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THE INTERPLANETARY ADVENTURERS

by

Jack Bertin

Ever since the first American-Russian space ship landed on Mars, the Red Comet had been a hotbed of intrigue which attracted all sorts of interplanetary adventurers. Now the Martians were coming out of hiding in their cities far below the icecaps and moving into the plastic-domed metropolises which the expeditions from earth had constructed. A novel of a future which, after all, may be only a life's breath away.

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LENOX HILL PRESS

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Printed in the United States of America

THE INTERPLANETARY ADVENTURERS

— I —

— Brawl In The Red Comet —

THE RED COMET was always a hotbed of solar intrigue. Since the first American-Russian space ship landed on Mars and started constructing the big Martian space base, the off-limits bar which sprang up almost immediately in the barren red wastes just outside the spaceport had attracted all sorts of interplanetary adventurers.

The first to come were tough, hardy earthmen—the hi-liners and the "cat" men, the earth movers and the dam builders, men who graduated naturally from building airports on earth to spaceports on the planets.

Accidents were many, but the pay was high, the risks a challenge, and the men kept coming. Behind the construction men came the miners—hard-rock men who ven-

tured out into the desolate Martian wastes, probing for strange minerals, some of them dying in forgotten and unexplored canyons, others returning with exciting finds.

And as the base expanded, the Martians crept out of their underground cities deep below the Martian icecaps —a small red-skinned people, highly adaptable, cunning, fitted for survival.

They had learned to move equally well within the score of plastic-domed cities which succeeding earth expeditions had constructed. In between these domed cities still existed a barren and largely unexplored wasteland of whirling red dust storms and mysterious silences.

Earth probes fanned out from Mars. Highly sophisticated rocket ships made landings on Mercury and set up guidance beacons on the solar system's furthermost outpost, lonely, ice-bound Pluto. And on every planet they landed the earth men found life—most of it primitive. Only the Martians approximated earth men in their technology.

But the others learned fast.

With the advent of small back-pack gravity nullifiers and adaptive breathing devices, the people of the solar system found they could move and live within each other's cities. Within a hundred years of the first earth

landing, Mars became a sort of melting pot planet. Positioned between the inner and outer planets, it was a natural stopover for space bums, drifters, con men and adventurers. Vice, prostitution and illegal drug traffic flourished here, and the Red Comet was generally acknowledged to be the center of it.

Which was not exactly why I, Jon Smith, and my companions, Franj Orcus and Mirg De, were here, sitting at a back table, sipping a drink of the local *damaj,* a mild (and legal) mind-expanding concoction made from the distillation of Martian mushrooms.

We had just come in off a long dry space run on a battered Venusian freighter and were trying to decide, with no especial urgency, what to do next.

I was thinking of shipping home—I had not been back to earth in a long time.

That was when Leon Taber walked into the Red Comet.

Taber belonged in this place as much as a two-headed ape belongs in a women's fashion show. He was a handsome man, well built but small. Most of the saloon's customers towered over him, except for the Mercurians, and these were few in number and kept to themselves.

I recognized him immediately. Leon Taber was one

of earth's telecast stars; his face appeared on every telescreen and was beamed out to earth colonies on all planets.

A burly earth man, a space bum I knew from way back, straightened up in his chair as Taber walked past him to the bar.

"Hey!" he bellowed, turning and grinning at the rest of us. "Look what just blew in!"

The big Titanian in front of me shifted his weight slowly, his big, seven-fingered hand sliding down to his *sheev* pouch. The ugly, curved blade was a deadly weapon at close quarters and was much in favor among the Titanians. He tensed, watching Taber out of narrowed eyes—and all at once I got the feeling this Titanian had met Taber before, and feared him.

I leaned back in my chair and glanced at my companions. Mirg De was grinning, his small red face puckered in faint anticipation of trouble. The scrawny Martian was one of the best pilots ever kicked out of the Martian clipper fleet. His weakness for the stronger types of *demaj* had been his undoing. Drugs and liquor were taboo on the space fleets. And his too quick temper had not endeared him to his superior officers. All of which bothered Mirg De not at all.

On my left Franj Orcus lolled, and I recognized the danger in that giant frame. Slow-moving, slow-thinking, with his hairless poll and batwing ears, Franj was one of the best engineers in the business—when he worked. But like Mirg De, the big green-skinned Venusian found it hard to resist the lure of the flowing bowl, particularly after a long dry space run. He preferred the *kova* of his native planet, but wasn't so particular he wouldn't down any brand of liquid dynamite.

I, Jon Smith, made up the last of the trio, though not the least and not the greatest. In height I am midway between Mirg De's five feet and Franj Orcus' seven. I am a navigator by profession, an adventurer by instinct, a space rover by inclination. With Franj and Mirg, I have breasted countless far-flung bars, from the blistering mining town of Mercury to the icy wastes of Pluto.

We three had been broke before—and stranded. We were broke now, and had been wondering on which of the grimy, battered freighters at dock in the big spaceport we could find a berth. Then Mirg De heard that his brother's tramp freighter had just docked in Marsport One. He and Franj had gone to see him while I waited in the Red Comet to see how they made out.

They had just returned with the news we had jobs on

Borg De's ship, the Erine, when Leon Taber came onto the scene.

TABER WAS either out slumming, or he had taken a few drinks too many and didn't realize what he had stumbled into. He ordered a drink, sipped it, then turned and surveyed the room, a funny little grin on his face. The bartender leaned over and whispered something to him, but Taber ignored whatever he said.

His eyes met mine, and for a moment I saw recognition flicker in them. We had gone to space navigation school together, but that was a long while ago, and we had lost touch. As far as I knew, he had signed on with the government's expanding telecast system right after graduation.

Maybe he just wanted to say hello, for old times' sake. Anyway, he started toward our table, weaving a little unsteadily, and unhappily, bumped into a table on the way. One of the customers sitting around it had his drink jostled into his lap. This was all the Titanian needed (the Red Comet seemed to be full of the breed tonight). He stood up and backhanded Taber across the face.

The blow spun the telecast star into our table. I reached up and caught him as he started to fall.

"Hello, Leon," I said.

He twisted and stood up, wiping the small trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. His eyes were gray and level, boring into mine.

"Jon Smith!" His voice was cold. "I see you're in bad company—as usual."

The big Titanian was standing looking at us. The rest of the room was just spoiling for a fight.

I shrugged. "You can make it out the back door," I suggested. "We'll stop him if he comes after you."

Taber said: "I guess you never really knew me, Jon." He turned and looked at the Titanian. "I came in through the front door, and I'm going out the same way."

If he had slapped me in the face I couldn't have been more surprised. I heard Mirg De chuckle beside me, and I grinned shamefacedly. *Well, if the fool wanted it that way—*

That night I took back everything I had ever thought about the handsome televiz boys. About Leon Taber, anyway.

He had more nerve than a bantam rooster, or else he didn't know what he was doing. He walked back to the Titanian, who had decided to sit down, reached over and punched him in the mouth.

The yellow-skinned engineer came back out of his chair with a roar, and Taber sent him sprawling across the table with as pretty a right hook as I had ever seen.

That settled it for me. I couldn't stand by and see an old classmate get himself killed.

I had forgotten the big Titanian just in front of us. I caught just a glimpse out of the corners of my eyes, and when I swung around Mirg De was swinging for his ugly jaw.

The blow snapped the Titanian's head back. The *sheev* in his right hand glittered as he whirled around to face the small Martian. I cried out a warning to Mirg. But Franj Orcus took care of him. Flat-handed, he slapped the Titanian alongside the head, sending him sprawling across the nearby tables.

All blazes broke loose then!

The barmen grabbed up their pacifiers and came hurdling over the bar. The more timid of the customers ducked for the front and back doors, while those who liked a fight, mostly space sailors, took sides and joined in the brawl.

For a while there was only the thud of fists and pacifiers to punctuate the shouting and cursing, and my fists were busy, as were those of Franj Orcus and Mirg De. I

kept looking for Taber, but he had gone down somewhere, and I couldn't spot him.

I was doing all right until I got a clip on the skull from one of those pacifiers. I went down, but not out. Franj saw me go down and thought I was dead. He seemed to explode into rage then.

I had accounted for a barman and three barflies who had taken up the cause of the Titanian, probably because they had come off the same space freighter. Mirg De had disposed of two and was tangling with a third. By the time I got up as far as one knee, shaking my head to clear it, Franj had about cleaned out the space.

The Red Comet was a shambles. The big Titanian who had pulled a *sheev* was dead. A half-dozen senseless gladiators were strewn about the battered furniture.

I found Leon Taber among them, his pretty face cut and bloody. I yanked him to his feet and spun him around. Outside, the sound of helicopters warned that the spaceport police were on their way.

From across the room Mirg De called: "Come on, Jon! The police'll be here at any minute!"

Taber grabbed my arm as I turned to go. His white scarf was streaked with blood, and there was a strange glint in his eyes.

"Jon—I'm coming with you!"

I tried to shake him off.

"Hang it all, Jon!" he snapped. "I can't be found in here like this."

I took sympathy on him. "All right," I growled. "Come on."

We followed Franj and Mirg out the back door. We could hear the helicopters roaring in front of the saloon as we ran down the littered back alley behind the Red Comet.

Mirg De seemed to know this section of the big space docks the way a rat knows its warren. Before we had gone a hundred feet, he turned down a ramp that curved under the space platforms.

We paused for breath at the foot of the ramp, and Mirg frowned as he saw Taber at my side.

"I couldn't leave him there," I said definitely.

Franj Orcus shrugged. Mirg said: "Better give him your flight jacket, if you want to get through to the Erine without being stopped. And get rid of that scarf!"

A warehouse guard stopped us farther along. But Mirg De showed him his papers, told him we were space sailors he'd signed on for his brother, and in the dark, we got by.

At the far end of the underground level, we rode a dock lift to where the big space freighters were loading. Mirg made his way to the rattiest-looking of these, and when we got close I saw the name Erine on the bow.

Now I knew that Borg De, Mirg's brother, had no use for Franj and me. As a matter of fact, he had more than once accused us of leading his brother astray, as if Mirg could have been led astray by anyone if he didn't feel like straying!

So when we followed Mirg through the busy freight hatch, after a word with the second mate who was superintending the loading of cargo, I knew what to expect.

Mirg took us straight to the skipper's cabin, where we found Borg poring over some space charts. He looked up, and when he saw us his face seemed to get at least two shades redder than its usual coloring.

"I told you to sign on some space sailors," he barked to his brother; "not these two space bums! And—" he pointed a finger at Taber—"who in the blazes is that?"

The telecast star's face was badly bruised, and he seemed small and uncomfortable in my flight jacket. But he met Borg De's stare and grinned.

"These are them," Mirg said, very ungrammatically. Then he went on to do some smooth explaining. The

way he told it, Franj, Taber and I had saved *his* skin back in the Red Comet, and Borg, being his brother, ought to be grateful.

Anyway, he sold his brother on signing us on and clearing the docks as soon as possible. But I saw Mirg frown as he looked at Taber. And I knew what he was thinking, for it had me puzzled, too.

Why had the interplanetary televix star come along with us? Why was he signing on the Erine as a common sailor?

It didn't make sense.

— II —

— Treasure Ship —

WITH THE air locks closed and the hatches battened down, we took off with a roar of the Erine's rickety old rocket blasts. I was up forward in the navigation room, strapped in my swived chair and plotting our course. Franj Orcus, now engineer's mate, was aft in the engine room. Leon Taber, in patched-up oiler's clothes, was helping Franj in the engine room.

Mirg De stood just aft, in the co-pilot's seat, hanging onto his space straps, and grinned back at me. Soon Mars' gravity pull began to let go, and we turned on our keel gravitors. That made us all more comfortable and free to move about, and I was just relaxing a bit when a signal rang from the skipper's televisor.

"Police ship. Heave to!" was the command.

I stiffened and looked at Mirg De. We both looked out through the control panel. Far out in the star-studded space ahead of us, I could see the long patrol ship with its three red interplanetary police lights showing. It was moving along at about our speed, keeping pace.

I started to duck for the space suit lockers, with Mirg De right behind me, when Borg stopped us. I knew for whom the security police were looking and I was thinking that it would be wiser to take a chance on the space chutes than on the law. But Borg had a different idea.

"Just keep out of sight for a few minutes," he told us. "And don't worry. I got drunk with the captain of that patrol ship last night, and I think we can get by him without submitting to a search."

Then he went back and switched on the two-way televisor.

"Hello, Captain," he said. "What's the idea of holding me up this way? You know I have a long trip ahead of me. I can't afford to waste fuel standing by."

"I'm sorry, Borg," came the reply. "But we're beating the spaceways for three space bums who wrecked the Red Comet and kidnaped an interplanetary televiz star just a short time ago."

That one must have hit Borg right between the eyes. But he caught hold of himself quickly and said: "Why pick on me? What would I be doing with scum like that?"

"Just a routine checkup, that's all," said the patrol ship captain. "But as long as you say they ain't aboard you, I'll let you through."

"I've no passengers at all," declared Borg De. "Only my crew and a load of carotin for Titania."

"Okay. Look out for the revolution on that satellite," the captain said, and the vidi-screen went blank.

Borg De swung around to face us, his red face almost purple. "Wrecked a saloon! Kidnaped an interplanetary star!" He seemed to choke. "I was right the first time, calling you space bums. I should have called the security police back at Mars Spaceport One! I should have—"

"Easy, Borg—easy," soothed Mirg, grinning at his brother. "It isn't as bad as all that. We didn't kidnap that televiz man. He just tagged along with us."

Borg De listened as his brother explained what had actually happened back in the Red Comet. The rage had left his face by the time Mirg finished, and I could see that something had come up to worry him.

"That Titanian," Borg said grimly, "the one who

pulled the *sheev*—did he have a small, star-shaped scar on his left cheek?"

Mirg reflected. "Seems like I did see such a mark just before I hit him," he admitted. "Why?"

Borg didn't answer him. His lips had suddenly gone thin. He swung around to me and snapped, "Get down into the engine room and bring that stowaway up here. Interplanetary star or no, I'm not going to get into trouble because of him!"

I had to agree with Borg. And I was a little worried myself. I still couldn't understand why Leon Taber should have signed up on the Erine as a crew member. He had enough connections, I knew, to have squashed any trouble he might have had because of the Red Comet brawl.

I went down the iron ladder to the engine room, where Franj was bossing the engine crew. He turned a sweaty face to me and shook his head. Taber was down in the cargo space somewhere.

I went down from the engine room, feeling the throbbing of the big motors vibrate through the freighter. It was dark in the cargo hold. Bales of carotin were piled high—they loomed like dim gray bulks in the gloom.

I knew that carotin was an important food to the yellow-skinned inhabitants of Titania; it supplied much

needed vitamins to the sunshine-deficient Titanians, and a good cargo brought a fair price on that far out satellite of the planet Uranus.

I stood in one of the narrow aisles, dimly lighted by a faint red guidance light, and peered into the gloom ahead. What would a television star be doing in a hold full of carotin? I wondered. Then I shrugged off an uneasy suspicion. I was about to call out when a tiny flicker of light off to my left drew my attention.

I swung around slowly, making no noise. The faint flicker was from a small pencil light. The tiny glow outlined Taber's bruised face. He was intently examining some object he was holding, but which I could not make out. There was a long rip in a bale of carotin, and I guessed that what he was holding had come from inside that bale.

I moved toward him, puzzled, alert. He must have had remarkably keen ears, for he heard me coming. The light snapped out. Then, a few seconds later, as I waited in the darkness, the light flashed on again, closer. And there was Taber coming toward me, frowning.

"What in the devil are you doing down here?" I snapped. "You're supposed to be up in the engine room, helping Franj."

Taber shrugged. "I was checking up on the cargo. I thought I heard a noise down here, as though some of these bales had broken loose."

"Next time you hear a noise," I growled, "it'll be my fist smacking against your pretty face." My temper began to rise just thinking about last night. "If you hadn't barged into the Red Comet, me and my friends would have spent a quiet evening, instead of winding up in a brawl. And if you hadn't forced yourself on me, we wouldn't be ducking every time we spot a security patrol ship—"

"Why?" Taber asked innocently.

"Because there's an alarm out for us, a solar APB, for kidnaping you!"

Taber appeared amused. "You don't say. Well, I'll fix that, soon as the next patrol ship hails us." He grinned. "This is a lousy tub, anyway, and I'll be glad to get off."

I TOOK him back to the control room with me. Leon leaned back against the bulkhead and explained to Borg De:

"I was drunk last night when I left the group I was with. We had been making the rounds of the hot spots. I don't remember how it happened—I guess I just wan-

dered into the Red Comet. But after the fighting started I was frightened. I didn't want to be caught in a cheap barroom brawl. So I thought if I beat it out the back way with Jon, Mirg and Franj and sort of disappeared for a while—"

He shrugged. "I don't want to cause any of you any trouble. You can signal the first interplanetary patrol ship you see and turn me over to them. I'll see that you all are cleared of the kidnaping charges."

Borg De's lips twisted. I noticed that the worried look in his eyes had grown deeper.

He said harshly: "What were you doing in the hold?"

Taber's eyes widened innocently. "Why, just checking up on loose carotin bales, like I told Jon," he said. "I thought I heard—"

Borg De's long fingers drummed on the metal control panel. "All right," he cut Taber off sharply. "Get back to the engine room with Franj. I'll see what I can do about getting you off somewhere between here and Titania."

Taber eyed him for a moment, then nodded. He walked off almost with a swagger, but I had the nagging thought that he was playing a part.

Borg waited until Taber had gone; then he swung

around to me. "Get Franj up here right away!" he said grimly. "Mirg, you stay here. I've got a proposition to make to the three of you."

I went down and fetched the big Venusian. There was a bottle of *pulcho* on the control room table when I got back, and Borg and Mirg had already taken a couple of swigs. Mirg's eyes were dancing with a reckless light.

"Sit down, boys, and pour your own," Borg invited.

We did without arguing. After the second round, I looked across at the wiry Martian skipper. "We're listening," I said.

Borg leaned across the table. "I think you both know how I felt about you dragging my younger brother around with you and raising Billy Blazes around the spaceways," he began.

"You made yourself very clear on that point a few times." I nodded. "But we're willing to let bygones be bygones. Matter of fact," I continued, "our opinion of you wasn't too good; either."

Franj Orcus nodded approval of what I was saying and poured himself another shot of *pulcho.*

Borg glanced at his brother and grinned. "Now that we understand each other, I'll lay out my proposition. It

calls for hard men, and I think you boys fit the bill."

He leaned back, poured himself another shot of the fast vanishing *pulcho* and started in.

"In the first place, I'm not taking this long trip to Titania just for the purpose of making a measly sliver of profit on my carotin cargo. That's merely a method of paying traveling expenses. What I'm after would buy a thousand better space tubs than this one. And it's not so heavy but what one man can carry it, provided he can find it and get away with a whole skin afterward!"

He let his hand slide over the table as he looked at each of us. "You all know something of the value of Titanian star stones, of course?"

Naturally we knew. Lord knows they'd been publicized enough, ever since their discovery on Titania by Carr Orson, the great earth explorer of a century past.

A rare and costly stone with greater brilliance and luster than the finest diamond, in addition, it shone with its own light in the dark. Moreover, the radio-active principle which produced this natural phosphorescent glow was actually beneficial to the wearer of such stones, generating a whole series of important hormones in the body. And the value? They were so rare that a stone

weighing one gram was worth more than the clearest diamond weighing ten thousand grams!

