

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

JULY

25¢



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## THE MAN the WORLDS REJECTED

*novel by Dickson Gordon*

## GAMA IS THEE!

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Incorruptible, the Assassin. The best you could do was to buy the delicate Kri-Kri death.

## ETHIC of the ASSASSIN

*by Hayden  
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A.M.C.

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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHERE THE  
GODS DECIDE \*\*\*

**WHERE THE GODS DECIDE**

**By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.**

*In the webbed hands of the stolid, green-faced  
ones rests the Screece gem. Some say it's a  
fabulous diamond; some an emerald; some a  
ruby ... but Caine guessed it was death itself.*

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*High above the wet plains and muggy jungles, above the slick rocks and shiny leaves, rests a temple. Like most shrines of ancient order its narrowing spires point to the sky. Men, Venusian men, walk quietly through the restricted labyrinth of this temple, green fingers webbed beneath the long sleeves of their gray capes; green faces expressionless beneath the sanctity of their gray hoods. There is movement, and these caped men circle a silver orb that lies in dead center of the golden walls. They pace, each flat step a soundless motion. The green fingers unmesh, spread, and come together again. "Screece," says a flute-like voice. "Screece," says another. The silver orb rests like a cloudy fist-sized tinsel globe, unsparkling, while a dozen minds search out through the vastness of Venus, probing for the cores of evil and purity. Feet pace, faces are immobile, and through the thick air comes a shrill rising scream from the throat of a giant black cat with deep orange eyes. The motion ceases, lidless stares meet. "Grith?" pronounces one. "Grith?" pronounces another. And the pacing continues, while green lips quirk the slightest bit. Minds search....*



---

It was that season when the jungle of Venus turned into a vapid, steaming swamp. Sleet buds glistened like long, thin snakes, and leaves hung limp and wet from the vine-trees. Nicholas Caine felt the sweat prickle upon his forehead and slide down the sides of his face. Fairchild, he noticed, was sweating, too, so that the man's shirt had turned dark, and the close-clipped gray hair curled on his head. Only the woman still looked fresh in her white shirt and shorts.

She was standing beside Caine's jetcopter, drinking plain Scotch from a silver glass. Her husband, Fairchild, was drinking, too, as he sat silently in a folding chair beneath the tip of the ship's left wing.

This is going to be a sweet thing, Caine thought, it really is.

The air was dead of breeze, and soggy clouds hung above them like an immense stifling blanket. The man stared at his knees and the woman swirled the Scotch in her glass. Caine kept his palms flat against the arm rests of his chair.

He watched the woman closely. There was too much brightness inside of her, too much nervousness, as though she were burning inside and she had to keep moving, laughing, insulting, enticing, because she was alive with that burning, and she couldn't stop. It wasn't the liquor, Caine knew, because they had just started that, a few minutes after he had brought the ship down.

They were approximately four-hundred miles from the Colony, and in the wild stretches of this Venusian jungle, four-hundred miles was like the distance from day to night. Here was the dark, the strange, the weird and the wild.

Kiitz birds screamed in the distance, and their sound was like the sound a man makes when he is touched by fire. A thick, muddy river went over a cliff above and behind them, hitting transparent rocks with a steady crashing noise that thrummed against Caine's ears like thunder in a distant sky.

Teewh birds with black wings and curling yellow beaks came out of the sultry sky and skimmed the tips of the trees surrounding the clearing. They screeched when they dove, and they kept harmony with the unseen stationary kiitz birds. A chilling, nerve-racking harmony.

---

"Won't you have a drink with us?" said the woman, her teeth white between her smiling lips.

"Thank you, no," Caine said. The woman tipped her head and watched him. Her eyes were very blue and they mocked Caine and taunted him, while her husband just sat there, drinking and watching his bare knees.

This could go to pieces in a hurry, Caine decided, and he rubbed his palms against the arms of the chair.



Because, on the other hand, the husband was too quiet, too brooding, too deliberately unseeing of the way his wife played with Caine, with her eyes and her movements.

Her legs, Caine noticed, were the kind that would look well bare, as they were, or in nylon beneath a skirt, and she had rather full hips, although not too full. Her breasts, Caine could see, were well enough developed.

She bent to rub a finger against her left knee. "Are there insects in this part of the jungle?" she asked Caine.

"Some."

"But no grith cats?" she said, straightening.

"Not here," Caine said.

"Just where we're going tomorrow?"

"Yes." Caine looked back to the man. He was about fifty, Caine judged, at least twenty years older than the woman. His face was lean and sad, and there were thin lines traveling out from the corners of his eyes and mouth that contrasted with the youthful cut of his wiry hair.

These two had come to Caine because his reputation in the Colony was established. He had been flying tourists into the jungle for more than three years, and while he could not predict all of this country, he at least knew the general traits of those sections within a reasonable radius of the Colony.

"Did you ever shoot a grith cat?" the woman asked, looking at Caine over her glass.

"No," said Caine.

"But you've heard that they're pretty horrible and dangerous?"

"Yes." Caine wiped a hand at the sweat on his forehead. The woman was working at the cats, her eyes shifting to look at her husband with every word, to see how he was reacting. So far he had done nothing, said nothing, only sat there and drank.

However, the cats were not the reason the couple were in the Venusian jungle. Hunting animals was a dead sport for them, something done in the past and something which had become boring.

They were looking for bigger game now. The Screece gem. And they had flown all the way from Earth to Mars, from Mars to Venus, to find it. The Screece gem was a myth, Caine was certain, a bit of fantasy out of ancient Venusian lore. But they paid him well for the trip, and he would ask no questions.

The woman stayed with the cats. "How big are these grith cats, Mr. Caine?"

"Eight to ten feet long," Caine said. "About like a large horse."

"Only they're cats, with the claws and the fangs and all."

"Essentially."

Caine felt himself tightening inside a little. The woman was trying to break through her husband's armor, because somewhere, sometime, he must have had trouble hunting a cat-like animal. Tiger. Or panther. The Martian frynx, perhaps. But she had not found her target, yet.

The man raised his head and spoke for the first time since they had landed. "How far away is this temple, would you say, Mr. Caine?"

"Fifty miles," Caine said.

"How close to it can we land?"

