. It hissed and the fiery jets died. He flung it into the pressing dark.

Kneeling, he stared into the quivering horror of the pit! The jellied light within stirred with life, bubbling furiously. With his teeth Alston drew out the pins of two grenades, dropped them. Two more. Feverishly, as rapidly as hands could function, he jerked out pins and hurled the bombs deep into the churning protoplasm in the pit.

From below came a staggered flash, followed by jarring concussions. The pit was a manifold convulsion of movement. Fans of flame spurted upward, became fountains of light and uproar. Waves of sound and pressured air hurled Alston back from the curbing. With the last burst shot up quivering, ugly chunks of pulpy matter which clung and burned.

Crawling masses of vegetation reached him, struck, broke in myriad struggling forms. Tentacles and tendrils of vine bore him down, overwhelming in their clinging embrace. His heat gun burned them through, loosening their grip. He broke clear.

Something like a fiery whip flicked his face, drawing blood and shooting rivulets of pain through arms and legs. Vines licked out, enwrapped him, lashing, constricting.

Steel-hard tentacles bound his arms to his body, crushing. From the surrounding dark came muffled explosions as spore-pods burst. A fine mist of searing dust powdered his face. Dust stung nostrils raw, burned into his eyes.

Incredible sound shrieked from the pit. A cry of mortal agony. Vines and tentacles released suddenly. Alston staggered and slumped to the floor. Blind, tortured, gasping for breath, he dragged himself. Groping fingers found the curb and led him to the ramp. Crawling, he inched his way over its high-flung span, down. Upright again, he stood before the pedestal, climbed upon it, fingers numbed and bloody. His arms stretched upward toward the frightful thing upon the web.

Blind, he did not see the swift blight overtake that lovely body. He did not see the rot which turned the softly molded limbs to dripping slime, the charnel droplets form and course down the blackened webbing.

He did not see the sudden withering of vines and snake-trunked treeforms in the temple, the dark, ugly writhings of the stricken plant-things, the collapse and convulsive death of all the fearsome, unnatural legions outside. He did not hear the dry, crisp, rustling fall of dead, shrunken leaves throughout the forest.

Blind and insensible, Alston stood upon the island pedestal in the ruined temple, arms yearning upward in hopeless supplica-

tion to the monstrous, decaying horror on the veil. He still stood there when a mopping-up squad of convicts searched the temple and found him. Raving, he was borne away to the returning ships.

IT IS another matter that he awakened later in the radiation hospital at Quanta City. Beautiful Kial Nasron, also suffering from painful radiation burns, sat beside him on the bed when he tore off the bandages and opened his eyes upon darkness. She pressed him gently back to the pillow, told him that he had been freely pardoned, and promised that he would see again, months later, when the paralysis had left his optic nerves.

It is also another matter that when Kial and her father returned to Mars Craig Alston went along, and that a court there reversed its findings in his case, restoring full civil rights which a man needs to be married.

In time even a man like Torkeg Nasron can be civilized into a potential father-in-law. Craig Alston volunteered for the Second Trans-Plutonian Expedition, and while Kial waits for him, she can work upon her father. But in the years ahead, she and Alston will rarely speak of Venus with its age-old mystery, its forgotten cities and strange plants. And they will try not to think of the temple and the Circean monster in its sacred well, nor of the thing that hung upon a veil of woven moonbeams. . . .