So I answered: "Of course," while Franj and Mirg De nodded agreement over their *pulcho.*

Borg De unlocked a small drawer in the control table. "I know where there's a hoard of them!" he said calmly.

We all sat up. "On Titania?" I said.

Borg nodded and carefully placed a piece of soft, tanned hide on the table. I could see it was a crude map of some kind, the lines obviously burned into the hide by a prospector's pencil heat ray.

"The location of the hoard is on this map. The old prospector who found it is dead. I represent his widow, and she's offered me a fifty percent cut." Borg rubbed a red palm across his beardless chin as he watched me with glittering green eyes. "I don't have to tell you what you'll have to face. Titania, or what we know of it, is bad enough. And right now there's a revolution going on that's spread even to the hill tribes. But where we're going few men have entered—and none have returned!"

Franj Orcus' big palm closed about his empty cup, crumbling it to a piece of tin in his hand.

"The Valley of the Mist Spirits," he said slowly. And

I realized then that I had never heard Franj's voice sound quite like that. There was a note of superstitious awe that was strange in the Venusian giant.

I had heard rumors of the Valley on Titania. The hill natives worshipped the strange glows that occasionally were seen over the craggy, unscalable cliffs that walled it in. For from these strange glowing lights fell the star stones that meant so much to them.

And I knew, too, that Carr Orson, the great explorer, had ventured into that valley, scaling with three picked men the peaks no others had dared to climb. They never returned. From time to time thereafter, others had tried—only to meet the same mysterious fate.

I was thinking of this when I said: "We've got less than a fifty-fifty chance to come out of that alive, Borg. Always provided we can find a way in, of course."

Borg tapped his finger on the old map. "Getting in will be comparatively easy, Jon, if we just follow the directions on this. That old prospector found a crack in the stone barrier, a narrow slit that leads into the valley." He shrugged. "Getting out with the stones will be the problem. That's why I need three men I can trust; men who won't turn tail at the first sign of danger;

men who've knocked around the system and won't back down at anything strange they might run up against."

He paused, then said: "Well, it's up to you. Are you in?"

I looked at Mirg and Franj. I could see Mirg's answer in his eyes.

"What do we get out of it?" I asked.

"A four-way split of my fifty percent," Borg answered. "Fair enough?"

I nodded. "Far as I'm concerned."

"Me, too," seconded Mirg. Franj just nodded and reached for the bottle.

Borg had to get him another cup. We killed the bottle then, to bind the deal. But I couldn't help thinking of what I had seen in the cargo hold, and the more I thought of Leon Taber, the less sense he made.

His explanation had been convincing enough. But I remembered that he had deliberately started the fracas in the Red Comet, and I also remembered how the Titanian who had drawn his *sheev* had acted when Leon first appeared—as though he had recognized Taber and the recognition had struck fear in him.

"Leon Taber," I muttered to myself in the darkness of my small cabin, "if you're a telecast star, then I'm a

Saturnian *giny* bird!"

And with this I stepped out of my cabin and noiselessly made my way down into the Erine's cargo hold.

— III —

— Gun Runner —

THE PILED tiers of carotin bales loomed darkly in the gloom. Ahead of me a round quartzite porthole let in faint starlight. I paused at the foot of the iron stairs, dousing my small light. The steel floor quivered to the keel discharges that were driving the tramp freighter at a snail's pace through the star-studded void.

And for a moment, as I stared out into that black emptiness where our objective was but a pinpoint of light among countless others, I wondered at Man's destiny—at his blind quest among the stars. Was this the meaning behind Life? Was Man always to be but an adventurer among the stars?

I did not know. I grinned a little wryly at my foolish flight of fancy and turned back to that which had brought me down into the Erine's hold.

I was bending over the slashed carotin bale when I heard the sound: the soft pad of feet coming up the aisle behind me!

I had turned on my light to examine the bale; now I twisted quickly, cutting it off, and stood listening.

The padding stopped. For a long moment the silence was broken only by the monotonous throb of the rocket blasts.

I shrugged. I must have been mistaken. I switched on the light again and, bent by the carotin bale, probed inside the slit. My fingers closed around a cold metal object, and it was with a shock of surprise that I saw what it was: a worn, second-hand electronic pistol, several years outdated!

I stood there, crouched by the bale, stiff and wondering. Thoughts jammed my mind. And a lot of things now began to fall into place.

Revolution on Titania. The interplanetary patrol trying to cut off the illicit flow of weapons to the revolutionaries.

The Erine a gunrunner!

I cursed softly. It looked as though my friends and I had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

I was about to straighten when the voice said, very softly, from behind me: "Gunrunning is a nasty business, Jon. It means twenty years on the Asteroid Belt penal colony for anyone convicted!"

My fingers tightened on that old electronic gun. But I let it fall to the floor before I turned. For the soft voice was warning me: "You couldn't make a quarter-turn before I'd get you. Forget it, Jon!"

He was standing in the middle of the aisle, not twelve feet away, and the vague glow from my still functioning pencil light softened the bruised outlines of his face. There was an electronic pistol, similar to the one I had dropped, in his right hand, and he held it like a man who knew how to use it.

I said: "No interplanetary televiz star ever saw the day he could get the jump on Jon Smith. You're not Leon Taber!"

The man in the aisle grinned. He dipped his hand into his pocket and showed me, briefly, a small gold symbol I immediately recognized.

"Captain Steeve Argite," he said evenly. "Interplanetary Secret Service. On gunrunning detail!"

THAT EXPLAINED a lot of things. It explained the strange fear of the Titanian with the *sheev* back in the Red Comet, and the way the supposed telecast star had handled himself.

I shrugged, matching his grin.

"You had me fooled all the way, Steeve. But how did you—" I paused briefly as I saw a shadow move behind the Interplanetary Secret Service man—"happen to pick on *us?*" I finished smoothly.

Steeve Argite made a motion with his electronic gun. "Tip pointed to the Erine. I saw Mirg leave the freighter last night and head for the Red Comet. I look enough like Leon Taber to be his twin brother, and decided to play the part. Started the saloon brawl so as to have an excuse to get aboard the Erine. Kuas, the Titanian that pulled the *sheev,* recognized me. He's contact man for the revolutionists on Titania. I reckon I owe you boys something for putting him out of commission."

I nodded, watching Franj slide like some ominous shadow up the aisle. "And what do you propose to do now?" I wanted to keep him talking, to give Franj the time he needed. "One man against the whole crew—"

"I'm going to take over the ship," Steeve interrupted me. His voice was calm. "You're going to walk back

to the control room with me as though nothing has happened. Once up there—" he rubbed the old electronic pistol, his grin icy— "I'll have patrol ships swarming all around the Erine within hours after I get to the televisor. That'll finish whatever—"

Whatever he intended to say was never completed. Franj's big green hand closed like a steel clamp over Steeve's face. The ISS man was lifted off the ground effortlessly, a squirming, wiry figure. The electronic pistol swung around to press against Franj's side, and I jumped in and knocked it out of Steeve's hand. Franj growled, his big hand closing inexorably around Steeve's throat.

But I stopped him. "No, Franj. Let him live. Take him up to the control room. Borg De's got some tall explaining to do himself!"

BORG DE'S FACE was a sullen red as we faced him in the control room.

"Well, what of it?" he snapped angrily. "So it's guns instead of carotin I'm hauling! Since when have you three become so particular? The stories I've been hearing about you—"

"Are probably greatly exaggerated," I cut in sharply. "We've knocked about the solar system quite a lot, we

three. Cosmic hitch-hikers, you might call us. We've stowed away and worked our way on scores of freighters. But we've never bucked the law—or willingly signed on as gunrunners!"

I glanced at Steeve Argite, standing in a corner, guarded by Franj Orcus. The ISS man was eyeing me with a doubtful expression.

"What do you plan to do with him, Borg?" I asked the Erine's skipper.

The scrawny Martian captain shrugged. "We can't turn him loose. We'd all be rotting on the Asteroid Belt pen inside a week." His green eyes narrowed. "What would you suggest? You three are in this now as deep as I am. And besides, have you forgotten our real mission on Titania?"

I looked at Franj and Mirg. The big Venusian was staring at me, stolid-faced, waiting—and I knew that any decision I made would be his also. Mirg was frowning. I knew he had always looked up to his brother as the solid member of the line of De. The shock of finding out he was a gunrunner was doing things to Mirg.

As for myself, I saw where Borg had us. Unwittingly or not, we had signed on the Erine on its gunrunning cruise. Steeve had explained he had gotten into that

saloon brawl so as to get aboard the Erine with us. It would take a lot of convincing to make him see we had been unaware of the real cargo in the Erine's hold. And I didn't relish spending twenty years of my life in the Asteroid Belt prison, the Alcatraz of space.

I cursed softly, swinging around to face Mirg. "Well, what do you say?"

Mirg scowled. There was a tight, bitter twist to his lips.

"Borg is right," he said slowly. "We can't turn Argite loose—"

Franj's big hands closed suggestively. "Let me fix him! One quick twist—"

"No!" I snapped. "We're in this deep enough as it is. Killing a member of the Interplanetary Security police won't do us any good."

I turned and walked back to the chart desk. My finger traced our route, rested on our present position.

"Callisto!" I grunted. Turning, I walked back to them. "In two days we'll be passing Jupiter. Callisto will be the nearest of its satellites. We'll set him down there—"

"There's a mining settlement on Callisto!" Borg De growled.

I nodded. "Var Lid. One tiny spot of life on the entire

satellite. We'll set him down a thousand miles away, with a life support space suit and a packet of concentrated food—"

Mirg De turned to look at the ISS man.

"He'll never make it," he said. "I'll take odds of twenty to one. . . ."

THE BLEAK, frozen surface of Callisto's northern hemisphere lay below us, a frozen tundra of grayish snow. Small hillocks broke the apparent levelness of the country. The stillness was strange, hushed. There were no winds on Callisto—no sounds of any kind—no life such as we knew it. None save in the hardy settlement of Var Lid, on the equator, roughly a thousand miles from where we were landing.

There was a strange reluctance in me as I watched the Interplanetary Secret Service man get into his bulky space suit. Over the rim of Callisto, like a giant globe cut in two by the horizon, was Jupiter—glowing with a dull, evil redness.

Steeve Argite was silent as we let him out of the air lock. The bulky pack on his back made him look grotesque, a gargoyle figure against Jupiter's red mass.

There were a thousand miles of unknown territory be-

tween him and Var Lid. I had to fight down a sudden urge to call it off. To take my chances with the law.

Slowly I handed him one of the old electronic pistols I had taken from the hold. "You'll find charges for this in your pack," I told him via radio headphones. "I wish you luck, Steeve."

I could still see that hard, impudent grin through the glassite of his helmet as he took the gun.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll be seeing all of you again. And next time it'll be my turn to leave you—in the pen on the Asteroid Belt!"

We left him there on that endless frozen plain and went back inside the Erine. I looked out through the Erine's porthole. The ISS man was still there, motionless—a grotesque-looking figure against Jupiter's swollen orb—when our rocket blasts lifted us from the bleak surface of Callisto.

— IV —

— *Shewajo* —

I KEPT SEEING Steeve Argite's bulky figure, motionless against the semi-disc of Jupiter, all the way to Uranus. Not until the blue-green glove of this outer planet loomed up in the void ahead of us did I succeed in shaking off that unsettling image.

Then the task of setting the Erine down on Titania absorbed all my attention.

Setting an old freighter like the Erine down on one of the satellites of Uranus is not exactly a simple problem. The moons of the planet not only revolve around their primary at approximate right angles to the plane of the elliptic—in addition, the revolution is retrograde. Setting the old tub down on Callisto had been simple by

comparison.

Eventually, however, we made it and were soon skimming over the rugged landscape of Titania. Lighted by the weird, blue-green radiance of Uranus, the satellite was a craggy, uninviting world. Far off to the left we could see the towering scarps that hemmed in the mysterious area known to the hill natives as the Land of the Mist Spirits.

Standing by my side at the port window, Franj Orcus was staring at the flashing landscape, his giant frame strangely stiff. He looked at me and shook his head.

"*Saluri!*" he said. "*Awa saluri!*"

In Venusian that was the equivalent of "taboo—very bad taboo!" I shrugged, grinning at the solemn face he made.

Ahead of us now, like a giant glass bubble, loomed the space port of Shewajo, the Shanghai of Titania—the trouble center of the Outer Planets. Here intrigues were hatched, shifts of power carefully planned. Here, under the great glass dome of Titania's major city, earth, Mars, Venus and Mercury had their interplanetary settlements, patrolled and guarded by their fighting men. For the moons of Uranus and Neptune as well as the rings of Saturn were rich in vital resources, and the great space-

port of Shewajo attracted the traders and miners of these dangerous satellites to market their precious cargoes.

Hotbed of revolution, the various planetary powers schemed and intrigued to keep in power those Titanians most friendly to themselves.

At the moment, one of these periodic shifts of power was going on, and a gunrunner, arriving at this inauspicious moment, had all the potentiality of a fission explosion.

Well, Borg De himself took over the controls just before we reached Shewajo and eased the Erine down onto the landing skids to which we were signaled. Then the huge air lock opened, and we slid in under the dome of the space depot.

The job of disposing of the guns were taken over by Borg, whose contacts in Shewajo seemed of the right kind at the moment. The carotin bales were quickly unloaded, without inspection, under the bribed eyes of the cargo inspectors, and loaded onto huge vehicles that rolled immediately out of the big depot.

As for myself, I was glad it was over. Had it not been for the strange fascination of the treasure hunt, the call of adventure from beyond those blue crags encircling that legendary valley on Titania, I would have signed

on the next freighter back to earth.

As it was, I remained. The four of us parted in the Spaceman's Café, on the edge of the great space docks, after the first round of drinks. Borg De, taking Franj Orcus with him, hurried off to see about buying supplies and getting clearance papers for our expedition into the hills the next morning.

Mirg and I remained in the café. But after a couple of shots of the fiery Titanian *targool* wine, Mirg got a yen to look up an old friend of his, an earth man who had resided on Titania for many years.

I didn't like the idea. "Listen, Mirg," I said. "We're walking on the thin edge of trouble now. If the present Titanian government ever got wind of what's in those carotin bales being unloaded from the Erine, we'd be lined up against a wall and shot so fast that *targool* you've been drinking would leak right out of your red hide. We've got enough going against us right now. I'm telling you, I didn't like the look in Steeve Argite's eyes when we left him stranded on Callisto. And if I'm any judge of men, we're going to have him back, breathing down our necks, sooner than we think."

Mirg shook his head. "A thousand miles to Var Lid. Afoot? Come on, Jon—you're getting jumpy. No man can

live that long—not with only seventy-two hours' worth of oxygen in his life support pack." He shrugged. "He's probably run afoul of one of those giant *clopths* by now, and you know how little use an electronic weapon is against that beast!"

He put an arm around my shoulders, a sure sign that Mirg had taken just a little too much *targool* for him—he was usually a cool, reserved sort of chap.

"Look—lying low back in the Erine isn't going to change things. I promise you I'll behave. We won't get into any trouble. And besides, Brown might be able to help us when we start out tomorrow. He knows as much about this back country as most hill men—his father was one of Titania's first settlers. If anyone knows anything about that valley behind those blue crags, Brown is that man!"

Well, I have always been easily convinced when it comes to risking my neck. So I acquiesced. But I didn't like the look in Mirg De's eyes as we started out. I had seen it before. Any trouble always followed.

WE HEADED across town toward a little café known as the Four Moons. This was where Mirg's friend, Yirl Brown, was supposed to hang out. On our way we saw a

few broken show windows and some bloodstains on the ramps here and there, but no active signs of the revolution. It looked as though things had quieted down for the time being, and the big, yellow-skinned traffic police, their faces showing a greenish-yellow in the blue-green light that shone through the dome from the great disc of Uranus, were directing traffic on the street corners as usual.

The streets of the shopping district were colorful and picturesque, with costumes and races from all parts of the solar system seething back and forth in a kaleidoscope of color, size and features.

Mirg and I walked, though we could have taken any one of the old-fashioned helicopter taxis that were parked on raised platforms above the sidewalks at intervals of about a hundred yards. Up under the dome, the constant whirr of these taxis made a steady humming, like bees circling a hive.

We saw few signs of the revolution until we got to the Four Moons. Then we found the windows smashed and barred and the door padlocked. The inside, from what we could see through the cracks in the window openings, looked as though it had been hit by a couple of hurricanes and a Venusian whirlwind, so we decided the

revolution must have taken place mostly inside this bistro.

Mirg was pretty badly worried about Brown when he saw this. So we decided to grab a taxi and fly out to his house. It seemed that the Browns, instead of living in the 'Merikan colony which was guarded by earth police and pretty much revolution-proof, lived in the native quarter, which was plenty dangerous for the natives themselves, let alone any foreigner who had the temerity to live there.

I knew something of the Titanians from several previous trips to the satellite. When Carr Orson, the great earth explorer, first landed on Titania, the natives of this forbidding world were half wild hill dwellers, worshipping the strange glows that sometimes, at certain phases of the great disc of Uranus, appeared over the mountains of the Valley of the Mist Spirits.

Carr would have departed, and no one would ever have bothered with Titania, had not the explorer come across several of the star stones which the natives worshipped. Carr was something of a scientist as well as an explorer, and he immediately sensed the unparalleled value of the strange gems.

He outfitted an expedition back at Denver, Colorado, on earth and came back to Titania. The natives had sworn that the star stones were dropped from the sky by the

gods who lived in the valley beyond the blue crags. Carr Orson and his followers, after a desperate effort, scaled the crags and entered the valley. They were never heard from again.

Other parties followed and met the same mysterious fate. Then others endeavored to fly over the forbidding region. But the strange blue mist that domes the valley made visibility impossible. Several of the more daring flyers nosed down into that mist and never came out. From then on the cliff-locked valley was left strictly alone.

But the discovery had brought adventurers from all corners of the solar system. And in a short time Shewajo grew up on Titania's craggy surface to serve as a base for the various exploration parties. The Titanians were elevated to the role of governing body under interplanetary law, which ruled out direct exploitation of any satellite's resources without consent of the natives.

Half primitive, big framed, these Titanians lived on a diet of carotin, transported mainly from earth and Venus. Carotin provided the sunshine vitamins the inhabitants of Titania lacked and which every living creature of the solar system seemed to need. They got some of course, from their primary, Uranus, which gathered

the sun's rays like a great blue-green reflector in the heavens and passed them back to her satellites. But it was not sufficient to keep the Titanians healthy and vigorous without a heavy carotin diet.

Perhaps because of this diet, the color of the natives had heightened in the last three generations. At least the hue of the city Titanians had, though the more remote hill tribes still retained a greenish tinge to their scrawny bodies.

Mirg interrupted my thoughts. "Let's take this one," he said abruptly, pointing to the nearest taxi stand, and immediately climbing the ladder to the platform.

The cabbie was a little black Mercurian and, business not being very brisk, seemed pleased at the prospect of a couple of fares. But when Mirg told him the destination he shook his head.

"Nothing doing," he said. "I wouldn't go into that district right now for the price of all the helicops in Shewajo!"

"I thought you were one of the fighting Mercurians," Mirg said, looking him up and down. "But I must be color blind. Want to make something out of it?"

The cabbie was about the same size as Mirg, but he only grinned. "I could take you apart in three min-

utes," he said. "But I'm not a fool. It's suicide to go into that part of town right now."