"Eight or ten miles, I imagine."

"Can't we get closer than that?" the man asked.

"I don't think so," Caine said. "The temple is on top of a fairly sheer rise of land, and I can't put the ship down there. The nearest clearing we'll find will be about eight or ten miles away."

Mrs. Fairchild walked to her chair and sat down. "That means, then, that we'll have to go through that much country where the cats are?"

Caine didn't answer, and the man returned to gazing at his knees. Time moved slowly in the thick wet jungle.

"Show Mr. Caine your scar, Charles," the woman said, her voice sudden out of the silence.

Fairchild picked up his glass from the arm of his chair and held it tightly in front of his waist. The muscles along his bare forearms were ridged and his

knuckles paled as he held the glass.

"Don't be bashful," the woman said, smiling. "I'm sure Mr. Caine would like to see what a cat can do."

She looked at Caine as though she were about to tell him a delightfully domestic story that had been, until now, nurtured between just her husband and her. "This was a leopard, Mr. Caine. A long vicious leopard. Mr. Fairchild, you see, didn't hit him right, and so he got Charles from about here," she tapped herself just below the neck, "to here." She touched her waist. "It's a long scar, Mr. Caine. Isn't it, Charles? About three inches wide, and...."

The man brought his glass down against the arm of the chair. "Shut up, Janet. I'll tell you nicely. Just shut up!"

"*Charles*," she said, blinking in exaggerated surprise. "I just wanted to tell Mr. Caine, because he's hunted, too, and while I don't know if these grith cats are anything like leopards...."

The man's eyes had become wide and angry. "I won't tell you again, Janet."

"I'm sorry, Charles." She smiled at him assuringly and blinked again. "We're just excited about tomorrow, I guess, aren't we?"

Fairchild returned his stare to his glass, noticed it was empty, and filled it.

"Can't I interest you in a drink, yet, Mr. Caine?" Mrs. Fairchild said.

"Not right now," Caine said.

"Oh." Her voice pouted. "But I think we should celebrate. Here Charles and I have come all this way to find the Screece gem, and we're sitting within fifty miles of it, and I think we all ought to celebrate."

---

Fairchild spoke to Caine without raising his head. "Maybe Mr. Caine doesn't really believe in the existence of the Screece gem. Do you, Mr. Caine?" he said, looking up.

Caine took a cigarette from a package in his shirt. "I'm just paid to get you to a temple, not to think."

"You're evading the question," Fairchild said. His eyes were narrow now, and a bit glazed.

Caine lit his cigarette and blew smoke into the damp air. He kept his voice non-committal. "I've heard about it. Everybody in the Colony has heard about it."

"Correction," said Fairchild. "Everybody in the System has heard about it."

"It's a very popular myth," Caine agreed.

The man stood up. "It is not a myth, Mr. Caine. It exists and it's in that temple, do you hear me? There is no damned myth about it, just cold hard fact, and I'm going to find it and take it out of there! Is that clear?"

Caine watched the man's taut figure. He inhaled his cigarette. "I told you, Mr. Fairchild, I'm just paid to fly the ship and I'm not paid to think. I'm responsible for getting you to the temple. That's all."

"Listen," Fairchild said, crossing to Caine and reaching for the front of Caine's shirt. "Don't get insolent with me...."

Caine slapped the man's hand away.

"Charles!" the woman said.

The man blinked and touched his slapped hand against his chest. "Sorry, Mr. Caine," he said, finally. "Didn't mean to fly off that way. Little nervous, you see. All that time in space, searching around this way. We're just this close, and I'm getting too nervous." He turned back to his chair and sat down. His face became very sad again, and the lines about his mouth and eyes seemed deeper.

The woman laughed lightly. "You don't want to pay any attention to Charles when he's this way," she said to Caine. "It's just that this means so much to him, finding the Screece gem. It's worth the wealth of the System, they say, and so Charles has to have it, Mr. Caine. Because he hasn't got any more money."

"For heaven's sake, Janet," the man pleaded.

"Are you ashamed of being poor?" she asked with false concern. She stood up and began pacing back and forth, and Caine noticed the easy way she moved, her hips swaying, the muscles of her long legs rippling. "No, he's



not ashamed of being poor," she said, looking at Caine. "He's *afraid* of it, aren't you, Charles?"

Fairchild tipped his glass to his lips, and when he brought it down, Caine could see that it was empty again.

The man refilled the glass and held it in front of him, looking into it, as though he might find another world there, a peaceful world, where there weren't any cats or beautiful women with reddish hair, a world where there might be peace and no fear. He raised the glass, trying to taste of that world. His eyes were getting filmy.

"I'll tell you why he's afraid of being poor, Mr. Caine," the woman went on. "It's because not only is Charles a yellow punk when it comes to cats, but he's frightened of losing his wife, aren't you, Charles?"

Caine felt himself tensing under the cutting lilt of the woman's voice. He was observing something, he knew, that should have been contained in the seal of marital privacy. But here he was, caught in the middle of it, while the woman swung back and forth, and the man seemed to crumple further into his chair, hanging on to the glass of Scotch, as though that were all he had left to hang on to.

And tomorrow they had ten miles of grith country to span on foot. Sweet, Caine repeated to himself, really sweet.

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## II

"Charles, you see," the woman said, stopping and turning to Caine, "thinks the only way he can hold me is with money. And now he's put every penny he had left into this hunt so that he can find the Screece gem and keep his lovely wife. And do you know what, Mr. Caine?" She placed her hands gently on her hips, and Caine could see the faintest swinging movement in them. "He's right, you see."

Caine remained very silent.

"He *has* to find the Screece gem," the woman said, smiling whitely, "or lovely Janet is gone, slipped right out of his hands. And Charles is just a

poor little sheep with gray hair and a two inch scar, who'll be cold and alone, while Janet—"

"Stop it, damn it!" Fairchild said, but he didn't get up and his voice was thick.

"—while Janet," the woman said, her voice even and relentless, "will be sleeping with someone else who can afford her, and poor old Charles will shiver in his damned freezing bed, all alone, thinking about that, wondering who it is, burning up his ancient jealous liver!" The woman whirled to face her husband.