"Come on, Jon," Mirg said, turning to me. "We'll walk to Yirl Brown's place."

So we walked.

— V —

— Bev Brown —

BEYOND the shopping district began the hive-shaped dwellings of the native Titanians. They had tiny octagonal windows, barred, but without glass panes to let in air and light. Since the whole city was air conditioned, practically the only glass used was in the show windows of the shopping district. The strange dwellings were made from Titanian white clay, tinted many colors, and were of different sizes, but all had the same conical design.

Naked children played in the streets, and some of them spat at us or hurled handfuls of dirt and pebbles, shouting uncomplimentary and sometimes decidedly foul epithets at us as we passed. This did not seem to disturb their scantily clad mothers, sitting or lolling in their

doorways, smoking their stubby clay pipes stuffed with rank-smelling *tambooj,* for they looked on with evident approval and sometimes added a few choice insults of their own.

It wasn't hard to spot Brown's house when we came to it. It bore not the slightest resemblance to the Titanian structures around. It was what is known in America as the old Spanish mission type—a two-story building with a red tile roof, stuccoed walls and an enclosed patio.

We went up to the front door, and Mirg jabbed at the bell button. "You'll like Yirl," he said, grinning. "He always keeps a stock of the best 'Merikan *wheesky* it's been my pleasure to sample."

We waited awhile with no answer, and Mirg tried again. This time we could hear a faint tinkle far back in the house.

We waited a few minutes more and then decided that the Browns were not at home. We were turning away when a girl's scream stopped us!

Without a word I tried the latch, jamming my shoulder against the door. It was locked and did not give. Mirg was already turning, sprinting around the house, and I followed, my longer legs carrying me past him

before we reached the wall. The high gate in the twenty-foot patio enclosure was barred, but that did not stop us.

We stripped off our gravity equalizing vests, which made the pull of this small satellite equal to that of our respective worlds. Relieved of its influence, we easily sprang to the top of the wall.

The patio, with its flagstone paths winding among ornate shrubs, fruit trees and beds of flowers, most of which quite obviously had been transported from earth, presented a scene of tranquil beauty. Birds sang among the trees to the tinkling accompaniment of the fountain that played in the center of the enclosed yard. Bees and butterflies flitted among the flowers, whose perfume scented the air with heavy fragrance.

For a moment we stood crouched on the wall. The scream was not repeated, and I was beginning to frown when Mirg touched my arm and pointed.

Across the patio a balcony overhung the garden at the back of the big house. Some struggle was going on there, for the flowering vine that draped one end of that big balcony was being violently agitated.

I nodded, and together we let ourselves down into the garden. My terrestrial muscles carried me across the patio ahead of Mirg. I didn't bother to stop to climb the bal-

cony. I leaped up, grasped the balcony railing easily with both hands and swung over.

A slender, black-haired, brown-eyed girl was struggling in the grasp of a burly flabby-jowled, pig-eyed Titanian army officer as big as Franj Orcus. He was all decked out in his green uniform, with its fur collar and gold braid, and sported a brace of heavy electronic pistols in addition to the long *sheev* that hung in an ornate sheath beneath his left arm.

I couldn't see the lower part of the girl's face, as it was covered by one huge yellow hand to stifle her screams. She was kicking and squirming while the Titanian army officer, holding a bit of cord which he had looped around one of her wrists, was trying to draw it around the other so he could bind her arms behind her back.

I sprang forward just as the officer glimpsed me from the corners of his little eyes. He dropped the girl and reached for his pistols. I hit him before his fingers closed over the shiny handles. My left fist sank wrist deep in his flabby stomach, and my right caught him squarely on the uppermost of his three chins as he started to sag, his face flashing a sickly green.

He reeled backward into the arms of Mirg De, who had just swung up over the balcony railing. Mirg caught

him and eased him to the floor. I turned, intending to remove the cord from the girl's arm so that we could use it to tie the Titanian officer.

To my surprise, she was standing right behind me, panting a little but otherwise calm and holding out the rope for me.

"Hello Mirg De," she said with a dazzling smile for the little Martian.

"Hello, Bev Brown," he replied, taking the rope I handed him and trussing the wrists of the unconscious officer. "Meet Jon Smith, who is a 'Merikan, like yourself."

She transferred that dazzling smile to me then, and I'll have to admit that it did things to my circulation. She was a knockout—the small, dark Spanish type, with dimples and long curling lashes.

"Thank you both for saving me from that swine," she said, nodding toward the prostrate Titanian.

I mumbled something about it being nothing at all, the pleasure being all ours, etc., while Mirg De finished the job of tying the officer. I was suddenly acutely conscious of my appearance. I hadn't shaved in nearly a week, and my stubble of sandy beard didn't improve the looks of my rugged features. My clothes were old and

worn, and the brawl in the Red Comet had not helped.

There was an awkward moment while Mirg finished the job and rolled the big Titanian against the wall. Then he straightened and looked at the girl with a worried gaze.

"Where's your brother Yirl, Bev?"

"I'll take you to him," she said. "He was badly wounded in a fight at the Four Moons, and some friends brought him home. I'm worried about his condition. Our power lines have been cut by the revolutionists, and I can't televise. The servants have all run off. I was starting out to get a doctor when I met that—" She indicated the unconscious army officer. "He's the military commander in charge of this district and was strutting along with a squad of his men looking for revolutionaries. Anyway, he promised to get me a doctor at once, and I went back inside the house and waited. When he rang the bell I admitted him, thinking he had the doctor with him. But he came alone.

"I turned and ran then, and he chased me through the house, finally cornering me on this balcony. I'd kept silent before, as I didn't want to disturb my brother. But I couldn't help screaming when he seized me."

"It's a mighty good thing you did," said Mirg. "Other-

wise we wouldn't be here now."

At that moment there was an interruption, a thunderous pounding on the front door.

"The revolutionists!" the girl exclaimed, frightened. "They are killing and looting all over the native quarter!"

"They're breaking down the door," I snapped to Mirg. "Come on!"

"Wait," he cut me off. He stooped over the unconscious Titanian and relieved him of his *sheev* and pistols. "We'll need these."

He passed one of the pistols to me and tried to get me to take the *sheev,* too. But I made him keep it. I could do more with my fists than he could.

Then we bounded down the front stairway, arriving just as the door crashed inward.

— VI —

— Mob Menace —

IT WAS an ugly-looking mob that burst through the door. All were Titanian civilians, a ragged-looking lot of them without uniforms who had armed themselves as best they could. All had *sheevs;* a few had electronic pistols of the type the Erine had carried, and some even brandished antiquated bullet-in-cartridge guns like those used by my ancestors more than a hundred years ago. Those without firearms carried clubs in addition to their deadly knives.

All were bent on looting, and when we met them with a withering fire from our electronic pistols, they seemed completely taken by surprise. Evidently they had expected to find the house unoccupied, except by a girl

and a desperately wounded man. In fact, I learned afterward that this definitely was the case. Two members of the mob were recognized by Bev Brown as former servants of her brother. They had evidently brought the others there to kill their master and mistress and loot the house.

Mirg and I mowed down the first six who came charging across the battered-down door. The others wavered on the steps outside, while those behind them, not understanding what was taking place, were shoving them on.

Those first in line fell back as we blasted four more out of existence. This gave us an opportunity to erect a barricade. There was no time to close the door, which had been ripped from its hinges. Instead, we rolled the bodies off it; then, raising the end of the door that was toward us, we slid the bodies under it. As the door was fashioned of tempered steel alloy, it formed a sloping barricade that easily turned the bullets from the old-fashioned firearms and checked the force of the electronic blasts, which, though they burned through the metal, were weakened in the process while the remaining charge was absorbed by the bodies behind it.

Back of this barricade we crouched, firing the two pistols until their charges were exhausted. Then, con-

fiscating the weapons of the fallen looters, we kept up the fire.

The street in front of the house was quickly strewn with dead and wounded. The rest of the mob stampeded, taking cover in doorways or behind pillars, from which vantage points they shouted insults, fired bullets and electronic blasts and hurled *sheevs,* clubs and stones.

I had my hair parted by a knife that came uncomfortably close and one cheek seared slightly by an electronic blast. A bullet grazed Mirg De's neck, and he grinned at me as he let drive with his electronic gun.

A moment later a thrown club knocked my pistol from my hand. When I retrieved it, I found the mechanism jammed.

Mirg De had two pistols left. One was a modern electronic, the other an old-fashioned bullet pistol which he'd taken from one of the dead looters. He kept banging away first with one and then the other, while I crouched behind our barricade with the reek of blood, Titanian bodies, cordite from the old-fashioned pistol and ozone from the electronic in my nostrils. I tried to unjam my pistol, but it simply wouldn't work.

And then came a new interruption.

The shrill blast of a Titanian police whistle sounded

from the rear of the house. In Shewajo the police were a branch of the standing native army, and the officer we had trussed up was the military commander as well as the police chief of the district. Somehow he must have slipped his bonds and summoned aid.

NOW THIS police chief and his men were fully as dangerous to us as the mob entrenched before the house. The officer had already shown his intention of abducting Bev Brown, and we knew his men would be just as ready to loot and murder as the motley crowd of revolutionaries outside.

It looked as though Mirg and I were now between the devil and the deep blue sea.

The blast of the whistle was soon answered by the roar of a helicopter patrol ship which must have been parked nearby, waiting for just this signal. It usually carried a complement of twenty armed men. Glancing back through the long hallway, I could see the ship settling like some giant hawk on the patio behind us.

"Mirg," I said, twisting toward the little Martian, "it looks as if we've landed in a mess of trouble. We've been in trouble since the Red Comet, but this one looks like our last!"

Mirg grinned in a way that reminded me of Steeve Argite, the ISS man we had marooned on Callisto—hard and cocky, as if he didn't give a damn.

"Well, they'll know they've been in a fight, Jon!" Then a sudden thought took away his grin. "The girl—" he said quickly. "She must be upstairs, with her brother. We can't let her fall into the hands of these—"

He crawled to me and pressed his electronic pistol into my hand. "Go get her, Jon! You can make it. Get her away from here. I'll hold this mob back!"

I tried to argue with him, but he wouldn't change his mind. "You have one chance in fifty of making it," he said quietly. "But if we both remain here, we won't give Bev Brown any chance at all."

I nodded. "All right," I said reluctantly. "Give me that old six-shooter. You'll need this electronic more than I will. And—good luck, Mirg."

We shook hands, grimly realizing it probably was the last time we'd do so. Then I swung away, scuttled to the foot of the stairs on all fours, then rose and made a dash for it, my terrestrial muscles lifting me ten steps at a time.

Bullets, clubs, *sheevs* and electronic blasts slammed into the stairway around me, but I made it to the top

untouched. I ran down the hallway, looking in room after room for the girl and her brother.

I found them in a large bedroom in the front of the house.

A glance told me what had happened. Yirl Brown had died sometime during or just before the fracas. Bev had closed his eyes and folded his hands over his breast and was kneeling in silent prayer beside the bed.

I touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Come," I said quietly. "We are hemmed in on both sides and must find a way of escape quickly."

She looked up at me, tears trembling on her long lashes.

"I can't leave him," she said, and there was a grief-stricken finality in her tone. "Save yourself, if you can, and go with my everlasting thanks to you and Mirg De for what you've tried to do to help."

"Your brother is dead," I told her. "You can do nothing for him now. And you know what your fate will be if you are captured by either side!"

"I know," she answered. She turned and took up a small, sharp-pointed knife laying on the bedside table. "When the time comes I'll use this."

I saw there was no use arguing with her in her condi-

tion. But I just couldn't let her stay there to die.

So I said, "Let me see that *sheev,* Miss Brown?"

She handed it to me without thinking, and I threw it under the bed. Then, before she quite realized what I was about, I caught her up, threw her over my left shoulder so that my right hand would be free to use the six-shooter and ran out into the hallway.

For a while I had my hands full holding the girl. She had suddenly become a little wildcat, kicking, scratching, striking at me with her little fists. But all at once she went limp, and I could feel her slender body wracked by sobs as she pressed her face against my back.

Sprinting to the head of the stairs, I called to Mirg De. He was so busy and there was so much din he couldn't hear me. I didn't dare put the girl down for fear she'd run back into her brother's room. Nor did I wish to expose her to the fire on that stairway. So I holstered my gun, picked up a chair and threw it down the long flight of carpeted steps.

The clatter attracted Mirg's attention, and I called to him again, my voice blaring above the racket.

He nodded and came scuttling to the foot of the stairs. Straightening, he started up, his red face sweaty and grimy, but the reckless grin still on his lips.

He died like that, midway up the stairs!

I SAW THE *sheev* enter his back like a glinting streak of light, saw the point suddenly protrude from his chest a full three inches, and knew Mirg De had fought his last fight.

He swayed a moment, his eyes strangely bright. Then, in a last terrible gesture, he raised his right hand to us in a grim salute before falling backward down the stairs.

In the same instant the police charged in through the back, the heavy-jowled officer urging them on from the rear. Evidently he had let himself down into the patio from the balcony, joined his men and organized them for the charge. They were just in time to meet the mob streaming in through the front doorway.

For a moment I stood at the head of the staircase, the girl across my shoulder, a cold sickness in the pit of my stomach.

"Goodbye, Mirg," I said sadly. Then I turned and ran for the rear balcony without being seen by any of the milling fighters below.

The girl began struggling again. "You coward!" she cried. "Running away and leaving a wounded comrade! Let me down!"

"Mirg De is dead," I told her. "He died the way he always wanted to—fighting."

We were on the balcony now, and springing to the railing, I looked over. The police helicopter was in the patio, guarded by one man.

With gun in one hand and the girl jackknifed over my shoulder, I jumped down.

The surprised guard snatched up his electronic pistol when he saw me. But before he could fire I shot him. Then, dragging his body from behind the controls, and appropriating his electronic pistol and *sheev*, I dumped him out onto the patio grass. I took his place, plumping the girl down into the co-pilot's seat beside me. Holding her back with one hand, I started the helicopter motor.

But it quickly appeared that we would not be able to get away soon enough. Evidently the mob had been quickly dispersed by the withering fire from the police detachment, and the latter were now searching the house for the girl. I set the whirring blades into lift-off, and just as we were rising above the balcony I saw two of the Titanian police in the hallway. One of them was the hog-jowled police chief. He spotted us at the same time and came charging out to the balcony with a yell to others

of his men to follow.

He brought up his electronic pistol to blast me. I wasn't more than ten yards from him and an easy shot. Both my pistols were on the floor, put there so Bev Brown couldn't reach them. The knife I had taken from the helicopter guard was on top of them. I reached back, snatched it up and threw it backhanded. It was a lucky throw and pinned the police captain's hand to the porch pillar.

He was screaming in pain and yelling orders when the whirring blades really took hold. We shot up past the balcony toward the great crystal dome of Shewajo before the others could come to the aid of their commanding officer.

I leveled off then and headed for the space docks in a beeline flight. But I soon saw that there were two more police helicopters, evidently signaled to by the police chief, trailing us. Fast four-man pursuit ships, these—and they started gaining on us!

I was having trouble juggling the controls with one hand while I held the angry girl back with the other.

"You needn't hold me," Bev Brown said, gasping a little from her exertions. "I give you my word I won't try to encumber you or get away again."

I looked at her and saw she meant it. I nodded. "I'm sorry if I was a little rough back there," I told her. "But I had to do what I did. I couldn't leave you behind to face that mob. And about Mirg—he was my best friend, Miss Brown. If there had been anything I could do for him—"

She made no reply to that but just sat staring straight ahead. I shrugged and turned my attention back to piloting the aircraft. Back of us, the pursuing police copters crept closer, and twisting my body for a better look, I could see the gun turret of the foremost ship swing about ominously, in an effort to line itself on our roaring aircraft.

— VII —

— Into The Titanian Outback —

I SWORE soundlessly and turned to the white-faced girl by my side. She seemed stunned by the death of her brother and the sudden turn of events which had made her homeless. She just sat there, looking straight ahead, and in that moment my heart went out to her.

As for myself, this was merely one of the hazards of a life I had deliberately chosen. But this girl— My jaw tightened. I couldn't let her fall into the hands of that porcine police chief.

I looked down over the side of the helicopter. Far below was the broad avenue leading to the great inter-

planetary arch erected by the governing bodies of the four Inner Planets to the memory of Carr Orson, the earth explorer. Land traffic roared along the avenue, the cars looking like bugs from our height close to the great glassite dome.

I swung my attention back to the nearing police copter and sideslipped the cumbersome transport I was piloting just as the forward patrol ship let go with an electronic blast. Ten feet to the left of us, the air suddenly flashed blue, and a heavy report, like the roll of thunder, tossed us violently about.

"That was close," I muttered, fighting the controls. "Hold tight," Bev. I'm going to try to shake them!"

And with this warning I nosed the heavy army transport craft over in a steep dive, heading straight for the broad avenue that was like a deep slash through the city blocks.

Down below us, the traffic suddenly scattered like a covey of quail startled from the brush. Those behind the slant of my dive suddenly stopped; those in line ahead suddenly spurted wildly forward.

Ten feet above that smooth road, I leveled off and gave her the gun. It fooled the pursuing police ships

completely.

They must have figured my ship had been hit and was falling out of control, for they came down slowly after us, in wide, leisurely circles. When I suddenly leveled off and shot for the great commemorative arch, they were caught flat-footed, far to our rear.

The girl made no outcry as I shot the heavy police ship through the arch, though for a moment it seemed as though the long helicopter blades would scrape the stone sides and spin us to our death on the ground below.

But we needled through, and I sent the craft roaring up through the canyon-like streets of the shopping district. The big space depot loomed ahead, its flat roof providing an ideal landing place.

I dropped the helicopter down on the roof gently and jumped out.

"Come," I said to Bev. "If we're lucky, we can make it down to the Erine before the sky patrol spots us."

She followed me without a word. We found narrow iron stairs leading down from the room. We came out in the warehouse area where lines of trucks were loading and slipped along between stores of freight, unnoticed until we came to the great skid pier where the Erine

was docked.

Franj Orcus was at the unloading chute when we made a run for the freighter. High overhead I could hear the roar of the police ships as they dropped down to the roof of the space depot. Evidently they had spotted our abandoned aircraft, and now it would be only moments before they'd have squads out searching the depot.

A great monowheel vehicle called the *sarat* by the natives was parked by the Erine. Fifty feet in diameter, it was the ideal land vehicle in which to venture out into the torn and pitted outlands.

Franj's big, pupilless eyes were wide as the girl and I scrambled past him up the gangplank. "Jon!" he called, following. "What's happened? Where's Mirg?"

"Where's Borg?" I snapped back at him. "This girl and I must find some place to hide. The dock police will be swarming all over this place in a few minutes!"

Borg De was just coming out of the navigation room when we met him. I told him briefly what had happened at the Brown home.

"There was nothing I could do to help Mirg," I finished. "He died instantly."

For a long moment Borg didn't speak. There were

lines in his face, around his mouth, that indicated plainly the shock he felt at his brother's death.

Franj was a big figure by the chart room wall, his big hands spreading helplessly, as though he were trying to grasp the fact of the little Martian's demise.

"Mirg dead?" he said, and repeated it like a man who found it hard to understand.

As for myself, even now, it still seemed incredible that I would never see Mirg's grinning, reckless features again.

Borg finally shrugged, as if forcibly shoving his grief into the background. "That police chief?" he asked, turning abruptly to face the silent girl. "You know who he is?"

Bev nodded. "Tadjil Rek, commander of the entire Shewajo armed forces and the right-hand man of Mor Ekkl, head of the Titanian government."

Borg's face hardened. "That's not so good," he muttered. "Tadjil Rek is a bad man to have trouble with. If he should suspect that I am running guns—" He broke off and started down the passageway. "Come! There's a chance I can get us all through in the *sarat!*"

We followed. There was a commotion at the far end

of the docks, and the few truck loaders nearby turned their attention to the disturbance.

"Come!" Borg snapped. "Now's your chance." And we slipped out of the Erine into the big monowheel.

There was ample living room aboard for four. Borg led us directly to the freight compartment, where supplies for our trek into the wilds had already been stacked.

"Hide here," he whispered, "and I'll try to slip you by the police search!"

And with this he closed the metal door, leaving the girl and me in stygian gloom.

Outside, I could hear shrill police whistles and knew that Tadjil Rek was surrounding the entire depot. And I had a pretty good idea what would happen if we were found. I would be promptly shot. But the girl—

She was very quiet. Only when the monowheel was entered into did she move, press closer to my side. The softness of her sent a warm tide coursing through me. I balanced my electronic pistol in my hand, my muscles tightening for whatever eventuality lay ahead.

Heavy feet tramped down the short passageway, pausing before the freight room door. In the deep silence I

could hear Borg's smooth voice saying, "I harbor no fugitives, Tadjil Rek, as you can see for yourself. I'm leaving immediately with my Venusian partner for the outlands. We intend to bring back a fine load of *clopth* hides to augment our return cargo."

The freight door was thrown open nevertheless, and a light flashed briefly over the packed cases. We were crouched in a far corner, behind boxes, and the light did not reach us. Then it went out, and Tadjil Rek's heavy voice gave orders to move on. The tramp of feet faded. Finally the monowheel was quiet again, and I relaxed, breathing easier.

It was some time later that Borg De and Franj came back. Franj whispered for us to hold tight, and a moment later the *sarat* rolled smoothly out of the great depot, heading across a corner of the city toward the air locks that opened out to the Titanian outback.

The *sarat* was halted at the locks, and security police came aboard. It must have been merely a cursory examination of clearance papers, for ten minutes later we were rolling on again, and I could tell by the sudden lurches that we were now traveling over rugged terrain.

Franj came back to the freight room, his huge figure

looming in the doorway.

"You can come out now," he said. "We have left Shewajo behind us."

— VIII —

— Doublecross —

BEV BROWN and I followed Franj to the control room, where Borg De was driving the *sarat*. Through the thick glassite observation windows we could see the cold, fissured terrain stretching forbiddingly ahead of us. Only hardy prospectors and the tough *clopth* hunters, clad in thick fur suits electrically heated and glassite helmets connected to life support systems carried on their backs, roamed these craggy outlands. These and the wild hill tribes that eked out a bare existence in the great caves that honeycomb the satellite and which retain a breathable amount of air in their depths.

It was a land of sub-zero cold, these outlands. During the long Titanian day, which was lighted mainly by the

huge mother globe of Uranus, the great carnivora came out of the semi-cataleptic state in which they rested through the long night and prowled hungrily through the great gorges.

There was vegetation there, but not of the type found on earth. Earth plants, like cold-blooded animals, did not regulate their own temperature, but changed temperature with the surrounding medium. Hence, when the medium became cold enough to freeze the plant liquids, life functions were suspended, or, in some cases, ended altogether.

Warm-blooded animals have their own heating and refrigeration apparatus, and within limits, maintain fairly even body temperatures. This was the case with all the indigenous plants of Titania. These plants, like those of earth, gave off some oxygen during the process of photosynthesis in the presence of reflected sunlight from Uranus.

The wild hill tribes turned these plants to their own advantage. In fact, without them, they could not have existed in the outback at all, but would have had to seek shelter in the doomed city. They constructed huts with roofs and walls of mica or quartzite which admitted light. In these huts they set out plants which manu-

factured for them air and heat and at the same time yielded edible fruit, nuts, leaves, stems and roots in great variety and profusion. When the hillmen left the shelter of these houses, they had to be bundled in furs and wear oxygen helmets.

Many hillmen lived in huge caves heated and aerated by the plants which in this instance were reared under artificial light.

Carr Orson, the earth explorer, had commented on this adaptation to environment in his famous *Space Journals.* He submitted the theory that the Titanians originally came from some other planet, for they differed greatly from the animal life which had sprung from the satellite. These, like the great *clopths* which he described minutely in his *Journals,* fell into a cataleptic sleep during the Titanian night and roused only during the day. In fact, all Titanian animal life was equipped with feeders ending in strange, tiny globes, and succeeding investigation proved Orson's explanation that some quality in the light of Titania's huge primary, Uranus, acting on these small globules, roused the animals from their deep sleep.

Carr Orson suggested that the Titanians probably were the progeny of the survivors of a wrecked space ship from one of the Inner Planets thousands of years

ago. He went even further and endeavored to link these with the strange ruins of the vanished civilization in Mars' Great West Gorge.

Little more had been learned about Titania since Carr Orson's day. That it was wild and hostile and exceedingly barren it was agreed, and the fact had dissuaded thorough exploration. Much of it remained unknown.

I stared out at the fissured land. The great bulk of Uranus lay on the horizon now, its belted surface mysterious and somehow ominous. Far ahead, the towering scarps that walled in the Valley of the Mists glinted coldly.

Bev Brown shuddered. "I hate this land," she said sorrowfully. "It has brought me nothing but sadness. Here my mother died when I was a baby. My father died out here not so long ago, and now my brother has been killed." She looked up at me, her eyes misting with tears. "I really am grateful for what you've done for me. But after what happened, I can no longer return to Shewajo. Nor can you, Jon. Not while Tadjil Rek remains in command of the police."

I shrugged. "I'm sorry, Bev. I'll see that you get back to earth, if that is where you want to go—"

Borg De cut in sharply: "Where we're headed, Jon,

is no place for a girl. There must be someone who would look after her while we're gone."

Bev smiled. "There is. If you would take me to the village of Tlal Khan, the hill chief, I would be very grateful. Tlal was my father's close friend. He will help me find my father's treasure."

"Treasure?" I looked at her wonderingly.

"Yes. My father was one of Titania's oldest prospectors from earth. Many times he ventured as far as the great barrier that walls in that terrible valley. Finally he penetrated it, and found enough star stones to make him incredibly rich."

Bev's eyes were dark and troubled as she recalled the event. "Several of Tlal's men had accompanied my father on his last trek. Only one returned, and he was dying. He babbled a terrible tale of outraged gods, of strange globes of fire that had killed the rest of the party. My father had drawn a map indicating the way into the valley, and knowing death was upon him, he gave it to this native with instructions to Tlal and my brother to organize a return expedition.

"Tlal brought the map to my brother, who immediately set about financing an expedition back to the valley. Then the map was stolen. We never recovered it. But

my brother decided to go ahead anyway, working from memory of the map, when he was badly hurt in the Four Moons, where he had been discussing the proposed expedition with friends.

She was a slim figure, staring out through the glassite window—a small and troubled figure—and I felt sorry for her.

"Memory of my father's find, for which he gave his life, is all I have left now," she said. "If Tlal will help me recover that cache I'll go back to earth—"

"We're looking for a cache of star stones ourselves," I broke in abruptly. I turned to look at Borg, suspicion stirring in me. "We got a map from the widow of an old prospector who discovered a way through the great barrier wall, like your father—"

I broke off as the girl swung around, her big eyes darkening in surprise.

"A map?" she said wonderingly. Then, "A map with lines burned into a *levadi* rodent's hide?"

I nodded grimly, my suspicions now crystalizing into certainty. "Yes, Bev." I turned my attention to Borg De. "Lines burned on a *levadi* hide, wasn't it, Borg?"

At that moment the monowheel lurched violently. The sudden move threw me back against the girl. Bev's slim

body was slammed against the thick glassite. I felt her go limp and caught her as she started to fall.

The monowheel was still lurching wildly, and I twisted to face Borg, anger surging like fire in me. But the scrawny Martian pilot was manipulating the controls feverishly, and I soon realized what was the cause of the trouble just as a heavy detonite blast nearly toppled the *sarat*.

We had topped a ridge and run directly into a battle between a party of Shewajo's army regulars and a group of revolting hill men!

— IX —

— Escape —

I HAD all I could do in the next few moments to keep myself and the unconscious girl from being battered around inside the control room. Franj was across the room, hanging onto a support girder. Borg was still in the driver's seat.

The *sarat* heeled way over again as a detonite shell burst uncomfortably close, and Borg stepped up the big land wheel's speed. The scrawny Martian was strapped into the swivel seat, and the vicious jolting did not affect him as much as it did us.

I looked down at Bev Brown in the crook of my left arm. She was hanging limp, her face white, and a stab of fear went through me as I saw the small streak of blood from a gash on her forehead.

I shifted her weight and looked out through the window. The hill men were retreating up the side of the ridge, falling back from the numerically smaller but far better armed army contingent. The Titanian soldiers had several pieces of light artillery firing detonite shells and two war *sarats* armed with deadly electronic cannon backing them.

We had run right into the midst of it, and our only hope now was to break through, unharmed, and make the opposite ridge. The regular army kept blasting away at us, no doubt under the impression we were with the hill men. The hill people themselves, though, were scattering away from us, some of them firing hand electronics at our vehicle.

Franj reached my side just as a close electronic burst rocked the monowheel. Franj's big hands tightened on his support.

"If we had an electronic battery mounted on this thing—" he muttered angrily.

Borg was spinning the big land wheel in a desperate effort to keep from being blasted apart by the war *sarats*. Bursts slammed about us, ripping huge gouges out of the rocky terrain. Then another blast rocked the monowheel perilously close to off-balance. When it finally settled back into equilibrium, the entire enclosed shell sagged awry. A harsh scraping of tortured metal made a continuous sound as the damaged engine drove us jerkily up the ridge.

The big land wheel made the summit and rolled down a long, pitted slant for about ten miles before the drive mechanism gave out. The *sarat* lurched to the left, rasped protestingly, and suddenly settled in a small depression, the inner shell tipped at a twenty-degree angle.

For about thirty seconds there was a cold, angry silence inside the wheel. I was staring at Borg, remembering what Bev had said just before the first violent lurch had slammed us against the glassite window. I had things to straighten out with the scrawny Martian. But first I had to get Bev Brown to her cabin, find out how badly she was hurt.

"Franj!" I called. "See what you can do in the engine room. I'll be with you as soon as I see that

this girl is all right."

Franj nodded. Borg De unhooked his safety belt and followed the big Venusian aft without a word.

I took Bev down to the cabin that was to have been Mirg De's quarters and laid her down on the small bunk. She stirred when I forced a sip of *pulcho* between her lips. She coughed; then a little moan escaped from between her lips. Her eyes flickered, open. For a brief moment a blank stare met mine. Then remembrance rushed back, and I saw contempt and anger replace the empty look in her eyes.

She sat up, shrinking away from me. "You thief!" she flared. "Leave me alone! Don't touch me!"

I tried to explain. "I didn't know, Bev." I told her how I happened to become involved in Borg De's treasure hunt.

"If Borg De had anything to do with the stealing of your father's map, neither I nor Franj nor Mirg knew anything about it."

The girl's lips curled. "You expect me to believe that?"

I shrugged. "I've told you the truth, Bev," I said angrily. "You can believe me or not, as you wish. In the

meantime, we're marooned here with a disabled *sarat.* If the damage can be patched up, I'll see that you're taken to the hill village of Tlal Khan."

I went out, slamming the door, and made my way to the engine room where Franj and Borg were sweating over the disabled engine. A main suspension bar had been weakened by an electronic blast and had finally given way, thus throwing the monowheel out of balance. At the same time the driving mechanism had been badly damaged.

We worked for about an hour, realizing the full extent of the mishap, before giving up. It would be impossible to get the *sarat* running again with the insufficient tools and parts at our disposal. From here on we'd have to travel afoot, carrying what supplies we could pack on our backs.

I straightened, still burning from the contempt in Bev's eyes, and caught Borg De by his green tunic. I pulled him up close, lifting him off his feet, my jaw thrusting almost into his face.

"We've been neck deep in trouble from the day we stepped aboard the Erine," I snarled at him. "First you turned out to be a gunrunner and got an ISS man on

our trail. Now it turns out you stole a map for this treasure hunt you hooked us on!"

My fingers closed tightly, and I shook him. "Blast your red hide, Borg, we're going to go about this my way now. We're taking Miss Brown to that hill village she mentioned, and then we're going through with this expedition into the Valley of the Mists. Only it isn't going to turn out the way you planned it. We're turning those stones, if we find them, over to Miss Brown. All of them! Do you understand?"

Borg straightened out his rumpled tunic when I let him down. I saw hatred flicker in his green eyes, but a crafty gleam wiped it out. He said, "Sure, Jon—if that's the way you want it. I didn't know how you felt about the girl."

I put my palm against his face and slammed him up against the wall. "Never mind how *I* feel about the girl, Borg! From now on I run things on this expedition, and you take *my* orders!"

I left him staring murderously at me and went back to Bev's cabin. I rapped on the door impatiently. I was getting fed up with this double-dealing and cross-thinking, and I wanted to get things straightened out with her.

There was no answer to my knock.

I tried the door, went inside. The room was empty. For a moment I stared foolishly. "Bev!" I called. Then understanding hit me like the lash of a whip, and I turned and ran swiftly to the air lock compartment.

A quick glance told me one of the four fur suits and one of the glassite helmets were gone. The outer lock door was open.

I quickly donned one of the life support suits. Franj came into the room behind me and called out a question, but I had no time to answer him. I entered the lock, and a moment later I was striding over the pitted, weirdly lighted terrain.

"Bev!" I called anxiously into the small mike built into the glassite helmet. I knew that if she were anywhere within a five-mile radius, she would hear.

"Bev! Come back, Bev!"

No answer crackled in my earphones. For several hours I searched among the shadowy gorges, cutting back as far as the ridge behind which the skirmish had taken place. The fighters had vanished, taking their dead with them. The hollow was still and silent in the blue-green glow of the mother planet, Uranus.

When I finally turned back to the disabled *sarat,* the realization faced me that Bev Brown was actually gone—swallowed completely by this land of shadowy gorges and strange, unearthly light!

— X —

— Lair Of The *Clopth* —

Franj and Borg De were waiting when I got back. Supplies had been set out in three separate packs, their bulk and weight calculated according to our individual capacity to carry.

Franj was slipping into his suit. His voice sounded in my earphones.

"Lost her, Jon?"

I nodded, my attention settling on Borg De, already clad in a fur garment and glassite helmet. "If anything happens to that girl, Borg," I said coldly, "I'll hold

you directly responsible!"

"There's nothing we can do about her now," Borg answered sullenly. "Let's push on. If we find that cache of star stones for her, it might help even things."

I shrugged, doubting his sincerity. I knew that Borg De would have to be watched closely from now on.

"We'll leave that up to her," I said bleakly. "I wouldn't be surprised, though, if she didn't put us all in the penitentiary."

I adjusted my pack to a better position on my shoulders, checked the oxygen recycling valves and strapped the brace of hand electronics Franj handed me about my waist. If half the stories I had heard of the Titanian gorges were true, we would have need of all our weapons.

We each carried a Stoltz compass strapped to our right wrist, and a new type direction finder specially adapted to travel on Titania. The tiny silver pointer glinted in the dim blue-green light as we set our course for the blue barrier.

Franj carried the biggest pack. He paused on the first rise, waiting for us to catch up with him. His giant frame loomed up grotesquely against the swollen globe of Uranus, and somehow, almost as though it were a

premonition, I remembered Steeve Argite, the ISS man, as I had last seen him on Callisto.

I shrugged the tingling feeling from me and took the lead as we went down a steep slope into a great, semi-dark ravine. The shadows lay still and somber along the crumbly walls. Overhead, the myriad stars of our universe blazed like cold white gems set in a greenish-tinted roof.

Strange plants crouched in still, motionless clumps on the canyon floor. These resembled the barrel cacti of the American deserts, save that hairy vines dangled limply from the central bulk. They looked for all the world like squat sleeping dwarfs as we passed among them.

Suddenly, without warning, one of them unfolded. The hairy tendrils lifted, whipped swiftly toward us. Borg screamed, his voice shrilling in my earphones.

I turned in time to see him being lifted by one hairy tendril encircling his struggling figure. He was being drawn toward the now gaping, thorn-lined maw of the plant.

Franj intervened before I could act. One huge hand caught the tendril that encircled Borg. At once a half-dozen other tendrils were entwining about the Venu-

sian's giant frame.

I leveled one of my electronic pistols at the body of the carnivorous plant. I fired. The heavy charge blasted most of the spiny bulk into charred fiber. The tendrils writhed wildly, whipping Borg and Franj about in the death throes of the deadly plant. Finally they went limp.

About us now other tendrils were reaching out for us. I felt a touch on my shoulder and, whirling, blazed away at the writhing tentacles.

Franj was struggling to his feet as I backed up to him. But Borg De was lying limp, his face looking purple inside his helmet. The hairy tendril had very nearly crushed the life from him. Franj lugged him out of danger as I blasted away at the nearby plants with both electronics.

On safer ground, we halted. Borg De came to and sat up slowly. The three of us stared down at those squat, silent shapes that were again deceptively motionless, apparently harmless.

Borg's labored voice rasped in my earphones. "*Oeji!* The carnivorous plant of Titania!"

We rested until Borg indicated he had recovered enough to go on. Then we proceeded, skirting those

lanes of *oeji,* keeping a sharp lookout for similar plants.

Several times we saw small rodents, shelled like turtles, scurry into cracks on bandy legs. Once a pair of lambent eyes stared at us from the depths of a deep crevice, baleful and watching. But we were allowed to pass unmolested.

The country appeared to be one vast maze of gorges, fissures and crevices. We rested several times, watching the great bulk of Uranus sink below the horizon almost with relief. Once night settled over the wild outback country, we would have little to fear from the great carnivora, at least.

We entered a rugged gorge whose steep walls seemed pitted by innumerable fissures and caves. I cast a quick glance over those dark walls and concentrated my attention on the treacherous passage ahead.

Thus I was several feet in front of my companions when the terrible roar forced its way through my helmet. A quick chill raked my spine, momentarily freezing me. Then I turned about in time to see one of the dreaded *clopths* launch itself from a ledge thirty feet above our heads.

Borg De, some twenty feet to the rear, stumbled

backward in fright, his electronic pistol firing wildly. The heavy electron bolt fused the rock wall several feet to one side of the furry carnivora, sending a small slide of rubble downward. That wild shot nearly cost him his life.

A small boulder hit my shoulder just as I leveled my pistol. It sent me stumbling into Franj. I heard Borg's wild cry and Franj's hoarse shout. When I regained my balance, the giant *clopth* was bounding up the opposite slope, with Borg's limp figure between his great mandibles.

Franj was blasting away at the beast, but I quickly stopped him. "Youl'll kill Borg if you hit them!" I said grimly. "Come! Our only chance to save him is to follow them!"

I set my gravity equalizer to low pull and followed the *clopth* up the slope, where it had already vanished inside a dark cavern. Franj followed, lumbering behind me.

The deep fissure glowed with a cold radioactive light that came from the blue walls. It seemed to be the natural habitat of the carnivorous *oeji* plant, as over a score of them lined the cavern walls.