The man tightened both hands around his glass, and Caine could see the whiteness about his mouth. The woman began to laugh, a soft, peeling laugh that got into Caine's brain because of the very softness of it.

She walked back to her chair and lifted her own glass. Her laughter stopped while she drank, and then it started again. She turned to look at her husband, and her eyes danced and her lips curved. Her body shook with the laughter.

"Who do you think it'll be?" she asked her husband. "If you don't find the gem?" She turned to Caine. "Mr. Caine, do you have any money? I mean, perhaps you wouldn't need as much money as Charles. I might make some compensation for virility, you know."

Caine disregarded her. "Mr. Fairchild, we have some rugged country to cover tomorrow. This is your party, of course, but if you keep on drinking...."

"If I keep on drinking?"

Caine examined the man's eyes and his slack mouth. "Nothing," Caine said. "Nothing." At least, he decided, the Scotch might stop the needling and the pressure for the man. He deserved that much, perhaps.

"You didn't answer me, Mr. Caine," the woman said. "About you and me. I'd like you to answer, so that my husband knows before he falls out of his chair, you see."

"I think we all ought to get some sleep," Caine said quietly.

"Mr. Caine, really? So sudden? I'd have to check your bankbook first, of course. Although if you give me your word...."

"If you don't mind," Caine said, his voice harsh, "I'd like to be left neutral in whatever you and Mr. Fairchild might have in conflict."

"Oh," she said. "Well, that's just because you haven't seen the full potential. Let me show you what you'd be getting for your money—the way Charles saw it." She raised her glass again, drank, and stood up to cross to the ship. She climbed the ladder to the cabin, very gracefully, and touched the switch of the radio. Music pealed into the warm air.

It was minor music, issuing from the Colony station, music that had been taken from the native Venusian melodies. It had been converted and fitted to the heavy rhythm of Earth's ancient Africa, and it seemed suddenly to become a part of this jungle of Venus.

The woman stood in the doorway, and then she moved down the ladder, as though it were one sliding motion. She remained there, her back against the silver metal of the ship, swaying her hips, moving her shoulders.

"I was a dancer, you see, Mr. Caine. I worked in a very expensive club in Habrill, on Mars. I was very popular and very good, and sweet Charles took me away from it all, didn't you, Charles?"

Fairchild, Caine could see, was having trouble focusing his eyes, but the rhythmic music was heavy in the air and it beat against the ears, and Caine knew that the man was aware of what was happening.

The woman began moving easily toward Caine, her movement a practised swinging motion of hips and shoulders. "This is what Charles took me away from, Mr. Caine, by the gentle touch of gold," she said. "'Come with me,' he said, and he fitted diamonds to my ears and rings to my fingers. 'Let me take you away from the damned searching eyes of every man on Mars. Let me hide you, so no one can see you or touch you, but me, and I'll give you all I own.' Isn't that right, Charles?" she said, looking at him with narrow gleaming eyes.

The man lifted his glass and slowly drained it. He let it fall to the ground with a breaking crunch, while the woman kept time with the rhythm, with her hips and her shoulders, slight swinging motions that only intimated.

"Only now," the woman said, "poor Charles doesn't have anything more to give, and so here I go again...."

She raised her hands over her head and cracked her palms together. Her hips swung and her shoulders shook. She caught her fingers in her hair, her teeth white and biting, while her whole body shivered. It was a rippling gyration of muscle and pink skin, building, furious.

Fairchild pushed himself out of the chair. His eyes were wild and vacant. "Don't ..." he said, and his words were meshed together so that it was a hoarse sound, full of anguish.

The woman laughed, a wild laugh that blended with the music and the frenzied movement of her body. She whirled and slapped her hands together and her body quivered.

The man staggered a step forward. "Janet, don't, please...." He fell forward, sprawling over the ground. Gradually, the woman ceased her movement, while her laughter rang through the wet jungle.

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*The gray-caped figures hold motionless around the muddy silver orb. A green head cocks. Another. The golden walls encase them, and only a circular opening near a tip of a spire brings in dim light and a little of the wispy outside vapor. Fingers disengage and a green extends from a gray cape. The hand sweeps in a downward slice, splitting by symbol, purity from evil. A second hand imitates. A third. A dozen. Voices flute to the cloudy orb. A cat snarls. Minds probe.*

---

The light was dimming, and she was a dark curving figure, standing over the crumpled figure of the man. The music pounded relentlessly. Caine stood up.

"Each time I make one of these trips," he said, looking at the motionless form of Fairchild, "I promise myself it'll be the last, and I'm promising myself again, right now."



The woman stood silent, and there was just her smiling mouth and the white teeth and the reddish hair. "But this one isn't over, yet, Mr. Caine. We still have a long way to go." Her eyes danced.

"That's right, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said, bending to lift the man. "Unfortunately, that's right."

He picked the man up while the woman watched, and he carried him to the ship. He climbed to the cabin, working against the surprising weight of the smaller man. For his age, Fairchild was a very tough, sinewy man who looked as though he had spent most of his life fighting through strange and varied wilds, constantly in search of new adventures and thrills.

Caine laid the man across a bunk built into the rear of the ship's cabin. The tip end of the wide scar was visible now, showing above Fairchild's open shirt, and the thin lines about the eyes and mouth were like written entries in his face, telling of too much Scotch and perhaps too much of the reddish-haired woman. All that he lacked, Caine thought wryly, was the empty bank account to show the price he had paid for the love of the devilish woman.

Caine straightened and walked back through the cabin, snapping off the radio.

He jumped to the ground. The light was very dim now, and the woman was only an outline. The screams of kiitz birds were in the air again, and in the distance, the thrumming monotony of the falls.

"You can use the cabin with your husband, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said briskly. "I'll get some blankets and sleep out here."

"Aren't there animals?"

"Not around here," Caine said. "I'll make a fire. If you want something to eat I'll get it out of the cabin for you."

"No, thank you, Mr. Caine," the woman said, sitting down in her chair. "I'll just enjoy the rest of my drink, if you don't mind."

"It's up to you," Caine said shortly. He was very careful to keep his eyes away from her. You handled a woman like that best, he knew, by keeping your eyes away from her.

He gathered wood from beneath the wet outer layer of the jungle floor. He bent to light the fire just as the darkness enveloped the clearing. The flames flickered and licked upward, sending their shifting yellow light into the surrounding foliage.

Caine straightened from the fire.

"Do you like my dance?" the woman asked, softly.

"I didn't see it for your husband, Mrs. Fairchild," Caine said, and he returned to the ship where he got several blankets. He placed them near the fire.

"He's not around now," the woman said.

Caine looked at her finally. "He is as far as I'm concerned."

"You're so noble, Mr. Caine."

"I'm not anything," Caine said. "I'm just a guide who gets paid for taking people where they want to go. Nothing more, do you understand, Mrs. Fairchild?"

"No," she said, smiling at him.

Caine walked to his chair and sat down. "We have a tough day ahead of us, Mrs. Fairchild, and we'll need all the strength we have to get through that stretch of jungle. This is a different jungle than you've seen before. Venus breeds some terrible country, and where we're going is that kind of country. I haven't been there myself, so I can't even predict what it'll be like. But I've circled it in the ship and it's thick and alive. I don't trust it. So you can stay up, if you like, and I'll be glad to stay awake myself, but I'd advise some sleep right now."

Mrs. Fairchild stood up slowly, her fingers drifting over her waist. "I'll tell you, Mr. Caine. You're not the kind of man I like to argue with. I've had just enough liquor to feel perfectly agreeable to anything, anyway. So I'll get ready for bed, but I'm sorry you didn't enjoy my dance. Let's do this. You wait while I get ready, and then we'll have one nightcap together, a sort of dancing nightcap. Are you interested, Mr. Caine?"

Caine lit a cigarette slowly, watching the blaze of his lighter. He snapped the lighter shut. "I'm interested in both you and your husband, Mrs.

Fairchild."

"To hell with my husband," she said, her teeth showing between her lips. She lifted her glass and drank all that was in it. "Relax, Mr. Caine," she said, walking toward the ship. "Enjoy yourself."

Caine noticed that the liquor had taken hold of the way she walked, so that she swayed a little, but there was still the grace there and the swing, and it was hard to disregard.

I hope she doesn't come out of there, Caine thought. I hope she just falls asleep and leaves me alone, and that tomorrow goes very quickly and smoothly.

---

But when Caine had watched the flames lick at the settling night for a few minutes and had finished his cigarette, he heard the sound again. The sound of music, muffled by the silver body of the ship. Wilder now, with heavier drums, seasoned into a more biting sound by the night and the flickering flames. Caine was aware of the blood in his veins and the pulse in his temples.

All at once, the door of the cabin was kicked open and the music rose in the air. The woman stood in the doorway, her hands gripping the silver frame tightly. She wore a black nightgown, made of shimmering stuff that was as thin as the fine mist in the air. Her hair had been let down and it fell over her shoulders and her back. Her feet were bare and very white beneath the black gown.

She stood motionless, her fingers tight against the frame, as though holding herself against the music. The melody disappeared then, and there was only the drums, rolling, and finding a punctuation that became all that existed in the night. The woman leaped from the doorway and she touched the ground, wriggling. Her feet were wide-spaced and her hands searched through her hair, lifting it from the nape of her neck. She bent forward suddenly, so that her hair was a reddish swirl against the light of the leaping flames.

She straightened slowly, one hand sliding her hair back, so that Caine could see her eyes dancing with her body, and she began moving toward him, shoulders swinging, hips pivoting. Caine kept his hands tight against the arms of his chair, his eyes narrow. The woman was a writhing movement beneath the black veil-like gown. She twisted and whirled and finally, she stopped in front of Caine, chin high, one hand still half-thrust through the soft thick hair. Her eyes glowed.

"Nightcap," she said, her voice breathless.

Caine shifted carefully in his chair. "I'm not thirsty," he said.

The woman's hand snapped from her hair, and the relaxed suppleness of her body tightened.

"I remember a man," Caine said through his teeth, "who's a dozen yards away, sleeping in the protection of alcohol, because a cheap burlesque queen is drawing out his blood until he's damned near dead. I can see through the pink skin, Mrs. Fairchild, and what I see makes me sick. You don't interest me at all, and you never will because I don't like the sight of hate and selfishness and just plain rottenness."

She struck him across the face with one hand and then the other. The fury burned in her eyes and her body trembled with it. She struck him again and again, and Caine's face bled where a ring ripped his skin.

He sat very still, his hands remaining against the chair arms. "You've just lost yourself a boy, Mrs. Fairchild. Put your clothes on, we're flying back to the Colony. You can find yourself somebody else for this, because I've had enough."

He started to rise, but she put one hand against his chest, and the fury was gone out of her eyes, and there were tears instead.

"Please," she said, and Caine could hear the tears going into her voice. "I'm sorry. I'm awfully sorry. Let me talk to you first, please." She knelt to the ground and watched Caine while thin tears ran down her cheeks.

"About what, Mrs. Fairchild?" Caine said coldly.

"I don't know why I did what I did," she said, touching at the tears. "Too much Scotch, I think. Only I'm still a dancer and it's in my blood. It isn't



cheap burlesque, Mr. Caine. It's something deep inside me and I can't help it."

"Nice trait," Caine said, "for a man's wife."

"I had that coming. I've got a lot coming, only the resentment for his drinking, the way he's tried to own me, keeps coming out and I want to hurt him. I know it isn't right, but it's what I do and I want to stop doing it. He's worried, and it comes out with what he says and what he does, and so I fight him. He thinks if he doesn't find this gem, he's going to lose me."

"Isn't he?" Caine asked, his eyes thin.

"No," she said quietly. "I'm frightened of him and I feel alone with him. But I won't leave him."

"Like I told you," Caine said, "I'm just a hired man. What my customers think or do between themselves is none of my business."

"You're not that cold," she said, looking into his eyes.

"I'm that cold."

She shook her head stubbornly. "Be kind to me. You can. For just this one moment, when I'm not alone or afraid, when there's just this one moment before tomorrow—when it starts all over again."

Caine didn't answer, but he relaxed in his chair slightly and leaned back.