I remembered the story told by the *clopth* hunters who had remarked on the strange kinship between the dread beast and the *oeji* plants. They seemed to have a mutual arrangement, whereby the plants supplied warmth during the long Titanian day to the *clopth* when it returned to its lair with whatever prey had fallen beneath its deadly charge, in return for scraps of flesh left by the carnivora.

I paused, searching the dimly lighted cavern for sight of them. Franj's big frame drew up beside me, his electronic ready in his hand.

Off to the right, where the blue stone roof beveled down to within ten feet of the floor, there was movement. Then a hoarse coughing shuddered through the cavern. The hairy tendrils of several of the *oeji* plants lining the wall waved uneasily.

I saw it then, crouched at the far end of the cavern. Borg was laying face down on the floor, under one huge clawed paw.

He was apparently dead, though I could detect no rip or tear in his life support suit, and his glassite helmet was still intact. Any damage to these would have meant certain death from the sub-zero cold.

On either side of them *oeji* plants squatted, silent

and motionless, their tendrils limps along the cavern floor—quiescent, waiting with fantastic patience for what the giant beast would leave of his prey.

I said, "We've got to work fast, Franj, if we expect to get Borg De out of here in one piece. You take the *clopth* with your first shot, while I rush in and snatch Borg away from those plants."

Franj nodded. I crept closer, moving away from the big Venusian so as to give him a clear shot at the growling beast. The great carnivora was crouching lower on its six padded feet, its knobby tail twitching dangerously. The slender, ball-pointed feelers on top of its shaggy, blue-gray furred head bent toward us, and a low growl issued from between saber-toothed jaws. Its single huge eye, placed just above the twin nostril slits, glared at me with lambent, warning flame.

I gathered myself, said, "Now, Franj!" and sprang forward, my electronic spitting at the *oeji.* But the legendary speed of that giant animal nearly proved our undoing.

I saw Franj's blast sear across the top of the animal's thick, furry shoulders, singeing the hair in a broad streak in the same instant that it charged.

I threw myself to one side, onto the cavern floor, and felt the brush of that huge body as it went past, charging for Franj. I didn't have time to look around. Already the limp tendrils had whipped to life, curling about Borg's limp figure.

I ran in quickly, blasting the remaining *oeji* into charred stumps. Bending over the Martian, I gathered his slight frame into my arms and turned to Franj.

I halted, the blood freezing in my veins at what I saw.

The great *clopth* had reached Franj. The giant Venusian was down with the huge beast over him. Somehow Franj's electronic pistol had been knocked out of his hand, and he was clinging to the *clopth's* terrible mandibles, his huge shoulders bulging with the effort to keep them from closing like steel pincers about his waist.

Slowly but surely those mandibles were overcoming even Franj's great strength. I leveled my electronic, sighting steadily. A bad shot would blast Franj as well as the beast into charred eternity.

The electronic spat its deadly bolt. The *clopth's* hind quarters seemed to dissolve in a burst of seared flesh.

Franj writhed out from under the relaxing forebody. "Thanks, Jon," he said drily as I reached his side.

"Things were beginning to get kind of tight for me."

"They'll probably get tighter if that *clopth's* mate shows up before we get out of here!" I growled. "Pick up your electronic and let's get out of here!"

— XI —

— The Night People —

BEV BROWN paused in her flight from the *sarat* and sank wearily down on a projecting lump of scaly earth. She was a mile or so from the damaged vehicle, but in that jumbled, weird land she might as well have been on another planet. Only chance could lead anyone to her.

She had fled without thought, wanting only to get away from men she felt she could not trust; adventurers whose only concern was for the star stones her father had given his life for—

She heard Jon's voice now in her earphones, calling. Jon Smith—a fellow earth man. He sounded concerned,

anxious.

"*Bev—please answer. Bev—Bev—*"

Her lips trembled. For a moment she felt tempted to call back—the empty world around her frightened her. Then, determinedly, she cut off the receiver in her headset.

Tlal Khan's village was not too far away, and Tlal had been her father's friend and hers since she could remember. She looked up into the sky, where the great orb of Uranus was already dipping down to the horizon. She didn't have much time. The hill tribes abandoned their villages and retreated into their caves as soon as the mother planet went down. . . .

The rumble of a *sarat,* faintly vibrating the ground under her, jerked her to her feet. Off to the left, topping a small rise, the huge uniwheeled craft came into view. She saw the insignia of the Titanian police force almost immediately, and terror sent her stumbling away.

The movement caught Tadjil Rek's eye as he sat in the control. He barked a sharp order, and the *sarat* heeled sharply in a quick turn down the ridge.

Bev ran blindly over that blue-lighted, barren earth. The fissure seemed to open up under her feet. She felt

herself falling and grasped wildly at the sides of the steep slope. She felt her suit snag on a rock, and terror raced through her as she hung there for what seemed an eternity, listening for the hissing of escaping air that would spell her death. Then, as only silence pressed against her eardrums, she disengaged herself and slid the last few feet down into the bottom of the gully.

Shaken, she cowered against the rocks and looked up. She had fallen at least thirty feet, and it was a miracle she had escaped with only bruises. Her suit was tough and pliant, constructed for just such emergencies in the Titanian outback, but how much damage the life support pack had suffered she could only guess. As of now, it was still working efficiently.

She looked around her. The walls were too steep for her to climb. She was trapped here, unless farther down she found an easier way back to the surface.

She started walking. The crack led downward. Once water or some fluid thing has worn its way through the blue earth. Now the rock walls of the crevasse were shiny, and only a few of the hardy *oeji* plants clung to the sides of the steep slopes, waiting with the infinite patience of their kind for something to fall within reach of

their tentacles.

Bev had lived most of her life on Titania, and she knew most of its fauna and flora. She had gone on several expeditions with her father and brother into the outback, and she knew its dangers.

It was in crevices like this, and in the deeper caves, that the dreaded *clopth* lurked. But fur hunters over the years had all but decimated the carnivorous animal, and even in the outback they were now scarce and hard to find.

It was not the *clopth* she was afraid of. She paused to look up toward the rim. The Titanian police in the *sarat* must have lost her. It was easy in this jagged, scarred land of poor light seemingly to drop from sight.

For this she was thankful.

She continued on. Somewhere, surely, she would find a way out. And the hill people were her friends. They were outcasts and exploited, and her father had felt a great sympathy for them.

She understood their revolt. But Titania had been a pleasant place before, with its ever-changing beauty, its remoteness in space, far from earth and the sun. Only vaguely, as a childhood memory, did she remember the great blazing orb that warmed the earth. Here the sun

was just another star in the sky.

She paused. Earth. Jon Smith. She remembered his face, his concern. Maybe she had been too hasty in judging him. Her mouth was dry; she fought the panic rising in her throat.

Her transmitter! She had forgotten it in her fright. She switched the headset on and called: "Jon—Jon Smith. Can you hear me? Please Jon."

She waited, but nothing came over the airless void. She sank down on a rock, and if she could have she would have buried her face in her hands. She felt small and alone and friendless. Now that her brother, too, was dead, there was nothing left for her on Titania.

Nor did she have any great feeling for earth.

Her family had lived too long in self-imposed exile here. If she went back, she would be a stranger in a strange land.

Something moved along the floor of the gully. She caught sight of it out of the corners of her eyes and jerked upright, her breath catching in her throat.

But it was only one of the ubiquitous turtle-like rodents that infested the outback. She switched on the headset again and was about to call when a voice came over

the earphones; a harsh, commanding voice she recognized as Tadjil Rek's, giving orders.

She cut off the set and ran, stumbling down the deepening cut in the earth. The walls rose higher, enclosing her—the floor narrowed.

She'd never get out this way!

She turned back. She felt like an ant crawling aimlessly along a crack in the ground. Maybe there was no way out; maybe she would remain trapped here forever—

From the rim above her a rock slid down. She turned, hope rising in her. She switched on her headset. Her voice was desperate as she sent out the distress call of the hill tribes:

"*Salejo salejo—*"

The glassite-helmeted face that looked down at her from the rim above was alone. She saw it briefly, and the insignia on the life support suit. The insignia of Tadjil Rek's police!

She turned and fled wildly back down into that narrowing crevice.

TADJIL REK looked down into the crevasse where one of his men had pointed out that the girl, Bev

Brown, had been seen.

He was an ugly man, even for a Titanian, but despite a fat and ungainly body, he had amazing strength and endurance. And he was cunning.

He had not succeeded to the office of police chief in Shewajo (and by extension head of the small Titanian army) by incompetence or cowardice. Nor had he attained the office by reason of birth.

His family, unlike most of those residing in Shewajo, had only recently come in from the outback; he knew the hill tribes very well.

Like most of the people in Shewajo, he ruled through the graces of foreign trade and foreign power. Most of the outer and inner planets had trade commissions in Shewajo. The Titanian rulers, the Shewajo governing body, existed only to keep order on this backward satellite.

But Tadjil Rek was shrewd enough to know that time was running out. The hill tribes had had enough of foreign domination and exploitation, and even the poor city people were revolting. Once the Central Planetary Commission sent in a team of investigators, the old order would go—and Tadjil Rek would go with it.

For himself, he could always go into exile on one of the outer planets. But Venus or Mars was more to his liking. And for this he needed money—coin that was recognized throughout the entire solar system.

Earth money was the current medium of exchange—but star stones were universally valuable, the way gold had been on earth.

Which was why he had gone to the Brown house. He knew of the cache of star stones found by Bev Brown's father; he had no doubt that the girl and the men he was after had come into the outback to find them.

He turned to the men assembled around the police *sarat*. "She's down there somewhere," he said harshly. "I want her, alive. A thousand *kornaks* to the man who brings her back to me!"

BEV BROWN kept running, her breath coming in gasps now. She had to slow down; the over-taxed recovery system was beginning to foul the air in her helmet.

The crack in the earth narrowed further; she felt that if she stretched out her arms she would touch the rocks on either side of her.

The floor of the crevasse led downward.

She paused, listening. With the earphones turned off, she could hear nothing; sound did not carry without air. But she listened through her feet—for the faint vibrations that would tell her that Tadjil Rek, or some of his men, were following.

She felt them.

She began to run again. The crevice became a tunnel sloping gently downward. Above her now was no slit of sky; only tons of rock. A faint light penetrated, then gave way to a bluish glow from the rocks.

Now Bev began to feel a different kind of fright. She recalled stories she had heard from childhood. Even the hill people believed them—legends, myths of an underground life—of people who never ventured out into the light.

The tunnel opened up into an underground cavern. It was at least a hundred yards across—she could not see the ceiling because of the faint blue light.

She reached up to snap on her helmet light. Something light, feathery, pushed against her arm. She froze. Against her glassite helmet she felt a faint sighing, a breeze rustling, flowing past.

She turned her palm toward the far end of the cavern, and now she felt the pressure of the windstream. It was not strong, but it was steady!

Air! Was it good enough for her to breathe it? Or was it some deadly gas?

She was not brave enough to find out. Her life support system was still working; she was in no immediate danger of running out of breathable air.

She stood still, waiting. The blue light in the cavern seemed to play tricks with her eyes. She thought she saw movement around her, but she wasn't sure.

She looked back to the tunnel. She couldn't go back. She dreaded what she might find farther on in the cavern. But the airstream—had to come from somewhere.

She moved on, following it. It seemed to come from somewhere at the far end of the underground chamber. Then, abruptly, it stopped.

She hesitated. Down below her somewhere, she heard something vibrating against her helmet, pushing against her eardrums. Voices chanting—or waves beating against a distant sea. . . .

She moved forward toward an opening in the cavern wall; a small opening, hardly wide enough for two or

three people to enter at once.

She could not see what lay beyond. Her eyes were attracted to the huge stone that formed the floor of the opening. It was smooth, polished, as though hands or feet had worked on it for a thousand years.

She was afraid now. She started to back off. Then, as she started to turn, a beam of light stabbed across the cavern. Light from a hand flash probed the murky blueness of the underground chamber. And behind the flash she saw the shadowy figures of Tadjil Rek's men.

Involuntarily she turned and ran directly toward the opening. A blast of air reached her as she stepped onto the flat, polished stone. Then, quickly, the stone sank under her, like the floor of an elevator sliding down a stone-walled shaft!

Terror held her motionless. The stone beneath her slid down on a cushion of air—down a shaft of stone. She had no idea how far down it went—time lost itself in the darkness and the unknown.

Finally the stone eased to a gentle stop. A small opening faced her. She hesitated, afraid to step out. Something moved around her; something soft touched her. . . .

She ran out into the dimly lighted cavern. Around

her now she felt movement; a querulous sound, rising and falling, beat through her helmet.

Terror held her rigid. There was nothing she could see. But she could feel them all around her.

The night people!

She remained motionless. The questioning sound rose and fell round her. Then something touched her arm again—soft, clinging. She jerked her arm away, and whatever was holding it relinquished its grip with a soft sucking sound.

Slowly her hand went up to her helmet light. She hesitated terrified at what she might see. Then something touched her arm again, slid across her face plate.

She snapped the light on.

The thing on her face plate was a tentacle, ending in a spongy pod. Behind it was a vaguely human face—round, staring, browless and with lashless eyes. The face shrank away from her, and a tentacle came up to shield those round sightless eyes from the light.

Around her rose a disturbed murmuring. She glimpsed scores of other night creatures around her, stirring, moving away from the light.

She screamed!

Behind ner the night people moved toward her, seeming to flow across the cavern floor. She turned and ran until the far wall stopped her. Then, as the first probing tentacle touched her, she fainted.

— XII —

— Into The Valley Of The Mists —

I WAS thinking of Bev Brown as we emerged from the cave with Borg De's limp, scrawny body. For a moment I listened, a vague premonition crawling over me. It seemed I heard her cry, a lost and hopeless call for help. I checked my earphones, but they were turned off.

Was I imagining things?

I stood still, crouched over the seemingly dead Martian, listening. A cold sweat broke out over my body. Bev *had* called! I was sure of it. She was in terrible danger somewhere, and I felt helpless.

I looked up at Franj, who was staring at me. I said:

"Did you hear her, Franj?" and then I realized he couldn't hear me without my turning my transmitter on.

"Miss Brown calling us. Did you hear her?"

Franj shook his head. He switched on his earphones and listened, but I knew he would hear nothing. Maybe it was because I was worried about her. And yet?

I uttered a silent prayer for her safety. I knew she had friends among the hill people—I hoped desperately they had found her.

Franj's voice broke into my thoughts. "Is he dead?" He was looking down at Borg De.

I crouched down beside the Martian skipper of the Erine and made a quick examination of his life support suit. Franj stood by, facing the mouth of the cave, his electronic held ready.

I could find no rent in Borg's suit, but the *clopth's* powerful mandibles could have crushed the life from him regardless. I was about to say this to Franj when Borg stirred. His eyes opened, and he looked up at me and managed a weak grin.

I didn't have much regard for Borg at the moment, but I had to admit he was a tough little man.

"Never expected to see you again," he whispered.

"But—thanks, Jon."

I shrugged. "Can you walk?"

He lifted up a hand to me. "I think so."

I helped him to his feet. He leaned against a rock, took a few tentative deep breaths. His face twisted in pain. "Hurts—to breathe. My ribs feel cracked."

I said, "You're lucky to be alive."

Franj moved between us. "Let's get out of here."

Borg nodded. He fumbled in his hip pocket for the *levadi* hide map and spread it out on the rock. We studied it with him.

"I may be a little off," Borg said painfully, "but my guess is we're here." He placed his gloved finger on a spot on the map and then traced a line toward the ridges indicating the barrier. "The way into the valley is right here." His finger rested on a tiny cross.

I looked out toward the distant barrier. "You think you can make it?" I asked Borg.

He nodded. "If I have to crawl my way inside," he said grimly. And I knew he meant it.

Franj adjusted the pack on his back. "Let's go," he said quietly.

We set forth across that barren, weird landscape. On

earth it would have been a desert—dry, cracked, blasted by the sun.

Here the blue light accentuated a sense of utter coldness. The ridges and crags seemed frozen, locked in time and space.

Only a crescent of the giant globe of Uranus showed above the horizon when we finally neared the mysterious blue scarps that had attracted so many men without yielding up their secret—the same cliffs Carr Orson had scaled nearly a hundred earth years before. Towering sheer for nine thousand feet into the darkening sky, they made a formidable barrier.

Borg De brought up his map again, and we scanned it. Borg's face had beads of sweat. He must have been in great pain, but he refused to show it.

"That overhang!" he said, and excitement crowded the pain from his voice. He pointed. "The way into the valley lies under that huge rock mass!"

I saw it—a frowning bulge of rock jutting a hundred feet or more out from the cliff face. But I saw no sign of a gap in the wall under it.

I said so. Borg's voice crackled in my earphones. "Perhaps that is the reason no one save Brown ever

found it. It must be a narrow defile, perhaps no more than a crack in that solid mass, and can't be seen until one comes directly upon it. Bev's father must have stumbled upon it by sheer accident."

I stared up at that stone mass. It bulged out about five hundred feet from where we stood, and a talus slide under it provided a tough but not insurmountable ascent to it. From then on the barrier was unclimbable.

I think the three of us felt it then—a cold foreboding—a warning of death!

Up to that moment we had been spurred by the thought of a fortune in star stones; we had not given much thought to what might lie beyond that barrier.

Now, in the icy stillness of the gathering Titanian night, I had a premonition of disaster. I glanced at Franj and glimpsed the same expression on his face. But he only raised his hand and smiled, and I knew that though the big Venusian shared my feelings, he was not afraid.

Borg shook off his own feeling of uneasiness. "Come on," he said, his voice sharp with false confidence. "There's nothing beyond those cliffs we can't handle!"

We started up the talus slide. There was no weather in the Titanian outback to erode and cut away at that

massive barrier. The talus slide must have been caused by some movement in the earth, or some meteorite smashing at a diagonal into the barrier, maybe a million or more years ago. Just when it had happened lay beyond the memory even of the hill tribes.

The going was rough. We climbed like ants toiling up an ant hill, sliding a little here, gaining a little there. I wondered what had made Bev Brown's father make this terrible climb. . . .

We were halfway up the slope when I saw it—circling low, dropping swiftly along the side of the huge rock barrier, like a glinting silver bullet, its discharge jets flaring bluish red against the towering scarps.

"Rocket ship!" Borg's voice crackled in my earphones. "Interplanetary patrol!" There was alarm in his voice.

I looked up just as it swept past. The markings on its glinting bow were momentarily discernible: "IP-1."

I said sharply, "Steeve Argite!" Somehow I knew that the ISS had survived, had somehow managed to get through to the settlement of Var Lid. Impossible as it had appeared, he had made it, commandeered a patrol ship and set out after us. Steeve Argite was definitely that kind of man.

The fast cruiser dipped to within a hundred feet above us, as though its pilot wanted a better look at us toiling up the talus slope. It was a dangerous thing to do. Then it was gone, like a snarling detonite shell, and the air rush of its passage pushed against us, sending us sprawling. It lifted into the darkening sky and fell away, dropping swiftly toward a landing somewhere behind us. And I had the feeling that Steeve Argite had seen us and was planning to come after us, alone!

Instead of fear, I felt a strange sense of relief. I had not relished abandoning Steeve to die on Callisto. I was glad he was alive.

But ISS man or not, I was going into that valley from which only one man had ever returned. Not for myself. I no longer cared for the star stones for myself. They belonged to Bev Brown. And I was resolved that she should get them.

I glanced at Franj. I didn't know what Franj felt. . . . I knew he was tired of wandering the interplanetary spaceways and would like to settle down on his native planet. The star stones would do that for him.