She smiled at him and it was a warm simple smile with all the hardness and sarcasm erased. "Would you have one drink with me? One small drink to seal the night up, so maybe you won't remember me so badly, so maybe you'll think I've got some heart and human feelings?"

Caine waited, watching her shiny eyes. "One drink," he said.

She smiled and stood up, returning to the side of the ship where Fairchild had set up his portable bar. She poured two glasses, and while Caine watched her, he noticed that in her straight, motionless posture, the animal liteness had disappeared. She was very simple—and naive-looking, and when she returned, he saw that the tears were still wet on her face.

She handed him a glass, and she held her own in the air. "A trite toast—here's to two people who met in the Venus night ... briefly."

"Two people," Caine repeated, lifting his own glass. The Scotch burned down his throat.

She kneeled again and smiled at him. Caine noticed then that the music was still beating into the night air, and that the black gown was still very thin. He turned his glass up again, to hurry through the drink. Even in her simplicity and tears he didn't trust himself.

The Scotch seemed to take hold of his blood and he could feel it racing in his veins.

He lifted the glass a third time, and the hand that held it seemed suddenly detached from his own movement. A singing began in his head and then disappeared, and when he looked at her, the smiling lips were redder and the shining teeth were whiter. The music pulsated in his head, seeming to beat against his brain.

"What...?" he began, and his voice was thick. He shook his head and looked at his glass. It fell out of his hand.

"A little witch's potion," she said, rising. "Something from the Martian cauldron. Quick and oh, so effective."

He fought the feeling that caught hold of him. His brain seemed to deaden until there was only the drums inside his head, and his senses became alive and burning. He could see her before him, and she began to sway back and forth, her hands moving in front of her face. He caught hold of the chair arms to keep his own hands from reaching out.

He tried to cling to reason, but his hands wanted to escape. The flames of the fire flickered somewhere in the distance, and in front of him the black-covered body began to move in rippling shivers. The moving pink hands rose in the air, and there was a shimmer of concealed muscles, dancing, dancing.

He clung to the chair, gritting his teeth, but the drums pounded at his senses, over and over, and the lips smiled and the white teeth shone and the pink body moved in time with the drums.

"Not yet?" he heard her say, somewhere far away.

And the body turned slowly, convoluting in a shimmering dance of thin blackness.

Caine lost his grip on the chair, and he was moving his hands. He heard the laughter, high in the air, stinging his ears and he couldn't stop himself. He was listening to the laughter when his fingers touched skin, and there was only blackness after that.

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*Minds examine. Judge. Decide. "Grith?" says a round voice. Golden bars snap open. A black cat crouches. Green heads nod within their hoods. The cat leaps, crouches again, and then begins to stalk. Lidless eyes turn to the cold orb. Voices chant. "Grith?"*

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### III

He awoke as a boot caught the side of his head. He rolled across the ground, the pain exploding inside his head. The boot found him again. Another time, above his eyes. He moaned, trying to make his muscles work, but it was as though he were still caught in a nightmare.

"Filthy damned swine," he heard, and his eyes watched a fist come out of the misty air to smash against his cheek. He rolled again, burying his face against the ground, trying to hide, to protect himself until he could find his senses and his coordination.

"You'll kill him." It was a woman's voice, saying this, a lilting feminine voice that was very, very familiar. Caine tensed himself, waiting for the next blow.

"Get up," a man said.

Caine felt the boot against his legs. He turned over slowly and pulled himself to a sitting position. He shook his head, but the thick mist that was in the morning air seemed to have gotten into his brain. His arms and legs felt as though lead had been poured into his veins.

Slowly it came back to him. The woman. The Scotch. He searched the fog-filled area in front of him. Fairchild, his mouth an ugly line, watched him

and in his hand was Caine's pistol. The woman was behind Fairchild, still in the black gown, and Caine could see that it was torn.

"I'd kill you right now," Fairchild said, his voice hoarse with rage, "but I want that gem. Get up."

"Darling," the woman said to her husband, while her eyes danced at Caine. "He's such a mess."

Caine tried to swallow and even that was difficult. Every part of his body had been taken hold of by the drug that had been put into his liquor, and each movement was a task he was certain he couldn't complete. He raised a hand slowly to his face and his fingers came away sticky.

"Get up!" Fairchild growled, his eyes vicious thin slits.

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Caine got to his knees and fell flat again. He clutched at the ground, waiting for the crushing boot. It came, and he tried again. He got to his knees the second time and then, inch by inch, he stood up. For a moment it seemed as though his head were floating away from his shoulders, and he looked down at his body, thinking that what he saw surely belonged to someone else, a limp, ragged body, cut and bruised with no clothes. He was falling again.

Fairchild caught Caine's arm and jerked him upright. "I'll give you two minutes to get your damned clothes on, Caine, and get behind the controls of that ship."

He looked at Fairchild stupidly. The man shook him. Caine turned around and searched for his clothes beside the dead fire. He staggered and groped,

and twice, blackness covered his eyes and he went to his knees.

Finally, he stood, weaving, clothed haphazardly, and he was vaguely aware that blood was sliding down his chin, dripping onto his jacket. He touched the blood with a finger and it didn't mean anything to him.

The man turned to his wife. "The same goes for you. Get into the cabin!"

"Charles," she pleaded. "He made me drink so *much*."

"Go on!" Fairchild said, waving the pistol.

She smiled crookedly and walked toward the ship. The mist lay over the jungle so thickly that the ship, not more than ten or twelve yards away, was barely visible. Caine heard the door of the cabin opening and closing.

Fairchild pointed the gun at Caine's stomach again. "You'd better watch every damned step you take," he said. "This gun is going to stay on you until I get that Screece gem, and the only reason you're alive, you bloody louse, is because I have to have it. Do you understand?"

Caine searched for his voice, and it came out thick and strained. "Won't fly you...." He watched the man's face whiten, and the gun trembled in Fairchild's hand. Then the gun was swinging through the air and Caine watched it coming until it struck him above the eyes.

---

Water dripped from his face and his chest, and he fought for air. His brain was a singing maize of pain, and the numbness in his arms and legs kept him riveted to the ground. He opened his eyes, finally, as he felt himself being dragged across the clearing. The rungs of the ladder leading to the ship's cabin were against him. He moved his head and his teeth struck silver metal. His coordination was gone and he couldn't tell what his movements were going to be.

"Up the steps," he heard Fairchild say behind him.

He lifted his hands, fitting them around the rungs of the ladder, and he began to pull himself up. It was an inching effort. Blood got in his eyes, and his head whirled into far-away spins that had nothing to do with the



movement of his body. He hung onto the ladder and climbed one rung, then another. He teetered near the top, and Fairchild pushed him into the cabin where he sprawled.

He could hear Fairchild coming up behind him, and the door slammed shut.

Caine rolled onto his back and looked up. She was standing over him in fresh white shorts and blouse. Her hair now was very neat and groomed, and her pink skin was radiant. She smiled at him, her teeth showing very whitely. "You're a pretty thing, Mr. Caine."

He knew he should have felt the rage then, the instinctive fury for what she had done to him. But the drug had left him with nothing but enough reaction to try to fight for consciousness and strength.

"Clean him up," Fairchild said. "Fast. Then we're leaving."

The woman got soap and water from the rear of the cabin. She washed Caine's face, her fingers cruel against the cuts and swellings. She raked the cuts with stinging medicine, and Caine lay unmoving, trying to let time feed him new strength. She stood up, finally, looking at her husband.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Let's go, Caine."

Caine looked at the man's face, at the set of his mouth. He looked at the gun and then at the man's boots. He pulled himself up and staggered into the seat behind the controls. His movements on the controls were slow and rough. He looked at Fairchild once, as the jets fired into the fog-laden air. "Can't fly this way. No balance, coordination. Visibility's rotten, I...."

The man moved the pistol into Caine's side.

Caine faced the instrument panel, trying to keep from weaving. He moved his hands and felt the ship rising. He tried to keep the rise steady and gradual, but his hands jerked. The ship tipped and swung toward the side of the clearing. Thick vine-trees came out of the fog, and Caine forced the ship straight up, the jets roaring. The silver jetcopter swung back and forth, climbing, slipping, dropping. He couldn't move the controls properly.

The sound of the waterfall was in their ears then, and Caine jammed the ship to the opposite side. They touched the tops of the trees, and finally he brought it up enough to be over the jungle and the rocks.

Instinct gave Caine vague direction, and he kept his altitude exaggerated to insure against his faulty senses.

"Some say the Screece gem is a diamond," the woman said, dreamily. "Some say it's an emerald. Some say it's a ruby. What do you say it is, Charles?"

Fairchild sat motionless, silent, in the seat beside Caine. He still held the pistol so that the muzzle pointed into Caine's side.

"Don't try anything, Caine," he said. "I'll smash us all to hell before I'll give up."

Caine flew the ship.

"It's romantic, isn't it?" the woman said, from behind Caine. "The most valuable gem in the world, deep in the Venusian jungle, protected by the long, long cats, and my sweet Charles is going to get it for me. Bless you, Charles. You are an extraordinary husband. I hope the cats don't get you."

Caine heard the words, but his brain was too slow and thick with the drug to understand the sharpness of her words. He only moved the controls, feeling the gun Fairchild held against him. In this condition, he knew that if he tried to fool Fairchild, the man—his nerves tightened the way they were—would not hesitate to pump the pistol into Caine's body.

Caine worked his fingers numbly. If only he could find his control, his response....

They were approaching the area where Caine thought the temple should be. "Somewhere," he said, and his tongue was clumsy as he tried to speak. "Somewhere."

---

The mist was like layers of soft tissue around the ship. The visibility was not much more than the length of the wings. He eased the ship down, slowly, foot by foot. A golden pike-shaped object appeared beside the right wing. Caine brought the ship up.

He grinned, a sly sudden grin. "Temple," he said foolishly. "Couldn't have hit it closer sober." He thought about the cleverness of what he had just said, laughing over it inside, noticing with a queer detachment how his words came out as though he had been drinking. The damned drug, he thought, but the laughter came up through him and it echoed through the cabin.

Caine felt the gun go hard against his side, the steel bruising his ribs. His laughter was cut short, as though a gag had been slammed across his mouth. "Can't help ..." he began.

But Fairchild's face was close to his own. "I'll make you laugh, Caine," the man whispered furiously. "I'll make you laugh over what happened. You think about that, eh? You think about that, you bloody...."

Vaguely, Caine knew the pistol had been pulled away from his ribs and was whipping toward his arm. He tried to shift out of its way, but he caught it squarely. The pain paralyzed him and even the sound of his cry was caught by his teeth snapping together. The ship wavered and slid downward.

"You stupid fool!" the woman screamed at her husband.

Caine felt himself sliding out of his seat, the pain throbbing. He caught himself and reached for the controls with his good hand. But he only half-balanced the ship before he saw the tip of a vine-tree. He cut the jets. The trees were all around them, enveloping them. He listened to the snap of the wings, heard distantly the splinter of glass, then nothing.

He was looking at the shape of his arm, when he found his vision again. It was bent peculiarly.

Whose crazy damned arm is that? he thought.

Somehow his brain wanted him to laugh, to slap the comic twisted arm, lying in front of his eyes. The laughter was in his mouth and through his teeth and he raised his good hand.

"Oh, Lord," he said, suddenly sober and feeling the blinding pain. He caught his good hand around a broken metal shaft, and the pain drew tears to his eyes.

I think I'll just go to sleep and die right now, he thought, wondering vaguely where his will and his strength had gone. Did they bleed out? he thought.

Did they fall out when the man struck him? Did the woman draw them out last night, like a vampire draws out blood?

Good night, he thought, dimly, dropping his hand from the shaft. Good-by. He closed his eyes.

He was screaming, he knew, and somewhere he heard a man's voice say, "The gauze. The gauze." It was a grating sound, like a metal wheel turning over gravel. He opened his eyes, and Fairchild was wrapping the gauze around his broken arm, splinted from a part of the cabin panelling.

Fairchild looked at him. There was a thick growth of gray whiskers, stubbling the man's chin and cheeks, Caine noticed, and the man's eyes were not sad any more. They appeared to burn, like his wife's. He grinned at Caine and it was a humorless grin, his teeth set tightly together. "You're lucky, Caine," he said. "I set it instead of cutting it off."