As for Borg—I didn't trust the scrawny Martian gunrunner. He'd kill both of us in order to keep the fortune

Bev Brown's father had cached somewhere inside this barrier.

As for Steeve—I'd settle things with the ISS man when we met!

THE CRACK in the stone wall was there, under the overhang, as Bev's father had described it. We had to squeeze through the opening, so narrow was it. But once we were inside, a few yards on it widened to eight or ten feet. From there it never grew any wider. The bottom of the defile was treacherous with fallen rubble, and a stygian darkness now filled the torturous crack in the barrier. We were forced to turn on our Lorel light, the lamp built into the top of our glassite helmets, which was an ancient device I understand was used by coal miners on earth several hundred years ago.

For over a mile the defile cut a torturous way through the barrier. Occasionally it narrowed to the point where Franj's thick bulk could barely squeeze by. At others it widened again so that once, looking up, we spotted a thin slice of sky.

Toward the end, I half expected the fissure to close in and trap us, forcing us to return. From above, the

enclosed valley appeared like a bowl of steaming blue mist. I expected some of that mist would flow through the crack. But our Lorel lights showed us nothing but the bare, jagged walls that rose nine thousand feet above us.

The defile narrowed again. We moved single file now. Borg led the way; I wanted the Martian in front of me all the time. Franj brought up the rear.

At one point Franj had to take off his back pack and hold it in front of him as he sidled past what was no more than a slit in that massive rock wall.

Then, less than a hundred yards beyond, abruptly and without preparation, we were through the barrier. Before us the valley floor sloped gently downward, like the inside of a huge shallow plate. Several ragged stone formations broke the apparent level expanse of the valley below us.

For a few moments we huddled together, looking down into the valley. I had expected to see almost anything save this still, apparently lifeless enclosure bounded by towering cliffs. A soft blue light suffused and illumined the valley. It came from the thick mist that hung above us, at least five hundred feet above the valley.

Whatever was alien and dangerous here, I thought,

lived in that mist, not down in the valley!

It was Franj who broke the silence. He was pointing out something downslope and to our right.

"A space ship," he said.

It was a good half-mile down, but even at that distance I could make out the long silver outlines of the wrecked space craft. Its prow was buried in loose rubble and earth. It glinted eerily in the soft blue light that reminded me of the radioactive glow in the lair of the *clopth.* I looked into the mist again. It was like a gaseous cover, sealing in the bowl of the valley.

And suddenly I had the feeling I was being watched—by something I couldn't understand. The very emptiness of the strange valley seemed to stir— *and wait!*

My hand went down to my electronic pistol, and I licked my lips. I could see Borg De's eyes widen as he clutched his pistol, and I knew he felt it, too.

Franj said quietly: "Something's out there, something we can't see."

I nodded.

Borg's voice sounded a little hoarse, as though he were forcing courage through his lips. "Long as we can't see it, it can't hurt us!"

It was strange logic, but it seemed to satisfy the little Martian. As for myself, we were here, and we would have to face whatever came.

We straggled down the slope to the space ship. According to Borg's map, Brown's cache was hidden somewhere along the inner cliff wall, beyond the wrecked craft.

The rocket ship loomed up now, crumpled and still in the blue silence. Still legible on the twisted prow was its name: COMATT II. I remembered it had been commanded by Captain Lee Selvin and had disappeared while on an exploring mission over the blue mists in the year 2004.

We moved up close, wondering what could have caused the powerful space liner to crash. There was no hole in its hull, nothing to show it had been downed by explosives or electronic gunfire. Behind it was a long scar in the earth. It marked where the craft had come down out of control and slid a considerable distance before burying its prow into the slope.

Through the still intact portholes, we could make out vague human forms sprawled about inside the ship's control room. They seemed to be resting; there was no

sign of deterioration of the human body. But even if we had wanted to, we knew there was no way for us to get inside to them. The air locks as well as the emergency exits had been jammed when the ship crashed, and it would have taken an arc-torch to burn our way through that tough metal shell.

We moved away from the wrecked ship after a brief survey. The sensation of being watched—of being judged by an alien intelligence—was stronger now. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck prickle, and I whirled around, my electronic ready. My sudden reaction affected Franj and Borg, for they, too, turned quickly, drawing their pistols.

But we saw nothing.

And yet something ominous seemed to lurk in that blue mist doming the valley. Something was waiting.

Waiting, I thought uneasily, *for what?*

Borg's voice crackled nervously. "You're getting jumpy, Jon. There's nothing here to be afraid of."

We cut across toward the inner wall beyond the space craft and started up the gentle slope. A small stone, dislodged by Franj's boot, rolled past me. It was the only movement, other than our own, in the valley, and

abruptly I realized we had not seen signs of life anywhere; not even the *oeji* plants that rooted themselves tenaciously in the blue and seemingly barren soil outside, the ever-present, scuttling turtle-like rodents that popped in and out of cracks in the ground.

Borg suddenly stopped and flung up a signaling arm. "Wait!" Then he pointed. "What is it? Over there!"

It lay against the base of the cliff—an old-fashioned space suit, the ancient face plate open. The insignia of the United States, the American flag, was sewn on the right shoulder, and the old United Nations emblem was emblazoned on the helmet.

It looked like a man resting against the base of the wall, waiting for us to join him. But even from where I stood, I could see there was no one inside the suit. Or so I thought.

For the next instant, with a jerky, unnatural movement, the right hand of that space suit lifted in a weary, terrifying, beckoning gesture!

— XIII —

— A Waiting Game —

TADJIL REK waited impatiently above the crevice down which Bev Brown had fled. The army unit which had been fighting the hill tribes had joined him. They were camped there, the big army *sarats* with their electronic batteries parked just beyond. A big field kitchen, its transportable and interlocking units quickly set up and containing its own air recycling unit, allowed men to eat and rest in comfort, outside their space suits.

Gondar, commander of the army unit and a close friend, came out to join him. The army lieutenant was a tall man, even for a Titanian, with sharp features and unreadable eyes. He was military to his toes—he

lived and slept by the book. He had only contempt for the hill tribes he had been fighting.

"They've gone back into their caves," he told Tadjil Rek, "Tlal Khan and his men. They won't attack again until it is light."

Tadjil Rek nodded. Beside the younger army man, he looked fat and ungainly, but there was a deceptive strength in him, an endurance that belied his appearance, and a ruthlessness most men had learned to fear.

"How is it back in Shewajo?"

Tadjil grunted. "Bad. Mor Ekkl is doing what he can to placate the people, but the foreign compounds are getting restless. I'm afraid the interplanetary council will be sending investigators to Titania soon."

Gondar frowned. "Give me a thousand more men, and I'll wipe the hill tribes from the outback. . . ."

"That is not the solution wanted by the council," Tadjil Rek said. "There is great sympathy for the hill tribes among the people of the Inner Planets. There will be a call for a change in rulers, more participation for the hill tribes in government—"

"And when that happens?" Gondar's voice was sharp.

"Mor Ekkl will go—and we'll go with him!"

Gondar was silent for a moment. "It's a shame," he said softly. "I like it here. . . ."

There was movement now down in the crevice. Tadjil Rek looked down as the returning patrol started to climb up the rope ladder. They came up one by one, glassite-helmeted, fur-suited, bulky and silent.

Not until they were all standing in front of him did the Shewajo police chief notice the girl was not with them.

He whirled on the leader, a young, battle-scarred man he had hand-picked from the scum of Shewajo's poor districts.

"Where is the girl?"

The young man raised his right hand and clenched his gloved fist. This was a Titanian symbol of honor, and it meant that whatever he would say was the truth. It was like swearing on the Bible for an earth man.

"She vanished into a hole in an underground cavern," he said.

Tadjil lookedly angrily into the man's face.

"You did not follow?"

The young man's eyes showed fear. "She was taken by the night people. It would have been foolish for us

to follow."

Tadjil choked back his disappointment. "Yes—it would have," he conceded.

He turned to Gondar.

"There were three others with her: a Martian gunrunner named Borg De, a giant Venusian and an earthman by the name of Jon Smith. They were in a *sarat* we followed out of Shewajo!"

Gondar reflected. "We fired upon a strange *sarat* during our battle with Tlal Khan's men. I know we hit it." He looked off into the distance. "It should not be hard to find."

THEY CAME upon the damaged *sarat* a few hours later. It lay over on its side, resting on its supporting flange. The airlock was open. They found no one inside.

Tadjil Rek stared with frustrated anger toward the distant scarps. He had no doubt that the three men had headed in that direction.

They followed, his police *sarat* leading, rolling over the fissured earth. They spread the vehicles out to cover a wide section, and just as the huge disc of Uranus began to settle over the horizon, a call came in from

one of the advance army patrols.

"Up there—on the talus slope under the cliff!"

Tadjil Rek took field glasses to the observation window of the command *sarat*. He saw them plainly now—three small figures struggling up the slope.

He could have ordered his advance patrol to fire at them, but he did not want them killed. Then, as he started to order his vehicle forward, something else intruded on the scene: a long silver craft darting low along the cliff side.

Tadjil Rek cursed. He did not have to read the insignia to know it was an interplanetary patrol ship.

Gondar, at his side, nudged him. "They've gone—the men you've been searching for. They've vanished under that bulge in the cliff."

Tadjil Rek nodded. "They must have found the way through the barrier." He watched the ISS ship wheel and vanish off to the left. It disturbed the heavy-jowled police chief. Perhaps it was but a preliminary survey craft, ordered by the Interplanetary Commission. . . .

Gondar pointed. "I saw where they entered. We can follow."

Tadjil Rek shook his head.

"No one knows what lies beyond that barrier." Gondar's eyes sobered. "That is true."

The army chief studied the cliff overhang. "There is but one entrance into the Valley of the Mists. If they live, and find the star stones, that is the way they must come out."

He settled himself into his swivel chair. "Let us wait, Gondar."

Gondar smiled.

"And the hill tribes?"

"They are in their caves, waiting for the night to end." He drummed his fingers on the control panel. "But there is something worrying me." He studied Gondar. He knew the lieutenant would do anything for him—for a price.

Gondar stared out through the observation window. "The ISS man?"

"That was a two-man patrol ship," Tadjil Rek observed. "Can you handle both of them?"

Gondar considered. "It is risky, killing men of the interplanetary patrol."

The fat army chief clasped his hands across his expansive waist. "A fortune in star stones. You know that

is what I'm after."

Gondar nodded.

"No one else knows. I will split the cache with you. There is more than enough to set both of us up in princely style on any one of the Inner Planets."

Gondar smiled. "The ISS has long arms, Tadjil; it reaches into every corner of the universe. There is no place we would be safe."

"Not if we blame their death on the hill tribes," Tadjil said smoothly. "I am still the military authority on Titania. . . ."

"In that case," Gondar said easily, "it is worth the risk." He paused at the entrance to the air lock. "Seven men should be enough to take care of them."

Tadjil nodded. He waited until Gondar had left, then turned back to stare moodily toward the blue scarps.

Only two men recently had penetrated that mysterious barrier—and both were dead.

Despite himself, a small shiver crept down his spine. Whatever the riddle of the blue mists, it still remained unsolved.

— XIV —

— Death of an ISS Man —

STEEVE ARGITE set the patrol ship down on a level stretch of ground a quarter of a mile behind Tlal Khan's village. Rug Jenkins, his co-pilot, was on his first patrol to Titania. He was a lanky man, born in Iowa, several years Steeve's junior, and he had a great respect for the prowess of his senior officer.

He turned to look at Steeve. "Back in Shewajo they told us there were four of them—and a girl. I only saw three of them on that talus slope. . . ."

Steeve shrugged. "They could have left the girl and one man behind, to guard their *sarat.*" He frowned. "If the girl is Dav Brown's daughter, and the port com-

mander seemed to think she was, she has friends among the hill tribes. . . ."

He was locking the controls as he talked. Now he headed for the life support suits on the rack by the air lock.

Jenkins swung around. "I've heard a lot of stories about the valley behind those cliffs. Carr Orson disappeared in there, didn't he?"

Steeve nodded. He was checking the recycling unit in his suit. "He was the first, but there been others. The girl's father, Dav Brown, was the last reported."

Jenkins was curious. "These men you're after—what are they looking for in there?"

"Star stones, probably."

The handsome ISS man started to get into his suit. Jenkins left his seat to join him. He was a bit troubled over orders they had received from central headquarters.

"I know you said they were gunrunners, Steeve. But shouldn't we be contacting the hill tribes? Our orders were to conduct a preliminary investigation—"

Steeve cut him off, his voice cold. "This is a personal matter." He glanced off through the observation window. "The hill tribes will have gone into their caves—there

won't be anything we can do until morning."

Jenkins frowned. "That's a long time, isn't it—by earth reckoning?"

Steeve nodded. "Long enough for me to find them and bring them back under arrest."

Jenkins didn't like being left alone through the long Titanian night.

"Maybe I should come with you," he said hopefully.

Steeve shook his head. "Can't leave the ship unguarded. Some of Tadjil Rek's army units are constantly roaming the outback. . . ."

He fastened his helmet in place and turned on his transmitter. He made a motion to Jenkins to switch on the ship's amplifier. Without it his co-pilot would now be unable to hear him.

"I'll keep in touch," Steeve said. "If something happens to me, call code number 72. Make it an ARS. That'll bring every interplanetary patrol ship within range in a hurry."

He disappeared into the air lock.

Standing at the observation window, Jenkins watched Steeve emerge a few moments later and start out across that blue-lighted land. Even in his bulky space suit,

there was a certain jauntiness to the ISS man's stride.

Jenkins watched him until Steeve disappeared from sight. The fissured earth and the weird light made it impossible for Jenkins to follow Steeve very far—he seemed to disappear almost immediately.

He settled in the pilot's seat and fiddled with a few knobs. A tape recording of a recent earth novel filled the cockpit—he listened to it for a moment, but soon lost interest. The world and the people and the problems they were encountering were far away and did not touch him.

He flipped on the local televiz station, the big transmitter in Shewajo.

Mor Ekkl, spokesman for the Titanian government, was speaking. He was a thin, ascetic-looking man with cold, unfriendly eyes.

"I repeat, there is no cause for alarm. The rabble that has rioted through our city streets these past few days have been driven out of the city. Many are dead. Others are in jail, awaiting transportation to our military penal colonies.

"The imperialist adventurers who have been supplying weapons to the city rabble and the hill tribes will soon

be taken into custody and immediately hanged. Tadjil Rek has taken command of the armed forces. He has assured me that the streets of our city are safe. The city itself is under control."

He paused, staring coldly out at anyone who might want to dispute him. And his voice was a warning. "This is for the benefit of the foreign compounds. There is no need for an inspection by the interplanetary security patrol. Nor do we welcome an investigation by the commission of the Outer Planets—"

Jenkins snapped off the receiver. Mor Ekkl was speaking brave words, but he could not head off the inevitable. Men like Tadjil Rek, who really ran the city government, had become corrupted over the years, their power self-perpetuating. The few got richer, the mass got poorer—it had been an old story on earth, and it seemed to be a disease of all life in the universe: the domination of the strong over the weak.

He got up and moved restlessly about the ship for a while. He was too charged with excitement to sleep. He paused in front of one of the port windows and looked out, his gaze attracted by the village he could dimly see slightly below him.

He had never seen a Titanian hill tribe village, but he knew, from space familiarization manuals, that the hummock-shaped huts with ther mica tops contained day plants which provided both air and heat for the tribesmen during the Titanian day. At night the plants ceased their activity and went into a state of anabiosis until the reflected sunlight from Uranus started the life processes again.

There was only the light of the stars now over the village—the hummocks seemed like crouched, frozen shapes, lifeless in the night.

He turned away from the porthole and put in a call to Steeve. "How is everything, Steeve?"

There was a long silence; then Steeve's voice came impatiently over the receiver. "Fine. I'll call if I run into anything unusual."

Jenkins clicked off the connection and stared glumly out of the observation window. He had looked forward to coming here with Steeve. Like all young interplanetary patrol men, he had joined because of the promise of excitement. Sitting there, guarding his patrol ship, was not his idea of adventure.

Why, he had had a better time on Mars while a

rookie pilot, or on his first swing to the Outer Planets, when he had been part of the crew of a patrol ship that had chased a Venusian slave trader in and out of the rings of Saturn. . . .

He took a deep breath. Might as well go to sleep. There were sleep-inducing aids in the medicine chest—drugs that produced dreamless rest or pleasant fantasies. Maybe he would dream of the girl he had picked up in the waiting room at Mars' big spaceport—a redhead from San Francisco. A lot of men serving with the space patrol fell in love with the small, lithe, vivacious Martian girls—but as for Jenkins, he preferred the girls from earth. All of them, except the members of FEMS, a militant feminist organization of women who had formed several exclusively female colonies in various places on earth.

He started for the medicine cabinet. Something out in the night caught his eye. He paused, then went to the porthole that overlooked the village.

He saw it again—a flash of light from one of the dwellings. It shone brightly for a moment, then winked off, then on again. It moved in a slow arc and then went out.

He hesitated only a moment. There was something out there that shouldn't be there. *Won't take but a few minutes to check it out,* he thought.

He quickly got into his space suit, checked his electronic pistol and his small hand electronic decoder. The air lock closed behind him as he descended the short ladder to the ground. It could not be opened again except through the decoder he carried. Steeve had one in his possession.

The terrain was rougher than he had expected. He found himself stumbling and paused to adjust his gravity to a few points below that on earth. He found it easier to walk now, moving with an almost springlike stride.

He did not see the light again.

It took him less than twenty minutes, by the chronograph strapped outside his fur-suited wrist, to reach the first hummocks. He paused, switched on his Lorel light. The beam showed him nothing. It sent a small swath of light between the dwellings, fading quickly into the blue light of the satellite.

He paused. He felt like an intruder in a graveyard. But something, or someone, had been there not too long ago—someone flashing a light akin to his Lorel lamp.

He walked on slowly, his hand on his pistol. The hummocks enclosed him now—he found himself in the village square.

A shadow moved among the hummocks across the square. Jenkins brought up his pistol.

A Titanian voice crackled in his earphones. "Who are you?"

Jenkins searched the shadows. "Lieutenant Rug Jenkins, interplanetary security service." He made a motion with his pistol. "Show yourself, whoever you are. It's an order!"

A Lorel light flashed on where he had spotted the shadow. The man behind it moved into the square toward Jenkins. He was Gondar, leader of the scouting patrol.

"Where's your companion?"

Jenkins eyed him. The man seemed harmless, but he wore the insignia of the Titanian army on his shoulder. "What are you doing here?" he countered.

Gondar smiled. "Waiting for you." He made a motion. "We knew you'd see the light."

"*We?*" Jenkins turned quickly as the rest of Gondar's patrol surrounded him, their weapons drawn, ready.

Gondar stepped up quickly and took Jenkins' pistol while the ISS man was still immobilized.

"It was the only way to get you outside the patrol ship," he said. Then, harshly: "Where is your partner?"

Jenkins tried to bluff. "Back inside the ship. If I do not return, he'll know I'm in trouble. One call to central command—"

Gondar cut him off. "You will tell him there is no trouble. Call him!"

Jenkins hesitated. Gondar raised his pistol.

Jenkins put in the call. He set the amplifier on low. He did not want to reach Steeve, draw him into Gondar's trap.

"Captain Argite," he called, "This is Jenkins. I've found nothing unusual. I'm coming back."