Caine watched the grinning stubbled face. He felt a shudder trembling through his body, and the sweat on his face turned cold. I'm not Nic Caine, he thought. Surely not. I'm just a frightened, chilled man with no guts or reason. I am a rubber puppet, that's who I am. Pull the strings, Mr. Puppet Master.

"Get up," said Fairchild.

"That's right," Caine mumbled, smiling crazily.

He pushed himself up and stood swaying in the cabin of the broken ship. He looked around, his eyes suddenly fierce. "Is this twisted wreck my pretty silver ship?" he asked loudly. "Oh, no!" he said, and tried to kick at a splintered panel.

He felt himself pitching forward, and he caught out his good hand, steadying himself. The drug, the pain, he thought deep in his brain, my damned arm.

But he was like two people, watching each other, shifting back and forth from one identity to another. Rational, irrational, laughing, crying.

He looked at the woman. She was huddling near the rear of the cabin. Blood spilled in a thin line down the side of her face from a cut above her eyes. "We'll never get out," she said. Her voice was a high-pitched sound with no change of tone in it. "We'll never get out."

"Why don't you dance for us?" Caine said, blinking with the brightness of his suggestion.

"Move, Caine," the man said, prodding Caine's back. "She'll dance when I give her the gem."

Caine crawled slowly out of the cabin. The undercarriage had been smashed, and the cabin was level with the ground. It was like going into a sea of vapor when he got out of the ship.

How long? he thought, looking at his splintered arm. How long would the drug hang onto his brain? This was not himself. This was a weak spinning scarecrow who was drunk on dope.

Then the pain smashed into his awareness. It disappeared as suddenly. He was in agony, then there was only the foolish whirling of his brain. He turned slowly, like a limp mannequin, searching the blankness of the mist.

"Where am I?" he said aloud.

"About one mile from Heaven," said Fairchild behind him, holding now a rifle from Caine's cabin rack. "Janet?" the man said to the cabin. "Take one of those damn rifles. Mr. Caine is going to lead us to his happy end. The gem first," he said to Caine. "Then you. I'll let you touch it before you die."

The woman came out of the cabin, a rifle in her hands. She pointed it at Fairchild. "We'll never get out of here," she repeated, in her sing-song tone.

"Not without me," Fairchild said quietly, looking at the pointed rifle. He turned his back to her.

The woman's face had lost its pink radiance, and it was white except where the blood trickled.

"Let's go, Caine," Fairchild said.

"I don't know where to go," Caine said stupidly.

"Up," Fairchild said. "Just lead the way up. I don't need you to know where the temple is now. You got us much closer than we'd planned, you know. You're just bait now, Caine. Bait for the cats. Remember the cats?"

"I won't go through that," the woman said, staring at the mist around them.

"All right," Fairchild said. "Stay here and meet the cats alone. I'll bring the gem back to you, if there's anything left of you. But, by heck, you're going to get it, do you hear me?" He faced her again. "You're going to get that gem if I have to kill seventeen cats, and Caine, and even you. Dead or alive, you're going to get it, do you hear?"

The woman was pale, sick-looking, and Caine tried to remember how she had looked the night before. It was too much effort.

"Move," said the man, prodding Caine. "Move, Mr. Caine."

---

#### IV

Caine moved, trying to find some hate to use on himself for letting the sight of the rifle in the man's hands frighten him the way it did. But there was only a dull craziness within him, where the strength and nerve used to be. It was as though his steel had been melted and drained out of him by the drug.

I'm like a fish, he thought, pushing through the foliage, a fish with a broken fin. Do cats like fish with broken fins? he wondered. And the three of them were moving in a slow silent line through the Venusian wilds.

The sounds were in Caine's brain like a dozen records being played in a large echoing room. Teewh birds pointed their yellow beaks and came screaming at his head. The kiitz birds fluttered wildly out of the thickets, their frightened sound like the rake of giant fingernails across smooth slate.

But there were other things in this part of the jungle. Soft, gelatinous phules, the size of a man's hand, hung to the vine-trees, and when Caine passed them they shifted off the trees to his skin and began their search for juices out of his own body. He swept them away, one at a time, and more found him.

"I have nothing left in my veins for you," he said to one of them sticking to his waist. "Maybe warm tea?"

Fairchild touched the rifle against his back, and Caine pushed the phule away.

A snake-like trill wriggled in front of him, its purple and black skin glistening as though it had been drawn through oil. It was about four feet long and as thick as a heavy rope. Its never-closing eyes stared at Caine. "Hello, friend," Caine said, reaching out his good arm. The trill slid away.

That's what I really am like, he decided, wondering when the pain would come shattering into him again. I am like the trill. I ought to lie down on the ground and start wriggling, instead of walking.

The pain found him then, and his brain was cleared briefly of the veil of the drug. The pain lasted longer this time. Drug wearing off, he thought, only now I don't want it to. And then he thought of the cats; the terrible cats, the horrible cats....

His brain spun and the veil dropped. What was I thinking about? he said to himself. Cats? Was it the cats? Why? Cats are pretty, especially grith cats. They are black, like the spots on a leopard. And what makes me think of a leopard? I'll ask the man behind me, he thought, and stopped.

"Go on, Caine," Fairchild whispered. "Go on, damn you."

Leopards? Leopards? Caine asked himself, and he pushed on through the growth, feeling the ground rising more steeply.

Razor plants licked at his skin, until his flesh was slit finely in a dozen places. The gauze around his arm became a fuzzy mass, like rags. If I see a cat, Caine promised himself, I'll take a splint off my arm and hit him over the head with it.

The mist hung around them like a hungry shroud, eager to cloak everything on the planet with its muggy wetness. Then the growth lessened a bit, and Caine saw bare rock here and there. It was easier to move and he did not jar his arm as much, but somewhere in his brain an old knowledge told him that this would be certain grith territory, and every step now was a step closer to the black face with the orange eyes and sharp teeth.

Caine felt himself growing weaker, and each motion was a building effort. The heat had risen, but there was no sweat on his face now, only a burning dryness. His head seemed to start its floating again, and he thought for a moment that it might drift up over the trees, like a balloon.