Gondar eyed him. There was no answer to Jenkins' call.

Why not?

"Security," Jenkins bluffed.

Gondar shook his head. He put the pistol against Jenkins' side. "Call again. Tell him you are in trouble!"

Jenkins' voice was firm. "He won't answer."

Gondar hesitated. "Then we'll visit him."

The return to the patrol ship seemed far shorter to Jenkins, than the trip out. He tried to understand what this army patrol wanted. *They must be crazy,* he thought; threatening an ISS man meant instant and terrible retaliation.

Gondar shoved him out into view of the patrol ship's observation nose. There was no motion inside the craft. Gondar called on his mike: "Captain Argite—this is Lieutenant Gondar, Titanian army. I wish to confer with you."

Gondar moved up to Jenkins. "Open up!"

Jenkins said, "I can't. Captain Argite must have left the ship. Only he can open the door."

"That's a lie," Gondar said calmly. "I am well aware of the working of the interplanetary patrol craft. And you lied, too, about your companion. Where is he?"

Cold sweat formed on the young pilot's face. These men were going to kill him.

"He went out after some gunrunners we were looking for."

Gondar thought a moment. The men he and Tadjil Rek had seen struggling up the talus slope—

He said harshly, "Open up. We'll wait for him

inside!"

He was thinking that this modern patrol craft with its heavy weaponry could provide the means for easily wiping out Tlal Khan and his hill people when they emerged from their caves.

Jenkins faced his fate. He knew they would kill him as soon as he opened the air lock door.

He nodded submissively, reached inside the zippered pocket just above his knee and took out the decoder. Gondar turned to look at the ship.

Jenkins dropped the decoder and brought his heavy boot down on it, smashing it.

Gondar whirled. His electronic beam hit Jenkins. What was left of the lieutenant slumped to the ground.

Gondar eyed the smashed decoder. There was no way now to get inside the ship.

But it was a prize he did not want to relinquish. He placed two men on guard. The other four went with him.

There was still a chance he could overtake Captain Argite before he vanished behind the barrier. And he'd make sure, this time, that the ISS man would be given no opportunity to destroy his decoder!

— XV —

— Report From The Dead —

WE DID not move at once. That dead, beckoning hand held us like nothing I had ever encountered.

Then Borg De gave a little choked cry and raised his electronic. I knocked his hand up before he fired. The blast powdered rock above and to one side of the space-suited apparition.

I said sharply, "Let's see what it is first!"

We moved slowly, our weapons ready. The hand lowered as we approached. Borg paused.

Above the figure I now saw a dangling length of knotted rope. It was fastened somewhere above, high

enough to be lost in the blue mist.

Carr Orson?

I knelt beside the suit. Now I saw it, down inside the helmet— a shrunken, mummified face that still conveyed the impression of an iron will and a terrible strength. The open black eyes seemed to stare up into mine with fierce intensity. I stepped back, momentarily shaken.

Franj said: "Something in there?"

I nodded. "Carr Orson, or what's left of him."

The stories I had heard indicated that Orson had been a giant of a man, as big as Franj Orcus. Time, and something else, had shrunk him to half his size.

Borg said: "Is he still alive?"

It seemed a ridiculous question to ask. Carr Orson had been in his prime when he had vanished more than a hundred years ago. And yet—his arm had raised, beckoned to us.

I looked at Borg. Had it only been our excited imagination?

I said slowly, "I don't think so."

Borg's eyes were round and frightened inside his helmet. "I saw his arm move—"

I nodded. "He's dead. But something moved his arm, called to us. . . ."

I knelt beside the body and lifted Orson's right arm. A notebook lay under it. I noticed, as I raised the arm, that Orson's fingers were tightly clenched. I pried them open.

A magnificent star stone lay in the palm of that dead, gloved hand. It seemed to glow with an inner, living fire as I took it from him.

And at once the unseen menace in the shrouding mist above us seemed to move, set itself to strike!

Instictively I glanced upward, shifting my pistol to my left hand. But nothing actually moved in the high mist, and the eerie light about us was still and cold.

I turned back and picked up Orson's notebook. Scrawled across the inner cover were the words: Diary, Carr Orson—May, 1995.

My hand trembled slightly as I glanced up at my companions. Orson, the legendary figure of Titania.

Slowly I turned the pages of that old notebook and started to read.

Terse, laconic, it was yet a terrible tale that unfolded. Much of the beginning had to do with the organization

of the expedition, the gathering and checking of supplies, comments on his companions, speculations as to the origin of the star stones. Then finally, the grueling climb to the top of the barrier. . . .

"At last we've made the summit. The valley below us is hidden by the mist. Strange phenomenon. Meers laughs at Reeves' apprehensions. The huge European has no nerves. But I confess I share Reeves' feelings. There is danger here. . . ."

Dated the next day:

"We've descended through the mist to the valley floor. Four of us. Reeves, Johansen, Meers and myself. I made no mistake, hand-picking these men back in Denver. Few men could have made this terrible climb and descent. . . .

We shall rest awhile before exploring this valley. . . ."

The next day:

"There's a stillness here one feels, a stillness that seems to get inside one's bones. Meers had a flight of

fancy. He said it is as though death—nay, something more terrible than death—keeps watch here. I know what he means. This valley *is* a place of the dead—and *something* in the blue mist keeps watch here. . . ."

Another date, a bit blurred:

"Meers found his first star stone today, close by that odd, birdlike formation of blue rock in the center of the valley. Worth a fortune back on earth.

"Joahnsen examined the flat stone in front of the formation. It is smooth, almost hand-rubbed. It is unlike any other stone in the valley. Could it have been brought here frome somewhere else? Reeves says it looks like a sacrificial stone. . . ."

A day later:

"Star stones by the thousands! Glowing like tiny lamps. Clustered in strange geometric formations that appear to have some significance. Meers and Johansen are crazy with greed. I can't control them. But the danger! *I feel it!* It hangs over this pit like the breath of disaster itself. . . ."

Again a hasty, blurred date:

"God! I've seen them! The mist spirits! The glowing gods! Meers is dead! So, I believe, is Johansen. Reeves is still with me, babbling, out of his mind.

"That smooth flat stone in front of the birdlike formation— it is a sacrificial altar! We saw it sink before our eyes. It descended into a smooth round hole in the valley floor. Then, and we all felt it, there was a wind, rushing up out of that hole. *A wind,* in this airless, hostile valley!

"Something held us there, waiting. Then (I didn't keep track of time) the flat stone surfaced, like the floor of an elevator. And we saw it—the body of a hill tribesman, lying on that smooth flat stone like an offering. My God, *to what!*

"Reeve hazarded a guess. The night people, he said; those legendary, never seen people who lived below the surface of the earth. This is *their* offering! But I've been backtracking. Forgive me; my mind is whirling.

"They're looking for us, searching, like the glowing eyes of death. But for the moment we are safe. Reeves keeps babbling; I can't shut him up. I know now

we'll never make it back. But we can't stay here, in this crevice, much longer. . . ."

Later; the writing is almost unreadable:

"Globes of fire—strange, whirling, spinning. And in the center, shining through a flaming aura, the star stone!

"They float and dart about with no visible means of propulsion. Globes of living, electronic force, they cause death at a touch! Detonite shells pass harmlessly through them. . . .

"Keepers of the graves, I shall call them. The explanation of this fantastic valley, these incredible globes of electric force that are also intelligent and alive in a manner incomprehensible to our minds, is being forced upon my thinking. Fantastic? Perhaps."

A break in the writing; a completely blank page; then—

"Reeves is dead. He ran wildly out of our hiding place, screaming. I couldn't hold him. I have not seen him since. But I could hear his voice, screaming in my earphones. I wanted to cut him off, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I said a prayer for him. And

then, suddenly, his screaming was cut short. The silence now is worse than his screaming. I am alone here, in this crack in the earth, so terribly alone. . . .

"I can see the rope down which we climbed. . . . It does not seem too far away. . . .

"My thoughts wander. How long ago was it that we came down into this valley. Four of us, eager to discover what lay beyond that blue barrier in the Titanian outback. I knew the others had come for the star stones. I told myself I was different—it was being the first to set foot in this mysterious and legendary valley that mattered. Not greed; just scientific curiosity. But I'm not sure now. Like Meers and Johansen, I was overwhelmed by the fortune in star stones. I still have the stone Meers found; it glows in my gloved hand. And I—yes, I find a peculiar satisfaction in holding it. I shall bring it out with me, if I can. . . ."

A few illegible scrawls, a blank space, then:

"I am lucid once again. This shall be my last entry. I'm going to make a break for the wall. But first I must record this fantastic phenomenon. For I

know now the partial truth—

"I have felt, all these hours huddled like a rodent in this crevice, as though a voice from somewhere within this valley were impressing information into my brain. This valley of the blue mists is a burial ground for the globe beings of Uranus. Once a year they make the pilgrimage across space—the ones in which the electronic life force is fading. *The star stones are the skeletons of these beings!*

"Occasionally, some of these globes, making their last trek across the void from Uranus to this valley, *die* (?) by the way. These account for the few star stones picked up by the natives in the outback, and explains, in some way, their superstitions. I am thinking, too, of what Reeves said about the night people and the sacrificial stone. It is possible. . . . I saw the body. . . . I think, I do think I understand. . . .

"*Wait!*

"A voice seems to be whispering to me—strange, alien, cold as the whisper of death. The valley of the blue mists is inviolable. The keepers of the graves will see to that!

"I can see the rope. It does not seem too far away.

"Maybe—maybe—"

There was no more.

Carr Orson had made his break—and lost!

— XVI —

— Keepers Of The Graves —

FOR LONG moments of which I was unaware, I remained kneeling by the shrunken body of that legendary explorer, caught by the strange tale Carr Orson's jottings brought forth. Vaguely I realized I must have read those notes aloud, for I became aware of Borg's whistling breath in my earphones.

I looked up and saw that he had backed up against the cliff side and was staring up into the mist with peculiar fascination. Franj stood close by, looking down over my shoulder, his big feet widespread, his thick hand wrapped tightly about his electronic.

I straightened, thrusting the uneasy sense of hovering death from me. Deliberately I pocketed the star stone Meers had found and which Carr Orson had taken with him. Then I looked up at that blue dome and waited.

Nothing moved. The valley lay silent and still under that weird blue glow.

"The map, Borg," I said harshly, turning to the scrawny Martian. "We came here for Brown's cache, and we're going out with it!"

Borg brought out the *levadi* hide with a trembling hand. My finger traced a line to the spot marking Brown's cache. "A formation near the center of the valley. . . ."

I paused and looked at Franj, remembering Carr Orson's notes about a birdlike stone formation and the sacrificial stone.

Franj must have sensed what I was thinking. But he merely shrugged. "That's what we came here for, Jon." His tone was matter-of-fact.

Borg's thin mutter held fear. "The globe beings, Jon. They're watching us. I can feel them. We'll never get out of this valley alive!"

I thought of Mirg De then, and how the small, reck-

less Martian would have faced this. Evidently, I thought, his brother was not cast from the same mold.

"We can try," I said shortly. "Carr Orson and the earlier explorers had only detonite guns. We have electronics. And I have yet to see a living thing stand up to the heavy charge of one of them."

Borg was not convinced. But I think greed made him come with us, overcoming his fears.

The valley sloped toward its center, remarkably smooth save for an occasional fissure. It was not far to the formation indicated on Borg's map, but distances seemed magnified in the blue light.

The formation rose above the valley floor for about fifty feet. It did look like some huge bird, its wings outspread, turned to stone.

It seemed utterly unreal—something alien—evil. It poised there, looking at us. I think that was what we all felt. It was waiting.

Around the base, fanning away in geometric patterns, were thousands of star stones!

I heard Borg's breath rasp in his throat. Then Franj touched me on the arm.

"The sacrificial stone!" His voice was sharp.

It was sinking, just as Orson had described it. I had the feeling that our presence had triggered it off. It disappeared, and now we felt *the wind,* blowing up out of that hole toward us!

We waited, unable to move. The wind made a noise, beating against our helmets. Borg took a backward step, whether from the force of the wind or from fear I could not tell. Then he raised his electronic—

I held his arm. Up to now we had not provoked an attack. Maybe we would be allowed to go unharmed. . . .

The stone came up again, smoothly, out of the depths below. The wind ceased abruptly.

I gasped!

There was a body on the stone, still, probably lifeless. *The body of Bev Brown!*

For a moment I was stunned. A thousand thoughts whirled through my head; then I blanked them out. "Cover me," I said to Franj.

I didn't wait for his answer. I made a run for the girl, passing among the neatly laid out star stones. I didn't know if Bev was dead, but I knew I had to get her out of there. . . .

The stone formation loomed above me. It did not

cast a shadow, but I felt its presence, and its displeasure. I looked up. The great stone wings moved—or did they? I wasn't sure.

I scooped Bev up in my arms. She stirred. Her eyes opened, and at first there was horror in them, stark and all-enfolding. Then, as she saw my face through the glassite helmet, she said: "Jon, Jon, is it really you?"

I didn't have to answer. She was alive, and that was all that mattered.

I turned with her in my arms and ran back to my companions.

"Let's get out of here!" I said.

Borg was staring at the star stones. "A fortune," he muttered. Then he began to laugh. "A fortune in skeletons. . . ." His laughter rose, thin and wild, and I knew the Martian was close to breaking.

I looked at Franj. "They're letting us go," I said sharply. "I don't know why. But we better move before they change their minds."

Borg was still laughing. Franj pulled him away. We started to run up the slope, toward the crevice through which we had entered.

I held Bev tightly in my arms; she seemed as light as

a feather. I knew I would never let her go again. She was sobbing quietly.

A crevice opened up before us—not too deep—nor was it wide. We paused. A hundred yards beyond it, I could see the knotted rope hanging down the cliff side, and under it Carr Orson's body.

This must have been the sanctuary in which Orson had jotted down his last notes!

I looked for a way around it. We were not too far from the exit—

Franj's voice broke into my thoughts. "Down there! Look!"

He was pointing off to one side, inside the gully, to the still figure of a man in a modern life support space suit.

Borg saw it at the same time I did. "The map," he said. His voice was shrill. "That must be Brown's body down there!"

The girl stirred in my arms, roused by Borg's voice. I set her down. She clung to me, looking into the crevice, looking down at a silver-haired, shrunken face dimly seen behind the glassite helmet.

"My father!" Her voice was a whisper. She looked

up at me, her eyes dark with dread. "How did I get here, Jon?"

I shrugged. "You came out of the earth on a flat stone. I though you were dead."

She shuddered. "The night people!" She clutched at my arm, remembering now. Horror filled her voice. "I was lost in an underground cave, running away from Tadjil Rek. . . . I felt something touch me. . . . I saw a face. . . ." She choked, unable to go on for a moment. Then, in a small voice: "I must have fainted, Jon. I don't remember anything else."

I said, "It doesn't matter now how you got here, Bev. You're alive—that's all that counts."

I motioned to her father's body. "That's what we came for, Bev—the star stones your father died for. They're yours—if you want them!"

But I was thinking of what Carr Orson had written. Those stones belonged here! They were sacred.

Borg was already scrambling down into the gully. He kneeled beside Brown's body and picked up a small chamois bag, much like those which jewelers of earth once used. His hand shook as he dumped the contents out into his gloved palm.

The star stones, a score of them, seemed to shine with evil menace, lighting up Borg's emotion-torn face. Greed was there—and fear. And also insanity.

Suddenly I knew that the only way we'd get out of the valley was to leave them behind.

I said sharply: "Leave them, Borg. Let's get out of here!"

Borg looked up at me. I could see resistance in his face, twisted, unheeding. He had come across millions of miles of space for this. . . .

The girl said, "They were my father's—they belong to me, Jon!"

I looked at her. She had not read Carr Orson's Journal—she did not understand!

"It is better we leave them here," I said, "with your father's body. I will explain—"

Bev pulled away from me and went down into the gully. Borg drew back. His hand went to his pistol.

I said sharply, "You touch your electronic, and I'll kill you!"

Borg's reply was a mutter. "An equal share—that's all I ask—"

I jumped down into the gully and snatched the bag

from his grasp. "You fool!" I said harshly. "There'll be no shares for anyone—"

Franj's voice spun me around.

The big Venusian was backing toward the lip of the gully, looking up, his electronic held ready. A few feet above him, hovering, was one of the globes Orson had described!

About a foot and a half in diameter, blue-green, shimmering, it had a huge star stone glowing brilliantly at its core. It seemed to float above us, its brilliant glow lighting up the shadows.

And in the same moment I felt a sudden tingling through my body, like some faint electric shock. I dropped the bag of star stones and instictively brought up my electronic.

Franj shook himself free of his stunned surprise at the same time—we fired together!

The double electronic blast wrought a strange change in the hovering globe. It went brighter, like an old-fashioned electronic light bulb under a sudden surge of high voltage. It shimmered wildly, wobbled, as though drunk with power. Then it was gone, shooting up into the blue mist with dazzling speed.

I had no time to speculate then on the reason for this change. That somehow the combined charges of our electronics acted on this thing of shimmering light much like a powerful stimulant, upsetting its normal pattern of reactions, I can guess. But at the moment I felt only relief that it was gone.

"Come!" I said, grasping Bev's arm. "There'll be others coming for us. And we may not be so lucky the next time!"

We scrambled out of the crevice. I did not notice that Borg held back just long enough to retrieve the bag of star stones.

We were halfway up the slope when I glanced back. I was right. Down from that blue mist, scores of the globe beings appeared, dropping like fiery meteors toward us!

— XVII —

— Flight —

WE MADE a run for it. The fissure in the towering wall was now only two hundred yards away. But the globe beings of Uranus dropped like avenging fires of hell. Fifty yards from the narrow opening, the electric aura of their approach was so intense it nearly stunned us.

We turned close to the entrance and blasted away with our pistols at the dropping globes. Each hit wrought the same strange transformation—a suddenly heightened glow, a sudden crazy swerving, a wild shimmering, then a zigzag upward into the protecting mist.

But others kept dropping down on us. Slowly, our electronics keeping up a steady, shielding barrage, we fell back to the slit in the towering wall.

Borg scampered through first, and it was then that I noticed he was clutching Brown's bag of star stones. I yelled at him. But he didn't stop. I felt a crazy desire to kill him; his greed was putting all of us in jeopardy. But he was gone before I could line my pistol on him.

I pushed Bev Brown toward the narrow opening. "Run!" I ordered. "We'll follow!"

She hesitated, then did as I had told her.

I turned back to Franj, shouting for the big Venusian to hurry. We backed into the slit; then Franj gave me a shove. "You go," he said. "I'll hold them here!"

He stood with his broad shoulders touching both walls, blocking off the entrance. "One man can hold them back," he continued, "as long as his charges hold out. You, Borg and the girl will have a chance to get through."

"No!" I grasped his arm, pulling him back. "We came into this together, and we'll leave together!"

He resisted for a moment, then smiled.

"Good, Jon. If we must die, we die together."

The globes hovered about fifty feet away, waiting. I wondered if perhaps there was some taboo that would keep them from following us. They seemed strangely

reluctant to draw nearer the exit.

I looked ahead. Borg was already out of sight. Bev had paused and was looking back. Her voice came through my earphones: "Jon!"

I started to run toward her.

Franj hesitated, then began to follow. I glanced back. The globes had darted closer to the opening; they seemed agitated, as though greatly disturbed.

Then one of them darted into the opening!

I called out to Franj. But it was too late.

The globe settled on Franj's bulky shoulders before he could turn. The big Venusian's body seemed to light up with a green fire; his face seemed to shrink inside his helmet. A moment later he slumped down, his suit sagging like a half empty sack of wheat.

I fired a double burst at the globe. It zigzagged wildly, ran into the wall, seemed to flatten into a band of bright light. Then it darted straight up between the hemming walls and out of sight.

Behind it, at the base of the wall where it had collided, it left a shining star stone!

I looked at what was left of my companion, Franj. We had flown the spaceways together, Franj, Mirg and

I, since the day, many years ago, when we had met in one of the dives on Mercury.

I raised my hand in final salute. "Goodbye, Franj." My voice was unsteady and thick with emotion.

Then I turned and ran along that narrow path between the hemming walls toward Bev.

She clutched my arm. "What happened?"

"Franj's dead," I said shortly. I glanced back along the narrow cut, fully expecting to see those darting, deadly globes shooting toward us.

But they did not appear. Whether the keepers of the graves withdrew back to their mysterious blue mist after the killing of Franj Orcus, satisfied with that measure of vengeance, or whether some taboo kept them from following into this slit in the barrier, I can not say, for I do not know.

I thought of Borg, with the star stones; how he had tricked us into signing on the Erine, used us to find a treasure that did not belong to any of us.

"Borg!" I said through my clenched teeth. "He has your father's star stones. I can't let him get away!"

Bev understood.

She followed me as I ran on ahead.

There was a place about a half-mile in where the crack in the barrier widened. I caught my first glimpse of Borg there. He must have slipped somewhere and hurt his ankle, for he was limping.

I called out to him.

He whirled; I know he saw me. But he kept going, losing himself behind a small pile of rubble.

I knew he could hear me. I said: "Borg—wait up!" I forced myself to sound winded. "I'm hurt. . . ."

There was a long silence. Then Borg's voice answered, thin and dry, in my earphones. "Sure, Jon. I'm waiting. Then, smoothly: "Franj and the girl with you?"

I smiled grimly, my suspicions now a certainty. Borg was waiting behind that rubble—waiting for me to appear so he could kill me.

"Franj is dead," I said haltingly. "I don't know what happened to the girl. . . ."

Borg's regrets were too smooth. Anger surged through me as I gathered myself—anger that solidified into a cold hatred for this unscrupulous Martian whose greed had blinded him to all else.

Hoping to catch him off guard, I sprinted toward the mound of rubble.

Borg stepped around the pile of rubble. He reacted in surprise when he saw me almost upon him, and fired a hasty burst that fused rock and debris in one quick flame behind me.

I slammed into him, bowling him over. It must have knocked the wind from him, for he lay still. I bent over him, picked up his pistol and threw it into the shadows behind the rubble.

Then I picked up the chamois bag of star stones which had caused us so much trouble.

"If it wasn't that you're Mirg's brother," I muttered, looking down at the scrawny Martian skipper, "I'd leave you here to—"

The voice that interrupted me, crackling in my earphones, was impudently familiar.

"Well, well—so the thieves are having a falling out. And my old friend, Jon Smith, is about to commit homicide." Then, as my shoulders tightened, the voice turned hard, warning.

"Easy, Jon! Drop your electronic before turning!"

I DROPPED it at my feet. A figure was moving toward me from beyond the rubble. I stood still, waiting

until the space-suited newcomer came close, stopped five feet away. In the starlight I could easily make out the handsome, smiling features behind the glassite—the impudent face of Steeve Argite, ISS captain.

"I spotted you on the talus slope," he said. "One of those million to one breaks. Five minutes later, and you'd have disappeared under that rock bulge. . . ."

I shrugged. "We saw you." I glanced back toward the slit through which I had come. Apprehension tightened my nerves. What had happened to Bev?

Argite's glance followed mine. "Where's Franj?"

"Back there," I answered grimly. "Dead."

For a moment Argite didn't say anything. I wasn't sure, but something like regret seemed to flicker in his eyes.

"And Mirg De?"

"Killed by revolutionists, in Shewajo."

The ISS man frowned. "They didn't tell me. But then, I was in a hurry. I found out Borg had bought a *sarat* and headed into the outback. I knew about Brown's cache of star stones, too." He grinned coldly. "I learned a lot aboard the Erine before I was so kindly marooned on Callisto."

"It wasn't my idea," I said stiffly. "Believe it or not, I'm glad you survived."

"I don't," Captain Argite said promptly. He kicked my electronic aside and blasted it with his leveled pistol.

"Makes you a little easier to handle," he said. He dropped his gaze to Borg De, who was beginning to stir. We could hear his heavy breathing in our earphones.

"Well, maybe Mirg and Franj went the easier route," the ISS man muttered. "Twenty years on the Asteroid Belt can be worse."

I said nothing. Borg sat up and looked at us, his eyes clouded.

Argite grinned. "It's me, Borg. I said I'd meet you again. Remember?"

Recognition stirred in the Martian's green eyes. He got to his feet and leaned unsteadily against a rock.

Steeve made a motion with his hand. "We've got a long hike back to where I left my ship, and a longer hop to the penal colony on Astro II. So move your feet!"

I said, "Not until I find out what happened to Miss Brown. . . ."

He turned to me, his pistol ready.

"Yirl Brown's sister? She with you?"

"Back there somewhere," I said. "I ran ahead to catch up with Borg." I held up the chamois bag. "This belongs to her. . . ."

I don't know if Argite believed me, but Bev's voice convinced him.

"Jon, I heard. . . ."

We turned. She came out of the shadows toward us, and a great relief flooded through me on seeing her.

Bev came to stand by my side.

"I've heard of you, Captain," she said. She turned and looked into my face, her eyes troubled. "Why is the ISS after you, Jon? Is it because of my father's map?"

"Ask him," I said coldly.

"He's a gunrunner, Miss Brown," Argite's voice was cold. "I don't know what he told you, or why you're here. But I wouldn't waste any sympathy on him—"

"I'm in love with him," Bev said. She stated it simply. "I don't care what Jon Smith has done. I don't believe he is a gunrunner, as you say. I don't even believe he had anything to do with stealing my father's map. . . ."

My gloved hand went out to hers, clasped it. I said as simply: "Thanks, Bev. . . ."

Argite shook his head. "I'm sorry, Miss Brown. But

we've traced the guns the Erine landed in Shewajo. They were the same weapons I discovered in the ship's hold." He looked at Borg.

"There's a mandatory sentence of twenty years for gunrunning," he added grimly.

Bev's hand tightened in mine.

I stood there, suddenly plagued by a grim picture—an image of barren chunks of rock, of dull gray buildings guarded by an electronic force field. The Asteroid Belt penitentiary! Twenty years of drilling worthless holes on iron-hard rock, working low grade ore—twenty years of loneliness, slowly wasting away—

All this—just when I had met the only girl I had ever wanted to marry!

Recklessly I pushed Argite aside and lunged for Borg De. The scrawny Martian shrank back. I caught him by the slack front of his suit and jerked him close.

"I want you to tell them the truth!" I grated. "Lies won't keep you off the Asteroid Belt now, Borg!"

I shook him. "Tell them!"

Behind me Steeve said sharply: "Let him alone, Jon!" He put a hand on my shoulder and pulled me back.

I took a deep breath. "Tell them, Borg. What good

is a lie now?"

Borg looked at the girl, and suddenly appeared resigned to his fate.

"It was the truth, Miss Brown," he said slowly, "what Jon told you. But I didn't steal your father's map. One of your servants, a woman, came to me in a café at Kao Sud. She told me the story I told Jon and my brother and Franj—that she was a widow—that her husband had found an enormous fortune in star stones—and offered me a fifty percent cut if I found it for her."

He turned to look at Steeve. "I had a little deal of my own, then. I was down in Denver to pick up a cargo of old electronics and detonies, hidden in carotin bales. The gunrunning deal was strictly my own—not even my crew knew what I was taking aboard. My brother, Franj and Jon signed on without knowing about the guns. That's the truth, Captain. I would never have told them at all, except that you found out—"

The electronic burst flared between them, part of its force turning Borg around. He stumbled forward, his mouth gaping, and inadvertently saved the ISS man's life.

The second blast shriveled him at Steeve's feet. The ISS man was moving, lunging for cover behind the

rubble. I followed, pulling the girl with me.

Gondar and two men (the others had been afraid to follow him into the barrier) moved forward, electronics ready. Captain Argite," he said, "I don't want to kill you. Nor do we want to kill the other two." He paused. "I want your ship decoder. . . ."

I glanced at Steeve. His face was grim behind the glassite.

"They want your ship," I said.

Argite nodded.

Gondar heard. "The lives of the three of you—for your ship, Captain. A fair bargain?"

I felt Bev's fingers pluck at my arm. I turned. She looked frightened as she pointed to something above.

The globes! A half-dozen of them, high up in the slit in the barrier. And I knew what they were after!

I took the matter out of Steeve's hands. "I've got a better offer, Lieutenant." I could see his rank within the army insignia on his shoulder.

Argite swung around to me, frowning. I pulled out the bag of star stones I had taken from Borg.

Gondar knew he had us. He took his time answering, and I could tell by his tone he didn't believe me.

"What is it?"

"A fortune in star stones," I said. I reached up and tossed the bag toward them.

The men behind Gondar had their guns ready. Gondar looked down at the bag. Several star stones had spilled out, and from the look on his face I knew we had him.

He bent quickly, scooped up the bag and spilled the stones into his palm. His men crowded close, greed shining in their eyes.

Steeve started to lift his electronic. I pulled his arm down. . . .

The globes were dropping down the slit like streaks of blue light. I think Gondar and his men didn't even know what hit them.

One minute they were clustered around the star stones; the next they were shrunken, lifeless things slumping to the ground.

Argite stared. This was his first glimpse of the keepers of the grave. I took his electronic from him without a struggle. . . .

The globes clustered above the scattered star stones. They seemed to glow, catch fire; an aura formed around them. The aura merged into that of the globes. Slowly

the keepers of the graves rose—the skeletal remains of their dead (according to Carr Orson, the star stones) rose with them. Gradually at first, as though intent on handling the stones gently, they lifted up through the barrier slit; then, in a burst of speed, they were gone.

Argite turned to me, his voice shaken. "What were those things?"

I was holding his pistol, but he did not even notice. I said quietly, "The keepers of the graves." I knew it did not explain anything, but the rest could wait for a later and more opportune time.

I looked at Bev. "The stones belonged to them, Bev. I hope you don't mind."

Her hand tightened on mine, and she shook her head.

I found Borg's electronic pistol, the one I had thrown behind the rubble pile, and handed Steeve Argite his weapon.

"You heard Borg's story," I said levelly. "I'm the only one left from the Erine. Did you believe him?"

Argite studied me for a long moment, his eyes cold. "I'll think about it," he said.

— XVIII —

— Homeward Bound —

I KEPT looking back as we made our way through the torturous slash in the barrier, but the bizarre globes did not reappear. The walls rose straight up now, scarcely six feet apart; they seemed to press in on us, blotting out the sky. We were running with our Lorel lights on, but even so it was difficult to see more than a few feet ahead.

We stopped when Bev called out that she wanted to rest. I was leading, with Bev just behind me. Argite brought up the rear; I don't think he trusted me.

"Should be daybreak by the time we get through," he observed. I could see his crooked grin in my light. "Not that it seems to make much difference if it's day

or night here. Just makes the shadows a little thinner."

"They'll probably be waiting for us," I said, "just outside the entrance."

"Who?" The ISS man seemed surprised.

"Those were regular army men we ran into back there," I said. "They must have followed you up the talus slope after you landed." I thought a moment. "The main contingent must be waiting outside."

"The ISS has no quarrel with the Titanian army," Steeve said curtly. "And their commander knows better than to interfere with one of its members."

"Perhaps," I replied. "But that lieutenant knew with whom he was dealing." I smiled. "It did not seem to bother him."

Bev said, "But why should he have wanted the captain's ship?"

I hazarded a guess. "Units of the army have been fighting the hill tribes for some time. But they are limited by interplanetary treaty to light artillery. It has not been enough to stop the revolting hill people."

I turned to Argite. "Your ship carries heavy armament?"

Argite nodded.

"Tadjil Rek would give his right arm to get hold of it," I murmured. I looked down that dark slit toward the exit. "And I'll give you odds that Tadjil Rek is out there, waiting for us!"

The impudent smile touched Steeve Argite's lips. "We shall see," he said softly.

WE CAME out under that massive overhang just as the huge disc of Uranus heaved up above the horizon. It was brighter here than inside the narrow crevice we had just traversed, but even so, the weird blue light hid more than it revealed.

I stared down the talus slope. Nothing moved down below us—at least nothing I could see.

It was easier going down, although the footing was treacherous, and several times I had to keep Bev from falling. I looked back when we reached bottom; the way into the valley was hidden under the overhang.

It seemed just a short while before that Franj, Borg and I had struggled up the slope and made our way through that mysterious barrier.

I caught Steeve looking at me, and I shrugged. "I was thinking about the star stones," I said. "As long as that

crack in the barrier remains open, men will try to get through."

Steeve glanced up at the massive overhang. I could not tell what he was thinking, but I think he shared my feelings.

We paused at the foot of the slope. The ISS man put in a call to Jenkins, his co-pilot. His face tightened as Jenkins remained silent. He called again—

The hill men seemed to materialize from the ground. Like shadows they sprang up, surrounding us. Light reflected from muzzles of old, outdated electronic pistols, detonite hand guns, ancient ball-in-cartridge rifles. Eyes glittered coldly from behind face plates of old type oxygen helmets.

We waited.

A tall man pushed through the foremost ring of warriors and strode toward us. I didn't know him. But Bev did. She ran toward him. "Tlal!" she greeted him. "Tlal Khan! Thank God it's you!"

"Bev Brown!"

He put his arm around her shoulder, staring at us. "Who are they?"

"Jon Smith." She waved toward me. "The other is

Captain Argite of the ISS."

Tlal started. "Interplanetary secret service!" And I noted from his tone that the service carried weight even among the outlanders.

Steeve said, "This man is my prisoner. I am taking him to my ship."

"The girl?" Tlal interrupted. "What about her?"

Argite shrugged. "I'm making a stop in Shewajo. But if she wishes to stay with you—"

The detonite shell, exploding some fifty feet behind us, made the final decision!

THE FORCE of its blast knocked us flat. I rolled over, half stunned, and pushed myself up to my hands and knees. Tlal Khan was already erect, yelling orders to his men.

"To the shadows under the wall—all of you!"

I crawled to Bev and helped her up. "Tadjil Rek!" I said bitterly. "He was waiting for us!"

A second detonite shell burst against the cliff wall. Chunks of rock crashed down, smashing among the hill tribesmen.

Their cries echoed in my earphones as I pulled Bev

with me, making a dash for cover.

I completely forgot Steeve Argite. Not until I was crouched with Bev behind a screen of rocks did I look for him.

I couldn't see him. A detonite shell exploded in front of us, showering us with small stones.

Had the ISS man been caught in such an explosion?

I turned as Tlal Khan, the hill chief, crawled up beside us. He had cut down the power of his transmitter so it would not reach beyond the thin line of his men.

"Look," he said.

I saw them now, Tadjil Rek's regulars, moving toward us. They had better weapons—they were better trained. I looked at Bev. There was nothing I could do.

Tlal was giving orders to his men. "We'll let them come up close. Fire when I say so."

I watched Tadjil Rek's men advance. A small shell burst above us, sending a shower of earth and small stones down. The tough glassite of my helmet bore the punishment without cracking, but I felt a chill at the thought of what a heavy electronic burst could do if it hit directly above us.

Tlal's voice suddenly barked into my earphones: "Now, men!"

A hail of detonite, electronic bursts and ancient lead slugs met the charging Titanian regulars. Gaps appeared in their lines. The charge slowed, wavered. Suddenly it broke, and Tadjil Rek's men were in flight, making for the cluster of army *sarats* drawn up just below the massive overhang that shrouded the passage into the Valley of the Mists.

The first assault had been turned back. But I knew the worst was yet to come. Tadjil Rek would probably wheel his batteries into position and resume the shelling.

A few moments later I was proved right. A shell burst high above us; another smashed into a group of hill men crouched under the wall.

Tlal's bitter voice sounded in my ears. "If only we had some light artillery—"

It was a futile wish.

Tadjil Rek's batteries kept pounding the wall, taking their toll of the hill men crouched below. Twice slides fell about us, nearly burying Bev and me under their debris.

The strain of waiting there was too much. "Tlal!" I called. "We can't stay here and be blown to bits!"

Tlal joined us.

"What else can we do?"

"We can make a run for it," I said. "How far is it to your village?"

"Too far," Tlal replied. He looked at Bev. "You know where it is. Go with him."

"And you?"

Tlal put a hand on her shoulder. "This is my fight—not yours. Go!"

I stood up. Tlal was right. The two of us might make it.

It made no sound as it passed overhead, but the flare of its rockets lighted up the shadows. I looked up as the long silver space ship went by, racing away from the wall in a tight circle across the barren bluish land beyond.

In my earphones crackled a loud, metallic order: "Tadjil Rek—tell your men to cease firing. Tlal Khan—the same orders! Interplanetary police speaking!"

"Steeve Argite!" I muttered. "You're a hard man to kill." But I said it with admiration.

Tlal's men ceased firing. But Tadjil Rek's artillery did not stop. Only now its target was the glinting patrol ship coming back along the towering barrier wall.

Detonite shells burst around it. For an instant I thought it had been hit. It rocked a little, then zoomed upward, racing away.

Then it came back, like a silver spear, heading for Tadjil Rek and his men. A blinding beam of white light stabbed down, outlining the army *sarats,* the drawn up light artillery, the men clustered around them. And then, mingling with the white light, I saw the deadly flash of a heavy electronic battery—the most destructive weapon known to the nine planets.

The massive overhang poised above that cluster of men seemed to go fluid. It came down in a massive, ground-trembling slide, sealing the crevice that led through the barrier forever, and burying Tadjil Rek and his small force beneath untold tons of rock.

The blinding white beam shot upward as the patrol ship climbed above the debris.

By my side Tlal Khan said simply: "The ISS gives orders only once. Tadjil Rek is no more!"

WE SAID goodbye, Bev and I, to Tlal and his men by the side of Captain Argite's ship. And then, in Shewajo Steeve said goodbye to me.

"Borg's story cleared you," he said bluntly. Then, as a grin stole across his face, "Besides, you and your friends saved my skin back at the Red Comet."

I grinned back at him. "From what I've just seen,

you can take pretty good care of your own hide."

We shook his hands. Bev gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll keep him home," she said. "No more brawls in places like the Red Comet."

The Earthbound, a big, fast freighter, was leaving for earth within the next few hours. We booked passage aboard her; and later, shaved and dressed in clean clothes, I stood by Bev's side and looked out at the rugged landscape as the freighter lifted out of its take-off chute.

We passed above the towering scarps that enclosed the strange Valley of the Mists. I had given Steeve Carr Orson's notebook, but I had kept the big star stone I had pried out of the explorer's gloved fist.

I looked down as we passed over the barrier. And for a moment I seemed to see Franj Orcus form out of the blue mist—a smiling Franj, waving goodbye. And with him, dwarfed by the giant Venusian, his red face alight with the spirit of adventure, stood Mirg De.

I waved back. "Goodbye, Franj—Mirg." There was a sadness in my voice for companions I would never see again.

Then I turned to the slim girl at my side and took her into my arms.