The idea was very funny to him, and laughter grew inside of him. He grinned, feeling his stomach move with it, until suddenly he was freezing his movement, laughing into the mist-filled air, staring straight into the orange eyes of a grith cat.

The laughter stopped in his mouth. He blinked once. The cat didn't move. Fairchild and the woman, Caine knew, had halted behind him. The cat's eyes shown through the mist like fiery globes. I'll pet him, Caine thought with great detachment, right on his black head, and then he'll go away.

The cat was motionless.

Caine knelt slowly, looking straight into the cat's eyes. It was about ten yards away.

Caine turned to look at Fairchild. The man was on one knee, the rifle pointing at the cat's head. The woman waited behind him, half-crouched, holding her rifle tight against her side.

Caine looked back to the cat, moving his head slowly. He could see the great swishing tail, moving back and forth, back and forth.

Why doesn't the man shoot? Caine asked himself. Why is he waiting this way?

Time halted.

Caine edged his look back to Fairchild. You crazy fool, he thought. You have the rifle in your hands, you....

And then he saw the sweat dripping from the man's face, the staring eyes, drained of their focus by fear. The man's body was trembling, and Caine thought: he's going to drop the rifle out of his hands, he's....

---

The woman screamed. "Kill him! Kill him—" The rifle exploded in her hands and bullets whined through the air. Caine felt a hot sting in his shoulder. And the cat was a roaring, crazed thing that swept through the air, a flash of shining blackness.



The air came apart with the sound of the rifle and the screams of the woman and the roaring of the cat. Caine waited, as though this were a dream he was watching. The cat had leaped straight for the woman, and she was tangled with the black and white claws now, so that Caine saw only a rolling, screaming mass.

Then there was no more sound from the woman, just a broken, bleeding body, and the cat was crouching again, the black coat stippled with red, the orange eyes wild.

Caine blinked, realizing that Fairchild was sprawled beside him, a bullet through his head, his hands just touching his unfired rifle.

I can't do it, Caine thought, looking at the rifle. Too slow. I'll have those claws in me before I can even touch it.

The cat hugged closer to the ground, its muscles bunching.

I'll try, Caine thought, and his hand was moving toward the rifle, slowly, like a floating feather, it seemed. Jump, he said silently to the cat. I can't do it.

"Grith?" sounded a flute-like voice.

The cat was motionless.

"Grith?"

The cat rose slowly and backed, tail swishing. Green hands slapped together, and the cat turned and disappeared.

Caine placed his palms flat against the ground, propping himself, and watched the approaching figures. The mist seemed to be disappearing, and he could see more clearly the green skin and the large, unblinking eyes that looked out solemnly from beneath the hoods of the gray capes.

*Priests?* Caine wondered. *From the temple?* I didn't know there were Venusians here, he said to himself, and although it was a very slight disclosure, as though he had suddenly learned that there were more men on Venus than women, he was astounded and impressed with it. "Well," he said, grinning up at them as they stopped beside him. "Well, well."

He got to his knees and, still smiling, looked at his arm where the gauze had come loose. He shook his head in wonderment. He narrowed his eyes and

examined the blood trickling from the surface wound in his shoulder. "Well, well," he repeated, and stood up.

The woman was a mangled shape on the wet ground, and the man lay very still. Caine looked from one to the other. "Yes, yes," he said, aloud.

He turned to the gray-caped Venusians and found the somber eyes watching him, in their kindly way. One of them reached out and touched Caine's shoulder above the broken arm. Others moved to the bodies of the man and woman and bent over them, making floating motions with their delicate green hands.

*Praying?* Caine wondered, watching these motions. He shrugged. He couldn't hold a thought very long.

The mist was evaporating quickly. Caine, looking up, thought he could see a pointed outline. Then suddenly—high above—there was the golden temple, a shimmer of towering spires of yellow beauty, splashed over by brilliant sunshine.

Caine turned his face up to a strange sun, a blinding sun that sent its bright life down through the leaves. And Caine was aware that the caped figures were kneeling all around, praying in a jumble of voices, their hands stretching up to the infrequent visitor of light.

What are they saying? Caine asked, smiling queerly. What is it they're saying? Screece? The Sun? The most valuable gem on Venus? Is that what they worship in the golden temple? Caine looked at the man and then at the woman. Is that what they had come from Earth and from Mars to find? The Sun? He felt the laughter starting in him again, as though it were someone else laughing. But his mouth widened and his teeth glistened in the sunlight, and he laughed long pealing laughter.

"Here it is," he said, staggering to the side of the man's body. "Here's your gem. Do you see it, Fairchild?" He pointed to the sky. "Give it to her," he said, laughing through his words. "No? I'll give it to her for you then. How's that?" He turned and moved slowly to the woman, stumbling. "Here," he said to the woman's staring eyes. "Here it is, you see?"

He looked at her face, shadowed by a large leaf of a vine-tree. He reached up and jerked the leaf away so that the sunlight fell full on her white face. "There! Take it! From Charles, to you, through me. Isn't it beautiful, so big,

so brilliant, so...." The laughter was getting in the way of his words and he could feel tears going down his face.

Pale green hands were holding him so that he wouldn't fall. And they were moving him away toward the temple. Caine looked at the large kindly eyes around him, feeling the hands guiding him. He couldn't stop laughing, only he wished to God he could, because it made the pain worse. And he couldn't take much more pain.

The lips of one of the green faces moved. "Wress?" said the voice, the word pronounced with difficulty.

"Rest?" Caine said, between spasms of laughter that he was quite certain now was crying, instead. "Yes, yes," he said, trying to wipe at his tears. "Oh, yes. Rest...."

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*Pale green hands extend again, palms down, and make sweeping downward motions, destroying evil. They are cupped then and raised, slowly, as though lifting purity to the top of the golden spires and beyond, where a bright sun burns. Feet step soundlessly and figures kneel, circling about a fist-sized orb. "Screece," says a flute-like voice. "Screece," says another. "Screece," say a dozen voices. Hands motion and the silver globe is no longer dull and cloudy, but filled with pure shining sunlight, so that it glitters like a thousand diamonds. Lips move silently. A cat whimpers somewhere, then sleeps. Silence.*

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GODS DECIDE \*\*\*

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